

KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief

**Increasing the Number of Children Whose
Parents Have Stable Employment**

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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When parents have secure employment and earn enough to meet their families' basic needs, children benefit in many ways. They are more likely to have decent and stable housing, good nutrition, and adequate health care. Secure employment supports healthy development in other ways as well. It can alleviate parental stress, prevent depression, and improve family functioning, thus creating a more positive home setting for children. In addition, going to work can put parents in contact with wider social networks, which not only contribute to parents' physical and mental health (Singer & Ryff, 2001), but also expand families' access to information and resources that can help support their children's growth and education.

Today, many children grow up without these advantages. In 2007, more than 24 million children (33 percent) lived in households in which no parent had full-time and year-round employment (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009). The economic recession that began in late 2007 has driven the unemployment rate higher and placed more children at risk. Jobs are especially scarce for those with low levels of education. In June 2009, when the overall unemployment rate reached 9.5 percent, the unemployment rate for adult workers without a high school diploma was 15.5 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009).

Historically, workforce development programs have focused primarily on job training and placement. While these are sound objectives, participants have too often ended up in low-wage jobs with limited prospects for advancement. More effective approaches not only prepare participants for the work force, but also address obstacles to employment, take neighborhood effects into account, focus on retention, and consider employers' bottom-line concerns.

This *KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief* outlines eight broad strategies for workforce development that are rooted in lessons learned from recent practice and research, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative:

- **Provide comprehensive employment and educational services geared to low-skill job seekers**
- **Add rungs at the bottom of the career ladder**
- **Focus relentlessly on job quality**
- **Support job retention and advancement**
- **Address the needs of both workers and employers**
- **Expand child care options for working families**
- **Address transportation issues**
- **Take a systemic approach to workforce development**

- **Provide comprehensive employment and educational services geared to low-skill job seekers**

In the late 1990s, many parents left the welfare rolls and found employment. Experts credit welfare reform legislation, a strong economy, and an array of policies designed to make work pay. But welfare reform took place at a time when demand for low-skill workers was relatively strong. Since 2000, such jobs have been harder to find, especially in the context of the economic downturn that began in 2007. Moreover, the more employable welfare recipients have already left the rolls; those who remain tend to face significant barriers to work, including very low skill levels, poor physical or mental health, and sick children. As welfare recipients continue to reach their time limits, they are especially vulnerable to economic upheaval (Ridley et al., 2008). Federal funding for work supports, including child care, is crucial since most states no longer have the funds that were available in the boom years of the late 1990s.

Today, high unemployment rates across the country translate into large numbers of out-of-work people who could benefit from efforts that would bolster their educational and employment-related skills (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2009). Economic recovery efforts offer opportunities for investment in the future.

Ensure that low-income workers have access to jobs created as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—and the skills they need to secure them.

Many of the jobs to be created—such as those in construction and other infrastructure-related activities—will require some specialized training. Federal funds earmarked for job creation could be expanded to provide training and transitional work experience for unemployed low-income workers aimed at developing the skills required for these new jobs (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2009).

Ensure that eligible low-income families have knowledge of and access to available work-support programs. Many eligible low-wage families—particularly those with no experience with the welfare system—do not take part in financial work support programs for a variety of reasons, including complex application processes that require transportation and time away from jobs; forms that are not available in languages other than English; insufficient knowledge about the programs for which they are eligible; and the stigma often associated with receiving public benefits (Miller et al., 2004).

Create coherent, coordinated employment services. Many states provide at least some of the services job seekers need to locate, prepare for, and retain good jobs. However, when these services exist, they are often scattered among multiple bureaucracies and supported with separate funding streams. By coordinating and consolidating services, states can promote more permanent transitions into the labor force and higher paying jobs (The Urban Institute, 2006).

