

HUD EMPLOYMENT LECTURE SERIES

Lecture #6 Pamphlet

**HOMELESSNESS AND HIRING:
EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES**

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INTRODUCTION

While many people who are homeless have the ability and desire to work, the barriers they face can be daunting. Inability to pay for transportation to jobs, appropriate work clothes and tools, and meals while at work is one major obstacle. Other obstacles range from needing to line up early to obtain a shelter bed or evening meal to lacking a place to store one's possessions while on the job.

Yet another kind of challenge is overcoming the preconceptions of employers, many of whom equate being homeless with inability to work. Many employers presume that most homeless people are too disabled to hold down a job and tend to view the rest as lazy, irresponsible, and/or dangerous, and thus poor hiring risks.

The fact is that a substantial minority of people who are homeless do work, often in part-time and "casual labor;" some successfully hide their homelessness from their employers. There are many people who are homeless whose resourcefulness, "street smarts," and determination to overcome the barriers they face make them as employable as the general populace. Others have skills and training in specific fields, such as construction, mechanics, or secretarial work, but potential employers hardly ever discover this due to their homelessness.

Job counselors, case managers, and others working with people who are homeless and want to work need to understand and effectively respond to the concerns of employers in hiring homeless jobseekers. The employers' perspective is valuable in determining what techniques to use in reaching out to and establishing relationships with employers, what factors influence employer attitudes about hiring homeless jobseekers, and what supports can be offered by agencies helping homeless jobseekers that will help employers successfully recruit, train, and retain workers who are homeless.

This pamphlet addresses these issues and also highlights a number of initiatives that employer groups are themselves undertaking. These include providing opportunities for homeless workers, combating the prevailing attitudes about hiring people who are homeless, and committing resources to ending and preventing homelessness.

This pamphlet and the lecture that accompanies it are aimed at staff of homeless assistance and community rehabilitation programs as well as

employment organizations and agencies that work with homeless jobseekers. These include the following:

- Case managers
- Staff of permanent and transitional housing programs
- Employment specialists at One-Stop Career Centers, other workforce development centers, and homeless assistance agencies
- Program managers of agencies serving people who are homeless

EMPLOYMENT STATISTICS

Knowing which sectors of the job market are growing and are likely to have labor shortages can help you target your efforts to the employers most likely to be hiring. Job market conditions can greatly influence the success of workers in finding and retaining employment, especially in the fields not requiring special skills and training.

While we can only address the demographics of the job market with a very broad brush here, you will be more effective at helping homeless jobseekers if you keep abreast of regional and local job markets and trends. This information is available from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, from State Departments of Labor, and often from local groups such as Chambers of Commerce.

Demographic Information

The Bureau of Labor Statistics issues monthly reports that provide statistics on several key employment measures. These include national data on job openings and labor turnover as well as national, regional, and State level employment and unemployment rates. Of particular interest is the breakdown of statistics by industry and by region, along with a brief interpretation of the data.

To take one month's reports as an example, in October, 2007, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the job openings rate was highest in accommodations and food services, at 4.9 percent. The report also indicates trends over time, indicating in which sectors job openings are on the increase, and where there are fewer jobs.

The October, 2007 report identifies the following industries as having consistently high rates of both hires and separations: construction; retail trade; professional and business services; arts, entertainment, and recreation; and accommodations and food services. This means there is an abundance of job openings for those seeking work. But the data also indicate that many of those hired do not remain on the job for long, underscoring the importance of attending to job retention.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics and others, long-term employment growth is projected largely for the service sector, with this sector expected to provide more than three-quarters of U.S. jobs by 2016. Many of the occupations predicted to have the largest growth are low-wage jobs that require little training, including retail salespersons, food preparation workers, office clerks, home care and nursing aides and attendants, and waiters and waitresses.

This increase in need along with the shrinking labor force as baby boomers age means that, in many cases, employers will need to expand their search for workers beyond traditional markets. This translates to more opportunities for often-overlooked groups such as people who are homeless and/or have disabilities.

Employment Data on People Who are Homeless and/or have Disabilities

Information on how many people who are homeless work is largely anecdotal. Many shelters throughout the country report that a significant minority of clients hold down jobs, either part- or full-time. In both Raleigh/Wake County, NC¹ and Washington, DC,² recent data indicate that close to one-third of people who are homeless work at least part time. Many other communities report similar findings.

More reliable data exists on employment of people with disabilities, who work and earn at a far lower rate than the general population. This is another group who, like people who are homeless, often have a hard time overcoming the stereotypes that they cannot work or make a real contribution to an employer. According to the 2006 Disability Status Report, the employment rate of working age people with disabilities was 37.7 percent, compared with the non-disabled working rate of 79.7 percent. Among people with disabilities, 21.7 percent worked full-time, far below the 56.6 percent of people without disabilities working full-time.³

The median annual earning of people with disabilities with full-time jobs was \$30,000. This is \$7,000 less than the median annual earnings of full-time workers without disabilities.

