

## The Special Challenges of Offering Employment Programs in Culturally Diverse Communities: The Jobs-Plus Experience in Public Housing Developments

Recent waves of immigration have made public housing populations around the nation increasingly diverse, challenging housing authorities to find new ways to provide employment assistance to residents of different ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. This report examines how the challenge was met by administrators and staff at two housing developments participating in the Jobs-Plus Community Revitalization Initiative for Public Housing Families, a demonstration project under way in six cities that combines employment assistance, rent incentives, and community-building supports to make work pay by significantly increasing residents' income. At the two developments — Rainier Vista in Seattle, Washington, and Mt. Airy Homes in St. Paul, Minnesota — immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia, East Africa, and Latin America who speak nearly two dozen languages settled alongside native-born African-American and Caucasian residents. The varied needs of the foreign-born residents extended far beyond basic language training and assistance in preparing for the workforce. A diverse group themselves, the immigrant residents included urban professionals in need of certification to practice in the United States, rural villagers barely literate in their native languages, and others afflicted by physical ailments and psychological traumas arising from war, torture, and famine.

By their variety and prevalence in the lives of the developments' residents, these distinctive issues presented major challenges:

- **Reading cultural cues.** Social, personal, and domestic issues that hamper the work efforts of low-income people in the United States had additional cultural dimensions in the case of the foreign-born residents that did not respond readily to standard employment and support services. For instance, foreign-born residents were often reluctant to use professional child care for fear of exposing their children to alien cultural practices, in addition to concern for their children's safety. Thus, to supplement their broad knowledge of employment issues, the Jobs-Plus staff became well versed in the social cues of the ethnic groups, such as taboos that some groups had against certain foods or mixed meetings of men and women in these developments.
- **Values and work.** Employment programs sometimes clashed with cultural priorities. Pressures to direct women into the workforce ran counter to residents' desire to maintain their traditional gender roles. Similarly, efforts to encourage residents to invest in financial assets and homeownership programs competed with residents' responsibility to remit savings to relatives overseas.
- **Institutional barriers.** Foreign-born residents were often unfamiliar with a range of institutions in the United States, including employment programs. To help close this gap, program staff adopted a flexible understanding of their service roles, often leaving their offices to reach out to residents in their homes and to accompany them off-site to social service agencies, medical clinics, and immigration offices.

**Administrative equity.** Jobs-Plus programs had to balance residents' needs and preferences for culturally specific services with the goals of preparing them to function in a diverse workplace and building a peaceful, multicultural community in the housing developments. And difficult choices have had to be made about which groups to accommodate with culturally specific services — decisions that inevitably incurred the dissatisfaction of those who were overlooked, including U.S.-born residents. To leverage limited funds and staff time, the programs partnered with local ethnic agencies and hired ethnic staff, including well-respected residents, to build trust and provide culturally appropriate services to the foreign-born residents.