



RESEARCH REPORT

Employer Engagement by Community-Based Organizations

Meeting the Needs of Job Seekers with Barriers to Success in the Labor Market

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Employer Engagement by Community-Based Organizations

Employers in communities across the country need to find skilled workers to fill open jobs. This is true even during economic downturns but is much harder during economic booms. In March 2018, the national unemployment rate was 4.1 percent, the lowest in 18 years.¹ However, the unemployment rate masks a more complex picture in local communities, where certain groups of workers continue to face barriers to finding work. These challenges may include a lack of skills and qualifications needed for available jobs; limited access to stable housing, transportation, and child care; previous involvement in the criminal justice system; and a lack of networks to access employment opportunities. In a tight labor market, these workers can be a valuable resource for employers if they get the assistance they need.

Workforce development programs prepare workers for jobs through training, education, work experience, and coaching. They also provide supports to help workers overcome persistent barriers to employment. Common supports include child care, transportation, counseling and financial assistance, and matching workers with available job opportunities. An essential part of their work is engaging employers to help workers get jobs and succeed at work while ensuring that employment programs are designed to meet employer needs (Spaulding and Martin-Caughey 2015). Ultimately, workforce development programs aim to develop deeper relationships with employers that go beyond transactional job matching to become a trusted partner in realizing human resource and other related goals. Some workforce development programs are operated by community-based organizations (CBOs), which are rooted in local neighborhoods or communities and serve disadvantaged residents of those communities. CBOs serving people with barriers to employment face a unique set of challenges in engaging employers.

This report highlights promising approaches and strategies that these CBOs can use to engage employers. This information can also help the public- and private-sector funders and other organizations that fund and partner with them. The findings are based on the experiences of three selected organizations: Cara Chicago (Chicago), Henry Street Settlement (New York City), and Community Learning Center Inc. (Dallas-Fort Worth). All three are grantees under JPMorgan Chase's New Skills at Work Initiative (see box 1).

BOX 1

The Urban Institute's Partnership with JPMorgan Chase

The Urban Institute is collaborating with JPMorgan Chase over five years to inform and assess JPMorgan Chase's philanthropic investments in key initiatives. One of these is New Skills at Work, a \$250 million multiyear workforce development initiative that aims to expand and replicate effective approaches for linking education and training efforts with the skills and competencies employers need. The goals of the partnership include using data and evidence to inform JPMorgan Chase's philanthropic investments, assessing whether its programs are achieving desired outcomes, and informing the larger fields of policy, philanthropy, and practice. As one of several resources Urban is developing for the field, this brief provides an initial framework for considering the different goals and dimensions of employer engagement, a central strategy of New Skills at Work. The framework will also be used to guide the assessment of JPMorgan Chase's programs in workforce readiness and provide a resource to the field so stakeholders and practitioners can better understand their own employer engagement efforts.

BOX 2

Definitions

Workforce development programs prepare workers for jobs by providing employment services, such as training, education, work experience, coaching, counseling, providing supports (e.g., child care, transportation, financial assistance), matching workers with available job opportunities, and providing support and guidance to retain jobs and advance in their careers.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are organizations rooted in local neighborhoods or communities that have a special mission to serve disadvantaged residents of those communities.

People with barriers to employment are those who are low-income and face significant challenges that interfere with their success in the labor market, including a lack of basic skills or English language skills, homelessness or housing instability, severe physical or mental disabilities, health or mental health issues, an involvement in the criminal justice system, disconnection from work or school, substance abuse issues, domestic violence issues, and so on.

Background

Employer engagement has long been considered a best practice in workforce development programs, with research pointing to the effectiveness of models that have engagement as a central element (Barnow and Spaulding 2015). Workforce development programs primarily engage employers to help participants get jobs.

However, they also engage employers to access networks for further expanding employer relationships and to build industry knowledge, ensuring that programs give participants the appropriate skills, qualifications, and experience required for the job. Workforce development programs also engage employers in the oversight and design of programs, delivery of training, and even the contribution of in-kind or financial resources to support a program (Spaulding and Martin-Caughey 2015).