This data is especially pertinent for those of you working in homeless programs serving people who have mental illness or substance abuse disorders, the most common disabilities among people who are homeless. To get hired, your clients must overcome the double stigma associated with being both homeless and having a behavioral disorder.

EMPLOYER ATTITUDES TOWARD JOBSEEKERS AND WORKERS

Knowing what employers are looking for in hiring workers and what factors contribute to job retention and advancement is valuable information for those helping homeless jobseekers find and retain jobs. As a case manager or job counselor, you can keep this in mind as you work with clients to develop their individual employment plans; you can encourage jobseekers to highlight these factors when they apply for jobs; and job preparation training efforts can focus on these areas.

Many people who have been homeless and/or are disabled have spotty work records, are unable to produce references, and lack the skills and experience for a particular line of work. However, it turns out that employers, especially those hiring for entry-level positions, are less concerned with evidence of past work success and specialized skills; rather, they are more interested in personal characteristics like honesty, ability to get along with others, and willingness to learn, as well as basic skills, such as reading comprehension, arithmetic, and communicating with others.^{4,5} These are referred to both as “foundational skills” and “soft skills,” which we discuss below.

In addition to soft skills, an important and related consideration is how job applicants present themselves in interviews. According to a Massachusetts One-Stop Career Center’s report on “lessons learned,” key qualities that employers consider in interviews are motivation, flexibility, willingness to work and learn, appearance, behavior, confidence, and positive gestures and mannerisms.⁶ Specific qualifications for the work consistently ranked below personal characteristics and soft skills.

The implications for assisting homeless jobseekers are clear: the lack of specific job skills should not be seen as a deterrent. The focus of

training and coaching should be on identifying individuals' basic skills and positive personal traits, and in helping them to present these in their best light in interviews. Because appearance, behavior, and mannerisms matter, you may need to help jobseekers obtain appropriate and clean clothing and hygiene care, and train clients to recognize the importance of body language. Role plays and critiquing how people come across to others can be helpful strategies here.

The one exception to the emphasis on soft skills is in cases where demonstrated competency in particular skills is required for employment, such as a plumbing or electrician's license. Thus, be sure that vocational assessments ask for specific licensures and training background. And because many communities have a shortage of workers certified in these and other technical areas (such as HVAC, truck driving, and X-ray technician), those assisting homeless jobseekers should identify local employers in these fields and reach out to encourage them to fill vacancies with skilled workers who are homeless.

The rest of our discussion will focus primarily on entry-level and low-skill jobs; these are the positions the majority of people who are homeless initially seek and for which they are hired. Even people who are educated and experienced have access primarily to entry-level positions until they become housed and stable.

Employers' Desired Characteristics and Skills

In the early 1990s, the DOL undertook a major initiative to identify and categorize the skills required to succeed as a worker in the U.S.—the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). The Commission's final report stated that key to high-performing workers was a set of skills and competencies that the report referred to as "workplace know-how."⁷ These include a three-part foundation of skills and personal qualities and five competencies. The skills and personal qualities are as follows:

- Basic Skills: reading, writing, arithmetic and mathematics, speaking, and listening
- Thinking Skills: the ability to learn, reason, think creatively, make decisions, and solve problems

- Personal qualities: individual responsibility, self-esteem and management, sociability, and integrity

The five competencies associated with high performance encompass the abilities to manage resources; work well with others; acquire and use information; understand and master systems; and work with various technologies and tools.

The SCANS report findings have largely withstood the test of time. More recent studies, employer surveys, and websites describing what employers look for in jobseekers vary slightly, but all underscore the importance of the foundational skills and basic competencies emphasized in the SCANS report.^{8,9,10}

Two related initiatives built on the SCANS findings provide a more current perspective on highly-sought job skills for entry-level positions.

Competency Models

Developed by the President's High Growth Job Training Initiative, Competency Models identify "building blocks" of inter-related competencies that represent the skills, knowledge, and abilities needed for many occupations.¹¹

At the base are the "Foundational Competencies," also referred to as "Work Readiness Competencies" that are needed for nearly all kinds of work. These are similar to the SCANS skills, but are divided up into three categories of skill sets, referred to as "competencies": 1) Personal Effectiveness, such as integrity and willingness to learn; 2) Academic Competencies, such as math, reading, and basic computing; and 3) Workplace Competencies, such as adaptability/flexibility, problem-solving, and teamwork.

Employers regularly use competency models for recruiting, hiring, and performance reviews. They are thus a promising resource for those helping prepare homeless jobseekers for employment to draw from in developing training that matches the skills and competencies for particular jobs. Employment training programs have also used competency models to create curricula to certify individuals as being prepared for jobs in a number of employment sectors.

The National Work Readiness Credential

The National Work Readiness Credential uses work readiness competencies to provide an assessment process to certify entry-level workers for jobs, both unskilled positions and skilled positions where the required skills can be learned on the job.¹² Credentialing workers offers employers ready access to qualified individuals, thereby reducing recruitment costs, lowering training costs, and increasing retention.

