

## How Can my Organization Increase Client Participation in Post-Employment Services?

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### Answer

As a result of federal, state, and local welfare reform efforts and, until recently, a strong economy, more and more welfare recipients have been able to find jobs and leave cash assistance. However, the newly employed sometimes find it difficult to keep their jobs because of problems with transportation and child care, a lack of work experience, or personal struggles with substance abuse or mental health problems. Even if they are able to continue working, their wages are often insufficient to support a family and make ends meet. Consequently, welfare offices, workforce development boards, and community organizations across the country are developing programs and services to help welfare recipients stay employed and advance in a career. Post-employment services can include meetings with case managers to address work and personal issues; training programs to upgrade skills; assistance with support services such as child care, transportation subsidies, and health insurance coverage; and group sessions on work and financial issues. But staff often find it a struggle to encourage intended beneficiaries to participate in these programs and services.

Increasing participation in post-employment services can be challenging for a number of reasons. Recently employed single parents in low-wage jobs may find it hard to balance work and family responsibilities; taking on additional activities may be overwhelming. Some may not be aware that the services are available, or they may feel a stigma associated with continuing to receive publicly funded support once they are working. Furthermore, the target population is sometimes hard to reach because they are no longer receiving cash assistance.

To counter these challenges, program staff must be creative in trying to increase participation in post-employment services. Specific strategies will depend on the nature of your post-employment program and the target population, but they will include: (1) marketing your program using a variety of different methods and media, and (2) structuring programs for working families or providing incentives for participation.

### How to Market Your Program

Research has shown that utilization rates of post-employment services — particularly child care, health care, or transportation subsidies - are low because individuals do not know about them. Just as a large corporation advertises their products and services, you should identify your customers and target marketing efforts specifically to them. Key lessons include:

- **Communicate early and often.** While benefits may not be available until a new jobholder begins working, it is important that intended beneficiaries be made aware of what they are and how they can help from the very beginning of their tenure in a welfare-to-work program. This will ensure that they are knowledgeable about the programs if they leave welfare for employment without contacting program staff. Knowing that support services are available may even influence their decision to take a job. Imparting this information can be made part of the welfare-to-work programs' orientation or separate workshops explaining the full range of work supports can be developed. Agencies may also consider incorporating information about these services into caseworker/client interactions and activities such as job search or job readiness classes.
- **Develop procedures for identifying and enrolling eligible families.** The most critical point for connecting new workers with post-employment services and benefits is when they first enter employment. But that's a time when intended beneficiaries may simply ask that their case be closed or may not show up for required appointments. Welfare staff may not even be aware that employment is the reason for case closure, so procedures should be set up to let the welfare office know when a client is leaving assistance to take a job and enroll the individual in appropriate programs efficiently. Some states use computer systems that automatically enroll potential

beneficiaries for post-employment benefits. Approaches developed by states include inquiring of those who request voluntary closure of their case whether they have become employed and, if earnings are confirmed, closing the case in a way that preserves their qualification for transitional benefits.

- **Train your staff.** A common problem of past welfare-to-work programs has been that staff were unclear as to who was eligible for benefits and what services could be provided once clients become employed. Administrators should ensure that staff receive consistent and thorough training on who is eligible, and how and when welfare recipients find out about these services. Staff should be made aware of the range of benefits, services, or subsidies available, as well as how the program is administered. Because staff turnover in some offices can be substantial, training schedules should also take this into account.
- **Make the provision of benefits or services a program priority.** Programs that have strong management systems in place and make participation a high priority have been successful in providing transitional benefits or post-employment services. Strong management can ensure that all program systems and staffing efforts are coordinated to maximize participation in transitional services and to see to it that no families fall through the cracks.
- **Involve employers.** Enlisting the help of employers can be an effective way to provide information to welfare recipients who no longer have any contact with the welfare agency. Employers may have a stake in assisting outreach efforts, since it may help them attract good workers; improve employee moral; raise retention rates; and reduce the costs of absenteeism, recruiting, and retraining — all at no cost to them. The Southern Institute for Children and Families found that one-on-one sessions that emphasized the benefits to employers were critical to having this group participate in outreach efforts. In New Jersey, some employers have agreed to include information about the availability of child care subsidies in paycheck envelopes. Employers can even be involved in general outreach efforts. For example, Safeway, the grocery store chain, is printing information on child health programs on grocery bags.
- **Involve community organizations.** Given the limited contact welfare agencies have with the post-employment population they try to serve, agencies in some locales have found it critical to enlist others in the community who may have frequent contact with low-income workers to help market their benefits. Informational materials can be distributed through health clinics, schools, Laundromats, child care centers, places of worship, one-stop job training centers, community groups, and recreation centers. Enlisting the services of community-based organizations for this purpose has been formalized in Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New York, where the state provides contracts or grants to local organizations to publicize specific programs and enroll eligible families. In other communities, the welfare department conducts sessions to provide information to these groups directly. The Southern Institute campaign found it effective to hold informational meetings and provide brochures and other materials that community groups could distribute to their clientele.
- **Use different modes of communication.** Relying solely on written materials to convey information about programs may not be enough. Posters, public service announcements, and the direct transmittal of information by caseworkers can be an important supplement to official documents, brochures, and fliers. Some programs have also had success with hotlines that people can call to learn more about benefits that may be available to them.
- **Know your audience.** Outreach materials should be tailored to the specific audience you are trying to reach. The Southern Institute developed three versions of its brochures, each targeted to a unique audience of welfare recipients, low-income working families, and employers of low-wage families. The Institute found that welfare recipients responded best to a straightforward message that provided minimal details but offered a hotline number they could call to get more information. Low-income workers, sensitive to the perceived stigma of being associated with a welfare agency, were found to be more responsive to materials that simply emphasized what was available for their families and contained no references to the welfare department. Finally, employers wanted information on how the programs could help them retain workers, explained how the programs worked, and made clear whether they would have to absorb any associated costs.

