

Research and Evaluation Brief

Facts, figures, and insights for workforce development practice and policy

Volume 1, Issue 6

One Path to Self-Sufficiency

The number of low-income individuals and families (living at or below twice the federal poverty level) in Massachusetts and the nation is substantial, even though many of these individuals are working full-time. This research project set out to better understand whether and how community action programs (CAPs) could effectively help individuals get the kinds of training and other services that would lead to jobs that pay family sustaining wages.

In 2002-2003, Commonwealth Corporation and its research partner, FutureWorks, conducted a study in partnership with the state's Department of Housing and

Community Development (DHCD) and the Massachusetts Community Action Program Directors' Association (MASSCAP). CommCorp set out to identify an effective continuum of education, training, employment, and wrap-around support

services. The goal was to develop training and technical assistance information that would strengthen the support services provided to the working poor to assist them in achieving economic success. Researchers attempted to identify past and present programs in Massachusetts and throughout the U.S. operated by community action programs, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), and

faith-based organizations—either independently or in partnership with other workforce development players—that hold promise in moving unemployed and underemployed adults and their families out of poverty and closer to economic self-sufficiency.

This review of programs focused on economic self-sufficiency, which was viewed as a continuum of several stages that working families move through, from the early stages of dependence, poverty and low-income status to higher levels of economic self-sufficiency and prosperity. By focusing on economic self-sufficiency, the survey did not intend to exclude other important dimensions of self-sufficiency such as social, cultural, or civic self-sufficiency. These additional dimensions were also examined in the program review.

This research is motivated by growing awareness among policymakers and practitioners that closer integration between community-based organizations and the workforce development system is necessary to move low-income individuals and their families from poverty to economic self-sufficiency.

Key Questions and How They Were Addressed

- How do Community-Based Organizations and their partners deliver integrated education, training, career, and support services to help individuals and families move from poverty to economic self-sufficiency?

REPORT FOCUS

Using a self-sufficiency framework to guide workforce development programs and policies; how Community-Based Organizations deliver integrated education, training, career, and support services to help families move from poverty to self-sufficiency

Released: August 2003

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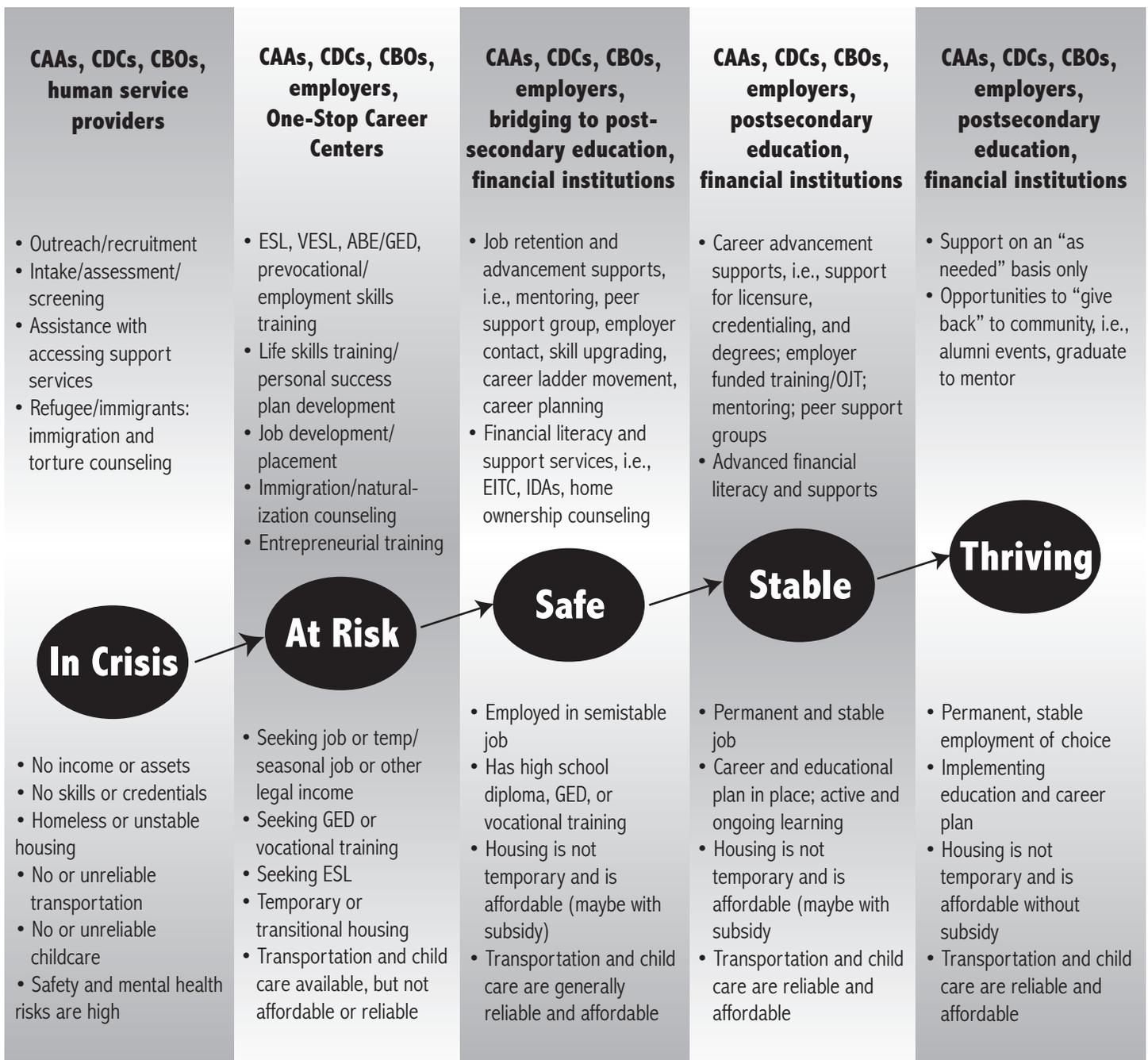
- How do Community-Based Organizations track and measure the progress made by their clients toward economic self-sufficiency, and how do they measure the effectiveness of their programs?