The Credential was developed by the National Work Readiness Council, through a broad-based effort involving businesses, unions, Chambers of Commerce, Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), and education and training professionals. In 2007, its first year, the initiative expanded from six States and the District of Columbia to 66 sites in 18 States.

The four-part assessment measures skills deemed critical to entry-level job performance; the skills are based on SCANS competencies and skills. In addition to oral language, reading with understanding, and using math to solve problems, the skills assessment measures situational judgment and nine work-related abilities, such as “listen actively,” “cooperate with others” and “solve problems and make decisions.”

As part of your efforts with homeless jobseekers, you may want to obtain the guidebook developed to help people working with those seeking to qualify for the Credential. The guide provides specific steps to help entry-level jobseekers gain the needed knowledge and skills to obtain the Credential, and includes links to curriculum and teaching resources.

Promoting Job Retention and Advancement

While the focus of those working with homeless jobseekers is often on helping people get hired, it is also important to make sure they keep the jobs they get. Workforce development and employment programs with large numbers of clients who face employment barriers such as homelessness, disabilities, criminal history, and lack of education and training have learned the importance of follow-up with both employees and employers.

The DOL has identified some basic steps that employees can take to improve their chances for being kept on and become attractive candidates for advancement. These steps, which can readily form the basis for training in job retention, include the following:

- **Know and meet your employer’s expectations.** This includes such areas as schedule, dress, attitude, and amount and quality of work, along with making an effort to understand the workplace culture.
- **Be a good communicator.** Issues should be discussed with the boss as necessary, but make sure that it is at an appropriate time.
- **Take advantage of performance reviews.** Employees are advised to stay calm, learn from what is said, and ask how they can improve.
- **Continue to learn.** This includes seeking out job-related classes and inquiring into on-the-job-training that may be paid for by the employer.
- **Aim to meet the employer’s needs.** Employees should actively seek to use their skills and knowledge to meet their employers needs, including looking for positive ways to be innovative.

How Employment Agencies Can Help

One-Stop Career Centers and other workforce development agencies who count people who are homeless among their clients can be an important link between employers and people who are homeless and/or have disabilities.

There are more than 3,500 One-Stop Career Centers. The purpose of the One-Stops is to offer comprehensive services to jobseekers, including preparation for employment as well as help with finding jobs that match individuals’ skills and experience. Funded by DOL, the One-Stop Career Centers are administered by local WIBs.

The DOL-funded Chronic Homelessness Employment Technical Assistance Center (CHETA) surveyed 10 One-Stop Career Centers that include people who are homeless in their service population.¹³

The survey inquired into services that One-Stop Career Centers working with homeless people offer employers.

The following list is derived from the CHETA survey, the Massachusetts One-Stop Career Centers service model, and other employment agencies focused on people who are homeless and/or have other barriers to employment.^{14,15,16} Taken together, these comprise a comprehensive set of strategies that recognize the importance of meeting the needs of employers and jobseekers alike in successful job placement and retention for people who are homeless and who often have other barriers to employment. Addressing all of these strategies will help ensure that you are offering employment services that best prepare homeless jobseekers to obtain and keep jobs, as well as respond to employers concerns and needs.

- **Vocational assessments.** These encompass two levels of assessments: 1) screening and assessment of jobseekers to help identify their strengths/skills and areas that will benefit from training, and 2) information for employers regarding jobseeker characteristics, skills, and job readiness, so employers can hire the best-suited people for their jobs. The Jackson Employment Center in Pima, AZ, a One-Stop Career Center specializing in homeless jobseekers, uses a three-part Individual Service Strategy with clients, beginning with a thorough assessment of individual interests and capabilities. Nancy Rider, of Denver's Division of Workforce Development Homeless Initiative, has found that "Employers will hire people who have been homeless, but ...prefer to deal with one organization that uses quality control and oversight to screen for strong applicants."
- **Job training.** This means addressing specific job skills such as office skills, cooking, and use of tools, as well as job readiness and foundational or soft skills such as responsibility, motivation, and self-management. At the Arkansas Workforce Center at Mountain Home, employment training workshops are held at local homeless shelters, and the Center collaborates with local employers to provide on-the-job training. Houston's SEARCH Program, which recently became a One-Stop Career Center site, collaborates with other agencies to make available training to clients for a number of

high-demand entry-level occupations, such as certified nurses assistant, warehouse/inventory clerk, and clerical/data entry.

