

# Achieving Employment Success for Job Seekers Overcoming Barriers to Employment



**A TOOLKIT FOR WORKFORCE  
DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS**

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# Introduction

As workforce practitioners, we are at the frontlines of the economy – observing employers faced with an inadequate supply of skilled workers and job seekers sidelined from the traditional job market. There is an opportunity to build an economy that works for everyone – no matter an individual's background.

The anemic talent pipeline that many employers face stems, in part, from the exclusion of individuals from the traditional job market. Many people want to work, but their experiences with the justice system, unstable housing, violence, trauma, mental health challenges, and substance use make it harder for them to participate in education and training, as well as to secure and sustain employment. These factors also influence employer hiring and promotion decisions.

- Researchers estimate unemployment rates among **people experiencing homelessness** ranging from 57% to over 90% compared to 3.6% for the general United States population (Acuña & Ehrlenbusch, 2009; Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2013; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a).
- A national survey of **survivors of domestic violence** found that they have an average of just \$288.90 that they can access.
- Approximately 60% of people **who were previously incarcerated** are estimated to be jobless at any given point in time.
- Approximately 11.5% of California's **youth and young adults** (aged 16 to 24), were not in school nor participating in the labor market.
- Thirty percent of survivors of **human trafficking** have household incomes of less than \$25,000 seven or more years after exit from the trafficking situation.

<sup>1</sup> Acuña & Ehrlenbusch (2009); Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness (2013) Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020). [https://hpri.usc.edu/homeless\\_research/homelessness-and-employment/](https://hpri.usc.edu/homeless_research/homelessness-and-employment/)

<sup>2</sup> Free From (2025). Support Every Survivor How Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, and Disability Shape Survivors' Experiences and Needs. <https://www.freefrom.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Support-Every-Survivor-PDF.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Wang, L. and Bertram, W. (2022). New data on formerly incarcerated people's employment reveal labor market. Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>

<sup>4</sup> Polaris (2023). Poverty After Human Trafficking: Survivor Income and Employment. <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Poverty-After-Human-Trafficking-Survivor-Income-and-Employment.pdf>

Supporting job seekers—especially those facing significant or multiple barriers to employment—is challenging. Many workforce development practitioners in California demonstrate empathy and creativity in helping these individuals succeed. This toolkit compiles strategies that workforce practitioners can use to assist job seekers with high barriers to employment. It includes briefs, case studies, and practical tools to help workforce development stakeholders improve long-term client outcomes. The toolkit draws from the experiences of employment social enterprises—revenue-generating businesses that provide jobs, training, and support to individuals overcoming employment barriers.

The content of this toolkit has been developed for California workforce practitioners, including frontline workers like employment specialists and case managers, as well as managers of employment and training programs and career centers. We hope this toolkit strengthens the capacity of both direct service staff and managers by offering practical insights and adaptable practices tailored to your organization’s stage of development. The effort required to implement suggestions in this toolkit will vary from minimal to significant.

The toolkit is composed of three sections:

- **PART 1: PROMISING PRACTICES:** Services Delivery, Design, and Improvement
- **PART 2: POPULATIONS IN FOCUS:** Tailoring Workforce Services for Employment Success
- **PART 3: TRIED AND TESTED:** The Employment Social Enterprise Model and REDF

# **PART 1:**

## **PROMISING PRACTICES:**

Services Delivery, Design  
and Improvement



The workforce development field is leveraging innovative ideas to improve employment and life stability outcomes for job seekers. Part 1 draws on promising practices from REDF's partners who provide paid work experience to individuals overcoming significant barriers to employment. Many individuals facing employment barriers have experienced trauma. Workforce development organizations are not equipped to provide trauma treatment, but their staff and processes can center job seekers, empower them, and demonstrate empathy, helping to reduce stress triggers. Brain and behavioral science has demonstrated strong outcomes for job seekers, and therefore takes a large spotlight within this section. Each section provides an explanation along with a complementary tool you can use at your organization.

## DELIVERING WORKFORCE SERVICES

### *Brain and Behavioral Science: Applications to Services Delivery*

Brain and behavioral science explores the connection between brain function and human behavior, offering valuable insights into how individuals think, learn, and perform in work settings. By understanding the neurological factors that shape decision-making, emotions, and habits, workforce development professionals can design strategies that enhance job seeker outcomes and well-being.

Applying brain and behavioral science to workforce development services leads to tangible benefits, such as fostering resilience, improving problem-solving skills, and enhancing workplace relationships. Approaches like trauma-informed care, motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapy, and executive skills coaching equip individuals with the tools to overcome challenges, build confidence, and achieve their career goals.

# Trauma-Informed Care

## What is Trauma-Informed Care?

Trauma-informed care (TIC) is a way of providing services that **considers the impact and pervasiveness of trauma**. To effectively provide TIC, it is important for workforce practitioners to first acknowledge and understand the impact of trauma and the ways in which individuals might experience re-traumatization when receiving services.<sup>1</sup>

**Note:** TIC is not intended to directly address an individual's trauma; for this type of support, individuals should be directed to trauma-specific services provided by appropriately trained professionals (i.e., therapy, counseling, etc.).

## What is Trauma?

Trauma occurs when we experience anything **too much, too soon, and/or too fast** for our nervous system to handle. Trauma can have long-term **adverse effects** on individuals' functioning and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

By overwhelming a person's ability to cope, trauma can also significantly hinder their ability to engage in education or training or to **find and keep a job**. For example, trauma might limit an individual's ability to participate in classes or workshops, consistently show up for job search appointments or interviews, or, once employed, might cause someone to have a shorter fuse and get into conflict with coworkers.

## Trauma-Informed Care in a Workforce Development Context

By implementing trauma-informed care, you can **more effectively support job seekers during job search, employment and related education and training**.

Trauma-informed care can help you:

- More accurately identify the skills, goals, and needs of job seekers
- Build trust and effective working relationships with job seekers
- Support individuals in building resilience and confidence
- Improve outcomes for job seekers and the organization as a whole<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>REDF. *Trauma-Informed Care Overview*. REDF Workshop. <https://redfworkshop.org/resource/trauma-informed-care-overview/>

<sup>2</sup>Behavioral Sciences Webinar, Terri Feeley & The Hub at New Moms – REDF Workshop <sup>3</sup>REDF. *Trauma-Informed Care Overview*. REDF Workshop. <https://redfworkshop.org/resource/trauma-informed-care-overview/>

## Trauma is the Experience – Not the Event Itself

The same event may be experienced as traumatic by one person but not by another. For this reason, it is important not to make assumptions about a person's experiences of trauma or to make decisions for them based on assumptions. For example, rather than assuming that an individual would not be open to a certain job, give them the chance to consider it and decide for themselves.

### Key Components & Tactics

Aligning your organization, programs, and services with the following guiding principles can be an effective approach to implementing trauma-informed care best practices.<sup>4</sup>

PRINCIPLE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE TACTICS
<b>1. Safety</b>	<p>Creating safety is essential to avoiding re-traumatization.</p> <p>Without a sense of physical, psychological, emotional, and ethical safety, it will be difficult for individuals to focus on job searching or learning new skills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Collect pronouns/preferred names as early as possible to avoid misgendering or deadnaming individuals (using a name assigned at birth after a person has chosen a new name).</li><li>• Ensure that any intake forms and signs are inclusive of all genders.</li><li>• Don't require keys or a code to access the bathroom.</li><li>• Offer comfortable seating in waiting areas and ensure individuals receive a warm greeting upon entering your facilities.</li><li>• Use body language and verbal cues to actively listen and validate individuals' experiences and feelings (i.e., maintaining an open posture; saying things like "I understand where you are coming from," or "that sounds really tough").</li></ul>
<b>2. Trust</b>	<p>Mutual trust is key. Both clients and staff need to trust each other to work effectively together.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Be consistent and reliable in your interactions; follow through on what you say you will do.</li><li>• Respect confidentiality and be transparent about how individuals' information will be used.</li><li>• Provide regular reminders regarding appointments and/or commitments.</li><li>• Only collect data that you truly need.</li></ul>
<b>3. Collaboration</b>	<p>Active collaboration among staff, clients, and other providers will lead to the best outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Implement a "no wrong door" policy, ensuring that regardless of where or how a person enters your organization, they will be guided to the appropriate resources or services without being turned away or redirected unnecessarily. This means that every person or entry point in the organization needs to be equipped to help and support individuals seeking services.</li><li>• Make decisions with clients, rather than for them or dictating what the "right" decision should be.</li><li>• Offer connections to other service providers to help address needs and barriers outside of your scope (i.e., childcare, transportation support, etc.).</li><li>• Hold regular team meetings to ensure everyone is on the same page and offering a cohesive experience.</li></ul>

<sup>4</sup>REDF. Trauma-Informed Care Overview. REDF Workshop. <https://redfworkshop.org/resource/trauma-informed-care-overview/>



<b>4. Peer Support</b>	Encouraging peer support among individuals allows them to build self-efficacy and recognizes that they are the experts when it comes to their own experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer peer mentoring opportunities or workshops where individuals can support each other in their education or job search goals.</li> <li>• Invite former recipients of your services to speak to current clients and share their successes.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Cultural, Historical and Gender Issues</b>	Acknowledging how culture, history, and gender impact our experiences helps mitigate the harm of these realities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide consistent training to staff on implicit bias, systemic trauma, trauma-informed care, and inclusion.</li> <li>• When collecting demographic information, be clear about what is and isn't exclusionary criteria.</li> </ul>
<b>6. Empowerment and Choice</b>	Trauma can make people feel powerless. Giving individuals real choices and control over their own lives helps them regain a sense of agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask clients about needs/barriers and offer connections to supportive services.</li> <li>• Center the job seeker as the expert in their own process.</li> <li>• Support job seekers in setting their own goals and making decisions about their path forward.</li> <li>• Celebrate successes, regardless of how small.</li> </ul>

## Motivational Interviewing

### What is Motivational Interviewing?

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is an evidence-based approach that helps individuals achieve **sustainable behavioral change** by guiding them to identify and leverage their own motivations for change.<sup>5</sup>

This process involves ongoing conversations where the motivational interviewer asks thoughtful questions to help individuals uncover their own reasons for wanting to make a change—or not. By exploring these personal motivations, people can find the inner drive they need to reach their goals and make lasting improvements in their lives.