Strengthen “fast-entry” programs. In the wake of welfare reform, numerous states redesigned their jobs initiatives to emphasize rapid job entry rather than participation in longer-term education and training programs. Often known as “work-first” programs, these initiatives are rooted in the conviction that immediate entry into the labor market is the most direct path to self-sufficiency. Such programs are geared at people who have

marketable skills and are ready to join the work force. For many job seekers, especially those with little or no work experience, such rapid-entry programs are not sufficient. If they live in neighborhoods where unemployment is high, they may lack basic knowledge of the world of work or the kinds of social networks that lead to good jobs. Such programs need to be redesigned to serve inexperienced or low-skill workers and address impediments to successful employment.

Provide personal support, addressing a wide range of impediments to employment.

As one research team observes, while the rhetoric of self-sufficiency is appealing, "...it collides with an exceptionally difficult reality for those individuals and families who struggle to escape poverty even as they work, or who cycle in and out of employment or on and off of welfare" (Heinrich & Scholz, 2009, p.1). Researchers identify many obstacles to work that have long-term adverse effects on the low-income job seekers, lack of a high school diploma or equivalent, lack of recent work experience, physical and/or mental health challenges, domestic violence, lack of transportation, and limited English-language skills (Lee & Vinokur, 2007). Such barriers are particularly steep for women in one-parent families (Blank, 2007; Lee & Vinokur, 2007; Nam, 2005). Some four million children in one-parent families rely on mothers who neither work nor receive welfare benefits (Blank, 2007). As they transition to work and face the challenges of balancing family and workplace duties, parents may need personal support through intensive case management, individual counseling, supervisor training, mentoring, peer support groups, hotlines, or Employee Assistance Programs.

Address practical and cultural issues. Many job seekers, especially recent immigrants, may also need help with practical issues, such as finding appropriate clothes, negotiating transportation, creating resumes, preparing for interviews, or completing necessary paperwork. They may also need help recognizing and meeting cultural challenges, such as learning to grasp a sense of time or space that differs from their own, learning about work habits and codes of behavior that are valued in most workplaces, and acquiring habits of language and speech expected by employers.

Teach 21st century skills. Basic workplace skills are important, but not sufficient. Relatively few adult education and job training programs are equipped to provide job seekers—particularly those with limited basic skills—with the full spectrum of competencies required for success in today's workplaces. These competencies go well beyond basic literacy, arithmetic, and computer skills to include written and verbal communication, time management, problem solving, personal responsibility and the capacity to work well with others. Employers report that too often, even high school and college graduates are not well prepared in these areas (DiMartino & Castaneda, 2007). Effective programs focus a large share of their resources on job development and skill building, both of which tend to improve job seekers' chances of securing jobs with higher wages, benefits and opportunities for advancement (Parrot & Sherman, 2006).

Address the needs of low-income immigrant families, especially English language proficiency. Studies show that immigrant working families with children are twice as likely as native-born families to be considered low-income (with earnings less than twice the federal poverty level) (Golden, 2005). For these parents, English-language ability is a

key to secure employment. Limited English-language proficiency narrows employment options and is the factor most closely linked with low earning potential and poverty in immigrant families (Koralek & Parnes, 2008). In addition to struggling financially, immigrant families often have trouble learning about or accessing benefits to which they and their children are entitled.

Recognize the link between access to health care and successful job entry. Health problems, mental health issues, and drug or alcohol dependency are major obstacles to steady employment. Yet, until they find jobs, many adults lack access to appropriate services. Expanding access to comprehensive health care is therefore a key to increasing employment. In theory, Medicaid has extended health services to large numbers of low-income Americans, but beneficiaries in many states face persistent access problems. Equity remains a major challenge as coverage for adults varies markedly across states. Access to employer-sponsored health coverage is far more likely in some states than in others. Innovative approaches to expanding health coverage and access for adults are sorely needed (Golden, 2005).

