

## Ensuring that the Transitional Job is a Developmental Experience

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### Program Technical Assistance Series

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Wage-paying, time-limited employment is the Transitional Job (TJ) strategy's defining feature and what sets it apart from other workforce strategies. Transitional employment is intended and designed to meet multiple critical needs for low-income people with barriers to employment, such as providing stabilizing income, offering a recent employment reference, and establishing eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), to name a few. Perhaps most importantly, the TJ employment should be a developmental, educational experience in which participants learn, apply and practice basic work-readiness skills to meet the demands and expectations of the workplace.

Ensuring that the transitional work experience is developmental should be a top priority of TJ programs. The transitional work experience should be designed from the outset to serve a developmental function beyond ordinary subsidized employment. Many programs adopt a theory of change to help inform the process by which this developmental progress takes place. Regardless of the specific nature of the transitional work such as program structure or industry sector, the goal for people completing TJ programs is to emerge with improved employability and strengthened job skills in addition to a few months of earned income and an employment reference. Developmental objectives include:

- developing work-readiness “soft skills” that are learned, modeled, reinforced and practiced in the transitional work experience, such as improved punctuality, cooperation with coworkers and supervisors, and personal presentation;
- training for “hard skills” that can be job-specific or transferrable to other entry-level positions; and
- helping participants who have been disconnected from the workforce to come to view themselves as workers, and have improved self-esteem and confidence in their value to employers.

TJ subsidized employment takes place in the context of the broader TJ strategy —resulting in a model that is more than the sum of its parts

While subsidized employment helps define the TJ model, it is important to remember that this work experience is embedded within a set of work-readiness training and supportive service offerings. Without a doubt, some of the value that transitional employment lends to the TJ model is that paid employment acts as an **incentive** for vulnerable and low-income individuals to engage and stay engaged in training, education, and job search activities. By helping to address the chaos and uncertainty that accompanies poverty and unemployment, TJ's wage-paid work and supportive services offer the **stability** to remain in the program and receive coaching and training to build employability skills.

The culmination of these impacts ideally results in individuals who are better equipped to get, keep and advance in family-sustaining jobs.

### **How can TJ program providers ensure that transitional employment is a developmental experience?**

While a substantial amount of rigorous research has been performed on the overall efficacy of the TJ strategy, there is little research evidence indicating which specific practices and elements within the transitional employment experience itself facilitate learning and development among participants. The Department of Labor's Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration Project is expected to provide some answers to this question by studying the impacts of several innovations and enhancements to the basic TJ model, including enhancements to the transitional employment component. However, much can be learned from the experiences and observations of the professionals delivering and studying the TJ strategy in the field. In order to identify the programming recommendations below, the NTJN looked to multiple experts in the field, including both researchers and highly effective practitioners.

#### **Transitional Jobs Program Structures: Impacts on Participant Development**

TJ programs provide transitional work experience in a variety of ways. These different structures can affect the ways in which programs ensure developmental, experiential learning takes place.

In programs using **scattered employment sites**—in which participants work in for-profit, non-profit or government sites with 1-2 workers per site—providers need to pay special attention to selecting employer partners that contribute to the developmental experience through supportive on-site supervision, training, peer mentoring and other guidance for gaining and practicing work skills. These programs may also find special value in establishing job clubs or other opportunities for peer support, since TJ participants are often not working together at the worksite. Benefits of scattered-site placements include a work experience that most closely resembles a competitive labor-market job, and the ability to customize placements according to participant aptitudes and interests.

In programs using **work crews**, crews of 5-7 people work on a project often within maintenance, janitorial, parks, and community renewal projects. This structure provides lots of opportunities for peer support among participants, as they are dispatched together to job sites. This structure also allows for frontline supervisors to be trained and take an active role in providing feedback and coaching related to work-readiness development, and for training and educational courses to be more contextualized to the work experience (see below). Unlike scattered-site placements however, the type of work experience cannot typically be tailored to an individual participants' interests.

In programs offering **in-house placements**, participants work for the TJ agency, often in the product or service revenue generating arm of the organization. As with work-crew structures, in-house placements offer opportunities for high-levels of peer support and constructive supervision. In-house placements also allow for providing work experience in a variety of positions and duties within the enterprise or workplace, such as cashiering, shipping/receiving, customer service, e-commerce, data entry, etc. Additionally, this structure offers unique opportunities for highly contextualized instruction in education and training classes—instructors can easily adapt materials, activities and examples from the worksite for classroom use. This contextualized instruction and curriculum development is a growing evidence-based practice in the adult education field and may also provide enhanced benefits related to work-readiness and employability.

It is also important to consider the specific developmental needs and goals of a program's target population—for example, formerly incarcerated participants may have different needs than people experiencing homelessness.