### Motivational Interviewing in a Workforce Development Context

You can use motivational interviewing to better support individuals in their exploration of education and training opportunities, MI job search, and the job preparation process. MI **centers individuals as the experts** in their own life and promotes self-efficacy by affirming strengths and positive coping strategies.

MI can help individuals **make the necessary changes to address barriers** they encounter during the job search and on the job. For example, a job seeker struggling with procrastination might, through MI, realize that this is due to feeling overwhelmed

by tasks. By identifying the underlying issue, they can develop strategies to break tasks into manageable steps, improving productivity and enhancing their job search success.

## Key Components & Tactics

Below are a few key components and tactics to keep in mind when implementing MI:<sup>6 7</sup>

- Training - Offer consistent MI training for staff from individuals or organizations with expertise in this area.
- OARS - Utilize the core MI techniques, which are often referred to by the acronym “OARS.” These are more thoroughly outlined in the table below:

OARS TACTIC	PURPOSE	EXAMPLE PROMPTS & PHRASES
<b>Open-Ended Questions</b>	Encourages individuals to share their thoughts and experiences in their own words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “How can I help you with...?”</li><li>• “What would you like to do next?”</li><li>• “Help me understand...”</li></ul>
<b>Affirming Statements</b>	Provides validation and emphasize strengths and successes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “I appreciate you meeting with me today.”</li><li>• “That’s a great idea.”</li><li>• “I appreciate your honesty.”</li><li>• “It’s clear that you are a resourceful person.”</li></ul>
<b>Reflective Listening</b>	Allows you to check and demonstrate your understanding of what the individual has said	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “It sounds like you...”</li><li>• “So, you feel...”</li><li>• “You are wondering if...”</li></ul>
<b>Summarizing</b>	Reinforces what has been said and allows you to highlight any change statements the individual has made (i.e., “I need to stop doing X”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Let me see if I understand so far...”</li><li>• “Here is what I’ve heard. Tell me if I’ve missed anything.”</li></ul>

<sup>6</sup> Homelessness Resource Center, SAMHSA (2007). Motivational Interviewing: Open Questions, Affirmation, Reflective Listening, and Summary Reflections (OARS). Homeless Hub. <https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/motivational-interviewing-open-questions-affirmation-reflective-listening-and-summary>

<sup>7</sup> Understanding Motivational Interviewing. MINT. <https://motivationalinterviewing.org/understanding-motivational-interviewing>

## Check Your Work!

Here are a few questions to help you assess whether you are effectively implementing MI. If you answer “yes” to these, you’re on the right track!

- ✓ Am I listening more than I am talking?
- ✓ Am I remaining open to individuals’ experiences, rather than telling them what I think the problem is?
- ✓ Do I create space for individuals to explore and share their ideas for change?
- ✓ Do I encourage individuals to explore their reasons for not changing?
- ✓ Do I ask for permission to provide my feedback?
- ✓ Do I affirm that ambivalence toward change is normal?
- ✓ Am I giving more value to individuals’ own opinions than to my own?
- ✓ Do I acknowledge that individuals can make their own good choices?

Sources<sup>9</sup>

## Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

### What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a practical, goal-oriented approach that helps individuals **change their behaviors** by focusing on how thoughts and feelings influence actions.<sup>9</sup>

CBT operates on the principle that harmful behaviors often stem from distorted thoughts or perceptions. By addressing these unhelpful thoughts, individuals can modify their behavior to better **align with their values and goals**.



<sup>9</sup> Center for Evidence-Based Practices. *Motivational Interviewing: An Evidence-Based Treatment*. Case Western Reserve University. <https://case.edu/socialwork/centerforebp/sites/default/files/2021-03/miremindcard.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> REDF. *Employment Social Enterprise Glossary*. REDF Workshop. <https://redfworkshop.org/resource/employment-social-enterprise-glossary/>



For example, a job seeker might avoid interviews because they believe they won't get the job. A CBT practitioner can help challenge this belief by identifying evidence that contradicts it, such as past job search successes or relevant experiences and skills. They might also encourage positive self-talk, replacing "I won't get the job" with "I have valuable skills and experiences to offer." By reframing these negative perceptions, the job seeker is more likely to begin attending interviews, increasing their chances of securing a job.

## Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in a Workforce Development Context

CBT can significantly enhance job seekers' success in multiple ways:

- ✓ **Enhanced Problem-Solving** – CBT helps break down challenges into manageable parts, making it easier to find and implement solutions.
- ✓ **Better Stress and Anxiety Management** – CBT equips job seekers with tools to better cope with stress, anxiety, and other emotional barriers that can hinder success in the job search process.
- ✓ **Enhanced Motivation and Resilience** – By addressing unhelpful thought patterns, CBT supports job seekers in maintaining a positive outlook and staying motivated throughout the job search. It also promotes resilience, enabling individuals to quickly bounce back from setbacks during the job search.<sup>10</sup>
- ✓ **Improved Job Search Outcomes** – Studies indicate that CBT can improve job outcomes for individuals actively seeking employment.
  - A University of London study found that, after completing a group-based CBT program, **45%** of long-term unemployed individuals secured full-time employment, compared to only 13% in the control group.<sup>11</sup>
  - The Ohio Depression Treatment and Research Clinic found that **41%** of unemployed or underemployed people got a new job or went from part- to full-time work by the end of a 16-week CBT program for depression.<sup>12</sup>

## Key Components & Tactics

CBT approaches should be led by trained mental health professionals, especially within the context of an individualized treatment plan. However, even without staff clinicians, you can still **support positive CBT outcomes** for job seekers in various ways:

- **Providing Training** – Offer trainings led by CBT experts to teach techniques that can support positive outcomes for job seekers. These might include:

<sup>10</sup> Maudsley Learning. (2020). *CBT for Workplace Wellbeing, Work Related Stress, and Anxiety*. Maudsley Learning Environment. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140673696090976>

<sup>11</sup> Proudfoot, J., Guest, D., Carson, J., Dunn, G., Gray, J. (1997). Effect of Cognitive-Behavioural Training on Job-Finding. *The Lancet*, 350(9071), 96-100. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140673696090976>

<sup>12</sup> Grabmeier, J. (2021). Depressed and out of work? Therapy may help you find a job. *Ohio State News*. <https://news.osu.edu/depressed-and-out-of-work-therapy-may-help-you-find-a-job/>

- Helping individuals align goals and values with job search efforts
- Offering mindfulness or meditation workshops to promote stress reduction and emotional resilience
- Building confidence in handling job-related situations such as interviews or feedback conversations through role-play exercises
- **Connections to Support** – Partner with mental health support agencies or hire appropriately trained professionals in-house to provide access to CBT.
- **Reinforcing Positive Outcomes** – Reinforce positive CBT outcomes by reminding individuals of therapy sessions and supporting their attendance. When applicable, validate positive changes in thought patterns or behaviors, and celebrate their progress.

## Executive Skills Coaching

### What is Executive Skills Coaching?

Executive skills coaching supports individuals in developing their executive functioning and **self-management skills**, enabling them to more effectively address challenges and achieve goals, such as overcoming barriers to employment, engaging in education and training, and finding a job.

### What are Executive Skills?

Executive skills are essential in our daily functioning and can be categorized into three key areas:

1. **How We Organize & Plan** – These skills include organization, time management, planning, and prioritization. Individuals with lower executive functioning in this area may have trouble following through on tasks or commitments.
2. **How We React** – These skills include response inhibition, flexibility, emotional control, stress tolerance, and metacognition. Individuals with lower executive functioning in this area might lose their temper quickly or react impulsively.
3. **How We Get Things Done** – These skills include task initiation, sustained attention, goal-directed persistence, and working memory. Individuals with lower executive functioning in this area might have trouble learning from experiences and implementing those learnings in the future.<sup>13</sup>

### Executive Skills Coaching in a Workforce Development Context

Executive skills coaching is inherently **strengths-based and humanizing**; it recognizes

<sup>13</sup> Feeley, T. and Bright Endeavors (2022). *Program Design Part 1* [Webinar]. REDF. <https://redfworkshop.org/resource/continuing-education-series-strengthen-program-design-pt-1-pre-employment/>

that everyone has executive skills, and everyone has some executive skills that are stronger than others. Through executive skills coaching, individuals can improve their effectiveness in the job search and better identify employment opportunities that align with their strengths and capabilities.

Furthermore, this approach helps job seekers recognize factors that may diminish their executive functioning and **develop strategies to overcome them**.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly beneficial for those experiencing ongoing stress or trauma, such as homelessness, domestic violence, or systemic racism, as these experiences can adversely affect executive functioning when left unaddressed or unsupported.