- **Add rungs at the bottom of the career ladder**

Job seekers may benefit from training opportunities that simulate work. They may need opportunities to learn the routines and habits associated with work and to build an employment record that can help them transition to paid jobs. Effective strategies include:

Support transitional jobs programs that offer supportive work environments. More than 30 states and many communities across the nation are making provisions for subsidized transitional jobs programs to expand work opportunities and overcome barriers for low-skill workers. These programs typically provide work opportunities along with close, supportive supervision for a wide range of low-skill workers, including welfare recipients, homeless persons, at-risk youth, parolees, refugees, immigrants and the disabled (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2009). The state of Washington operates a Community Jobs program that has had positive results. In Minnesota, a paid transitional jobs program that offers job skills assistance along with intensive case management was found to produce better results than the state's standard employment assistance program (Baider and Frank, 2006). The New Hope program in Milwaukee provides community service jobs for those unable to find employment in the private sector (Miller et al., 2008).

Provide work-based training. Another approach provides short-term training that combines basic academics with vocational instruction. An example is the vocational training model used by the Center for Employment Training (CET), which provides job training and placement to unemployed and low-income workers of all ages at its training sites in 30 locations in several states.

Provide incremental work experience and/or community service. This has been referred to as a “job safety net”—publicly funded, low-wage service jobs that offer a sense of purpose and a pathway to employment for people who want to work but cannot find jobs or lack the skills they need to be employed. Many welfare recipients are not

immediately ready for private-sector employment or the education, training, and work activities typically provided by welfare-to-work initiatives. However, they can benefit from work experiences that serve as steppingstones to more traditional jobs or training programs. Chicago's Project Match is an example of a community-based welfare-to-work program designed to help those who are least ready to get and keep jobs.

Ensure that workforce development program staff members are culturally competent. Programs need to develop innovative strategies for integrating issues of race and ethnicity into their own projects as well as in all facets of workforce development, including recruitment, job placement, worker retention and advancement, and employer relations.

Use TANF funds to support the developmental disability system. Developmental disability work programs, both sheltered and supportive, may be appropriate for some job seekers who are unable to transition from welfare to work or to keep a job due to cognitive disabilities.

- **Focus relentlessly on job quality**

Many families struggle to make ends meet even when a parent has a job. In fact, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of low-income families with children have at least one parent who is employed for more than half the year (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009). Many parents are underemployed (with part-time or part-year jobs). Some underemployed workers report that they are unable to find full-time, year-round work; others cite disability or the need to care for family members (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007). Many other parents are employed in service jobs that, even in a booming economy, tend to offer low wages, limited benefits, and fewer opportunities for advancement. In short, these workers lack the economic security that is important for all families. Workforce development programs and policies should seek to ensure that all working families earn enough to meet their basic needs.

Move beyond job entry alone as a performance indicator. Many workforce development initiatives gauge performance on the basis of the number of job placements they make. Leaving the welfare rolls and gaining employment are important but insufficient steps toward economic security and family well-being. When they measure success, programs need to link job entry with one or more indicators of job quality, such as earnings level or benefits received (Stevens, 2001).

Adopt an approach to defining a “family-supporting wage” that reflects cost of living in a given location. The federal poverty line has often been used to gauge whether families have enough income to meet their basic needs. However, there is now broad consensus that an income at the poverty line cannot support most working families. New tools have been devised to provide a more realistic measure. Basic family budgets have been developed for specific communities and family constellations (e.g., one parent/one child, two parents/two children, etc.) (Cauthen & Fass, 2007). These tools calculate what it takes to have a no-frills standard of living that is safe and decent. For the state of New York, for example, the Economic Policy Institute has determined that a family of four in rural New York needs about twice the poverty level to meet its basic needs, but in Long

Island, a basic budget for the same family would be about three times the federal poverty level. Some states, including New York, are now moving toward this approach to measuring economic need (Fremstad, Ray & Hye, 2008).

Improve working conditions for employed parents whose earnings cannot support their families. In 2007, 18 percent of the nation's working families with children were considered low-income—with earnings equal to or less than twice the federal poverty line, or \$41,300 for a family of four in 2007 (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009; Health and Human Services, 2007). These families struggle to make ends meet despite the fact that at least one parent worked 50 or more weeks during the previous year. Compared with families earning a bit more—between two and three times the federal poverty line—these families find it more difficult to make rent or mortgage payments, put food on the table, and afford health care (Golden, 2005). Research shows that many low-income workers never move out of low-wage jobs, even as they gain experience and seniority (The Urban Institute, 2006).