Much has been written about strategies for effective employer engagement. An important component is developing a deep knowledge of employer needs (Clymer 2003). In sector-based programs, this means developing an understanding of an industry to more effectively respond to employers' demand for skilled workers (Conway et al. 2007). It is also important to deliver quality services that are responsive to business needs (Clymer 2003). Taylor (2011) notes the importance of feedback loops that allow for continuous improvement so that skills training programs can make adjustments that ensure participants are getting the appropriate skills and communicating their qualifications effectively during recruitment and hiring. Staff members who are responsible for helping participants identify, apply for, and be considered for job opportunities are urged to make the business case, leading with the assets and value that a person can bring to a company (Clymer 2003; Spaulding and Martin-Caughey 2015; Taylor 2011).

All workforce development programs face challenges in effectively engaging employers, ranging from limited resources and capacity to differences in organizational cultures that make communication difficult. CBOs serving people with barriers to work face additional challenges. Employers are often wary of working with these populations. CBOs need to overcome employer perceptions that the populations they work with are generally less desirable employees (Burtless 1985; Clymer 2003; Laufer Green Isaac 2004; McPherson 1997:). Businesses can stereotype certain groups of workers, and research shows that employers tend to believe low-income workers are not as productive, skilled, reliable, or loyal as other workers (Laufer Green Isaac 2004). Further, research has documented persistent discrimination in hiring practices based on gender, race, ethnicity, criminal history, and even unemployment status, which make it more difficult to help participants who fall into certain groups secure employment (Holzer 2006; Pager 2007). Computer automated recruitment practices can screen out individuals with issues such as gaps in work history making it difficult for some to even be considered for open positions (Cappelli 2012).

CBOs operating workforce development programs have used a variety of strategies aimed at helping individuals with barriers to employment find jobs and be successful in the labor market. One approach has been transitional employment, a paid (sometimes subsidized) temporary job placement. This is aimed at helping individuals "get their foot in the door" and help them build work experience. Though some studies have found that positive employment impacts dissipated over time, transitional employment strategies hold promise for achieving a variety of goals for workers facing disadvantages in the labor market (Dutta-Gupta et

al. 2016; Jacobs 2012). Similarly, studies of programs using an approach of rapid placement (“work first”) for welfare recipients have often shown positive impacts in the short term with respect to employment but welfare leavers often struggle with low wages and job instability (Bloom, Loprest, and Zedlewski 2011). The Employment Retention and Advancement demonstration tested different approaches for improving employment and earnings for disadvantaged groups, including financial incentives for participants, encouragement to change jobs, encouragement to participate in education and training, and counseling on job-related issues. A rigorous evaluation found positive impacts in 3 of 12 sites (Hendra et al. 2010).

Another approach to improving outcomes is through sector-based programs, which have shown evidence of effectiveness even for subgroups of workers, such as youth (Maguire et al. 2009). Sector-based programs often focus on effecting changes in systems that benefit workers and employers. Increasingly, this has included strategies for improving the quality of jobs as way of improving outcomes for disadvantaged workers (Conway and Dawson 2016).

There is research that suggests that offering a mix of strategies may be most effective in meeting the needs of hard-to-employ job seekers (Butler et al. 2012). The combination of appropriate and individualized social supports and services helps address the varying needs for well-being and skill development on job seekers’ path to employment (Butler et al. 2012; Sama-Miller et al. 2016). For individuals returning from prison, individualized assessment, pre-release collaboration with justice agencies, career pathway strategies and mentorship have been recommended approaches (Marks, Kendall and Pexton 2016). In addition, workforce development programs that build close employer relationships help participants with barriers gain more reliable pathways to employment (Butler et al. 2012; Maguire et al. 2009; Martinson and Holcomb 2007). Building employer partnerships—where employers and service providers codevelop curricula, programs are customized for employers, or where they collaborate on the delivery of sector-based strategies—helps ensure that programming aligns with the labor market and can also create opportunities to change employer practices in ways that benefit disadvantaged workers.

These studies discuss the kinds of interventions that help link job seekers with barriers to employment, and indicate the importance of engaging employers. However, they tell us little about strategies for engaging employers among programs providing employment services to people facing barriers to employment. This report adds to our knowledge base by specifically identifying the engagement strategies and approaches used by CBOs assisting people with significant barriers.