## Key Components & Tactics

Below are key executive coaching strategies and tactics you can use to support job seekers in achieving their goals:

TACTIC	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
<b>Help Job Seekers Self-Assess Executive Skills</b>	Review the 12 executive skills and definitions; ask job seekers to self-assess their level of strength in each.	Consider referencing tools offered by the nonprofit New Moms: <a href="#">Executive Skills Definitions</a> & <a href="#">Executive Skills Questionnaire</a> .
<b>Promote Healthy Executive Functioning</b>	Help individuals address factors that inhibit executive functioning, such as stress, loneliness, fatigue, poor physical health, and hunger. Keep in mind that individuals have varying executive function capacities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide meals or connect to food pantries.</li> <li>• Offer peer support opportunities for job seekers.</li> <li>• Offer meditation and wellbeing workshops focused on stress reduction.</li> </ul>
<b>Reduce Required Effort</b>	Support individuals in implementing strategies to reduce the demand on executive skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide reminders for interviews or meetings.</li> <li>• Highlight key information in job descriptions.</li> <li>• Help individuals make checklists.</li> <li>• Create scripts for important conversations.</li> <li>• Additional examples can be found <a href="#">here</a>.</li> <li>• Recommend jobs that align with executive skills. You may find <a href="#">this</a> tool helpful.</li> </ul>
<b>Build Executive Skills (Longer - Term Strategy)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with clients to set achievable goals and break them into manageable steps.</li> <li>• Use thoughtful incentives to support motivation, increasing the perceived benefit of completing a task.</li> <li>• Provide opportunities to practice executive skills within the context in which they will be applied.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Break tasks like “Prepare for interview” into smaller tasks. For example: 1) attend two mock interview sessions 2) wash interview outfit 3) meet to outline transportation plan, etc.</li> <li>• Help an individual practice time management by co-creating a daily schedule that allocates specific time to various tasks.</li> </ul>

<sup>14</sup>Feeley, T. and The Hub at New Moms. *Behavioral Sciences Webinar* [Webinar]. REDF. <sup>15</sup> Feeley, T. and The Hub at New Moms. *Behavioral Sciences Webinar* [Webinar]. REDF.



# Brain and Behavioral Science Navigation Tool for Workforce Practitioners

TACTIC	COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY	TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE	MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING	EXECUTIVE SKILLS COACHING
OVERVIEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps individuals stop cycles of negative thinking &amp; behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledges the impacts of trauma in the design and delivery of programs, services, and the work environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps individuals identify and leverage their own motivation to achieve behavior change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps individuals leverage their strengths and improve executive functioning for better outcomes</li> </ul>
BEST USED FOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Changing negative thought patterns</li> <li>Improving stress and anxiety management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing a safe and inclusive environment for individuals who have experienced trauma</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resolving ambivalence about unhealthy or unhelpful behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating more ease in daily executive functioning</li> <li>Identifying jobs that match individuals' strengths</li> </ul>
CONSIDERATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High level of training and expertise required, i.e., hiring or partnering with a licensed therapist</li> <li>Less suitable for individuals who aren't open to structured therapy</li> <li>Doesn't address underlying causes (i.e., childhood or systemic trauma)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extensive &amp; ongoing training is required for full implementation</li> <li>Additional costs associated with creating trauma-informed spaces</li> <li>Requires a cultural shift and buy-in at all levels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moderate, but ongoing training required</li> <li>Staff must be comfortable with non-directive approach</li> <li>Less needed for highly motivated groups or individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moderate training required</li> <li>Requires sustained effort &amp; commitment from the individual - not a quick fix</li> <li>Effective for people struggling with time management, organization, focus &amp; planning</li> </ul>
STRENGTHS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaches practical strategies to use in everyday life</li> <li>Evidence-based; can help address anxiety &amp; depression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low barrier to start implementing some trauma-informed changes</li> <li>Can help prevent re-traumatization and improve program outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offers structured approaches for practitioners</li> <li>Promotes self-efficacy and positive coping strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides common language to discuss skills</li> <li>Universal &amp; inherently strengths-based: everyone has executive skills</li> </ul>
POTENTIAL BARRIERS OR CHALLENGES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of access to a trained professional</li> <li>Resistance to therapy</li> <li>Inconsistent attendance or appointments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of staff or key stakeholder buy-in</li> <li>Adapting TIC to support different needs and cultures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of time or touchpoints to build the necessary relationship and develop trust with individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inability to have ongoing 1-on-1 touchpoints with individuals</li> <li>Undiagnosed mental health issues</li> </ul>
EXAMPLE SCENARIO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assisting someone in overcoming interview anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offering private spaces for confidentiality</li> <li>Converting to all gender restrooms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Addressing lack of motivation to job search</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helping person make to-do lists to support weaker planning skills</li> </ul>

## INITIAL CLIENT MEETINGS:

### *Learning What Matters For Effective Service*

Prioritizing the needs and experiences of job seekers from the outset affirms their dignity and fosters safety and trust that can jumpstart your ability to effectively support them. This approach creates an environment where all job seekers feel welcomed, valued, and confident on their path to success, ultimately increasing their chances of securing and maintaining employment and improving your program's outcomes.

Staff from workforce development organizations commonly meet one-on-one early on with job seekers. During these sessions, important information is gathered to inform goal setting and service planning. The sessions are also an opportunity to introduce the organization's services and set expectations. Effective design and execution of these initial meetings set a positive tone for future engagement and success.

This document assumes your organization already has a list of information needed from each client, information often dictated by your funding sources or internal processes. The following suggestions aim to foster dialogue with job seekers that facilitates the collection of required information and improves your ability to match them with services and support their workforce success. You can integrate specific inquiries into the suggested structure. Alternatively, and preferably, you should use open-ended questions to elicit information organically, capturing information as you go and asking follow-up questions when further detail is needed. Throughout this brief, we provide examples of potential questions to choose from or use as a starting point for developing your own questions.

### Preparing for the Meeting

- **Facilitate Decision-making:** Clearly communicate eligibility criteria and programmatic requirements upfront, enabling job seekers to decide if your organization is a good fit for them.
- **Honor Job Seekers' Time:** Screen for eligibility in advance of the initial meeting to respect the jobseeker's time.
- **Choose Your Language Wisely:** Avoid describing the meeting with terms like "assessment" to reduce anxiety and prevent feelings of judgment.
- **Set Expectations:** Inform job seekers of the meeting's duration and reassure them that the conversation is your priority, and a second meeting can be scheduled if needed. Build a buffer into your own schedule to avoid rushing.

- **Normalize the Conversation:** Share planned topics ahead of time, assuring job seekers that no advance preparation is necessary. Consider using language like the following:

*“By the end of our time together, I hope to know more about your journey, your goals, and the obstacles you’re overcoming. Many job seekers choose to share their aspirations, strengths such as skills or prior work experience, and challenges, such as [mention one or two barriers common among your organization’s clients that the jobseeker may share].”*

- **Book a Suitable Space:** Ensure the meeting space will be private and conducive to conversation.
- **Confirm the Appointment:** Follow up the day before the meeting and again on the morning of it to demonstrate your enthusiasm and interest.

## Setting the Stage for a Positive Meeting

- **Warm Welcome:** Greet job seekers warmly. Instead of starting with paperwork, give a brief tour and introduce fellow team members to help them feel comfortable and visualize themselves accessing services.
- **Create a Comfortable Setting:** Meet in a private, comfortable space, arranging it so there are no barriers (e.g., a computer screen or desk) between you and the jobseeker. Before beginning the discussion, offer refreshments and a restroom break.
- **Be Transparent:** If filling out paperwork or entering responses on the computer, let the jobseeker see the questions you’re responding to and, later, the opportunity to review what you have written. Explain that the information captured will inform the service plan you are creating together. Clarify who will have access to the information and assure the jobseeker that there will be future opportunities to discuss topics in further detail.
- **Empower the jobseeker:** Powerlessness is at the heart of trauma, and a perceived lack of power can be very stressful. Give power to the jobseeker by letting them set the pace and tone of your discussion. Reassure the jobseeker that their experiences and challenges are common and that the goal is to provide support. Acknowledge that discussing personal issues can be difficult and offer to pause or revisit questions as needed. Examples of upfront questions that empower the jobseeker in the moment include:
  - What questions do you have about the conversation we’re going to have today?
  - What is one hope you have for our conversation?
  - What would you like me to know about you and your journey?



- What do I need to know to help and support you?
- Are we good to get started?

## Building Connections and Trust

While funder requirements and organizational processes make completed forms and documentation essential outputs of an initial meeting with a jobseeker, these bureaucratic necessities should not take center stage.

- **Prioritize the Relationship:** While paperwork is necessary, the primary goal is to understand how to support the job seeker in achieving their goals.
- **Encourage a Natural Conversation:** Instead of rigidly following a script or asking each question on a form, let the dialogue flow naturally. This creates a more relaxed atmosphere and encourages open communication.
- **Integrate Information Flexibly:** Gather required information through open-ended questions that give the jobseeker space to share what they consider most important. Ask follow-up questions if they do not mention specific topics or clarification is needed. If it is not feasible to capture all the information in the moment, use notes to do so immediately after the meeting concludes.

