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Participating in a Place-Based Employment Initiative Lessons from the Jobs-Plus Demonstration in Public Housing

Linda Yuriko Kato

Is it feasible to engage large numbers of public housing residents when employment services are offered right in their own housing developments? This is one of the many questions that the Jobs-Plus Community Revitalization Initiative for Public Housing Families (“Jobs-Plus” for short) is trying to answer. Since 1998, Jobs-Plus has been under way in six cities in an attempt to raise the employment and earnings of residents of “low-work, high-welfare” public housing developments. Jobs-Plus offers residents employment-related services, rent reforms and other financial work incentives that help to “make work pay,” and community support to strengthen work-sustaining activities among residents. Operating on-site at the developments and offering service referrals to off-site partner agencies, Jobs-Plus seeks to inform all working-age residents about its services and to accommodate all who come forward for help.

Key Findings

- **Implementation challenges.** Program operators had to overcome residents’ entrenched skepticism; contend with crime and safety problems; and address wide variations in residents’ employment histories, cultural backgrounds, and service needs. Efforts to address these problems diverted staff energies away from the program’s immediate employment goals.
- **Saturation.** The sites achieved widespread awareness of Jobs-Plus among the target group of residents, enlisting some of them as outreach workers to play a key role in enhancing the program’s profile and credibility among their neighbors.
- **Residents’ engagement.** Initial delays in implementing some features of Jobs-Plus added to the challenge of getting residents to embrace the program. However, as of June 2001, over half the targeted working-age residents across the sites had officially attached themselves to Jobs-Plus either as individual enrollees or as members of a household that received rent incentives. However, as additional Jobs-Plus services and program components became available over time, attachment rates increased among the targeted populations. Jobs-Plus’s place-based approach also permitted the site staff to assist residents in a variety of informal ways that proved critical to the program’s appeal.
- **Contrasting site experiences.** Variations in residents’ participation from site to site were influenced primarily by organizational factors, including differences in the sites’ ability to achieve stable program leadership, adequate professional staffing, and continuous support of the local housing authority. At the Dayton and St. Paul sites, an impressive 69 percent and 78 percent of targeted residents, respectively, became attached to Jobs-Plus; by contrast, at the Chattanooga site and at one of the two sites in Los Angeles, only 48 percent and 33 percent of residents were attached to the program.

This report presents recommendations for how housing authorities and their partner agencies can implement Jobs-Plus’s offer of on-site employment assistance. It describes practical steps that can be taken to promote employment as an expectation that comes with tenancy among working-age residents and to mobilize community resources to address residents’ employment needs. The lessons of this report are also applicable to other place-based employment initiatives that strive to be more accessible and more responsive to residents by locating in low-income communities outside of public housing.