- **Employer outreach and relationship building.** This key step involves one-to-one recruitment meetings with employers, as well as opportunities to present to groups of similar businesses. Job developers should clarify employers' specific needs and address their concerns around issues such as employees' job readiness, screening strategies, and to whom they can turn regarding questions or problems.
- **Job retention and follow-up assistance.** This involves case managers or other program staff following up with both employers and employees to ensure all is going well and to provide early intervention where problems are identified. In Boston, the JobNet One-Stop Career Center provides clients who are homeless and have mental illnesses with one-on-one case management to help with job retention for individuals identified as needing that level of assistance. Employers report that they value having someone they can go to if problems arise who is in regular contact with the employee.
- **Adjunct services.** These are supports and services providing tangible resources that help workers succeed in the workplace and ease employer concerns about hiring people who are homeless. These would include benefits counseling for clients so they will be able to access incentives and services that support work; transportation to worksites; business attire, uniforms, and work-related equipment; and adult education and GED classes. For individuals with disabilities, One-Stop Career Centers regularly help clients to obtain assistive technology and other work aids employees might need.
- **Job customizing.** This means negotiating with employees and employers upfront to design jobs that meet the individual strengths and interests of people with disabilities or other employment barriers, while at the same time considering their special needs and meeting those of the employer. Denver's Oxford Hotel, which has hired numerous homeless workers, regularly tailors jobs for these employees, including shifting hours and job responsibilities. An unusual accommodation made for several new workers has been to shorten the

required internship period to accelerate permanent job placement into the work that most interested them. This has helped with retention. Community Work Service's START Program in Boston provides customized employment training strategies, including job coaching, program try-outs, job shadowing, and a mock hotel room experience.

A common theme across programs is the value of employment staff in both the job placement process and in retention. These services make it much more appealing and less risky for employers to hire people about whom they may otherwise have second thoughts.

Case Study: Meeting Employer Needs in the Hospitality Sector

A unique Boston area partnership is proving to be a boon for both the city's growing hotel industry and for homeless jobseekers. Boston, like many cities, is facing a shortage of hotel workers, along with a high number of people who are homeless and often have other barriers to employment.

In 2005, a hotel industry foundation and an agency focused on employment services for people who are homeless began a collaboration that has already made tremendous inroads. The Massachusetts Lodging Association Education Foundation (MLAEF) and Community Work Services (CWS) partnered to create At Your Service, a comprehensive job training program that prepares participants for hospitality industry employment.^{17,18,19}

The training curriculum, Skills Tasks and Results Training (START), was developed by the American Hotel & Lodging Association. START prepares trainees for 18 different hotel industry jobs, covering the gamut from housekeeping to reservation-taker to restaurant server.

In addition to the START training, which is offered in 10-week, 25 hour per week cycles, At Your Service provides case management, job readiness and life management skills development, job placement, and project support/follow-up.

Program results are impressive, with graduates working at more than 25 hotels, and growing. These include some of Boston's most elegant hotels: the Taj (Ritz Carlton), the Charles Hotel, Hilton Back Bay, and the Millenium Bostonian Hotel, as well as traditional business hotel

chains. Out of the first 87 participants, 85 percent completed the training; 86 percent of graduates were placed in jobs, at an average wage of \$13 plus benefits and tips; and the job retention rate was 67 percent (71 percent for the first graduating class).

CWS Executive Director Serena Powell provides the following lessons for success:

- Carry out upfront candidate screening, with an intensive interview to identify and address possible obstacles, assess for a 6th-8th grade reading level, and determine ability to work hotel hours (nights/weekends, 3rd shift).
- Use a solid industry-developed curriculum with credential.
- Conduct periodic program evaluation, with feedback from participants that has led to important adjustments.
- Know the local hotel industry, including hiring practices, culture, and hardest to hire positions. Reach out to individual hotels.
- Reserve a half-day per week for participants to address personal needs (housing, medical appointments, etc.).
- Create ongoing communication vehicles: placement specialist who is the one point of contact for employers; structured feedback on participant performance; advisory committee from hotels; and project evaluation.
- Formalize partnerships with a Memorandum of Understanding outlining roles and responsibilities.

Participating hotel representatives report that their initial motivation for participating in At Your Service was their desperate need for workers due to high turnover rates. Thus, choosing an industry that faces worker shortages is another key to success.

Many of those hotels have since become strong program advocates who highly value their START Program employees. Deborah Andrews of the MLAEF summed up the hotels' response: "These are employees we want to keep. They are dedicated and have made a commitment to the lodging industry...They have the potential to become some of the best employees."

EMPLOYER ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMELESSNESS

Employers' perceptions about the causes of homelessness, the impacts of homelessness on businesses and the community, and the potential risks or benefits of hiring people who are homeless has a great deal to do with hiring practices. As is true for most of us, employers' attitudes are often shaped by their own experiences and by what they hear from their peers. A store owner who has dealt with customer complaints about homeless panhandlers in front of his store entrance may well be more reluctant to hire a homeless worker than someone whose church or Rotary Club is an active player in her community's efforts to end homelessness. In the former case, it will often fall to you to do the outreach needed to educate businesspeople and counter negative stereotypes.