## Ensuring a Constructive Conversation

- **Start with strengths:** Begin by asking about strengths and sources of pride. You can reference this information as touchpoints throughout the rest of your discussion and relationship with the jobseeker. Examples of questions to elicit this information include:
  - *What are you proud of?*
  - *What can you do better than most people?*
  - *What tasks come most easily to you?*
  - *What do you get asked to help with? (by friends, family members, colleagues)*
  - *How would your friends describe you?*
  - *When do you feel most engaged? What energizes you?*
  - *Whose opinion and respect are important to you?*
- **Lay the groundwork for goal setting:** Although your conversation will inevitably touch upon challenges in the past and present, keep the focus on the future. Example questions include:
  - *What is an area of your life where you would like to see some change?*
  - *Where would you like to see yourself one year from now? How would*

*you like to have grown professionally? Personally?*

- *What is a goal you have for yourself, something that is a stretch for you, but still within your reach?*
- *Thinking about the work you would most like to do, how would you describe your ideal workday? What would you spend your time doing?*

When asking these or similar questions, consider building in time for the jobseeker to close their eyes and visualize the future they want or jot down some notes prior to answering aloud.

- **Invite reflection:** Ask open-ended questions to invite a fuller response and tee up potential solutions to challenges experienced. A tip for reframing questions to be open-ended is to start them with “Why,” “How,” “What,” “Tell me about,” or “Describe.” Sample questions include:
  - *Tell me about any challenges you have faced in \_\_\_\_\_? [e.g., returning to work? holding onto a job?]*
  - *What about that goal feels out of reach or unrealistic to you?*
  - *What would make you feel more confident about your ability to succeed?*
  - *How would you approach [challenge previously mentioned] if you had more time?*
- **Create a safe space for disclosure:** Use an empathetic tone and non-judgmental language to make job seekers feel comfortable disclosing sensitive information. For example, instead of asking “Have you ever been incarcerated?” you can ask, “What experiences in your background might impact your ability to find work?” Acknowledge that discussing personal issues can be difficult and offer to pause or revisit questions as needed.
- **Normalize Job seekers’ Experience:** Reassure job seekers that their experiences and challenges are common among your organization’s clients and that you can help. Consider sharing success stories about job seekers you’ve previously helped. Spark a conversation by asking “What about their experience feels familiar or is relevant to your situation?”

## Gathering Information to Support Resilience

Job search can be time-intensive and discouraging. Education and training can be hard work. Overcoming personal challenges can be frustrating and involve navigating difficult bureaucracies. Help job seekers identify practices that support their resilience and which you can remind them of when times get tough. Potential questions to ask include:

- *What helps you cool your jets when you get angry or upset?*
- *What helps you when you’re feeling discouraged?*
- *Who and what are the people, places, or activities that improve your mood?*

## Concluding the Meeting

As the meeting draws to a close you want to:

- **Create a Sense of Partnership:** Let the jobseeker know they are not alone and that your organization will assist and encourage them moving forward.
- **Establish Support:** Gather information about how you can work together effectively. Possible questions include:
  - *What do you need to feel safe and productive in our work together?*
  - *What forms of communication do you prefer?*
  - *How do you learn best?*
  - *What else do I need to know to support you?*
- **Communicate Next Steps:** Share with the jobseeker what will happen next, the anticipated timeline, and anything required of them.

A thoughtful, respectful approach in your early interactions will build trust and enhance your ability to support the jobseeker effectively over time.

## WORK EXPERIENCE:

### *An Interim Step on the Path to Employment Success*

#### What is Work Experience?

Work experience is a valuable way for job seekers to **enhance their resumes** and improve their prospects for **long-term employment**.

Workforce development organizations can support job seekers in gaining hands-on work experience by facilitating connections to local programs and employers.

#### Why Work Experience?

Connecting job seekers with short-term work experience while they search for long-term employment or participate in education or training helps them:

- **Build Their Resume & Gain Positive References** – Recent work experience can help mitigate concerns about gaps in a candidate's resume and signal their job readiness to an employer. Furthermore, it opens the possibility for candidates to secure positive references for their job search.



- Sharpen Their Skills – Work experience provides individuals with opportunities to sharpen both hard and soft skills, which is likely to increase their chances of succeeding in long-term employment.
- Reduce Financial Stress – Alleviating the financial stress of unemployment with short-term paid work opportunities is also likely to support overall well-being and confidence.
- Support Positive Outcomes – Furthermore, research indicates that short-term or transitional employment through social enterprises (SE) enhances positive outcomes for job seekers. According to studies conducted by REDF in collaboration with Employment Social Enterprise (ESE):
  - **44%** of workers reported stable housing in the year after their social enterprise job began vs. 16% in the year before.
  - **56%** hired by SEs had jobs one year later vs. 37% who only received job support services.<sup>16</sup>

## Key Components & Tactics

To help job seekers gain valuable work experience, consider supporting them in exploring the following avenues:

- Employment Social Enterprises (ESEs) – ESEs are businesses that provide jobs, training, and support to people who are getting back on their feet.<sup>17</sup> Connecting job seekers with ESEs or other work-based learning programs can offer immediate earning potential and skill development even as they pursue long-term employment. Research has shown that work-based learning and transitional jobs programs are associated with increased earnings, reduced recidivism, and improved short-term employment outcomes.<sup>18,19</sup>
- Short-Term Opportunities – Temporary placements, such as internships, transitional jobs, volunteering, or staffing opportunities, provide individuals with hands-on experience and, at times, may lead to permanent employment. Keep in mind that, given financial pressures, volunteering is not an accessible option for all and should only be recommended when an unpaid opportunity is suitable.

Developing trusting relationships with ESEs, nonprofits, and short-term employers will help you more effectively refer and connect job seekers. Start by researching and identifying organizations in your area, and then reach out to inquire about developing a pipeline for referrals.

<sup>16</sup>REDF. *How Social Enterprises Serve Multi-barriered Individuals: Mathematica Jobs Study*. REDF Workshop. <https://redfworkshop.org/resource/mathematica-jobs-study/>

<sup>17</sup>REDF Programs (June, 2022). *What is an Employment Social Enterprise?* REDF. <https://redf.org/news/what-is-an-employment-social-enterprise/>

<sup>18</sup>Webster, R., Hearn, S., Elkin, S., Omwenga, S., (February 2023). *Literature Review on Wage Subsidies and Work Based Learning*. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/snap-workbased-learning-022123.pdf>

<sup>19</sup>Cummings, D., and Bloom, D. (2020). *Can Subsidized Employment Programs Help Disadvantaged Job Seekers?* Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/can-subsidized-employment-programs-help-disadvantaged-job-seekers-synthesis-findings>

## Recognizing Non-Traditional Work as Valuable Experience!

Acknowledging non-traditional work is crucial for highlighting job seekers' existing backgrounds and skill sets. Roles that often go unpaid and unrecognized, such as caregiving or community organizing, can showcase valuable skills, emphasize relevant work experience, and strengthen a candidate's job application.

### WORK EXPERIENCE TOOLKIT – RELEVANT EXPERIENCE TRACKER

The following page provides a tool for job seekers to log all relevant experiences in preparation for their job search. This should include both traditional and non-traditional roles where they have honed existing skills or developed new ones.

#### TRACK YOUR EXPERIENCE

##### POSITION TITLE OR DESCRIPTION OF ROLE:

Organization/Company:

Start – End Date:

Type of Experience		Skills You Developed / Learned	
<input type="checkbox"/> Temporary/Contract Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteering	<input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork	<input type="checkbox"/> Technology
<input type="checkbox"/> Seasonal Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Education or Training	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication	<input type="checkbox"/> Production or Kitting
<input type="checkbox"/> Part-Time Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Military Service	<input type="checkbox"/> Customer Service	<input type="checkbox"/> Machine Operations/Repair
<input type="checkbox"/> Full-Time Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-employed	<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/> Retail or Cash Handling
<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership/Community Organizing	<input type="checkbox"/> Childcare/Caregiving	<input type="checkbox"/> Problem-Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Food Handling/Preparation
<input type="checkbox"/> Internship	<input type="checkbox"/> Household Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Conflict Resolution	<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative
	<input type="checkbox"/> Event Planning	<input type="checkbox"/> Multi-tasking	<input type="checkbox"/> Caregiving
		<input type="checkbox"/> Safety Procedures	<input type="checkbox"/> Janitorial or Landscaping

Additional Skills or Notes:

##### POSITION TITLE OR DESCRIPTION OF ROLE:

Organization/Company:

Start – End Date:

Type of Experience		Skills You Developed / Learned	
<input type="checkbox"/> Temporary/Contract Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteering	<input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork	<input type="checkbox"/> Technology
<input type="checkbox"/> Seasonal Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Education or Training	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication	<input type="checkbox"/> Production or Kitting
<input type="checkbox"/> Part-Time Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Military Service	<input type="checkbox"/> Customer Service	<input type="checkbox"/> Machine Operations/Repair
<input type="checkbox"/> Full-Time Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-employed	<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/> Retail or Cash Handling
<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership/Community Organizing	<input type="checkbox"/> Childcare/Caregiving	<input type="checkbox"/> Problem-Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Food Handling/Preparation
<input type="checkbox"/> Internship	<input type="checkbox"/> Household Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Conflict Resolution	<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative
	<input type="checkbox"/> Event Planning	<input type="checkbox"/> Multi-tasking	<input type="checkbox"/> Caregiving
		<input type="checkbox"/> Safety Procedures	<input type="checkbox"/> Janitorial or Landscaping

Additional Skills or Notes:

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**POSITION TITLE OR DESCRIPTION OF ROLE:****Organization/Company:****Start – End Date:**