Promote working conditions that allow parents to meet family responsibilities. All working families face the challenges of balancing employment and family responsibilities. For low-income workers, this can be especially stressful. Most working parents with incomes below the poverty line get no vacation, sick or personal days (Levin-Epstein, 2006). Studies show that workplace flexibility and paid leave can help employers to attract and retain qualified workers while enabling low-income parents to meet their responsibilities both at home and in the workplace (Levin-Epstein, 2006).

- **Support job retention and advancement**

For workers with few marketable skills and little experience, keeping a job often turns out to be even more difficult than finding one. In the absence of support services, those who make the transition from welfare to work often lose their jobs soon after landing them.

Incorporate job retention into the mission of all agencies and organizations involved in workforce development. Newly placed workers must be closely monitored and provided with support and follow-up services, including support groups, telephone calls and meetings, as well as financial, housing, and child care assistance. Employers who understand the negative impact of high turnover on the bottom line need to take a more active role in ensuring that entry-level workers from diverse backgrounds succeed in the workplace. Employees need to be encouraged to stay in jobs and establish a stable employment history, which can lead to greater earning potential and career advancement. Both employers and employees need to learn about one another's concerns to minimize the misunderstandings and conflicts that lead to high turnover. In addition, the success of agencies responsible for employee placement should be based on retention, not just job placement.

Factor into policymaking the role of supports such as subsidized child care and health insurance in creating job stability. Research on welfare leavers shows a “boomerang effect”: One in four people who left the welfare rolls in 2000 or 2001 were again receiving assistance in 2002. Roughly half of those returning recipients had

reported leaving welfare for work. Compared with those who keep their jobs, welfare returnees are far more likely to be in poor health, have low levels of education, and to have young children. Employees who received such supports as subsidized child care and health insurance were less likely to return to welfare (Golden, 2005).

Provide re-employment services. Workers who lose their jobs may need assistance in order to learn from their experiences and apply for a new job.

Ensure that successful workers have the supports needed for advancement.

Researchers say that up to three-quarters of employed welfare leavers perform at least as well as their coworkers, and their job-turnover rate is extremely low. However, welfare leavers typically start out earning low wages and have limited opportunities to move up the job ladder. In many cases, these workers need support to develop the skills associated with career advancement. A smaller group of welfare leavers have difficulty keeping jobs due to absenteeism, poor attitudes toward work, and problems with coworkers. This group needs targeted on-the-job help or other counseling (Golden, 2005).

- **Focus on the needs of both workers and employers**

Effective workforce development strategies have a dual customer focus: They increase the likelihood that entry-level workers will have job success while improving the odds that employers will meet their bottom-line goals. A key lesson from Casey's Jobs Initiative was that employers must be engaged in all phases of workforce development. When job-training programs fail to engage employers, the result is a workforce that does not meet employers' needs (Gibson, 2000).

Seek the help of “brokers” who can link community-based organizations engaged in workforce development with the business community. A critical challenge for workforce development programs is to broker new relationships with potential employers and encourage them to work in partnership with community-based organizations in training and hiring unemployed and underemployed people. Improving communication across the cultural divide that separates employers from community-based organizations and agencies is a related task. Employers need to see how their company or organization will benefit from changes in their workplace culture, including their hiring, training, and retention policies. They need to understand the challenges that low-income, entry-level workers frequently face in relation to housing, child care, and transportation. At the same time, workforce initiatives need to appreciate employers' concerns and constraints.

