

FOSTERING SUCCESS FOR PEOPLE FACING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT THROUGH SNAP EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING:

Promising Employment Program Models, Practices, & Principles for SNAP E&T Participants Facing Barriers to Employment

August 2015, Issue Brief

SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) Programs aim to help SNAP recipients facing barriers to employment transition into work with self- or family-sustaining wages. Many SNAP recipients are likely to face barriers to employment and able-bodied adults without dependents, or ABAWDs, who receive SNAP are especially likely to face significant barriers to employment and chronic unemployment.

This brief provides information and resources about best and promising employment program models, practices, and principles for serving people facing significant barriers to employment in order to inform SNAP E&T state planning, partnerships, and implementation.

Report Information

Project team: Leiha Edmonds, Caitlin C. Schnur, Amy Rynell, Chris Warland, and Melissa Young

Writers: Caitlin C. Schnur, Chris Warland, Melissa Young

Primary Author: Caitlin C. Schnur

Suggested citation: Schnur, C., Warland, C., & Young, M. (2015). *Fostering success for people facing barriers to employment through SNAP Employment & Training: Promising employment program models, practices, & principles for SNAP E&T participants facing barriers to employment*. Chicago, IL: Heartland Alliance's National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity

National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity

[Heartland Alliance's National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity](#) is dedicated to ending chronic unemployment and poverty. We believe that every person deserves the opportunity to succeed in work and support themselves and their families. Through our field building, we provide support and guidance that fosters more effective and sustainable employment efforts. Our policy and advocacy work advances solutions to the systemic issues that drive chronic unemployment.

Our national initiatives include:

[The National Transitional Jobs Network](#) (NTJN)

[The National Center on Employment & Homelessness](#) (NCEH)

[Black Men Overcoming Barriers & Realizing Employment](#) (B.MORE) Initiative

Table of Contents

Report Information.....	p. 02
Introduction.....	p. 04
I. SNAP E&T Participants Can Face Significant Barriers to Employment.....	p. 04
II. Intensive Employment Program Models, Practices, and Principles for Serving People with Significant Barriers to Employment	
Rapid Attachment to Paid Employment	p. 05
Supportive Services to Mitigate Barriers to Employment	p. 06
A Socially Supportive Environment	p. 06
Strong Job Development Services and Employer Engagement	p. 07
Job Retention Services to Help Program Participants Keep and Advance in Employment.....	p. 08
Pathways to Sector Training.....	p. 09
Conclusion.....	p. 10
Appendix I: National Initiatives Resources.....	p. 11

Introduction

In fiscal year 2013, [only about one-third](#) of all Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) households had earned income from employment. SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) Programs aim to help SNAP recipients facing barriers to employment transition into work with self- or family-sustaining wages. Many SNAP recipients are likely to face barriers to employment and able-bodied adults without dependents, or ABAWDs, who receive SNAP are especially likely to face significant barriers to employment and chronic unemployment.

ABAWDs ages 18 to 49 years old are also subject to [time limits](#) on their SNAP eligibility if they do not meet work requirements. As a result of improving overall economic conditions, at the end of calendar year 2015 few states will be able to extend their current [ABAWD time limit waivers](#). ABAWDs subject to SNAP time limits who fail to meet work requirements will be cut off from basic food assistance, leaving them without the resources to meet their basic nutrition needs as they look for work. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that in fiscal year 2016 about [1 million ABAWDs](#) will lose their SNAP benefits.

As a result of looming SNAP time limits and increasing accountability at the federal and state level to demonstrate employment outcomes through the SNAP E&T program, it is imperative that states build and partner to implement robust SNAP E&T Programs that can meet the employment needs of individuals facing significant barriers to employment. This brief provides information and resources about best and promising employment program models, practices, and principles for serving people facing significant barriers to employment in order to inform SNAP E&T state planning, partnerships, and implementation.