### **How to Promote Ongoing Participation**

Beyond developing the marketing tools to create awareness of the availability of post-employment services is the challenge of structuring the programs in ways that will promote ongoing participation — a challenge that is especially large in the case of programs that provide post-employment education and training or services that require in-person meetings.

- **Offer incentives.** Some programs have found that gift certificates, coupons for free movies, haircuts, visits to the zoo, or other inexpensive amenities can motivate families to sustain their participation. Others provide direct cash payments to encourage participants in education and training programs to maintain their regular attendance and complete their curricula.
- **Provide services that are compatible with the schedule of working parents.** Program components and case management services should be made available in the evening and on weekends to make it easier for single, working parents to take advantage of them. In Portland, Oregon, for example, Mount Hood Community College provides short-term training in the evenings for employed former TANF recipients who want to upgrade their computer skills. Programs may also want to create alternative schedules for post-employment case managers so they can work after normal business hours. Job retention specialists in Oregon's Jackson and Josephine counties carry pagers to make themselves available when clients need immediate assistance with a work-related problem. Other programs have 24-hour hotlines that clients can call if they need help. Finally, case managers should consider meeting clients at the worksite. For example, career advisors in Moving Up, an employment program operated by New York's Vocational Foundation, routinely take working clients to a "business lunch" during their normal midday break.
- **Keep the ratio of staff to new workers low.** Low caseloads are essential if staff are to keep in frequent contact with each worker and have time for in-depth, face-to-face conversations. Participants will be more inclined to stay engaged with program services if they feel their caseworker is responsive to their needs and concerns. Post-employment services focused on retention and advancement issues require a close personal relationship and an aggressive, proactive approach by staff. While it is difficult to determine the appropriate caseload size, several programs have had success with caseloads ranging from 50 to 60 clients.
- **Negotiate release time for employees to take part in on-site activities that support work.** In Salem, Oregon, a post-employment program called Up With Wages struck an agreement with participating employers to allow workers eight hours of release time to use the initiative's services through group workshops and individual appointments.
- **Structure service delivery to overcome stigma.** To counter the reluctance many people feel about being associated with a welfare program, many welfare offices offer their post-employment service programs through one-stop employment centers or other offices designed specifically for people who have jobs. In Salem, Oregon, the welfare office has divided service delivery between the North Salem office that serves only unemployed families and the South Salem Resource and Opportunity Center that serves only employed families.
- **Ensure that services are relevant to the target population.** People will be more likely to participate in your program if the services it offers are interesting and address the issues and problems that they face. The South Salem Resources and Opportunity Center in Oregon offers peer support groups and seminars on practical topics of common interest to the recently employed such as how to manage a household budget, build a good credit history, and deal with challenging workplace situations. These groups meet once a week and provide dinner and activities for the participants' children.
- **Make participation mandatory.** Clients who continue to receive cash assistance after they become employed may be required to take part in post-employment services or face sanctions if they fail to participate. Although there is little direct evidence that mandating participation in post-employment services is an effective strategy, research has shown that mandates or the threat of sanctions can increase program participation in pre-employment activities.

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## NOTES

1. Loprest, 1999; Cancian and Meyer, 2000.
2. Strawn and Martinson, 2000; Rangarajan, Schochet, and Chu, 1998; Moffitt and Slade, 1997.
3. Strawn and Martinson, 2000.
4. Ibid.
5. See Martinson, 2000.
6. See studies discussed in Strawn and Martinson, 2000.
7. Proscio and Elliott, 1999.
8. See Jenkins, 1999, for a discussion of effective bridge programs.
9. See discussion of sectoral interventions in Relave, 2000.

**QUESTION: How can I help workers find better jobs or advance with their current employer?**

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## **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

### **Programs and Organizations**

Moving Up: Vocational Foundation, Inc., 902 Broadway, New York, NY 10010; (212) 777-0700

Oregon Department of Human Services: Adult and Family Services Division, 500 Summer Street NE, Salem, OR 97301; (503) 945-5601; [www.afs.hr.state.or.us](http://www.afs.hr.state.or.us)

Southern Institute for Children and Families: 500 Taylor Street, Suite 202, Columbia, SC 29201; (803) 779-2607; [www.kidsouth.org/home.html](http://www.kidsouth.org/home.html)

Steps to Success: Mount Hood Community College, 14030 Northeast Sacramento Street, Portland Oregon, OR 97230; (503) 256-0432; [www.steps-2-success.org](http://www.steps-2-success.org)

### **Publications**

Hamilton, Gayle. 1995. *The JOBS Evaluation: Monthly Participation Rates in Three Sites and Factors Affecting Participation Levels in Welfare-to-Work Programs*. New York: MDRC

Hamilton, Gayle, and Sue Scrivener. 1999. *Promoting Participation: How to Increase Involvement in Welfare-to-Work Activities*. New York: MDRC.

Shuptrine, Sarah C., Vicki C. Grant, and Genny G. McKenzie. 1998. *Southern Regional Initiative to Improve Access to Benefits for Low Income Families With Children*. Princeton, NJ: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Strawn, Julie, and Karin Martinson. 2000. *Steady Work and Better Jobs: How to Help Low-Income Parents Sustain Employment and Advance in the Workforce*. New York: MDRC.