The Organizations

For this study, we selected three CBOs to explore these issues. These organizations are not representative of all CBOs providing employment services, but they offer useful examples of different approaches to employer engagement informed by varying program histories, missions, and community contexts. We looked at three programs: Cara Chicago, Henry Street Settlement, and Community Learning Center Inc (CLC Inc.). Each organization was selected because it has a sophisticated approach to employer engagement that connects with employers in multiple ways using innovative strategies. We provide detailed descriptions of the three organizations below.

Cara Chicago

Since 1991, Cara Chicago has provided job training placement services, wraparound supports, coaching, and on-the-job learning opportunities to homeless, formerly incarcerated and other low-income populations in the Chicago area. The program aims to connect people to employment and “rebuild hope, self-esteem and opportunity” for those most in need.

TARGET POPULATION

Cara serves those affected by poverty, unemployment, and underemployment. Candidates take steps to overcome their challenges, such as domestic violence, episodic homelessness, gaps in employment, and incarceration.

EMPLOYERS

Cara staff build relationships with employers in a variety of industries and occupations, including hospitality, food service, janitorial, health care, and human services.

SERVICES

Cara is self-described as “bootcamps and businesses” that help people in poverty get back to work. By bootcamps, they mean full- and part-time training programs that focus on addressing poverty across multiple dimensions: poverty of esteem, of connections, of skills and of assets. The coursework, coaching, and simulated workplace environment in which it is experienced is designed to develop individual leadership, meaningful relationships, workplace competencies (like time management, teamwork, professionalism, communication, and conflict management), and socioemotional health as the foundation for any job search or any career.

To increase overall candidate marketability, they leverage their social enterprises (for-profit businesses in exterior maintenance [Cleanslate] and contract staffing [Cara Connects]) as blue- and white-collar options to develop additional skills through transitional or temporary jobs and build more recent employment on candidates' résumé.

With its employment partnerships and the efforts of each participant's supported job search, they secure hundreds of jobs each year while providing wraparound services to support retention. Their coaches work one-on-one, face-to-face with each participant for a minimum of twelve months after placement. And they have a career advancement program and alumni association that follow in support of their ultimate goal of transformational, not transactional, employment.

Henry Street Settlement

For over 122 years, Henry Street Settlement has worked to address the social welfare, education, and employment needs of New York's Lower East Side community. Henry Street provides a slate of services and programs for low-income residents and is also engaged in community-based programming and advocacy.

TARGET POPULATION

Henry Street primarily targets its services to residents of the Lower East Side, but the organization has begun drawing more participants from across the city. Each year, it serves more than 60,000 New Yorkers through its range of programming, broad infrastructure, and partnerships.

EMPLOYERS

Henry Street targets employers in and around the Lower East Side. In recent years, it has focused on employers that have come to the community as part of development projects, opening up opportunities in construction, food service, hospitality, and retail.

SERVICES

Henry Street offers a wide range of services, including supportive housing, health and wellness services, youth programs, arts and cultural programs, programs for seniors, and workforce development programming. Workforce development programs include youth-focused career exploration and job opportunities through the Summer Youth Employment Program and Young Adult Internship Program; training and job placement support for adult job seekers through Job Essentials Training; and contextualized English language instruction, workplace-communication skills training, and skills training for service-sector jobs geared toward immigrant populations.

Community Learning Center Inc.

CLC Inc. is a technical school providing education, training, and employment services that lead to high-wage, high-demand career paths in Dallas-Fort Worth and its surrounding areas. Started in 2000 by a union representative from the aerospace industry, the organization has close partnerships within that industry but has expanded over time to focus on a broader set of industries.

TARGET POPULATION

CLC Inc. targets unemployed and underemployed job seekers in need of intensive skills training for high-demand, high-wage employment. CLC Inc. partners with local social services agencies and other CBOs to recruit a wide range of candidates, dislocated workers, at-risk opportunity youth, veterans, formerly incarcerated people, and low-income candidates. The organization also trains incumbent workers in the aerospace sector and its related industries.

EMPLOYERS

CLC Inc. has its roots in the aerospace industry and is still closely linked to that sector. Over time, it has expanded to other industries, including construction, advanced manufacturing, and logistic/supply chain services.