I. SNAP E&T Participants Can Face Significant Barriers to Employment

Many SNAP recipients participating in SNAP E&T Programs are likely to face [barriers to employment](#) including living in poverty; low educational attainment; being at-risk of homelessness or living in unstable housing; a limited work history; and behavioral and mental health issues. Single adults who head SNAP households with young children may also struggle to secure affordable childcare. [SNAP ABAWDs in particular](#) face significant barriers to employment. SNAP ABAWDs tend to be extremely poor and lack basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills. Among SNAP ABAWDs who report [their race](#), about one third are African American and a tenth are Hispanic. These individuals may face [employer discrimination](#) in the hiring process. [Available data](#)¹ [show](#) that SNAP ABAWDs are also likely to have criminal records, a significant barrier to employment.

¹ Robust data on the percentage of SNAP ABAWDs with criminal records is not available. Available 2013-2014 county-level data from Ohio show that about one-third of SNAP ABAWDs had felony convictions, a significant barrier to employment.

II. Intensive Employment Program Models, Practices, and Principles for Serving People Facing Significant Barriers to Employment

Intensive employment interventions that draw from the program models, practices, and principles discussed below can help chronically unemployed individuals succeed in the labor market.

These types of interventions appear to [work especially well](#) for higher-risk individuals compared with those who are more work-ready. Moreover, because these interventions are typically more expensive to deliver than less-intensive employment services, jobseekers who are likely to be successful with low-intensity services such as resume development or job search assistance should not be considered candidates for programs that subsidize wages, provide holistic supportive services, and engage participants for extended periods of time.

For these reasons, SNAP E&T Programs that aim to help SNAP ABAWDs or other SNAP recipients facing significant barriers to employment succeed in the labor market should be sure to identify, recruit, and provide these services to the individuals who face the most barriers to employment and would be very unlikely to get, keep, and advance in employment without assistance. This means [assessing](#) for barriers, including long gaps in employment history, and referring individuals facing more pronounced barriers and limited work histories to intensive programs.

Rapid Attachment to Paid Employment

Employment programs serving people facing barriers to employment are likely to encounter jobseekers struggling to meet their basic needs, including housing, healthcare, and clothing. By rapidly connecting these jobseekers to paid work opportunities, employment programs can incentivize program participation and help jobseekers stabilize their lives and become accustomed to workplace norms. While providing the supportive services described on page five of this brief will help mitigate barriers to employment, it's not necessary that all barriers be resolved or that participants go through lengthy training or preparation before being placed into a paid job. Indeed, the job itself is an environment for workers to mitigate barriers and identify strengths through experiential learning, employer feedback, and job coaching.

Evidence-based employment strategies for rapidly connecting individuals facing barriers to employment to paid work include [Transitional Jobs \(TJ\)](#) and [Individualized Placement Support \(IPS\)](#). Although SNAP E&T funding may not support all components of these strategies, both TJ and IPS represent ways jobseekers facing barriers to employment can quickly be connected to paid work and may be strategies that states could pilot or expand by leveraging federal, state, and local [funding streams](#). TJ places jobseekers into subsidized, wage-paid, short-term employment while providing work readiness and soft skills training coupled with supportive services such as those described below. [Job development services](#), described on pages six and seven of this brief, help TJ participants transition into the competitive labor market once their subsidy period ends. Research shows that TJ can help [reduce recidivism](#) among people recently release from incarceration and move recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF, or welfare) [off of public assistance](#). Subsidized employment has also been shown to be especially effective in connecting the [long term unemployed to work](#) and supporting the [employment goals of youth](#) who are most at risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. IPS combines rapid entry into the competitive labor market integrated with time-unlimited, individualized support for as long as workers want and need it. [IPS practice principles](#) emphasize inclusive eligibility and services based on jobseeker preference and choice. IPS is an [evidence-based](#) employment strategy for people with chronic mental illness.