Concerns about Hiring

The common reasons that employers give for not hiring people who are homeless generally stem from the fear that hiring homeless employees is too great a risk. These concerns are as follows:

- **Residential instability.** Roberta Meyers-Peebles, Director of the National H.I.R.E. Network that focuses on helping individuals with criminal records find work says, "The biggest barrier to hiring someone who is homeless is their instability because of their living situation...They may be living in their car, or a shelter, or doubled up with friends or relatives, and the stress and complications that go along with this lifestyle are seen as greatly impacting their ability to work."
- **Root causes of homelessness, such as substance abuse or mental illness.** Agencies working with employers report that one of the largest hurdles they face is overcoming the stereotypes that nearly everyone who is homeless cannot work due to their degree of mental disability or addiction, or is too lazy to work. The Project Manager of Denver's Road Home reported that a common assumption is that homeless people are "homeless and jobless by choice, which is outrageous." He also stressed how difficult it is to counter the picture many people have of "the shopping cart guy" or "the drunk drinking on the corner." Employers fear that homeless workers are not up to taking their job seriously, will not show up on time, will

not care about the quality of their work, and will be unmanageable.

- **Safety risk.** Another common misconception employers have is that they are putting their other workers in danger by hiring someone who is homeless. Many people think of homeless people as violent and presume that a high number of them are criminals who prey on others. According to Glen Martin of the Fortune Society, which runs an employment program for ex-offenders in New York City, many of whom are homeless, this perception is a major barrier their clients face. He explained in an interview that few employers realize that many people with criminal histories were convicted of low-level property crimes or even picked up for sleeping on the streets. However, employers tend to deny employment to anyone whose background check shows an arrest. As Drew Moritz of the Raleigh, N.C. Chamber of Commerce states, "Employers have a hard time justifying why they should take a chance on a homeless individual with a criminal record when the Raleigh area has an abundance of young, eager workers."
- **Security issues/insurance risk.** Because some people who are homeless have issues such as drug use or criminal records, employers may be reluctant to consider hiring any people who are homeless for jobs requiring security clearance, bonding, or where someone might be an insurance risk. According to Bob Palmer of the Indianapolis Private Industry Council, "Employers regulated by federal agencies like the Transportation Security Administration, Department of Transportation, or the Federal Aviation Administration face stringent security requirements to prevent terrorism. This serves as a barrier to employment for those with criminal records and effects industries like trucking, air, and other logistics."

Factors that Influence Employer Attitudes

There are ways that you can increase employers' openness to take on homeless jobseekers. According to others who successfully recruit employers to hire homeless people, marketing campaigns with glossy brochures, videos, and colorful posters are not the most effective

approach. Rather, it is personal contacts that are most effective in bringing employers around.

Job developers with One-Stop Career Centers and other workforce programs working with people who are homeless have in many cases designed strategies to reach out directly to employers to counter the stigma and stereotypes about homelessness. An employment counselor for homeless jobseekers in Denver reports that part of her job is educating employers to expect that they will get candidates who are ready and able to work and meet the job requirements.

The importance of correcting false assumptions through education is echoed by the Project Manager of Denver's Road Home/10-Year Plan, who states that the most effective strategy to convince employers to hire homeless jobseekers is helping them to understand that many people who are homeless are not very different from the rest of the low-income population; some are already working, but still can't afford a home. The Oxford Hotel in Denver hired its first homeless youth after being approached by a training and social service program that works with urban youth, and being convinced that the program was a reputable one that would provide appropriate support and follow-through for those referred for employment.

Another influence on employers' attitudes can be leaders who themselves serve as role models by hiring people who are homeless. In Raleigh, the Chamber of Commerce has agreed to recruit 20 businesses to hire people who are homeless. Part of the strategy is that the first several employers will then recruit their peers to follow suit in hiring homeless jobseekers.

Those who are willing to hire people who are homeless share the belief that there are benefits to doing so. Some are motivated by primarily economic motives, while others see it as their responsibility to give those who have had a tough break an opportunity to make it. Often there is more than one motivating factor. The primary reasons employers give for hiring homeless jobseekers are as follows:

- **Makes good economic sense.** Businesses are more likely to be open to hiring people with special challenges, including those who are homeless and/or have disabilities, when there is a worker shortage. A business journal article states that in a tight labor market, employers are looking to new sources of labor, including migrant workers, people with mental illness,

and those who are homeless.²⁰ Many are realizing, as one workforce development staffer explains, that the stereotypes of homeless people having no education or skills are not true. In particular, she notes the high number of older experienced workers in the trades, such as contractors, electricians, and plumbers, who lost everything in an economic downturn but who have solid skills and work ethics.

A study on employer perspectives in hiring people with special needs reported that monetary benefits such as tax benefits and public supports were a factor in hiring people with disabilities or other challenges.²¹ The Fortune Society has also found that tax credits and incentives are strong motivators for employers to take on someone they might not otherwise hire. Thus, your efforts should include working with a benefits specialist who can help you understand what federal tax credits and State and local incentives may be available for employers who hire workers who are homeless and/or have disabilities.