SERVICES

CLC Inc. offers a range of services and programs across its two campuses. Its offerings are anchored in its skills training programs in welding, CNC (short for computer numerical control) machining, manufacturing and aerospace assembly, logistics associates and technician, and production technician. CLC Inc. technical training courses are nationally and industry recognized and the curricula are developed by aerospace industry partners, such as Lockheed Martin and Bell Helicopter, enabling a more seamless transition from training to gainful employment with family-sustaining wages and benefits

Alongside technical training, CLC Inc. offers programs with additional support services either in-house or through partnerships with other organizations. CLC Inc. provides in-house services to veterans and their families as part of the Veterans Employment and Training Service. In addition, they provide training for job seekers going through the Family Self-Sufficiency program and Family Empowerment Program, which operate out of partner service organizations. Through these programs, qualifying job seekers can get their high school equivalency or access to personalized services according to their needs and preferences. CLC Inc. also offers several programs for youth. In Partnership with YouthBuild, CLC Inc. provides youth ages 16–24 who have dropped out of high

school with academic and pre-apprenticeship services. In partnership with the Fort Worth Independent School District, CLC Inc. provides work readiness, internships, and summer employment in the justice field to low-income high school students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. CLC Inc. continues to grow its partner network and training offerings to meet the employment needs of its community.

How the Three CBOs Approach Employer Engagement

Each of these three organizations has a different strategy for engaging employers. In this section, we describe the themes that emerged from our conversations with program staff, partner organizations, and employers regarding their approaches. We begin with a summary of each organization's engagement strategy followed by a discussion of the common strategies and context across the three organizations.

Cara

Cara's employer engagement strategy centers on developing a deep understanding of employer needs, available positions, workplace culture, and overall job quality. Such in-depth knowledge allows Cara's team to cater its skills trainings and job placements to the specific talent needs of employers. A business development manager is responsible for developing new employer relationships. Once an employer hires a program participant, the account is shifted to a corporate account manager, who maintains partnerships with employers and is responsible for helping them fill additional vacancies. Participants placed in jobs work with Cara's individual development specialists, who act as coaches and provide professional and personal support to help workers maintain employment. After nine months on the job, participants can receive additional advancement support from an advancement coach.

Employers are involved in the organization in a variety of other ways, participating in "Motivations" sessions (a daily ritual of storytelling and song that serves as Cara's 'prep rally' for the day) and mock interviews, hosting workplace tours, offering training, contributing financially to the organization, and sitting on its board of directors. Cara aims to develop deeper relationships with employers, where they are considered a "triple threat," signifying their involvement in training and hiring as well as their financial contributions to the organization.

Henry Street Settlement

Henry Street Settlement takes an asset-based approach to employer engagement and markets program participants to employers based on the value they can add to a company. Program staff refers candidates for open positions, and a business development team decides who to send for interviews. The business development team is also responsible for maintaining relationships with employers after placement. Participant barriers are only brought up with employers that are known to be motivated to work with Henry Street because of its social mission. Businesses are also involved in the organization as donors and volunteers and also offer workshops, provide internships, and inform the development of curricula.

Community Learning Center Inc.

CLC Inc. is deeply connected to the aerospace sector and its related industries, which is reflected in its approach to employer engagement. Industry representatives serve on the board of directors and a steering committee that ensures its programs are designed to meet employer needs. Such deep integration is seen in the industry-cocreated curriculum, customized trainings, industry-grade training materials and equipment, and the direct hiring of graduating classes.

A single job developer is responsible for developing and maintaining relationships with CLC Inc.'s employer partners, although its CEO and other senior leaders are also heavily involved in engaging employers and maintaining employer relationships. Staff from employer partners also help deliver training as instructors or as mock interviewers hosting site tours, leverage their networks to help CLC Inc. identify new employer partners, and facilitate donation of equipment and materials from employer companies.