Supportive Services to Mitigate Barriers to Employment

It's critical that employment programs serving people facing barriers to employment provide or link participants in meaningful ways with comprehensive supportive services geared toward helping them manage and resolve their barriers. Barriers to employment may include limited or no work experience, low literacy and numeracy skills, unstable housing, and unreliable or unaffordable transportation, among others. States should ensure that employment programs are leveraging initial and ongoing assessments to identify participants' barriers so that employment programs can provide or build referral partnerships to necessary supportive services at program start or ongoing. Supportive services to mitigate barriers to may employment include:

- **Work readiness training:** Work readiness training helps program participants learn how to write resumes, complete applications, interview effectively, and succeed in employment. Work readiness training teaches core competencies including problem solving, critical thinking, verbal communication, work ethic and habits, interpersonal skills, teamwork, and adaptability. Work readiness training also equips jobseekers with workplace norms such as good attitude, punctuality, and ability to follow direction. Among employment programs offering participants a paid work experience, work readiness training can occur prior to or be ongoing throughout the job placement.
- **Academic instruction:** With few exceptions, basic literacy, math, and writing skills and the ability to apply them in a real work situation are essential to attaining an entry-level job and advancing. Academic instruction may include Adult Basic Education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), and GED courses. As discussed on pages eight and nine of this brief, employment programs are encouraged to offer or link to accessible sector training and contextualized and concurrent adult basic education that leads to an employer-recognized credential.
- **Behavioral and mental health services:** Depending on their individual needs, participants may benefit from access to substance use counseling, mental health counseling, and anger management workshops.
- **Life skills training:** Enhanced life skills can help program participants manage or mitigate barriers to self-sufficiency in their everyday lives. Life skills training may address computer literacy, financial literacy, budgeting, self-care and stress reduction, time management, nutrition, and other skills necessary to lead a healthy, independent life.
- **Additional services as needed:** Additional supportive services that jobseekers facing barriers to employment may need include, but are not limited to: transportation assistance; connections to reliable and affordable child care; work materials such as clothing or tools; assistance obtaining identification; glasses or vision care; dental care; a mobile phone; and legal services.

A Socially Supportive Environment

Fostering a socially supportive environment can help jobseekers facing barriers to employment grow their social networks, implement a job search plan, and maintain momentum as they search for work. As states develop and partner to build successful employment programs, we encourage being mindful of these strategies. Strategies for fostering a socially supportive environment include:

- **Provide worksite peer support and mentoring:** Working alongside others who share common circumstances or work positions may serve as an informal peer support group in which participants can offer each other understanding, positive reinforcement, and opportunities for role modeling. Employment programs can encourage informal worksite peer support by leveraging the transitional jobs model to offer participants work opportunities in a collaborative [work-crew setting](#) or an [in-house social enterprise](#) that requires teamwork to meet production goals. Employment programs can also institute formal peer mentoring relationships, which may offer an opportunity for relatable individuals to offer [advice and encouragement](#), serve as an example that success is possible, and model good work habits. Former program participants who have been [hired as permanent staff](#) may be good candidates for a mentoring role, along with successful program graduates who have achieved employment elsewhere.
- **Encourage positive and caring relationships between participants and program staff:** [Employment program providers indicate](#) that supportive relationships between jobseekers and program staff can have positive effects on employment outcomes. A supportive relationship is considered integral to engaging participants and helps staff learn more about participants, assess their interest in employment, and determine their readiness for change. Staff members are encouraged to draw from [Motivational Interviewing principles and techniques](#) to build an empathic, collaborative, and friendly relationship with participants that will help them address their employment goals. Additional information about the role of Motivational Interviewing in employment interventions [can be found here](#).
- **Host a job club:** [Job clubs](#), a type of support group, offer opportunities for jobseekers to gather and learn job search skills, share job search information, provide accountability to their goals and plans, offer peer support during setbacks, and combat the isolation of unemployment. [Experimental research](#) demonstrates that job clubs have a significant positive impact on helping individuals obtain employment.
- **Celebrate success:** Celebrations can foster peer support, self-worth, and a sense of accomplishment and mark important milestones for program participants and graduates. Employment programs can celebrate success by publicly acknowledging whenever a program participant achieves employment; [sharing success stories via social media](#); maintaining a “client success board” that lifts up program participants’ accomplishments and goals; and hosting “alumni events” to bring together program graduates who have been successful in employment to swap stories, share advice, and build their networks.