Employers and business groups are recognizing that investing resources in helping people who are homeless become contributing members of society is a wise use of funds. While it may take some extra resources upfront to place, train, and provide follow-along support to someone who lacks the security of a home, the payoff is great when individuals become independent and stabilized.

- **Improves the quality of communities.** This attitude has become more prevalent among businesspeople in recent years, replacing the common belief that the way to address homelessness was to force people who are homeless out of city centers, away from the public eye. The Federal Interagency Council on the Homeless, which promotes adoption of 10-Year Plans to End Homelessness, touts the community-wide benefits of business and non-profits combining forces to fund efforts to end homelessness, including employment programs.

Ed Blair, General Manager, Oxford Hotel, Denver, commenting on the hotel's hospitality internship program for homeless youth, reflects the view of many in his statement:

“Homelessness affects downtown businesses and the hospitality industry...We could either complain about the problem or do something to get these folks off the streets and into a job, so they can be self-sufficient.” Similarly, the director of a men’s shelter in Raleigh, NC stated that the businesses that hired twelve men who had been chronically homeless as part of a new demonstration program were motivated by the helping to make their community better and improve the lives of their neighbors.

- **Personal values: “It’s the “right thing to do.”** Some businesses that have made it their responsibility to hire people who are homeless are motivated by their own beliefs that they should do what they can to help those in need. Employers are willing to give people who are homeless an opportunity based on the idea of corporate responsibility – that those who have done well should help those who are less well off. Denver’s Road Home Project Manager states that businesses hiring people who are homeless do so because they have a sense of corporate responsibility, because of their commitment to the community, and because they believe it’s the right thing to do.

There are also employers who are moved to hire homeless people because they have “been there themselves.” An owner of a successful construction business in Reno states that he hires people who are homeless because he can empathize with their plight. He originally arrived in Nevada at the age of 18 without a job, starting out with day labor work.²²

THE ROLE OF BUSINESSES IN ENDING HOMELESSNESS

Organizations such as Chambers of Commerce, Business Improvement Districts, and other groups representing employers have long expressed concern about the economic toll of homelessness on their communities. They have shared common worries about the drain on the local economy from paying public dollars for homeless services and housing and the loss of revenue stemming from the presence of homeless people who frighten away customers and make communities less appealing to residents and visitors alike.

As homelessness became a growing problem, business groups led efforts to discourage people who are homeless from congregating in downtown commercial districts. Measures ranged from criminalizing activities such as panhandling, sitting on streets, and sleeping in public, to removing public outdoor seating and rousting sleeping people from doorways and outdoor heat grates.

More recently, growing numbers of business leaders have determined that intervening in ways that reduce homelessness has clear economic benefits. They have responded by both urging members to hire people who are homeless, as well as actively joining in efforts to improve community housing and services for people who are homeless.

In Atlanta, for example, the Chair of the Regional Commission on Homelessness, a retired partner of a major law firm, declared that “It’s much less expensive to put chronically homeless folks in safe and decent housing, giving them the support system they need, than it is to have them perpetually rotating in and out of hospitals, jails, ambulances, and psychiatric hospitals.”²³

In many communities, individual employers and the business community have become a significant force in efforts to end homelessness. Communities have found that engaging business leaders in this issue has been key to making inroads and overcoming public opposition to investing in housing and services for people who are homeless.

Following are the primary ways that employers and businesspeople are involved.

Corporate Giving and Voluntarism

Corporate donations have been a tremendous source of funding for homeless providers. Many businesses make direct contributions to local nonprofits; a number of large corporations provide substantial grant funding through their own foundations. In Denver, for example, more than 20 foundations and scores of businesses have contributed to Denver’s Road Home/10-Year Plan, raising \$33 million total.²⁴

In addition, businesses sponsor a wide variety of events to both raise money and raise consciousness about the importance of communities working together to prevent and end homelessness. These include fashion shows, basketball tournaments, auctions, and concerts, among

many other activities. These are often high-profile events sponsored by multiple corporate leaders, raising many thousands of dollars.

Project Homeless Connect, a major initiative of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, capitalizes on the willingness of businesses to take a stand and invest resources in ending homelessness. Homeless Connect days are being held in more than 100 communities throughout the country, bringing together housing, social service, employment, and health agencies along with businesses and community volunteers to provide a “one-stop shop” for people who are homeless. The one-stop shop offers a range of services, from housing and job leads to help obtaining identification documents; donations of needed items such as sleeping bags, clothing and hygiene kits; and services such as haircuts and dental, medical, and mental health screenings.

In San Francisco, which holds Homeless Connect days every other month, Sprint-Nextel provides a free phone bank. In Carson City, NV, a casino donated blankets and bedding. Comcast employees volunteering through the “Comcast Cares” community services day provided many of the volunteers for Denver’s third Project Homeless Connect.