Type of Experience		Skills You Developed / Learned	
<input type="checkbox"/> Temporary/Contract Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteering	<input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork	<input type="checkbox"/> Technology
<input type="checkbox"/> Seasonal Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Education or Training	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication	<input type="checkbox"/> Production or Kitting
<input type="checkbox"/> Part-Time Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Military Service	<input type="checkbox"/> Customer Service	<input type="checkbox"/> Machine Operations/Repair
<input type="checkbox"/> Full-Time Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-employed	<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/> Retail or Cash Handling
<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership/Community Organizing	<input type="checkbox"/> Childcare/Caregiving	<input type="checkbox"/> Problem-Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Food Handling/Preparation
<input type="checkbox"/> Internship	<input type="checkbox"/> Household Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Conflict Resolution	<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative
	<input type="checkbox"/> Event Planning	<input type="checkbox"/> Multi-tasking	<input type="checkbox"/> Caregiving
		<input type="checkbox"/> Safety Procedures	<input type="checkbox"/> Janitorial or Landscaping

**Additional Skills or Notes:**

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**POSITION TITLE OR DESCRIPTION OF ROLE:****Organization/Company:****Start – End Date:**

Type of Experience		Skills You Developed / Learned	
<input type="checkbox"/> Temporary/Contract Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteering	<input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork	<input type="checkbox"/> Technology
<input type="checkbox"/> Seasonal Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Education or Training	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication	<input type="checkbox"/> Production or Kitting
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<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership/Community Organizing	<input type="checkbox"/> Childcare/Caregiving	<input type="checkbox"/> Problem-Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Food Handling/Preparation
<input type="checkbox"/> Internship	<input type="checkbox"/> Household Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Conflict Resolution	<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative
	<input type="checkbox"/> Event Planning	<input type="checkbox"/> Multi-tasking	<input type="checkbox"/> Caregiving
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**Additional Skills or Notes:**

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**POSITION TITLE OR DESCRIPTION OF ROLE:****Organization/Company:****Start – End Date:**

Type of Experience		Skills You Developed / Learned	
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<input type="checkbox"/> Part-Time Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Military Service	<input type="checkbox"/> Customer Service	<input type="checkbox"/> Machine Operations/Repair
<input type="checkbox"/> Full-Time Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-employed	<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/> Retail or Cash Handling
<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership/Community Organizing	<input type="checkbox"/> Childcare/Caregiving	<input type="checkbox"/> Problem-Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Food Handling/Preparation
<input type="checkbox"/> Internship	<input type="checkbox"/> Household Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Conflict Resolution	<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative
	<input type="checkbox"/> Event Planning	<input type="checkbox"/> Multi-tasking	<input type="checkbox"/> Caregiving
		<input type="checkbox"/> Safety Procedures	<input type="checkbox"/> Janitorial or Landscaping

**Additional Skills or Notes:**

# DESIGNING AND IMPROVING WORKFORCE SERVICES

## *Experimentation: Testing New Approaches<sup>23</sup>*

### What is Experimentation?

Experimentation is a valuable practice for organizations to **understand challenges** or **test new ideas** effectively. Workforce development organizations can benefit from experimenting with **new services, programs, or approaches** before committing significant resources to full-scale implementation. This allows for informed decision-making and minimizes risks.

### Why Experimentation?

Here are a few reasons why you might consider experimentation:

- ✓ **Sustainable Use of Resources** – Allows organizations to assess the viability of an idea before investing significant resources.
- ✓ **Strategic Decision-Making** – Enables organizations to make informed decisions based on evidence rather than assumptions, thus better supporting their communities.
- ✓ **Feedback & Power** – Provides opportunities to hear directly from key stakeholders and co-design solutions with them, redistributing power by enabling individuals to create their own paths.
- ✓ **Innovation** – Reduces the risk of trying out new and creative ideas, thereby providing a safer and more encouraging platform for innovation.<sup>20</sup>

### Key Components & Tactics

The following practices and tactics can help incorporate experimentation into your organization:

- **Check If You Are Truly Ready!** There are some essential prerequisites to experimentation. Before you dive in, make sure you are truly committed to the process by asking these two questions:
  - Are we testing something that we are actually **willing to change**?
  - Are we committed to centering **learning** in our experimentation efforts?

If your answer to either of these questions is “no,” then you won’t be able to run a successful experiment. The primary goal of experimentation is to learn

<sup>23</sup> The information included in this guide are informed by Lauren Jordan and the work of the REDF Accelerator team.

<sup>20</sup> Saarelainen, E. (2017). *Why There's No Innovation Without Experimentation*. UNHCR Innovation Service.  
<https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/why-theres-no-innovation-without-experimentation/>



something about what you are looking to do or change!

- **Structure Your Design** – When designing an experiment within your organization, think of following the scientific process – this means including a hypothesis, clear metrics, and a defined scope.

Also, ensure that your design considers equity, power dynamics, and structural oppression. This requires acknowledging systemic inequities and biases that play a role in your work, considering the cultural context of your stakeholders, and prioritizing the needs and goals of clients when evaluating success.<sup>21</sup>

- **Collect Feedback Intentionally** – When designing feedback tools—such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups—it is important to do so intentionally. As a best practice, avoid asking for feedback on things that you are not willing to change or that are outside the scope of your experiment. For example, if you are not intending to change your intake procedure, don't ask for feedback on it.

Also, always be sure to “close the loop” after collecting feedback by reporting back to clients on learnings and next steps. When appropriate, consider compensating clients for their time and effort. More details on feedback loops can be found in the Perceptual Feedback guide later in this section.

- **Consult with Stakeholders** – Involving stakeholders should be an active process that goes beyond merely collecting individuals' feedback and focuses on co-designing alongside your community. This requires active consultation—not just with stakeholders who have the greatest power and access, but more importantly, with those whose voices are most marginalized.
- **Develop a Minimum Viable Product (MVP)** – An MVP is a basic version of a program or service that you intend to develop further. It allows you to quickly test a core concept and gather valuable feedback from key stakeholders.<sup>22</sup>

Example: If your workforce development agency wants to create a new job training program focused on tech and AI, start with a 2-hour workshop to test the idea and collect client feedback. Use this feedback to decide whether to develop the concept into a full program.

- **Run a Pilot** – A pilot serves to fine-tune a program or service in preparation for fullscale implementation, usually after the core concept has been validated

Example: After validating the tech/AI training program concept, implement a 6-month pilot to continue assessing and refining the program to meet your intended outcomes.

- **Utilize Design Thinking Best Practices** – Design thinking is a structured approach to experimentation that centers on stakeholders. In practice, design thinking is a heavily iterative and non-linear process—you may find yourself jumping back and forth between various phases multiple times. The goal of design thinking is to build new initiatives slowly and intentionally so that things can move more smoothly and efficiently down the line. The core phases of design thinking are outlined below:

<sup>21</sup>Chin, D., Smith, K., and Enelow, N. (2024). *Introducing Our Equitable Evaluation Principles*. Ecotrust.

<https://ecotrust.org/introducing-our-equitable-evaluation-principles/>

<sup>22</sup> Omarov, R. (2023). Product pilots vs. minimum viable products (MVP). LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/product-pilots-vs-minimum-viable-products-mvp-ramiz-omarovzcgre#:~:text=In%20summary%2C%20a%20product%20pilot,market%20and%20validate%20the%20concept>

Phases	Purpose	Example Prompts & Phrases
<b>Empathize</b>	Creating opportunities to get close to the community. Asking the right questions to build a more nuanced understanding of the challenge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who are we trying to help?</li> <li>- What are their needs?</li> <li>- What are they thinking?</li> </ul>
<b>Define</b>	Creating a needs statement to better understand the problem that we are trying to solve.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What problem are we trying to solve?</li> <li>- What information do we need?</li> <li>- What limitations exist?</li> </ul>
<b>Ideate</b>	Creating a how-might-we statement to help generate a large quantity of ideas followed by converging to a single idea.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encourage “Yes, and” over “Yes, but” for open and creative brainstorming.</li> </ul>
<b>Prototype</b>	Developing a hands-on, tactile model of your idea.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is an easy way for us to test this concept or idea?</li> </ul>
<b>Test</b>	Testing the prototype, with a clear idea of what you want to learn and how to assess whether to move forward.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What are we looking to learn from this test?</li> <li>- What metric or indicator will inform whether we move forward with the idea?</li> </ul>

# Experimentation Toolkit – Design Thinking Worksheet

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## EMPATHIZE

Who are we trying to help & what are their needs?

## DEFINE

Who are we trying to help & what are their needs?

## IDEATE

Who are we trying to help & what are their needs?

## PROTOTYPE

Who are we trying to help & what are their needs?

## TEST

Who are we trying to help & what are their needs?

# Perceptual Feedback: Using Clients' Insights to Evolve Services

## What is Perceptual Feedback?

Perceptual feedback refers to individuals' **feelings, perspectives, and opinions** about their experience with a program, service, or organization. Collecting this feedback from job seekers is a great way to identify strengths and areas for improvement and is central to human-centered design approaches.

## Why Perceptual Feedback?

Perceptual feedback enables you to align your programs and services with clients' insights and needs in critical ways, including:

- ✓ **Centering Participant Voice** – Perceptual feedback draws upon your key stakeholders' own expertise and insights, highlighting the importance of tailored approaches to meet unique needs.
- ✓ **Building More Impactful Programs & Services** – Perceptual feedback provides immediate insights into what is working and what is not, allowing you to make timely improvements to job seekers' experiences with your organization.
- ✓ **Redistributing Power** – By involving community members in decision-making and valuing transparency, perceptual feedback approaches help to redistribute power, foster trust, and ensure organizational accountability.
- ✓ **Promoting Continuous Organizational Learning & Evolution** – Perceptual feedback also pushes organizations towards a culture of continuous listening, reflection, and evolution to meet their community's needs.<sup>24</sup>

## Perceptual Feedback and Program Outcomes

A study by REDF and RTI International linked positive experiences in Employment Social Enterprise (ESE) programs with favorable employment outcomes.<sup>25</sup>

- Participants who felt respected by staff were more likely to be employed 18 months after intake.
- Higher general satisfaction with the ESE program was most strongly linked to participants working at least 30 hours per week.
- Frequent interactions with the ESE were associated with higher wages.