Strong Job Development Services and Employer Engagement

As states design and partner to develop and expand employment programs, job development—or identifying, cultivating, and matching jobseekers with employment opportunities—is essential to employment programs for people facing barriers. Because job development can be one of the most challenging aspects of employment program delivery, programs must allocate appropriate resources and staff time to job development. Employment programs also must hire the right employees for the job, who often have strong skills in sales, networking, and building relationships with employers. Strategies for [delivering effective job development services](#) and [engaging employers](#) include:

- **Begin job development on day one:** Even in employment programs offering participants a time-limited, subsidized employment experience, job development efforts should begin as soon as a participant enters programming. To avoid continued unemployment following

program completion, program staff and participants should engage in conversations and assessments about employment goals and interests, efforts to identify potential employer matches, and job search activities from the program's start, rather than wait until a participant nears program completion or graduation.

- **Research sectors and employers for a solid match:** Job developers should engage in thorough research to identify the local industry sectors that have low barriers to entry for workers (including those with criminal records), have a demonstrated demand for new workers, and offer opportunities to access higher-quality jobs. To determine if a workplace is a good match for program participants, job developers should inquire about employee scheduling, workload, turnover, and opportunities for promotion. To encourage job retention, it is important to [seek out employers that treat workers well](#) and turn down potential employer partners if the positions they offer are low-wage, low-quality jobs.
- **Take a “dual customer” approach that considers the needs of employers and job seekers:** It is important to match employers with jobseekers whose goals, interests, and aptitudes align with what employers are seeking. Attending to both employer and employee needs through deliberate job matching supports long-term employer partnerships by ensuring job placements are mutually beneficial. Thorough career interest assessments, coupled with ongoing conversations between program staff and participants, can help determine what types of job opportunities will match a participant's abilities, goals, and interests.
- **Engage and network to develop long-term employer relationships:** Job developers are most effective when they are out in the community meeting and connecting with employers. To gain access to local employers, job developers can join and participate in their local Chambers of Commerce, [Rotary](#), or trade associations. Attending local job fairs also gives job developers an opportunity to network with employers and share what they can provide employers with regard to candidates and services.
- **Make the “business case” for employment program graduates to employers:** Employer survey data, program evaluation evidence, and other relevant research shows that [businesses benefit](#) by hiring employment program graduates. Job developers should feel comfortable sharing these [business advantages](#) with potential employer partners, which include tax incentives, free federal bonding to protect against loss or liability, and—depending on the services an employment program's specific service offerings—workers who have recent soft skills training and ongoing job retention services to help them succeed on the job. Employment programs that offer subsidized employment can also highlight job candidates' recent work experience.

Job Retention Services to Help Program Participants Keep and Advance in Employment

[Job retention](#) should be a priority for any employment program serving people facing barriers, and program service delivery—including the strategies described in this brief, such as barrier mitigation, job development, and sector training—should aim to prepare jobseekers not only to get jobs but also to keep and advance in employment. As states develop and partner to design employment programs, strategies for job retention include:

- **Engage in regular, ongoing check-ins with participants and employers:** Once a participant becomes employed, employment program staff should make periodic follow-up

contacts to ensure that the participant's needs are met, help the participant manage workplace difficulties by clarifying employer expectations and concerns, and help participants work through any conflicts that might arise. [Research shows](#) that retention services lasting at least six months, and involving three or more check-ins with the participant each month, are associated with positive outcomes such as working more months, working full time, and higher earnings.