## Elements That Need to be in Place to Make TJ a Developmental Experience

### Key #1 Opportunities for Social and Peer Support

Researchers and providers alike see value in the formal and informal support offered by TJ participants to one another, as well as supportive relationships with program staff and other social support systems. Working in an environment with others who share common circumstances may function as an informal peer-support group in which members provide understanding, motivation and positive reinforcement to one another. This phenomenon is observed in work-crew and on-site TJ structures, and may also be facilitated in scattered-site programs by seeking out worksites at which two or more participants can be placed at a time. Moreover, meaningful relationships with program staff have also been identified as a critical factor in participant success. While this sort of on-the-job support can happen informally and organically, there are multiple ways in which TJ programs can structure services to build social support among their participants, such as:

#### Job Clubs and other types of structured support groups

Some TJ programs set aside a time, usually before the beginning for the workday, during which participants gather to discuss their experiences, address issues, and offer advice and support to one another. These meetings may take on attributes of a typical group therapy session, or those of a Native American “peace circle” which employs a “talking piece” that designates ones turn to talk. Job clubs, organized groups of job seekers who work together under a leader to learn and practice job skills, are another model of peer group support that has been evaluated extensively with older jobseekers,<sup>1</sup> as well as welfare-to-work participants.<sup>2</sup> When compared with regular job-seekers, members of job clubs were more likely to be employed, had higher earnings,<sup>3</sup> experienced greater self-efficacy,<sup>4</sup> and were less likely to be depressed.<sup>5</sup> The peer support component was reported as a particularly important part of job-seekers’ success.<sup>6</sup>

#### Peer mentoring and program alumni visits

Assigning or designating more experienced participants or coworkers to mentor incoming participants appears to be a successful strategy. Former TJ participants who have been hired on as permanent staff are good candidates

#### Program example, building peer support: CARA/Cleanslate

The CARA/Cleanslate program in Chicago offers employment services, including Transitional Jobs, to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. CARA’s emphasis on personal transformation is rooted in a strong sense of community support, reinforced through daily “morning motivations” that are highly participatory, requiring all participants to share stories, experiences, feelings and even songs in front of the group. The group responds with supportive, enthusiastic, call-and-response style encouragement. This experience is meant to strengthen the community bonds among participants, as well as provide a safe, supportive venue in which participants can build confidence and face fears related to public speaking and personal presentation.

CARA’s theory of change is based on a set of five Transformative Principles:

1. **Don’t relax:** Stay alert and always be aware of opportunities and risks.
2. **Look with new eyes:** See yourself, others and situations in affirming and profound ways.
3. **Think outside the box:** Use your creativity to overcome the fears, limitations and obstacles that confine you and prevent your success.
4. **Know your deepest self:** Understand your unique gifts, honor them, and share them with the community around you.
5. **Change your behavior:** Recognize and change the habits, actions and perspectives that sent you down the wrong path.

Defining features of CARA’s model, in addition to the morning motivations, include the provision to each participant of a set of professional clothing which must always be worn to the office, and a well-appointed professional office environment. This serves to reinforce to participants that they are worthy and deserving of a better life.

to perform a mentoring role. Programs may also invite former participants who have successfully transitioned into the workforce to come back and visit with current participants, to offer advice and encouragement, and serve as an example an example that success is possible. Moreover, there is strong evidence to support mentoring for individuals reentering communities from incarceration; the Ready4Work reentry initiative found that participants who met with mentors were more likely to find a job, found jobs more quickly, had better job retention and lower recidivism rates than participants who did not meet with mentors.<sup>7</sup>

### **Outreach to participants' families**

Participants' families often comprise their natural support network. Efforts to engage participants' families in order to build support for their participation in the program can be important to participant success through the program and can serve as critical support systems post program. Family support is associated with better employment outcomes for a range of target populations, including vocational rehabilitation consumers,<sup>8</sup> people with psychiatric disabilities,<sup>9</sup> unmarried mothers,<sup>10</sup> and formerly incarcerated African-American males.<sup>11</sup>

### **Meaningful relationships with program staff**

In addition to social support from peers and family, practitioners and researchers also see an impact in strong, supportive relationships between participants and staff members such as case managers, job coaches, job developers and retention specialists. Meaningful staff-client relationships have been found to impact therapeutic relationships between therapist and client have repeatedly been found to be consistent with and strongly predictive of positive outcomes, and this holds true despite differences in therapeutic practice and theory.<sup>12</sup> The experiences of successful TJ practitioners suggest that this positive impact applies to employment interventions as well. The importance of supportive staff relationships may inform hiring and staffing decisions, and may also suggest the usefulness of staff trainings in sensitivity, cultural competency, or clinical therapeutic methods.

