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The Employment Retention and Advancement Project

Results from the Valuing Individual Success and Increasing Opportunities Now (VISION) Program in Salem, Oregon

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Although much is known about how to help unemployed welfare recipients find jobs, little is known about how to help them and other low-wage workers keep jobs or advance in the labor market. This report presents an assessment of the implementation and effects at the one-year follow-up point of a program in Salem, Oregon, that aimed to promote better initial job placements, employment retention, and advancement among applicants to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program who were unemployed. The program is part of the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) project, which is testing 16 models across the country. The ERA project is being conducted by MDRC, under contract to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, with additional funding from the U.S. Department of Labor.

The Salem ERA program began operating in May 2002. Called VISION, it was jointly operated by staff from the local welfare agency and a local community college, and it was located at a One-Stop Career Center. The program provided TANF applicants with job search and placement services, including workshops that focused on future job retention and career paths. Then, once clients secured employment, VISION was to continue with postemployment services to promote job retention and career advancement. VISION is being evaluated using a random assignment research design whereby eligible individuals were assigned, through a lottery-like process, either to a program group, whose members participated in VISION, or to a control group, whose members participated in Oregon's standard welfare-to-work program (known as JOBS).

Key Findings

- **A pre- to postemployment model of providing retention and advancement services was difficult for program operators to implement.** During the preemployment period, VISION had more frequent contact with clients and delivered additional workshops and other services that had a strong retention and advancement message. A high proportion of VISION group members participated in group job search. However, VISION staff struggled to develop and implement the postemployment retention and advancement component. They had a difficult time managing both employed and unemployed clients, and the bulk of staff time was spent on preemployment responsibilities, particularly eligibility issues and individual crises.

- **VISION operated in a difficult environment.** Implementation was further complicated by the fact that the program operated in a difficult economic and fiscal environment and suffered from staff turnover and cutbacks, funding shortages, and management issues.
- **VISION did not achieve its goals of helping participants secure better jobs and advance in the labor market.** VISION did not generate statistically significant impacts on employment, retention, or advancement during the first follow-up year. However, the increased attention and longer-term contact provided by staff to VISION clients led to their having greater access to public assistance — including TANF, food stamps, and public health insurance — during the first year of follow-up.

These results are not the final word on the VISION program in Salem. MDRC will continue to track the impacts of VISION using unemployment insurance records.