Collaborate with Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs). In the past, Private Industry Councils (PICs) managed the local operations of federal employment and training programs. Since the enactment of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, these bodies were reorganized and given broader authority. The new organizations, called Workforce Investment Boards, are councils of business and community leaders charged with the governance and oversight of employment-related education and training programs in states, cities, and counties. Local and state WIBs have embraced this broader role and are important partners for organizations committed to workforce development. WIBs have begun to consider local job seekers and employers as their customers, and are reaching out to both groups. Both state and local WIBs are engaged in strategic planning efforts,

with state boards focusing on policy development and local boards making progress in assessing local workforce needs.

Challenge restrictive hiring policies. It may be possible to persuade employers to change hiring policies, giving greater weight to job-related competencies and less weight to traditional requirements. Casey's Jobs Initiative found, for example, that employers may be more willing to rethink restrictive policies once they have experienced success in hiring people without high school diplomas or ex-offenders (Fleischer, 2001).

- **Expand working families' options for child care and after-school care**

Numerous studies show that workers in low-income families are more likely to both get and keep jobs if they have help meeting child care costs. When low-income workers do not have child care assistance, they run the risk of returning to welfare, building up large amounts of debt, having to make do with child care that may be lower quality and less stable, or having to choose between child care and necessities such as food or rent (Matthews, 2006). In addition, many jobs available to low-skill workers take place during nontraditional hours, when child care is typically not available (Szekeley, 2004). Efforts to bolster employment opportunities for low-income families need to encompass strategies designed to help parents find quality, available, reliable, affordable child care. Key strategies include the following:

Incorporate early childhood services into public assistance plans. Help with child care costs allows low-income working parents to stay employed. States are taking varied approaches to this challenges, including investing TANF and TANF maintenance-of-effort (MOE) funds, fully matching Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDF) allocations, using Social Services Block Grant funds, and spending state general revenues. In 2005, California invested approximately \$2 billion in child care using TANF and CCDF block grant dollars, enabling working parents to earn approximately \$13 billion (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2008). Some states and cities have taken innovative approaches, providing not only child care subsidies but also intensive home visiting programs, parent education, and other services (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2008).

Increase the number of licensed child care spaces. Unlicensed, informal child care is often of lower quality than the care provided in regulated settings. But many families turn to unlicensed, informal forms of child care in order to meet new work requirements. States can help promote children's well-being by encouraging families to use licensed caregivers whenever possible, and by paying subsidies only for children cared for in regulated settings. At the same time, states need to expand the number of licensed child care openings (Rigby, Ryan & Brooks-Gunn, 2007).

Help parents make good choices for their children. Many states have funded resource and referral agencies not only to provide information and referral services to families, but to undertake a range of quality improvement activities. In addition, some have launched special products or campaigns aimed at educating parents about the value of quality child care programs.

Provide support to family child care providers. A number of states have funded the development and support of family child care networks through local recruitment efforts, training, and technical assistance. Others have taken a different approach, providing mini-grants for starting up family child care homes and funding mentoring projects.

Expand out-of-school-time programs for school-aged children. Work development efforts need to expand programs that provide developmentally appropriate care to children when schools are closed but parents are working. For most working families, school and job schedules are out of synch. Out-of-school-time and community school initiatives have begun to address this need, but fiscal constraints have resulted in budget cuts, with most programs nationwide reporting increased demand and diminished capacity. Sixty percent of programs cite losses in funding and 10 percent say that funding losses will necessitate program cutbacks or closures (Afterschool Alliance, 2009).

- **Address transportation issues**

States have used many different strategies for filling the transportation gap of people moving from welfare to work, including providing loans to purchase vehicles, reimbursing workers for job-related transportation expenses, providing vans to accommodate locations or schedules not served by public transportation, and offering opportunities for individuals interested in becoming transportation providers. Despite such efforts, transportation continues to be a daunting challenge for many working families. A 2006 study of low-income single mothers in Pittsburgh confirmed the important role that transportation played in their work lives. It found that those women who commuted to work in private vehicles had more positive employment outcomes than those who rode the bus—even when the bus was easily accessible from both home and work. Moreover, the study concluded that transportation arrangements had a greater effect on employment outcomes than either work experience or education level (Lichtenwalter et al., 2006).