[We seek] employers that see employees as investments in their growth as opposed to expenses to be cut. They are saying, “If I do this training I am going to get employees that are more loyal, productive, and happier,” we need employers who think, “If I invest, I am going to see a lot of benefits.” Not all employers see it that way. Some see them as expenses. – Henry Street staff member

Common Strategies

Careful Selection and Targeting of Employer Partners

The CBOs we visited discussed a strategic approach to identifying employers that offers participants the greatest chance at economic security. Although employers do not exclusively come from the community or meet all the requirements of a “good employer partner,” several staff talked about how an intentional approach to identifying and selecting partners is important for assisting participants with significant barriers to employment.

SELECTING EMPLOYER PARTNERS

CBOs can identify employers that are a good match for the participants that the CBOs serve and ask key questions in the selection of employer partners, such as the following:

- **Are employers community minded?** In interviews with various employer partners, we heard repeatedly about the desire to give back to the community, be good community members, and be “employers of choice” in a competitive labor market. CBOs supporting people with barriers to employment seek out employers with this community-oriented mindset, whether it is motivated by a business imperative or a reflection of a company’s values.
- **Do they have the desire to invest in workers?** Staff from Henry Street talked about seeking “a values match.” The organization seeks out employers that want to support and invest in workers, not only for the benefit of these workers but because they see this an investment in the company’s productivity and growth.
- **Do they provide good jobs with opportunities for advancement?** All three organizations look carefully at issues of wages and benefits when scoping out whether an employer might be a good

partner. When participants qualify only for low-wage jobs, it can be particularly important to identify employers who offer advancement opportunities. For participants who have not succeeded in school or dropped out of the labor force for some time, maintaining an entry-level job for some time in a company that offers advancement opportunities might be their best chance to move up in the workplace.

TARGETING CERTAIN TYPES OF EMPLOYERS

Small CBOs may not be positioned to meet the hiring needs of large employers with large job orders, but they can assist small or neighborhood-based employers. Henry Street staff described targeting both types of employers in its engagement efforts. Smaller employers that might not be the target of city government efforts because of their size and who may lack robust human resource capacity can benefit from customized assistance from a CBO that knows them well and understands their hiring needs. Henry Street specifically targets small employers because its staff feels Henry Street can provide the intensive customized services that these employers might not be able to get elsewhere. Henry Street also targets neighborhood businesses because such employers want to be viewed positively by the community and may be more willing to give program participants a chance.

We'll give [employers] a tour and talk about job needs. I like to follow with referrals. Another visit would be off site to get a tour of their facilities and so I can better understand their work culture and what a job is going to be like for our participants. Maybe meet with people who are not the main contact to get deeper into the relationship. I like to plan information sessions to learn more about the jobs and what it's like to work there. I also like doing a hiring component where they come and do interviews to fill certain positions. –CLC Inc. staff member

Service Delivery That Reflects a Strong Knowledge of Employer and Job Seeker Needs

All three organizations we visited talked about the intensive work they do to understand employer and job-seeker needs and design services reflective of those needs. Deep knowledge of employer and job-seeker

needs helps CBOs provide “concierge-level services” to both parties. Staff described alignment and customization of services was as key to effectively engaging employers.

KNOWING EMPLOYERS AND JOB SEEKERS AND WORKING TOWARD THEIR NEEDS

All three organizations described intensive efforts to understand employer needs as a key strategy for engaging employers. With strong knowledge of a business, CBOs can more effectively provide services to the employer. Examples include understanding the required skills and certifications, the work culture, expectations regarding scheduling, how an employer considers criminal records, and their preference regarding frequency and forms of contact.

Just as important for the engagement of employers is having a strong understanding of participants. What wages and hours are necessary for them to support their families? Are they seeking work that offers health insurance? Can they get to the job given their transportation options? Are their skills and personality suited for the type of work? Having staff who can get to know participants is key to matching employers with people who have faced challenges in school or the workplace.