## **Key #2 Strong Communication and Feedback**

### **The importance of feedback for TJ participants**

TJ participants, because of their limited experience in the workplace, typically need far more feedback on work performance and

### **Program example, participant feedback:**

#### **Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)**

CEO is a comprehensive employment program that serves the formerly incarcerated. CEO's Transitional Jobs program provides immediate income and supported work crew experience that helps ground individuals after release. The CEO site supervisor is a "first boss" who, in addition to directing work tasks, coaches participants in proper work behavior, giving positive feedback when they exhibit such behaviors, and pointing out what they can do better.

CEO's primary tool for communication and feedback on participants' work readiness is the **Passport to Success**, a small, passport-sized booklet that participants must carry with them at all times. Inside are daily checklists of work-readiness attributes that site supervisor fills out on a daily basis, and which are shared with job coaches and other staff members regularly. The work-readiness factors assessed in the Passport are:

- cooperation with supervisor(s)
- effort at work, punctuality
- on time
- cooperation with coworkers
- personal presentation.

The booklet contains similar assessments for participation in classes, as well as program rules and a "Roadmap to Success."

Other program features unique to the CEO model include the TJ payroll, which is processed daily. Participants receive a pay check at the end of each day in order to reinforce the value of work. In addition, CEO offers special programming designed for young adults exiting prison. CEO also has cultivated strong supportive relationships between staff and participants from the time of enrollment to post-placement services.

The results of a random assignment study showed that recent released individuals who enrolled in CEO had significantly lower rates on all measures of recidivism, including arrests, conviction and re-incarcerations three years after initial enrollment.

behaviors than more experienced workers. They often lack prior knowledge about workplace requirements and expectations that experienced workers take for granted, and which often remain unspoken by supervisors and coworkers in the competitive labor market. For example, it is not unheard of for TJ participants to need coaching regarding the necessity of calling into work if they are going to be late or miss work due to illness or emergency. This is the sort of lack of knowledge that can easily result in termination from an unsubsidized job.

### **The critical role of frontline supervisors in providing feedback**

TJ employment experience offers an environment in which work-readiness lessons are modeled, reinforced and practiced in the workplace. In order for this practice and reinforcement to be effective, frontline supervisors need to communicate clearly and regularly to transitional workers about their performance and progress—to a degree not typically seen in an unsubsidized job. This feedback should be ongoing and pervasive throughout the transitional work experience. Frontline supervisors at TJ worksites have a critical role to play as on-site, real-time job-readiness instructors. These supervisors are in the best position to observe, assess and monitor progress on participant work-readiness, and have a key role in communicating this progress to participants as well as job coaches, case managers and other staff. In the case of programs that offer transitional employment off-site at scattered placements, it is especially important to get buy-in from frontline supervisors at those worksites, and ideally offer training or orientation to help them fulfill this important role. For on-site and work-crew programs, staffing and hiring choices should reflect the dual nature of frontline staff and crew chiefs who must ensure that work gets done as well as offer on-site training and feedback regarding work-readiness.

### **Developing structures and tools for feedback and communication**

It is also critical to establish an effective communication structure and develop tools that allow for effective and easy monitoring of participant work-readiness. Work-readiness assessments or checklists that can be completed by supervisors and participants on a daily or weekly basis provide an opportunity for a structured conversation about basic workplace performance and behaviors, as well as a written record of performance and skills gains that can be referenced as long-term participant progress is assessed. This is particularly helpful as job coaches and developers determine whether or not a participant is ready to interview for unsubsidized employment.

## **Key #3 Transitional Work that Represents Real Experience**

It is essential that transitional employment positions offer real-life work experience in which participants can practice work-readiness skills and develop transferrable hard skills. Particularly for scattered-site TJ programs, selecting quality worksites is essential to ensuring that the TJ experience is developmental. While a high-quality worksite provides the learning environment necessary for participants to develop workplace behaviors, skills and knowledge, a poor one can impede learning and reinforce counterproductive behaviors and habits.<sup>13</sup> When selecting employer partners for TJ worksites, programs should consider the following factors that can affect the developmental potential of a partner worksite:

- **Close supervision at the work site** that is ongoing, supportive, and provides feedback on performance and growth over time. This includes frontline supervisors who are able and willing to function as instructors or coaches to help participants learn the expectations and behaviors of the workplace. This requires understanding and supporting the goals of TJ;
- **Work responsibilities and tasks that promote learning** and enhance future employability. This involves providing participants with challenging work that provides for increasing levels of responsibility;
- **Flexible work schedules** that allow participants to attend education and training activities. Typically TJ participants work less than full time, so that 10 hours or so per week can be dedicated to training and other services; and
- **Suitability of the work environment** including considerations of safety, diversity and workplace culture.<sup>14</sup>



TJ programs should avoid partnering with thinly-staffed employers that may not be able to provide adequate supervision and guidance, those with highly competitive workplace cultures that may not offer adequate support for learning and development, or those that take a “sink or swim” approach to new hires.<sup>15</sup>

In order to ensure that worksites consistently provide the meaningful work, supportive environment, constructive supervision and flexibility necessary to provide a high-quality transitional employment experience, it is usually helpful to ask employer partners to sign a memorandum of understanding or other agreement in which they commit to facilitating the TJ experience and support participant development in exchange for subsidized labor.