A number of activities were undertaken to address these questions including:

- Identifying criteria for literature/program review and developing case studies
- Conducting an initial local and national exploratory scan of programs

- Conducting a review/survey of programs
- Preparing case studies based on findings from site visits and interviews
- Mapping coordinated services specific to the stages on the self-sufficiency continuum
- Identifying measurement and reporting methods
- Creating and disseminating training and technical assistance resources.

Figure 1. The Path to Self-Sufficiency



The selection of programs for evaluation was limited to those that met specific criteria. The program had to:

- Work with a population that is not economically self-sufficient and faces multiple barriers including but not limited to language barriers, literacy barriers, life and job skills barriers, lack of barriers related to (formal) education, transportation, child care, health care, housing, access to the workforce development system, unemployment, underemployment, dependence on public assistance, mental illness, criminal history, physical disabilities, and substance abuse.
- Have been operating or operated for a substantial period of time.
- Be operated by a CAP agency or the CAP agency is a key partner in a partnership that operates the program.
- Facilitate worker mobility by providing training and supports that lead to employment in high-quality jobs or in jobs that are in demand in the labor market. A quality job implies living wages, benefits, and access to career pathways.
- Provide—either directly or indirectly through partnerships—a continuum of integrated basic education/language, skill training, and wrap-around support services.
- Set objectives that are concrete and measurable on the continuum along self-sufficiency and captures, records,

monitors, analyzes, and reports/uses information regarding meaningful movement along the continuum.

Key Findings

This exploratory research provides important information about how Community-Based Organizations deliver integrated education, training, career, and support services to help families move from poverty to self-sufficiency. This research also highlights the multiple barriers organizations encounter as they strive to make self-sufficiency a central operating principle.

Findings are grouped below:

Capacity Building

- The concept of self-sufficiency may be well developed but the capacity of CBOs to implement new approaches is limited.

Service Mix and Partnerships

- Wrap-around support services are often an essential part of the path to self-sufficiency.
- Strategic partnerships with other public and private organizations along the self-sufficiency continuum are key.
- Career ladder initiatives and job retention and career advancement programs provide important lessons

Focus of Selected Program Case Studies

Asian Neighborhood Design (AND), San Francisco

- Case study describes AND's self-sufficiency framework and the value it has derived from using it for over six years.

Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD), Financial Services Academy – New England College of Finance Model

- Case study describes the mix of services and how partnerships were established to provide entry via ABCD into the Financial Services Academy.

Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation

- Case study describes the mix of services and how partnerships were established to create the Boston Health Care and Research Training Institute - a career ladder initiative that advances entry-level health care workers to higher positions.

Jewish Vocational Service's Center for Careers and Lifelong Learning (CALL)

- Case study describes how Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) in Boston tracks and measures performance along a self-sufficiency continuum

about the appropriate service mix and strategic partnerships required to move clients toward self-sufficiency.

Funding and Timeframe

- Achieving self-sufficiency is a long-term process that requires deep and wide supports.
- Organizations that have adopted a long-term, self-sufficiency approach to working with clients have funded their work through a patchwork of private, philanthropic and state funds.

Continued Research

- Further research is needed to better understand the promise and practice of a self-sufficiency continuum framework.

Conclusions

While it does not seem that the self-sufficiency continuum has become the primary organizing principle of programs dedicated to the eradication of poverty,

research indicates that more and more organizations are using the continuum as a framework for accomplishing their mission. However, many of these organizations lack the tools and resources to adequately restructure themselves accordingly, which may lessen the impact of their efforts. Thus, while use of a self-sufficiency continuum framework is on the rise, it is not without its challenges.

If programs intend to support individuals and families along the continuum, then organizations may need to revisit their service mix, partnerships and perhaps organizational structure. Strategic partnerships with other providers of key services are the foundation for weaving disparate supports into a comprehensive package that can favorably impact an individual's ability to increase their skills, credentials, work experience, and wages.

Funding streams will need to better support a continuum of integrated services that will support workers from poverty to self-sufficiency. A multiplicity of funding sources can be melded to support these initiatives.

The full report is available on the DHCD, MASSCAP, and CommCorp websites (www.commcorp.org/wss/re).



For more information, contact Johan Uvin,
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Please visit the Center for Research and Evaluation's
web site at www.commcorp.org/wss/re
for additional workforce development findings.

Project Partners

Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), Massachusetts Community Action Program Directors' Association (MASSCAP), and Commonwealth Corporation with its research partner, FutureWorks. The project also received support from numerous community, workforce, and economic development agencies including, but not limited to, the Massachusetts Workforce Board Association, the Hispanic-American Chamber of Commerce, and the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations.

Funder

United States Department of Health and Human Services

Sponsors/Co-Funders

National Center for Adult Learning and Literacy (Cambridge) and the Center for Law and Social Policy (Denver).