

New Strategies to Promote Stable Employment and Career Progression

An Introduction to the Employment Retention and Advancement Project

Welfare reform has dramatically increased the need for effective strategies to help low-income parents work more steadily and advance in the labor market. Although much has been learned about how to help welfare recipients prepare for and find jobs, the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) evaluation is the most comprehensive effort thus far to learn what works in promoting stable employment and career progression for welfare recipients and other low-income workers.

Conceived and sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the evaluation is being conducted under contract by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC). As of fall 2001, a total of 15 ERA demonstration projects were operating or under development in nine states. Because the projects typically aim to help families for whom welfare reform efforts have been less successful, nearly all target current or former recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Key findings

- **Aligning goals and target groups.** Building on prior studies showing that many welfare recipients are able to retain employment, several of the ERA projects target narrower “hard to employ” groups that have demonstrated difficulty finding or holding jobs. Other projects target low-income working parents and focus specifically on helping participants advance to higher-paying jobs. A final group of projects has mixed goals: Most of these programs target welfare recipients who are seeking work, focusing first on placing participants into good jobs, next on stabilizing their employment, and finally on helping them advance.
- **Redefining case management.** ERA planners sought to learn from earlier projects such as the Post-Employment Services Demonstration (PESD), which found that follow-up case management did not improve employment retention. In most of the ERA projects, case management is seen not as the main service strategy but as the starting point to deliver other services or activities, such as education and training, financial incentives, career planning, rehabilitation services, and job search assistance. In several projects, case managers aim to build relationships with individuals who are searching for work that will be beneficial in the post-employment phase.
- **Early implementation lessons.** The ERA evaluation has already demonstrated some of the issues in implementing relatively large-scale retention and advancement programs. Encouraging and maintaining the participation of low-wage working parents is an ongoing challenge; sites are responding with aggressive outreach, tailored services, financial incentives, and advancement strategies that do not rely on traditional classroom-based education and training. The agencies that provide ERA services have restructured staff roles, trained staff to take on new responsibilities, and lowered worker caseloads — even as they forge the new linkages and inter-agency partnerships that are vital to delivering retention and advancement services.

Each ERA project is being evaluated using a research design that assigns people, by chance, either to a program group that receives the new services or to a control group that receives the services that were available before ERA was developed. MDRC will follow the two groups for up to three years and will produce both site-specific and crosscutting reports describing the programs and assessing their effects.

The states’ strong commitment to the ERA projects — even in the face of mounting budget pressures — suggests that their vision of welfare reform includes a focus on long-term self-sufficiency for families. The states’ ability to sustain and expand these efforts will likely depend on whether the funding level and the flexible approach of the 1996 welfare law are maintained when the TANF block grant is reauthorized.