## Key #4 Flexibility and Allowing for Mistakes

### Creating a safe environment to make mistakes

As noted above, TJ participants often need to be educated about basic workplace expectations that experienced workers tend to take for granted. Because of these educational needs, TJ participants often make mistakes that might result in termination or serious reprimand in an unsubsidized work environment. The TJ workplace should be a relatively safe environment for participants to learn from their mistakes and correct behaviors, so that these do not result job loss once they transition into the competitive labor market.

Every TJ program builds some degree of flexibility into their program to account for mistakes and failures among participants, although the form this flexibility takes can vary widely from program to program. For example, some programs offer multiple progressive reprimands but do not allow a participant to reenter once they are terminated; others will allow participants to return multiple times. One practice that many providers recommend is allowing a participant to take another transitional job if he or she has been fired from an unsubsidized post-TJ position, and work with case managers to address the issues or behaviors that contributed to the termination. Some programs also use a “graduated stress” strategy in which participants move through phases of increasing work responsibility and higher expectations as they learn and practice successful workplace skills and behaviors. Regardless of specific policies, it is essential that transitional work provide an environment in which participants are allowed to learn from their mistakes and apply those lessons in their ongoing work experience.

### Flexible length of transitional employment

Another key area in which TJ programs may employ flexibility is in the length of time participants are engaged in

### Program example, allowing for mistakes: Roca, Inc.

**Roca, Inc.**, located in Boston, is a program serving at-risk youth that includes TJ. Roca’s strategy is theoretically grounded in the stages of change developed by James O. Prochaska, in which individuals move through the stages of precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. According to this theory, which is often used in treatment settings, relapse is an inevitable and expected occurrence that can manifest at any stage in the change process. For that reason, Roca has designed a transitional work experience in which failure to meet the expectations and requirements of the workplace is anticipated and planned for. Participants are frequently “fired” from their transitional jobs, and presented with conditions that must be met before a “rehiring meeting” can be planned to discuss reinstatement.

Roca is also notable for its progressively tiered TJ experience, in which participants work their way up through positions of increasing expectations and responsibility. Participants start in Work Crew 1, and then as work skills improve they progress to higher-level work crews and eventually a partially-subsidized placement at an employer in the community. Roca’s unique model is made possible by an unusually long period of engagement for a TJ program; a participant can remain active in the program for as long as five years

the transitional employment. Although financial considerations are frequently the limiting factor in determining how long TJ should last, programs with the financial means to do so are finding that considering each participant's individual developmental needs, and delivering an optimal length of transitional work experience to meet those developmental goals, can improve participant outcomes. For example, Workforce, Inc. (WFI), an Indianapolis TJ program serving formerly incarcerated individuals, has experimented with widely varying lengths of engagement—some participants are deemed ready for unsubsidized employment in short order, and others may work at WFI essentially indefinitely. This practice allows participants to move into the competitive labor market when their chances of success are best, as opposed to following an arbitrary standardized schedule. WFI is able to apply this policy of flexibility because its social enterprise revenue, earned through its electronics recycling business, provides unregulated program funding.

## Conclusion

These program elements have been identified by experts in the field as being especially important in making sure the transitional work experience is educational, developmental—even transformative—when compared with temporary work or subsidized employment that does not meet the criteria to be considered TJ. It is by no means an exhaustive list however, and it is necessary to restate that TJ works in part because it is delivered in the context of supportive services designed to address and manage barriers to employment. These services range from transportation assistance to adult literacy classes to anger management training. Nevertheless, in order for the TJ strategy to be effective in changing the long-term employment outcomes for people with barriers to employment, the transitional work experience must be carefully and thoughtfully designed to teach, reinforce and apply critical work-readiness skills.

## Endnotes

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The National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN) is a coalition of city, state, and federal policy makers; community workforce organizations; anti-poverty nonprofit service providers and advocacy organizations committed to advancing and strengthening Transitional Jobs programs around the country so that people with barriers to employment can gain success in the workplace and improve their economic lives and the economic conditions of their communities. The NTJN supports a constituency of over 4,000 active members and stakeholders across the country.

The NTJN is a project of Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights.