These findings underscore how collecting perceptual feedback can contribute to your program's impact and provide early insights about it.

<sup>24</sup>Threfall Consulting (February, 2017). *Perceptual Feedback: What's it all about?* <https://d35kre7me4s5s.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/18173322/PerceptualFeedback-20170306.pdf>

<sup>25</sup>Wilderson, D. and Sauer, L. *Employment Social Enterprise: A Model that Works*. REDF. <https://redf.org/wp-content/uploads/REDF-RTI-Report-SocialEnterprise-FINAL.pdf>

## Key Components & Tactics

There are many best practices related to collecting and integrating perceptual feedback to better support your community. These include:

- **Use Diverse Methods** – Surveys, 1-on-1 interviews, and focus groups are three common methodologies for collecting feedback. Some methods may be more effective than others depending on your intended participants and what you are hoping to learn (i.e., focus groups and 1-on-1s provide detailed, qualitative insights, while surveys offer anonymity and broad, representative data).
- **Build Buy-In** – Securing support for your feedback initiative from key stakeholders is essential to its success. These stakeholders typically include the people providing feedback and those making decisions based on the feedback received. When developing an approach to effectively build buy-in, consider the following questions:<sup>26</sup>
  - Who needs to use the feedback you collect?
  - Why do they need to use the feedback?
  - Who needs to give you feedback?
  - Why would they want to provide feedback?
- **Be Intentional About Frequency & Timing** - Collect feedback at strategic program milestones, such as before, during, and after program participation. Be intentional about the timing and frequency of data collection to avoid survey fatigue while still capturing timely insights.
- **Ensure Accessibility and Anonymity** - Offer feedback opportunities in multiple languages and formats (i.e., paper and digital) to increase accessibility. When appropriate, provide anonymity through anonymous surveys or third-party facilitators, and consider compensating participating clients for their time.
- **Regular Review and Integration** – Establish a structured schedule (i.e., weekly, monthly, or quarterly) for reviewing feedback and implementing changes based on learnings. This will help promote internal accountability to making concrete changes based on insights.<sup>27</sup>

Using the below feedback loop approach (adopted by experts in the feedback field, such as [FeedbackLabs](#) and [Listen4Good](#)), you can collect and integrate perceptual feedback to better support your community.<sup>28</sup> Throughout each step of this process, seek opportunities to build buy-in from key stakeholders.

<sup>26</sup> Feedback Labs. *Feedback Fundamentals*. Feedback Labs (June 2017) <https://feedbacklabs.org/blog/2017/06/14/feedback-fundamentals-buy-in/>

<sup>27</sup> REDF. *Participant Worker Feedback Overview*. REDF Workshop. <https://redfworkshop.org/resource/participant-worker-feedback-overview/>

<sup>28</sup> The information included in this guide are informed by Yon Jimenez-Macuse and the work of the REDF Learning & Evidence team.



Phases	Description	Related Tactics and Examples
<b>Design</b>	Articulate feedback goals, identify who to involve, and how best to engage them. Focus on creating a simple, accessible, and inclusive feedback approach.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offer surveys in different languages.</li> <li>- Keep survey language clear, simple, and accessible.</li> <li>- Request only necessary data.</li> <li>- Ask your target audience for feedback on your planned approach.</li> </ul>
<b>Collect</b>	Gather feedback from a representative group with a focus on eliciting honest input. When collecting, be sure to communicate the purpose of the feedback collection, timeline, and how feedback will be used/shared.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use focus groups, interviews, or surveys to collect feedback.</li> <li>- Reassure clients that their feedback won't affect their access to services.</li> <li>- Clarify protections around sensitive data.</li> </ul>
<b>Interpret</b>	Assess feedback to identify key insights and areas for improvement or celebration. Disaggregate data in various ways to identify varying experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Disaggregate data by length of participation in the program or demographics to identify differences in experience among various groups, and to inform tailored strategies to address them.</li> </ul>
<b>Respond</b>	Engage stakeholders to learn from results and co-design necessary changes based on what was learned. Implement the changes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meet with clients to verify, clarify, and refine your assessment of the feedback received.</li> <li>- Hold a debrief session to review results and brainstorm changes to programs, services, or policies.</li> </ul>
<b>Close the Loop</b>	Share with clients what was learned and how the organization is responding, both in the short-term and further into the future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- For example, share that, based on feedback received about long wait times, you are implementing a new scheduling system to reduce wait times.</li> </ul>

# Perceptual Feedback Toolkit – Survey Development Guide

Type of Feedback	If You're Looking to Learn About...	Potential Questions
<b>Community or Individual Needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Job seekers' needs</li> <li>- Barriers to accessing your programs and/or services</li> <li>- How individuals would prefer to receive services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What additional services could [organization] offer to support your employment and training needs and goals?</li> <li>- How important are the services provided by [organization] to you?</li> </ul>
<b>Experience &amp; Quality of Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individuals' perceptions regarding services received</li> <li>- Job seekers' assessment of the quality of a service or whether it met their needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overall, how well has [organization] met your needs?</li> <li>- I believe [organization] is going to help me find the right training program or job.</li> <li>- My job coach's support is helping me better navigate the job search or explore educational opportunities.</li> </ul>
<b>Relationship with Service Provider</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Job seekers' feedback regarding the quality of their interactions with you or other members of your team</li> <li>- Perceptions of how impactful a service is</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I feel respected in this program.</li> <li>- My job coach listens to me.</li> <li>- There's at least one staff member at this organization who knows what it is like to stand in my shoes.</li> <li>- [Specific staff] really try to understand how I feel about things as a client of this organization.</li> </ul>
<b>Satisfaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feedback regarding how services made job seekers feel and whether they would recommend them to someone else</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How satisfied are you with the job preparation services provided by [organization]?</li> <li>- How likely are you to recommend [organization] to a friend or family member?</li> </ul>
<b>Initial Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individuals' input regarding how services received will impact their future behavior</li> <li>- Individuals' self-reported mindset, attitudes, and behaviors as they relate to program objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- After completing [program], I feel confident in my ability to secure a job or participate in educational and training opportunities.</li> <li>- I am proud of the qualifications I have to offer.</li> <li>- Because of [program], I feel like I can tackle life better.</li> </ul>

# **PART 2:**

## **POPULATIONS IN FOCUS:**

Tailoring Workforce Services  
for Employment Success

As experienced workforce practitioners, many of you already adapt your services to ensure the success of job seekers. Part 2 offers in-depth insight into five populations that have historically experienced high barriers to employment. This section of the toolkit is based on existing research, as well as firsthand accounts provided by employment social enterprises (ESEs) through stakeholder interviews, studies completed by REDF affiliates, and existing internal REDF materials. The included briefs provide an overview of the focus populations, including context and terminology. In addition, the briefs provide specific suggestions on tailored wraparound services support that can be offered along with program design considerations. Finally, each brief contains suggested success metrics.

Many of these metrics will be familiar to workforce development professionals. These briefs aim to be comprehensive and do not imply that workforce programs are not already using them.



# EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS IN BRIEF:

## Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

### Defining Homelessness

Defining homelessness is crucial not only for building a shared understanding of the issue but also for assessing individuals' eligibility for specific programs, services, and support.

For the purposes of this brief, homelessness is defined broadly, including individuals who lack access to a safe and stable place to stay as well as those without a fixed address for a longer period. This definition recognizes all individuals who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness or unstable housing.<sup>29</sup>

There is no single federal definition of homelessness. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), viewed by many as having the narrowest definition, currently establishes four different criteria for homelessness:

1. Literally Homeless
2. Imminent Risk of Homelessness
3. Homeless Under Other Federal Statutes
4. Fleeing/Attempting to Flee Domestic Violence (DV)<sup>30</sup>

Each criterion is expanded upon in more depth [here](#).

There is vigorous advocacy aimed at expanding HUD's definition of homelessness to include children, youth, and families temporarily staying with others or in motels. This initiative stems from concerns that the current definition, employed by HUD's point-in-time homeless count, significantly underrepresents the number of individuals experiencing homelessness and, in turn, inaccurately informs essential policy and funding decisions. Moreover, it prevents individuals temporarily staying with others or in motels from accessing federal homeless assistance and other essential resources during a critical period.<sup>31</sup>

Due to these concerns, service providers have sounded the alarm on the ramifications of these more restrictive definitions, particularly regarding youth, who are exceptionally vulnerable and whose risk of prolonged homelessness could be effectively mitigated

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<sup>29</sup> <https://redfworkshop.org/resource/employment-social-enterprise-glossary/>

<sup>30</sup> [https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HomelessDefinition\\_RecordkeepingRequirementsandCriteria.pdf](https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HomelessDefinition_RecordkeepingRequirementsandCriteria.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/aligning-homelessness-definitions/>



through enhanced access to housing, shelter, and other services.<sup>32</sup>

There are additional definitions of homelessness, including those tailored to children and youth who are homeless. For example, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, used to determine eligibility for programs run by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, defines homeless youth as unaccompanied individuals under the age of 21.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides a more inclusive definition, considering homeless children and youth as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. More details can be found [here](#).