Local Workforce Investment Boards

Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), comprised of business, industry, labor, education, and government representatives, are charged with planning and overseeing local workforce development issues under the Federal Workforce Investment Act. Much of WIBs’ focus is on creating training and job opportunities for groups who are underemployed, unemployed, or displaced. Among their major duties is oversight of the One-Stop Career Centers in their jurisdictions. Thus, WIBs are one of the primary structures through which employers can become involved in employment initiatives for people who are homeless.

Recognizing their role in preventing and intervening in homelessness, some WIBs are reaching out as collaborators on homeless initiatives. In Indianapolis, for example, the local WIB, the Indianapolis Private Industry Council, has been involved in developing and implementing Indianapolis’ 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness.

WIBs play an active role in determining to what extent local workforce development activities, including the One-Stop Career Centers, focus

on creating opportunities for homeless jobseekers. In Pima County, AZ, the WIB decided to operate one comprehensive One-Stop Center, with four partner sites focused on specialized populations, including the Jackson Employment Center for the Homeless.

Through the DOL’s cooperative agreement program Ending Chronic Homelessness through Employment and Housing Projects, which is administered by Office of Disability Employment Policy, WIBs at the five project sites are leading coalitions of local organizations to coordinate permanent housing with employment that responds to the capabilities and needs of people who have been chronically homeless.

Downtown Business Improvement Districts

Comprised of businesses and property owners committed to increasing the economic vitality, appearance, and safety of city centers, Downtown Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have been actively involved in homeless policy and funding decisions ever since public homelessness became an issue in our cities. Many BIDS originally were largely in conflict with homeless advocates and providers, as they were primarily concerned with clearing the streets of homeless people. This attitude has changed in many cities. While not always in agreement with each other, BIDs, homeless advocates and government agencies are collaborating to develop policies and programs that both keep downtowns attractive and safe while also directly addressing the needs of people who are homeless.

In Columbus, OH, for example, the BID funds and directs a homeless outreach team to build trust and offer service linkages to those individuals who do not use homeless shelters. In Washington, D.C., the BID spearheaded a day center providing food, laundry and showers, and regular on-site visits from local health, housing, employment, and other providers. The center is funded through a one-cent tax for each square foot of property businesses own.²⁵

Trade Associations

As with BIDs, Chambers of Commerce and trade associations representing major employers, such as the construction industry, homebuilders, and hotels, have recognized that they can and should play a role in ending homelessness. HomeAid, a nonprofit construction firm that builds housing for people who are homeless, was founded by a Southern California affiliate of the National Association of

Homebuilders. HomeAid's 22 chapters, which has built homes providing more than 4,000 beds per night, are run by local homebuilder associations throughout the country.²⁶

In many cases, Chambers of Commerce are active partners in their communities' 10-Year Plans to End Homelessness. Recently, the Business Civic Leadership Center, an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, sponsored a panel at a major conference on how business thinking and planning approaches have contributed to local homeless planning efforts.

Participation on Boards of Homeless Initiatives

Business leaders who recognize that ending homelessness is key to strong and healthy communities have taken leadership roles on 10-Year Plans to End Homelessness and many other efforts to prevent and end homelessness. Public and private homeless programs are recognizing that the skills and experience that have helped these individuals succeed in business and industry are the same kinds of expertise that can help resolve some of the barriers that make ending homelessness such a challenge. By putting their time and energy into homeless assistance efforts, they are setting examples for others about the value of civic involvement and commitment to improving their communities.

As the co-chairs of the Raleigh/Wake County 10-Year Action Plan to End Homelessness wrote, "Homelessness is a blight that harms all of us...Ensuring affordable housing, effective medical treatment, family supports, and opportunities for work and other meaningful activities is both more humane and cost-effective than maintaining an ever-expanding 'homeless service system."²⁷

EMPLOYER PROFILES: HIRING HOMELESS JOBSEEKERS

The following represent brief examples of some businesses that have made a point of reaching out to hire people who are homeless or face other employment barriers. While employers develop individual approaches to recruiting and retaining people who are homeless, all of these businesses share high expectations of their employees, combined with support to help employees realize those expectations.

Large Business

In line with its corporate commitment to socially responsible business and improving community life, Ben & Jerry's operates a PartnerShop Program whereby scoop shops are independently owned and operated by community-based non-profit organizations. Ben & Jerry's waives the standard franchise and royalty fees and provides support to help the non-profits succeed.²⁸

Ben & Jerry's provides its regular hands-on training to the non-profits, who receive travel stipends to attend "Scoop U", the company's training headquarters in Vermont. As with other scoop shops, this is supplemented with on-site training at the PartnerShop scoop shop by a Ben & Jerry's regional trainer. Ben & Jerry's provides regular visits from its field-based support team that visits all scoop shops, in addition to extra help from Ben & Jerry's staff who are specifically dedicated to supporting PartnerShops.