Change rules regarding car ownership for families receiving assistance. While most states no longer count the value of at least one vehicle when calculating a family's eligibility for assistance, others continue to impose limits of the fair market value of the vehicles owned by families receiving TANF funds. In some states, the ceiling on the value of a sanctioned vehicle is so low that families are, in essence, barred from owning reliable means of transportation. Ten states exclude vehicles valued at \$5,000 or less (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, undated).

Improve public transportation systems to allow access to jobs outside of cities. In recognition of the fact that welfare caseloads have become more concentrated in inner-city and rural areas while most job growth has occurred in the suburbs, the Department of Labor's Welfare-to-Work initiative recommended expanding urban transit systems to serve "reverse" and "off-hours" commuters. Other strategies include creating rural transit/van programs and using school buses during off hours to transport low-income workers to and from job sites.

In addition to improving public transportation systems programs can also foster entrepreneurship in the transportation field by providing training or microenterprise

assistance to small business owners. They can also help low-income workers buy, finance, or repair cars to reduce barriers to steady work.

- **Take a systemic approach to workforce development.**

Increasing the number of children whose parents have stable employment requires systemic change. Connecting low-income residents with high-quality jobs that offer career advancement requires buy-in from all affected stakeholders—low-income workers, employers, elected officials, community-based organizations, government agencies, and others. No single institution or delivery system can improve the lives of families that live in areas of concentrated poverty. The following strategies, along with commitment and collaborative effort, can lead to lasting change:

Build on the strengths of families and communities. The capacity of a workforce development program to produce results, hinges not only on its design and implementation, but also on the strengths and challenges of the community in which it takes shape (Molina & Nelson, 2001). Workforce development initiatives must be sufficiently powerful and broad to address the complex realities of urban neighborhoods where job opportunities may be scarce. This phenomenon, which William Julius Wilson has referred to as “the disappearance of work,” stems from the decline in manufacturing and the movement of jobs to the suburbs, leaving residents of inner-city neighborhoods at a greater disadvantage than in the past (Wilson, 2006). Workforce development efforts must therefore address not only the capacity of job seekers to meet employers’ needs, but also the capacity of urban labor markets to work for residents (Fleischer, 2001). By building on community assets—including employers, formal and informal networks, congregations and other affinity groups, human service providers, and neighbor-to-neighbor relationships—programs can help communities become places that support work.

Support efforts to integrate workforce development with human services and education. Because unemployment and underemployment are intertwined with many other social, economic, and environmental issues, workforce development programs can be most effective when they deal holistically with job seekers, their families, and communities. Service integration requires many changes in how systems are managed and financed. Many changes in rule-making, data-systems management, and staff development are needed. Private- and public-sector organizations can provide technical assistance to community-based service reform efforts, helping them plan, implement, document, and evaluate system changes.

Involve all stakeholders in planning workforce development efforts. All planning and program design efforts, as well as efforts to influence government policies, should take into account the perspectives of diverse stakeholders and reach out to potential allies, including labor, faith-based groups, civil rights organizations, and women’s groups.

Sustain public engagement efforts. Make consistent efforts to infuse workforce development issues into national and local policy discussions, stressing the idea that a substantial rise in employment levels will lead to broader community improvements. A chorus of voices is often needed to get this message across. For example, the Center for

Community Change's Workers' Alliance for a Just Economy is a national collaboration of grassroots groups working in cities across the U.S. The Alliance coordinates activities at the state and local levels that keep workforce development issues in the public consciousness.

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Online resources:

Center for Community Change

www.communitychange.org

Center for Law and Social Policy

www.clasp.org

The Finance Project

www.financeproject.org

MDRC (Founded as Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation)

www.mdrc.org

National Association for Welfare Research and Statistics

www.nawrs.org

National Center for Children in Poverty

www.nccp.org

National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices

www.nga.org

Neighborhood Funders Group

www.nfg.org

Urban Institute

www.urbaninstitute.org

Welfare Information Network

www.welfareinfo.org