The organizations interviewed for the purposes of this brief specifically were [Missoula Works](#), [Uplift Northwest](#), and [UTEC](#).

## More About Contributing Employment Social Enterprises (ESEs)

**Missoula Works** - *Missoula Works*, founded in 2016, provides employment services and opportunities, both temporary and permanent, for the long-term unemployed in the Missoula community.

**Uplift Northwest** - Seattle-based *Uplift Northwest* provides job training, dignified work opportunities, and support services to men and women experiencing poverty and homelessness. They operate a non-profit temporary staffing organization that provides hundreds of workers to a wide variety of commercial and residential employers in the Puget Sound Region.

**UTEC** - *UTEC*'s mission and promise is to ignite and nurture the ambition of the most disconnected young people to trade violence and poverty for social and economic success.

## Terminology

Various terms are used to refer to this target population, often with the intention of fostering increased respect, dignity, and understanding toward individuals confronting homelessness. These include:

- “Individuals experiencing homelessness” or “Individuals with experiences of homelessness” - This deliberate use of "person-first" language recognizes individuals as people first, emphasizing their humanity before the conditions or

circumstances they face.<sup>34</sup>

- “Houseless” or “unhoused” person - This language highlights the concept that a person can have a home without having conventional housing. For example, a home can be established in a community, in a car, or on the street.<sup>35 36</sup>
- People experiencing housing insecurity - This is a broader term that intentionally encompasses the diverse spectrum of homeless and unstable housing experiences.

## Variances

An individual’s experience of homelessness can be influenced by various factors unique to their specific situation or circumstances. Some of these factors are outlined below:

### The Duration or “Type” of Homelessness

Understanding and addressing the diverse circumstances of homelessness involves recognizing different types of homelessness, including:



<sup>34</sup> <https://www.interiorhealth.ca/sites/default/files/PDFS/language-matters-housing-infographic.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.dogoodmultnomah.org/blog/why-do-we-say-houseless#:~:text=By%20%20calling%20%20individuals%20%20experiencing%20%20homelessness,we%20serve%20chooses%20to%20use>

<sup>36</sup> <https://blanchethouse.org/homeless-houseless-unhoused-glossary-about-homelessness/>

TYPE	DESCRIPTION
<b>Situational or Temporary Homelessness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generally, describes individuals who have lost housing due to a crisis, such as job loss, divorce, domestic abuse, a fire, or a healthcare emergency.</li> <li>Individuals can often exit situational or temporary homelessness once the underlying crisis is resolved.</li> </ul>
<b>Episodic or Episodic Homelessness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Refers to individuals facing ongoing instability and a consistent risk of homelessness.</li> <li>Contributing factors include insecure employment, high housing costs consuming much of their budget, and a lack of financial reserves for emergencies.</li> <li>Entails intermittent episodes of homelessness, typically for short durations. Support at this stage is critical to prevent episodic homelessness from becoming chronic.</li> </ul>
<b>Chronic Homelessness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Includes people who have spent a significant portion of their lives unhoused and face high barriers to reintegrating with their community.</li> <li>Common obstacles include substance abuse and serious mental health barriers.<sup>37</sup></li> <li>Individuals who are chronically homeless are three times more likely to experience health and drug-related issues than those who have recently become homeless.<sup>38</sup></li> <li>Individuals are likely to experience more significant barriers in finding and retaining employment. Research has shown that permanent supportive housing approaches, coupling affordable housing with the necessary support services, serve as an effective intervention to address chronic homelessness.<sup>39</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Hidden</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Describes individuals who live with others (i.e., couch surfing or staying with friends) and do not have a permanent home.</li> <li>As such, they are often left out of national homelessness statistics (“hidden”) and unable to access essential services.<sup>40</sup></li> </ul>

## Demographics

Demographics—including age, family status, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and veteran status—often serve as crucial determinants in understanding the root causes of homelessness, shaping individual experiences of homelessness, and presenting barriers related to homelessness. Furthermore, demographics can influence a person’s eligibility for or access to certain resources or services. For example, some homeless shelters prioritize families with children or pregnant women, while others focus on serving individuals. Similarly, certain services and programs may target specific demographic groups, such as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/housingsearchtool/?housingsearchtoolaction=public:main.making-the-case-why-provide-housing-search-services>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-flaming-homeless-crisis-employment-income-housing-20190606-story.html>

<sup>39</sup> <https://endhomelessness.org/blog/addressing-chronic-homelessness-research-tells-us/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.comicrelief.org/posts/what-are-the-four-types-of-homelessness#:~:text=Hidden%20Homelessness&text=Individuals%20who%20live%20with%20others,from%20national%20statistics%20on%20homelessness.>

## Race, Sexual Orientation and Gender Intersections with Experiences of Homelessness<sup>41, 42, 43, 44</sup>

There are significant racial disparities within the homeless population, with rates of homelessness being higher for most groups of color than for white people. As of 2022, the rate of homelessness for Black people was more than four times as high as the rate of homelessness among white people. Additionally, women and members of the LGBTQ+ community confront increased safety concerns, including the risk of violence, assault, and trafficking.

## Physical & Mental Health

The intricate connection between homelessness and health forms a self-perpetuating cycle. Homelessness can both stem from and contribute to mental and physical health issues and is likely to limit access to necessary support and healthcare.<sup>45</sup>

Individuals grappling with significant health challenges often face barriers to retaining employment. Upon losing their job and, in turn, income, accessing necessary healthcare services becomes increasingly difficult. For many individuals without a reliable safety net, a health issue can quickly escalate into a housing problem.

Homelessness can also lead to the emergence of new health problems or exacerbate existing ones. Individuals who are homeless face an elevated risk of violence, communicable diseases, malnutrition, and exposure to adverse weather. Moreover, maintaining a healthy diet and managing medications becomes particularly challenging without access to necessary nutrition and storage options. The persistently difficult conditions of homelessness are also likely to compound or give rise to behavioral health issues, including depression and substance use disorders.<sup>46 47</sup>

Individuals experiencing homelessness often confront a myriad of mental, behavioral, and physical health problems that go unaddressed, thereby intensifying the barriers to exiting homelessness and obtaining employment.

## Socioeconomic Factors

Socioeconomic factors, such as employment history, criminal background, education,

<sup>41</sup> <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/what-causes-homelessness/inequality/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://nationalhomeless.org/lgbtq-homelessness/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://bmcmwomenshealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12905-021-01353-x>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.newstatesman.com/chart-of-the-day/2022/11/black-people-homelessness>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/orr/science/homelessness/index.html>

<sup>46</sup> <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/homelessness-and-health.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.samhsa.gov/blog/addressing-social-determinants-health-among-individuals-experiencing-homelessness>



prior living conditions, and access to a support network, also have significant implications for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Immigration status and proficiency in English further contribute to the distinct needs and barriers encountered within the homeless population. These factors can significantly influence access to resources, support services, and opportunities for stable housing and employment.<sup>48</sup>

## Education & Homelessness<sup>49 50</sup>

Individuals with lower levels of formal education face an increased risk of unemployment, poverty, and, consequently, homelessness. This risk is particularly pronounced among youth who lack a GED or high school diploma. A survey conducted through the Voices of Youth Count initiative at the University of Chicago found that not having a high school diploma or GED was the primary risk factor for youth and young adult homelessness, with these individuals being 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who completed high school.

## Cultural and Geographic Implications

Experiences of homelessness are further influenced by local cultural and geographic context, such as the prevailing political climate and whether the setting is urban or rural.

These factors can correlate with the prevalence of stigmas that may lead to discrimination and additional barriers for individuals at risk of or already experiencing homelessness.

Depending on the social and cultural context, stigmas towards LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, mental health issues, substance use disorders, and homelessness can hinder people from accessing and receiving the support they need.<sup>51</sup>

## Sheltered vs. Unsheltered

Another variable to consider is whether an individual is living in sheltered or unsheltered conditions, such as on a city sidewalk, beneath a highway underpass, in their vehicle, or in their car.<sup>52</sup>

Research indicates that unsheltered individuals face significantly heightened health

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.samhsa.gov/blog/addressing-social-determinants-health-among-individuals-experiencing-homelessness>

<sup>49</sup> <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/groundbreaking-research-on-youth-homelessness-youth-without-a-high-school-degree-young-parents-and-low-income-at-highest-risk/#:~:text=In%20fact%2C%20youth%20without%20a,peers%20who%20completed%20high%20school.>

<sup>50</sup> [https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/ChapinHall\\_VoYC\\_Education-Brief.pdf](https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/ChapinHall_VoYC_Education-Brief.pdf)



and safety concerns. However, accessing sheltered housing presents its own set of challenges. In addition to capacity constraints within shelters, many providers have policies that add complexity for individuals, including restrictions on access for couples, pets, or those dealing with substance use challenges.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, some individuals (particularly those belonging to specific subgroups, such as the LGBTQ+ community), may avoid shelters due to a heightened risk of discrimination, assault, or re-traumatization.<sup>54</sup> It is essential for providers to understand the challenging realities that unhoused individuals confront, even when access to a shelter is possible.<sup>55</sup>

## Homeless Subgroups in Focus

Many subgroups within the homeless population encounter a distinct set of barriers. Of course, beyond these groups, every individual's reality is also uniquely shaped by a complex intersection of demographics, identity, and circumstances. A few of these subgroups are outlined below:

### Youth

Homelessness among youth is caused by a wide range of factors, including family rejection and conflict, the child welfare system, and housing instability. Many homeless youth are also “opportunity youth.” Opportunity youth are young people between the ages of 16 and 24 years old who are disconnected from school, the labor market, and social support systems.