INVOLVING EMPLOYERS IN THE DESIGN OF PROGRAMS

Getting input from employers on programs and services can also help ensure that participants gain the skills and preparation needed to outweigh other barriers they might have. The literature makes clear the importance of designing education and training programs with the input of employers to reflect the skills desired by their industry. For programs serving people with significant barriers to work, codesigned training provides an added advantage. Providing participants with the specific skills employers demand can help overcome other disadvantages, like gaps in work history, a criminal record, or a lack of related work experience. If employers also help deliver training, they can directly assess whether a candidate’s fit for an available position or for their business. All of the skills-training courses that CLC Inc. offers are designed with significant input from employers, with processes in place for constant feedback loops for updating the training. Both CLC Inc. and Cara have gone a step further and developed “branded” trainings that are run by the employers or specialized to reflect their needs. At Henry Street, staff seek to deepen relationships with employers that are willing to provide feedback on participants that have been placed in jobs. This feedback allows for improvement and refinement of services generally and for that specific employer and is an indicator of opportunities to grow the relationship.

USING SUPPORTIVE SERVICES TO ENGAGE EMPLOYERS AND MEET CUSTOMER NEEDS.

The supports that CBOs provide help participants prepare for work, retain those jobs, and advance. These services can be marketed to employers as a selling point for working with the CBO. Applicants that “walk off

the street” may face some of the same barriers as the people who walk through a CBO’s doors. The difference is that a job candidate from the CBO has the supports from the program, including often continuing access to staff who can help with retention support.

Our central belief is that the participants already have natural skills and talents, and it is our job to draw them out. They are already great, and our goal is to match great people with great opportunities. To do this, we first seek to build employment partnerships, not just employment transactions. To do that, we want to provide a concierge level of service to engage with companies in really knowing their needs, know what their culture is, taking a consultation sales approach. We want to become that trusted pool of candidates for them, so that even though we aren’t able to provide a high volume of candidates, they know we’re not just going to send bodies. –Cara staff member

Building Trusting Relationships with Employers by Providing Quality Service and Making Good Matches over Time

At the most fundamental level, CBOs assisting people with significant barriers to employment must do what any organization helping employers fill positions does—they must work to make the best match. Given many employers’ wariness in hiring individuals with barriers to work, CBOs serving these populations face an additional challenge of convincing employers that the candidates they offer are a good match. Overcoming this perception involves intensive work and trust building with employers over time. CBOs must get to know the needs of job seekers and employers, make good matches between the two, and provide ongoing support to ensure that matches are successful.

Building trust with an employer is not just about making a single match but is about quality service over time. As one Cara staff member remarked, “Companies appreciate that we are sending people who are **intentionally matched** with their needs. We also are solid and consistent with getting to know what’s needed and how to have business as the primary customer and provide value to them.” It is the consistency in quality over time that allows CBOs to potentially help participants access opportunities they might not have been able to previously. This combines the professional service provision with built-in feedback loops and responsiveness to issues. The provision of supportive services after a person is placed in a job helps ensure that matches “stick.”

Over time, this can open up opportunities to engage employers on behalf of workers who might not have been considered at first. For example, a staff member at Cara described getting a participant with a criminal record an interview with a company that did not hire people with convictions:

I remember one specific time there was a position in a manufacturing company who didn't allow convictions, but our best candidate had seven. So we said, "We know what your policy is. We're being up front knowing this person has seven convictions, but we really do believe he's the best fit." They saw the track record we had in the past with him and other participants they hired. He didn't get the job, but he did get an interview. But just to show that we go for employment partnerships, not just employer transactions.

Similarly, CLC Inc. staff remarked on being able to open up opportunities for a participant wearing an ankle monitor because they could speak to the student's performance in the training and because the employer trusted the quality of the training and its alignment with their needs.

[A participant] had a lot of barriers and he was struggling. We did intake with him. To be able to have a community organization like CLC rally for you and get behind you and say to employers, "Yes he has a background, but look at how [well] he did in class." I don't think an individual has that on their own. –CLC Inc. staff member

Using a Variety of Strategies to Help Employers Get beyond Stigma

One of the biggest barriers job seekers face may be the stigma that employers attach to particular groups or communities and the CBOs that serve these communities. The CBOs used a variety of strategies to get beyond the stigma associated with certain groups of workers. With their deep knowledge of employer and job seeker needs, they develop a customized approach to address the concerns and needs of employers:

PROMOTING THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICE PROVISION

CBOs might need to counter preconceived notions about the delivery of free services by nonprofit organizations or the quality of those services. Staff at Cara talked about maintaining "constant follow-through" and the need to "operate in a hyper-professional manner" to help "reduce the work of the recruiter." The combination of intentional matching along with high-quality services can help CBOs overcome stigma and discrimination and become a trusted source of job candidates.