PartnerShops, which are expected to meet the same standards as other Ben & Jerry's shops, are encouraged to hire a mix of "target employees" (e.g., homeless people or at-risk youth) and traditional hires.

The Common Ground Community in New York City has run one of the most successful PartnerShop franchises for more than 10 years, currently operating three highly profitable scoop shops.²⁹ Most of the employees come from Common Ground's housing, training, and employment programs for people who are homeless, as well as from several other homeless provider organizations. Trainees take part in a three-month work cycle of 20 hours a week that provides them with the customer service skills and work experience to qualify for permanent service industry jobs, and hopefully move up from the \$7.00 an hour they earn at Ben & Jerry's. The success of this program speaks to the importance of working with businesses to help them adapt their practices so they can provide people who are homeless, but who may not be ready for full-time work right away, an opportunity to participate in an extended training and part-time work schedule.

Common Ground makes an excellent profit, much of which helps fund the agency's supportive housing programs, as well as other community non-profits that Common Ground supports.

Medium-sized Business

Fresh Start Catering is a full-service for-profit Washington, D.C. caterer that handles more than 400 events annually. These include many upscale weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs as well as events for universities, museums, and government agencies.³⁰

Fresh Start hires graduates from DC Central Kitchen, which provides a 12-week culinary arts training program to trainees who are homeless and often also have criminal records and/or histories of substance abuse. The training program covers all aspects of entry-level professional kitchen work, including hands-on training by staff as well as visiting chefs. Job-readiness skills are also a training focus, including teamwork, punctuality, following directions, and maintaining a positive attitude. All D.C. Kitchen graduates complete the ServSafe course, a food handlers certification course created by the Educational Foundation of the National Restaurant Association.

Many Fresh Start employees go on to permanent employment in restaurants and other food service positions. The sous chef of Fresh Start is herself a formerly homeless recovering addict. After graduating from DC Central Kitchen, she found a job at the Grand Hyatt's restaurant as a prep assistant. She eventually moved up to the position of banquet chef and returned a year later to Fresh Start.

While some people consider using Fresh Start because they want to help a business that is also a good cause, the Fresh Start staff know that they would never be hired for the kinds of elegant events they cater if they did not provide first-class catering in terms of both food and service.

Small Business

Ashbury Images in San Francisco creates custom screen-printed and embroidered apparel and promotional items for private companies, non-profits, and special events.³¹ What began in 1991 as a vocational training center for at-risk youth in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury District has become one of the largest screen printing and embroidery shops in the area, using the latest technology and screen printing techniques.

The company hires current or formerly homeless people, many of whom have just completed substance abuse treatment, and most of

whom have mental health problems. New hires go through a rigorous yet supportive training program focusing on building self-esteem and job skills. They are then hired full-time at the company, with the expectation that most will use their experience at Ashbury to move up the employment ladder. Many former employees now work in jobs in multimedia, retail, youth counseling, and other industries.

Ashbury Images capitalizes on its role as a social enterprise, successfully marketing itself to non-profits and socially responsible businesses that desire to buy from companies with a social purpose. One effective marketing tool is Ashbury's offer to affix hangtags to the garments they sell with the following quote: "Rebuilding lives one shirt at a time: Ashbury Images provides employment opportunities, job training, and hope to individuals recovering from substance abuse and homelessness."

Day Labor

Primavera WORKS is a program of the Primavera Foundation, which provides a variety of programs and services to help people who are homeless and near homeless become stable and independent.³² Primavera WORKS Temporary Day Labor Option pays workers a minimum of \$7.00 per hour and provides supports such as lunches, transportation, and work clothes and equipment. Working in the day labor program is seen as a temporary position, with participants expected to participate in job readiness classes that focus on interviewing, applications, skills assessment, and job search activities. The Day Labor Option enables homeless individuals to establish a stable work history, gain work skills, and link to the resources they need to obtain permanent housing and full-time employment. Because Primavera Works is a partner agency with the Jackson Employment Center One-Stop Career Center, workers can access the services there, many of which focus on helping homeless jobseekers find jobs and training.

CONCLUSION

While many employers are initially averse to hiring people who are or have been homeless, attitudes can change. It is clear that a number of factors can bring previously reluctant employers to decide to hire individuals who are homeless and even become strong advocates for

expanding their community's commitment to ending and preventing homelessness.

Homeless jobseekers will likely continue to face an uphill battle finding stable employment that can help them move out of homelessness. However, there are plenty of success stories. It is clear that with targeted assistance, homeless workers are proving to be able and valuable employees, in many cases surprising their initially reluctant and distrusting employers and co-workers.

Especially in areas of worker shortages, including many service, retail, and health care jobs, there are ample entry-level opportunities. With the right kinds of training and support, these industries can provide a stepping-stone into better jobs with stability and a decent wage for employees whose financial situation has kept them homeless. Meanwhile, workers who have been homeless can help stem the problems of poor job preparation, high turnover, and recruitment difficulties for employers.

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