

# SUPPORTIVE SERVICES AND THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SECTOR OF DETROIT

A WHITE PAPER

MARCELLA S. FOX  
AMERICORPS VISTA, Michigan Nonprofit Association

## Abstract

The workforce development sector of Detroit has the responsibility of preparing Detroit's residents for the current and emerging job markets. Supportive services, however, are still being perceived as a miscellaneous expense that does not have a significant impact on the outcomes of workforce development programs. If these services continue to be regarded in this manner, workforce development organizations will fail to meet their objectives.

The workforce development sector, using empirical evidence from various studies, should advocate for its clients and programs. Funders need to be persuaded to include supportive services in their funding streams. The need for supportive services is immense. In order to be efficient and effective, organizations need to collaborate and employ collective impact strategies. Awarding sufficient funding for supportive services will yield greater outcomes and improve program design.

## Introduction

Stephen, a 19-year-old, high school dropout wants to enroll in an auto mechanic training program. A new student advisor was able to reassure him that he qualified for a program that would cover the cost of tuition and fees. Stephen, however, had concerns about the cost of transportation and supplies needed to complete the program. If he were unable to get to the school or obtain the supplies needed to complete the assignments, why bother enrolling?

Ashley, a single mother of two, has successfully passed the GED exam. Her tutor has encouraged her to enroll in the nursing program at the local community college. Becoming a registered nurse would enable her to provide a stable income for her family. But the problem is she needs assistance with locating and paying for a licensed child-care provider. Without high-quality child care she cannot enroll in community college courses.

Without supportive services, both Stephen and Ashley will not be able to receive the training necessary to improve their skills. Supportive services are essential to the success of any program. If clients do not have access to food, clothing and shelter, they are not able to focus on education or job training activities. The unfortunate result is that many students stop attending classes or drop out (officially or unofficially).

They will use all of their time and energy to sustain themselves and educational training will be seen to be of little worth. This confirms the theory known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which holds; that people instinctually seek to fulfill the most basic of needs (food and shelter) first (Maslow, 1943). Not helping people to meet these basic

needs has a negative impact on education and job training retention rates and the funding of workforce development programs.

Supportive services are not only important to those seeking training, they are invaluable to those actively engaged in job searches. Those seeking work need clothing for interviews, and if they obtain a position, work clothing and sometimes required safety items.

There are other barriers to employment and self-sufficiency, but the need for basic resources that enable individuals to survive while looking for employment and to remain employed once they are hired, are the focus of this paper. The need for supportive services has been identified as a primary need for clients and a secondary need for organizations (Awalt, et al., 2015).

### **How supportive services are essential to success**

Dave, a returning citizen, completed a carpentry program and is now ready to begin his job search. After one week of intense job searching he was asked by an employer to come in to be interviewed. But he did not have the appropriate clothing for a job interview. Should he appear in his jeans and running shoes?

Jack needs steel-toed boots. He has priced them, and they cost approximately \$100. Jack does not have the money to purchase the boots. The plant manager has assured Jack if he arrives on time, is properly dressed and ready to work; he will get the job.

This job is an opportunity for Jack to get back on track after being laid off for the past 10 months. He really needs it to save his home. Where does he go for help? Will the organization be able to get the boots for him in time?

Jane is a recently divorced mother of three. Her ex-husband had a drinking problem and would neglect to renew the license plate or pay the auto insurance. Jane would use the car to pick up their children from school or to do the shopping. On several occasions she was ticketed by the police because the car did not have insurance coverage. As a result, Jane's driver's license was suspended.

After her divorce, Jane was offered a position as a paralegal. But there is one barrier to obtaining this job --- she needed to have a valid driver's license. Without a job, she would be unable to pay the fees that would restore her license. Without the license she would be unable to secure the position that would provide financial independence for her family.

No one could successfully argue against the importance of preparing people to enter a competitive workforce. But as with the road to job attainment, can have barriers. These barriers are frustrating for the clients, the organizations seeking to help them, and the collective workforce development sector. The elimination of barriers is essential to success. It has been proven that full financial support of supportive services programs has a positive correlation with desired outcomes (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1998).

The Detroit workforce development sector has repeatedly identified three barriers that have proved to be the most challenging for its clients (Awalt, et al., 2015). Transportation, child care and housing. These three critical areas will be examined here.

### **The need for Transportation**

The lack of affordable, reliable and safe transportation is the barrier that is most presented. This is especially true in areas where public transportation services are limited or underfunded. The inadequacies of the public transportation system in Detroit and its surrounding areas are the topic of many meetings and very little action.

Detroit is the largest city in the state of Michigan both geographical (142.9 square miles) and by population and has an unemployment rate of 10.2 percent (April 2015). “Jobs are only useful if you have a way to get to them” as stated in the book “Overcoming Barriers to Employment Success” (John J. Liptak, 2009). If you are unemployed or receiving public assistance, there isn’t any money, to cover transportation costs, after paying for basic living expenses.

Passenger buses are the primary mode for many city residents. However, only a small portion of workers may be able to use this antiquated transportation system to seek and secure work. Thirty days of bus travel has a cost of \$70 to \$100 per month. When you are unemployed and seeking work, this is an expense you just cannot pay. Clients who are required to seek work or training are often not provided the means to do so. A job is needed to pay for transportation expenses, and one cannot secure the job without having reliable transportation.

For those organizations that are able to provide assistance in the form of bus tickets, gas cards or checks for the purchase of fuel, clients' school or job training attendance is more consistent. In comparison, programs that cannot offer these services experience as much as a 50 percent lower rate of enrollment or attendance. Attendance has proven to be a strong indicator of achievement within program evaluations, and successful programs have higher retention rates. Clients with higher scores are easier to place into jobs and they retain their positions longer.