FOCUSING ON THE ASSETS OF PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Staff reported that they primarily market participants to employers based on their suitability for open positions and the value they would add to a company. Henry Street staff said they only bring up participants' barriers if they think an employer will be responsive to the social mission of the organization. Cara also emphasizes participants' strengths but it also errs on the side of full disclosure with employers about the candidates and some of their challenges because it helps build trust with employers. CLC Inc.'s job developer rarely talks about barriers with employers and emphasizes the skills participants have received in CLC Inc. programs. The only barrier the job developer may bring up is transportation—employers know this is a challenge in the region, so it is important to convey that they have a plan around transportation.

EXPOSING EMPLOYERS TO JOB SEEKERS IN NONHIRING SETTINGS

By involving employers in all aspects of a program, CBOs can help them get beyond the stigma they may associate with specific groups of workers. We learned of multiple ways that organizations are getting employers involved as a way of overcoming stigma and building relationships. Cara staff said that inviting employer representatives to their "Motivations" sessions helped them overcome their biases. Other opportunities for exposure include having employer representatives conduct mock interviews or inviting them to speak in workshops and having employers host site tours to expose job seekers to the industry and workplace.

USING TRANSITIONAL JOBS TO OVERCOME STIGMA AND OPEN UP ACCESS

Another way to help employers overcome stigma and create opportunities for disadvantaged job seekers is through transitional jobs, including subsidized employment, temporary employment through a staffing agency, internships, and summer youth employment. Such strategies have been used for decades to help certain disadvantaged populations access jobs. Research results are mixed on the effectiveness of these approaches, but some studies have found significant positive impacts for participants (Dutta-Gupta et al. 2016). Transitional jobs can help employers see beyond the stigma they may attach to certain groups of workers and provide an opportunity for workers to gain skills and for employers to "test out" workers before hiring them. All three organizations we visited offered transitional employment opportunities. Cara runs its own neighborhood beautification company, where participants can perform subsidized work and create a track record of employment. Cara also runs its own staffing agency to help meet employer and job seeker needs and collaborates with employer partners to develop branded trainings offered at their job sites. Henry Street's Young Adult Internship Program has candidates intern with an employer for three months while receiving training and supports to help them transition to a full-time position. Henry Street staff say they advocate for employer partners to hire interns where feasible.

SERVING A SPECTRUM OF WORKERS WITH DIFFERENT SKILL LEVELS

One strategy for engaging employers can be to work with a client base that is more diverse in its skills, qualifications, and experiences. As a staff member from Cara put it, “When you say ‘end cycle of poverty and homelessness’ people have preconceived notions. They start imagining who we serve and make unfair judgments. We talk about the diversity of our student community. I have people working on GEDs, and there’s a bell curve with people with master’s degrees and all in between. Then they get interested.” CLC Inc. also works with a range of customers, including incumbent workers who pay for training because they see it as providing a path to coveted jobs with large employers in the aerospace industry. Those with significant barriers do not represent the majority of participants that the organization serves, which can make it easier to open up opportunities for those with such challenges.

ADVOCATING FOR PARTICIPANTS

There are two ways that CBOs can advocate for participants to help overcome stigmas. First, they can translate workers’ experience into terms that employers understand. For example, CLC Inc. operates a program exclusively for veterans. Although the major aerospace contractors employ many veterans, CLC Inc. staff still encounter employers that do not look at military service as job experience, and staff consider it their responsibility to translate that experience. CBOs can also advocate on behalf of specific participants despite their barriers, such as gaps in work history or a criminal record, by using the relationships they have built with employers. In the words of one CLC Inc. staff member, “Right now, we have a young man who has just got out of prison and he’s got an ankle monitor. He has a lot of barriers and he’s struggling. We did intake with him. To be able to have a community organization like CLC Inc. rally for you and get behind you and say to employers, ‘Yes he has a background, but look at how [well] he did in class.’ I don’t think an individual has that on their own.”