- ***Provide financial and non-monetary incentives:*** Financial incentives provided to participants or employers [have been associated with](#) successful job retention. By providing gift cards, wage supplements, and retention bonuses to participants and graduates, programs can offer needed income and financial motivation to [continue succeeding in employment](#). Incentives also encourage program graduates to remain engaged with employment programming staff and, if necessary, follow up services. Other incentives for continued success and program engagement include access or linkages to resources such as child care and transportation and invitations to alumni events such as celebratory dinners. Connecting participants to the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) may serve as an indirect retention incentive by increasing the program graduate's take-home pay and [increasing work effort](#).
- ***Offer reemployment services:*** Jobseekers improve at their own pace and may need flexibility to leave a specific job, learn from mistakes, and enter another job that better suits their needs. Employment programs serving people facing barriers to employment can anticipate that some program participants will choose or be asked to leave their first (or second) job, and should be prepared to offer reemployment services to quickly reconnect participants with employment. Reemployment services may include identifying the reasons for job loss from the program participant's and employer's perspectives, coaching participants on managing barriers that emerged on the job, and offering job search assistance.

Pathways to Sector Training

While a core goal of any employment program is to help participants get and keep jobs, states designing and partnering to develop SNAP E&T programs must remember that moving participants toward economic security requires that they be able to advance in full-time work, increase their wages, and access benefits such as health insurance and paid time off. [Experimental research shows](#) that sector training, which offers participants education and hands-on training to match in-demand job openings in a specific occupation or industry, results in significant labor market gains for low-income, disadvantaged workers and jobseekers. However, sector training programs typically have basic skills requirements that many individuals facing barriers to employment do not meet, often requiring that candidates test at a sixth-grade level in reading and math. Strategies that employment programs can use to help skill up participants for sector training include:

- ***Contextualized Adult Basic Education:*** Contextualized learning is a practice in the field of adult literacy and adult basic education that provides adult learners with academic skills lessons that are relevant to their real-world interests, employment goals, and everyday life. Contextualized learning can occur [while employment program participants are engaged in work activities](#), and [research shows](#) that the strategy yields significantly positive results.
- ***Bridge programs:*** [Bridge programs](#) connect individuals to post-secondary education and training programs by equipping them with basic academic and English language skills. Bridge programs are condensed to make learning as efficient as possible, flexibly

scheduled to meet individual needs, and may offer contextualized learning (described above), career development, and transition services to help move adult learners into credit-bearing coursework or occupational training.

Conclusion

Now is the time for states to build and partner to implement robust SNAP E&T Programs that can meet the employment needs of people facing significant barriers to employment or chronic unemployment, including ABAWDs. The information and resources in this brief about best and promising employment program models, practices, and principles for serving people facing significant barriers to employment can inform SNAP E&T state planning, partnerships, and implementation and help to ensure that every person has the opportunity to succeed in work and support themselves and their families.

Appendix I: National Initiatives Resources

All of these resources and more can be found here: <http://nationalinitiatives.issuelab.org/home>

Transitional Jobs and Subsidized Employment

- [Transitional Jobs Toolkit](#)
- [Employer Engagement Toolkit](#)
- [Guide to Transitional Jobs Program Design](#)
- [Transitional Jobs Program Element Checklist](#)
- [Innovative City and State Funding Approaches to Supporting Subsidized Employment and Transitional Jobs](#)
- [Key Questions for Cities, Counties, and States in Designing Transitional Jobs Programs](#)

Employment and Homelessness

- [Employment Program Models for People Experiencing Homelessness: Different Approaches to Program Structure](#)
- [Populations Experiencing Homelessness: Diverse Barriers to Employment and How to Address Them](#)
- [Service Delivery Principles and Techniques: Helping People Experiencing Homelessness Engage in Services and Succeed in Employment](#)
- [Employment Program Components: Considerations for Modifying Programming for People Experiencing Homelessness](#)
- [Tips for Transitional Jobs Programs Serving People Experiencing Homelessness](#)
- [Work Matters: Employment as a Tool for Preventing Homelessness and Improving Health](#)
- [Getting Homeless Families on Their Feet: Steps for Integrating Employment Programming into Homeless Services](#)

Employment, Child Support, and Reentry

- [Overview of the Child Support System and Innovations in Child Support Policy and Practice](#)
- [Healthy Relationships, Employment, and Reentry](#)
- [Tips for Working with Jobseekers Newly Released from Prison](#)
- [Tips for Working with Noncustodial Fathers](#)