### **The need for child care**

In addition to those with transportation needs, another large group of underemployed/unemployed people in need of supportive services is parents. This group is not limited to single parents. Two parent households, parents who want to participate in job training and adults serving as legal guardians to minor children also share this problem. Parents in all of these categories may find themselves without adequate resources and support.

A lack of child care has a direct and immediate impact on participation in the workforce. Parents who lack child-care resources, are simply unable to take advantage of job and training opportunities. The cost of child care is in many states, more than all other necessary household expenses. "The cost of child care fees for two children exceeds housing costs for homeowners with a mortgage in 23 states and the *District of Columbia*"

(Fraga & McCready, 2014). Many parents who cannot afford the full expense of child care often work reduced hours and that lowering household income overall.

Subsidized child care payments through the Michigan Department of Human Services are extremely difficult to qualify for and the payment amounts vary. Many parents never receive any assistance. Parents who do receive assistance and must utilize substandard care often face another barrier for gainful employment. When they have concerns about the safety and welfare of their children, it affects their performance on the job or during job training. If their concerns becomes heightened they are more likely to have poor attendance and finally withdraw completely from employment or job training.

### **The need for housing**

Housing is a fundamental need for everyone, regardless of occupation or income source. When a person needing employment or job training is also homeless, the barriers to obtaining a job and a home can be or seem insurmountable. Living in a temporary residence has a profound effect on the stability of someone's' life. The lack of structure casts a shadow over all other daily functions.

It is not the case that all homeless citizens experience mental illness or some type of disability; situational poverty is most often the factor of the problem. Despite the many barriers that people experiencing homelessness face, many want to work. They are willing to participate in job training and search activities. But without the necessary supports in place, they are unable to begin to work their way out of poverty.



To secure affordable, safe and stable housing is an unreachable goal without a job (National Alliance to end Homelessness , 2013). Providing the services that could help a homeless person secure a stable living arrangement is the first step in assisting the person on the journey to independence. Stable housing is the foundation for well-being in multiple areas of life. Studies verify that when you have affordable and safe housing; medical care, transportation and nutrition have been shown to improve (Lubell, Crain, & Cohen , 2007). In other words, providing effective supportive services transforms lives.

Once people have housing, their focus can be redirected to job training and education. Research has shown that “...with the appropriate blend of assessment, case management, employment, training, housing and support services, a substantial proportion of homeless individuals can secure and retain jobs...” (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009 ).

### **Why current supportive services are inadequate**

With all of the research available to reinforce the practice of providing supportive services, why is it not being adequately? There are two related reasons: overburdened workforce development agencies and lack of funding.

The goal of Detroit-based workforce development agencies are to use sector-based strategies to help provide a flexible, innovative and effective workforce. They work persistently to match skills to needs. They provide a wide array of programs for a wide range of job seekers. Besides education and training initiatives, many agencies offer

additional services such as case management, career development and certification courses.

But Detroit workforce development organizations are overburdened and may not offer the supportive services their clients need. When individuals do not get these services, an organization may begin to problem-solve how to help its clients obtain the services they need. The organization's priority then shifts away from education, training and employment — its primary mission.

Currently, the workforce development sector tries to fund supportive services for its clients by soliciting donations, diverting some of its capital and using unrestricted funds. But since, providing supportive services is not the primary mission of workforce development agencies; they are stretching their internal resources to the point of distress by attempting to fulfill this role.

Since supportive services are essential for client success and the core operations of workforce development programs, why are funders ignoring this need? It may be that many funders do not view these services as necessary. In that case, it is necessary to educate them on the link between supportive services and successful workforce development programs.

They need to understand that without supportive services for clients, workforce development agencies cannot accomplish its primary objective: to provide education and job training in the community that will provide a viable workforce that can support future business and industry.

Among funders that do recognize the need for supportive services, may say that the responsibility for providing these services lies with charities and social service agencies. Detroit workforce development organizations without funding to provide supportive services often encounter problems in referring their clients for these services.

Many of the organizations refer their clients to 211, a free, confidential service that connects people with community-based organizations across the state offering thousands of programs and services. The problem with referring clients to 211 are: (1) There is no accountability for ensuring the delivery of the needed service. (2) The clients are often shuffled around because, there is no coordination of care. (3) The need is so great that the United Way of Southeastern Michigan is unable to provide resources to all those in need. Referring clients to another agency or organization is passing off the problem because of a lack of a viable solution.

It may be that of the 170 self-identified workforce development agencies in the city of Detroit, a vast majority have not presented a compelling argument for the funding of supportive services. Much of the funding for these agencies is in the form of grants, which have specific parameters.

It is often the case, especially when an agency applies to foundations for funding, there is room for miscellaneous items or the grant has broad terms. When this occurs it is an opportunity to secure additional funding for supportive services. It is often true, that in order to acquire something — one must ask.

## **Closing thoughts**

Many funding and program problems can be mitigated through collaborative practices or collective impact. When organizations become client focused, they remove processes that are duplicative, inefficient and/or ineffective. The key focus changes from satisfying the funders' requirements to generating successful outcomes for individuals.

The workforce development sector of Detroit must be bold and advocate on its programs and clients. Making a strong case for funding supportive services is the first step. Workforce development organizations in Detroit must also be willing to progress past the need for self-preservation. Their primary mandate must be to work towards the elimination of barriers and move towards to gainful, sustainable employment.

There will always be a need for workforce development programs and services. Supportive services must become an integrated component of the funding stream in order to elevate Detroit's workforce to a superior standard.

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