Leveraging Partnerships and Community Knowledge as an Employer Engagement Strategy

The three CBOs we studied for this report are all established organizations that have been operating workforce programs for decades. Employer partnerships and their deep roots in their communities have been key to their employer engagement strategies. Below, we offer three examples of how these CBOs leverage their relationships and community knowledge to meet employer needs. In all three examples, the CBOs used their knowledge of community and business needs to develop and strengthen their strategies for engaging employers. They seemed to understand the needs of their communities and employer partners and how to leverage partnerships to meet those needs:

LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS WITH CBOS AND INTERMEDIARIES TO ACCESS OPPORTUNITIES WITH LARGER EMPLOYERS

Although the three organizations we visited have strategies in place to engage with employers directly, staff members discussed the value of using partnerships to open up opportunities for the participants they serve. Sometimes this involves partnering with the public workforce system, which may target larger employers or receive job orders they cannot fill through a single organization. Another example is the Lower East Side Employment Network (LESEN), which was cofounded by Henry Street and University Settlement to expand the capacity of local nonprofits to meet the demand for workers as a result of the boom in neighborhood development projects. LESEN is a collaboration between workforce development agencies that works with Manhattan's Community Board 3 to meet business hiring demands and support candidate supply directly from the neighborhood. Collectively, the group of nonprofits can more effectively engage with businesses in the area to fill larger job orders and offer a diverse group of candidates to meet employer needs. The collaborative nature of the model mitigates competition amongst the groups and creates a single point of access for employers and developers to engage with workforce development programs in the community. LESEN was developed to ensure that development projects in the Lower East Side were yielding value to local residents, serving as a vehicle to help make sure that “community benefit agreements” and commitments to hire local are actualized. The model features a single shared employee who engages with new employers and then coordinates sharing job leads and job orders across the participating nonprofits in the network, ultimately referring qualified candidates from across the partner organizations for available jobs and trainings. The community board plays a key role as they are in a unique position to introduce the network and its services to new employers coming into the neighborhood that could potentially hire participants served by the LESEN organizations. The partnership allows job seekers to connect with employers and jobs that they might not otherwise have access to and provides an additional way for CBOs to serve disadvantaged workers.

LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS WITH STRONG EMPLOYER PARTNERS TO GAIN ACCESS TO NEW PARTNERS

By building trusting relationships with businesses in the community, CBOs can establish credibility and leverage those relationships to open up new opportunities for their participants. CLC Inc. staff described how the organization uses its relationships with major aerospace employers to begin working with other employers in the region. The reputations of its strongest employer partners lend credibility to the organization and help open doors with new employers. Cara also used a longstanding relationship with a large hospital employer to open up opportunities with other health care employers.

PROVIDING OTHER SERVICES TO EMPLOYERS

As a multiservice neighborhood-based organization, Henry Street Settlement has strong connections to multiple organizations in the Lower East Side and a deep knowledge of the history and culture of the community. Staff from Henry Street talked about the role the organizations play in educating new businesses on the needs and preferences of local residents that help guide how businesses orient themselves to the community. The businesses benefit from this knowledge and from hiring from the community through Henry Street and LESEN and being connected to Henry Street's strong reputation in the community. Ultimately, the new businesses want to have a good relationship with residents and draw customers and workers from the community.

Conclusions

CBOs play important roles in their communities by providing workforce development services and programming to disadvantaged groups facing barriers to work. An essential part of this work is engaging employers. This report highlights the engagement strategies three different CBOs use to help participants with barriers to employment succeed in the labor market. These include

- carefully selecting employers to target;
- acquiring deep knowledge of employer and job-seeker needs;
- building trusting relationships with employers by providing quality services;
- using targeted strategies to break down negative employer perceptions; and
- leveraging partnerships and knowledge of the community.

The CBOs profiled here each have many years of experience following these strategies. Other CBOs trying to improve the workforce outcomes of disadvantaged populations they serve could benefit from adopting these practices. Implementing these strategies requires CBOs have the capacity (including resources and the right staff) to interact in an ongoing way with employers. Funders working with these CBOs have a role to play, by helping to support these capacities and understanding the time it can take to build trusting relationships.

Note

¹ “Databases, Tables & Calculators by Subject: Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>.

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