Within the homeless youth demographic, certain groups are disproportionately represented, including youth who identify as Black, Hispanic or Latino, LGBTQ+, young parents, those who do not complete high school, and those with experiences in foster care, juvenile detention, jail, or prison.<sup>56</sup> Research by the National Network for Youth found that:

- Black youth are 83% more at risk of experiencing homelessness in comparison to their white peers.
- Hispanic youth face a 33% increased risk in comparison to their white peers.
- LGBTQ youth are more than twice as likely to have experienced homelessness.
- Young parents – especially those who were not married – are three times more at risk than non-parenting peers.

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<sup>51</sup> <https://www.samhsa.gov/blog/addressing-social-determinants-health-among-individuals-experiencing-homelessness>

<sup>52</sup> <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness/>

<sup>53</sup> <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/unsheltered-homelessness-trends-causes-strategies-address/>

<sup>54</sup> <https://nationalhomeless.org/lgbtq-homelessness/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.capolicylab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Health-Conditions-Among-Unsheltered-Adults-in-the-U.S..pdf>

<sup>56</sup> <https://nn4youth.org/learn/youth-homelessness/>

- Youth with experiences of foster care, juvenile detention, jail, or prison are at higher risk.

Homeless youth are also particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including human trafficking.<sup>57</sup>

## Veterans

Veterans, especially those returning from active deployment, often face invisible wounds of war, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injuries (TBIs), both of which correlate with homelessness.<sup>58</sup> The effects of these can be compounded by a lack of access to reliable support networks, potentially leading to substance use as a coping mechanism.<sup>59</sup>

Women veterans face additional unique barriers, including childcare, risk of domestic violence, and financial independence, that may put their housing stability at risk. Alarming rates of military sexual trauma, predominantly affecting women veterans, further contribute to an increased risk of depression, suicide, substance use, and difficulties maintaining stable employment or relationships.<sup>60</sup>

The transition to civilian life and employment opportunities can be taxing for veterans, as military skill sets may not readily translate into civilian job opportunities.<sup>61</sup> This reality, along with mental and physical health challenges, is likely to be key contributors to veteran homelessness. Interestingly, some evidence also indicates that common factors present prior to veterans' enlistment in the military (i.e., socioeconomic factors, adverse childhood experiences, demographics) may factor into this subgroup's heightened vulnerability to homelessness later in life.<sup>62</sup>

## LGBTQ+ Community

LGBTQ+ individuals are severely overrepresented in the homeless population, particularly among youth. According to Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, LGBTQ+ youth are 120% more likely to experience homelessness than their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts.

This is, in part, due to LGBTQ+ minors being rejected by their families and forced to leave home at a young age, exposing them to a higher risk of discrimination, violence, and instability.<sup>63</sup> The likelihood of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing human trafficking is twice as high compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.unitedway.org/blog/the-intersection-between-housing-instability-and-human-trafficking>

<sup>58</sup> <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/who-experiences-homelessness/veterans/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://nchv.org/veteran-homelessness/>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/2023-12-06/female-veterans-homelessness-sexual-trauma-12276895.html>

<sup>61</sup> <https://nchv.org/veteran-homelessness/>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/why-veterans-remain-at-greater-risk-of-homelessness/>

Within this subgroup, transgender individuals experiencing homelessness are at especially great risk of facing discrimination and violence when living on the streets or accessing services. For example, service providers may deny individuals shelter based on their gender identity or place them in a housing situation based on a gender with which they do not identify.<sup>65</sup>

## Individuals with Disabilities

People experiencing physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities are disproportionately likely to experience homelessness and encounter additional barriers because of their disabilities. Unfortunately, most shelters offer little to no accommodations for individuals with physical and/or ‘hidden’ disabilities. Buildings are generally older and not constructed in accordance with ADA guidelines, making them difficult to navigate. Furthermore, service providers often do not have the training or resources to provide necessary support.<sup>66</sup> Individuals with behavioral, developmental, or mental health disorders may find it especially difficult to cope in shelters, where there are often altercations, a lot of people, and loud noises. As a result, some individuals resort to living on the streets, which may exacerbate existing issues.<sup>67</sup>

## Defining Disability

The definition of “disability” is critical to establishing eligibility for certain supports, resources, and legal protections. Similar to homelessness, definitions vary. HUD, the ADA, and the Social Security Administration all introduce unique definitions that serve as criteria for accessing supports.

## Individuals with Substance Use & Addiction Challenges

Individuals with substance use and addiction challenges face unique barriers that require targeted interventions.<sup>68</sup> Research indicates that substance use disorders are disproportionately present among individuals experiencing homelessness, although this statistic is difficult to measure and report on accurately.<sup>69</sup> Substance abuse can be a cause or result of homelessness, with many individuals turning to substances as a coping mechanism after becoming homeless.

Substance use and addiction often co-occur with untreated mental illness, ease of access to substances, physical health conditions, trauma, self-medication, and/or a

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.unitedway.org/blog/the-intersection-between-housing-instability-and-human-trafficking>

<sup>65</sup> <https://transequality.org/issues/housing-homelessness>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.naccho.org/blog/articles/homelessness-among-individuals-with-disabilities-influential-factors-and-scalable-solutions>

<sup>67</sup> <https://shelterforce.org/2023/07/19/why-arent-homeless-shelters-accommodating-people-who-have-disabilities/>

lack of social support.<sup>70</sup>

## Survivors of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence has proven to be a primary cause of homelessness, predominantly affecting women.<sup>71</sup>

Individuals who experience domestic violence often have limited or no access to financial resources or support networks as a direct result of the abuse. Furthermore, landlords may evict or reject victims/survivors of domestic violence because of the violence that has occurred. For many, fleeing an unsafe and potentially deadly domestic violence situation leads to homelessness.

In addition to the trauma that many survivors experience, domestic violence can have far-reaching consequences on survivors' employment history, financial stability, credit and rental history, and health.<sup>72</sup>

## Employment Barriers and Service Delivery Interventions

Individuals experiencing homelessness or housing instability face extensive barriers to finding and retaining employment. This section outlines key barriers as well as supports that workforce development organizations working with this community can implement.

### The Uncertainty, Instability, and Stress of Homelessness

Daisy Alexander, Personal Development Coordinator at Missoula Works, flagged 'uncertainty' as a key barrier for their unhoused clients. As an example, she shared that encampments regularly get cleared out and/or moved around. Knowing this, clients who are living on the streets may miss appointments or work out of fear of losing their belongings and/or shelter. In some cases, they may know that their encampment is next in line to be cleared out and can't abandon their belongings. Similarly, the team at Uplift NW highlighted lack of sleep, shelter curfews, and stolen belongings as common challenges incurred by their job seekers.

Ricardo, Senior Director of Social Enterprise at UTEC, identified the general stress of homelessness as the biggest barrier for clients. He noted that this stress affects their sleep, influences how they perform at work, and often intersects with addiction and substance use.

<sup>68</sup> <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/rehab-guide/homeless>

<sup>69</sup> [https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC\\_PopSub\\_NatITerrDC\\_2022.pdf](https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_NatITerrDC_2022.pdf)

<sup>69</sup> [https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC\\_PopSub\\_NatITerrDC\\_2022.pdf](https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_NatITerrDC_2022.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/rehab-guide/homeless>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/dvhomelessness032106.pdf>

<sup>72</sup> [https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2017-05/SHPHomelessness%20and%20DV%20Infographic\\_1.pdf](https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2017-05/SHPHomelessness%20and%20DV%20Infographic_1.pdf)

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION	PROMISING PRACTICES AND SUPPORTS
<b>Housing</b>	Lack of access to housing makes it difficult to get the necessary sleep and rest, which may affect punctuality, ability to concentrate, and general performance on the job. Similarly, living in conditions that jeopardize personal safety can affect well-being and effectiveness in the workplace. Curfews and restrictions enforced by shelters also impose constraints on the shifts and schedules individuals can feasibly work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate connections to service providers or directly support individuals in accessing housing.</li> <li>• Offer vouchers for short-term motel/hotel stays.</li> <li>• Develop relationships with local shelters and provide letters to help ensure clients don't lose access to a bed due to their work schedules.</li> </ul>
<b>Transportation</b>	Many individuals experiencing homelessness do not have access to a car and face financial hurdles in accessing public transportation. Public transportation can be unreliable and affect a person's ability to consistently get to a job on time or at short notice. Individuals who do have a car may be unable to cover the costs of gas or necessary repairs. Without reliable transportation, obtaining and retaining a job can be very difficult.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide bus/metro vouchers or gas cards, especially until the first paycheck is received.</li> <li>• Offer shuttle service to work sites.</li> <li>• Offer flexible spending support for individuals who have a car but need assistance to address necessary repairs.</li> </ul>
<b>Clothing &amp; Hygiene</b>	Many individuals experiencing homelessness do not have access to necessary facilities or clothing to present in alignment with job requirements, expectations, or societal norms. Clothing or hygiene considered inappropriate for a job can easily impact an interviewer's decision on whether to hire or not. Aware of this social stigma, individuals may also self-select out of going to work and/or an interview, rather than facing humiliation or discrimination. <sup>73</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer hygiene kits to clients as needed, including menstrual hygiene products, as well as toothbrushes, deodorant, and shaving kits.</li> <li>• Set up an initiative to receive donated professional clothing of all sizes and/or provide uniforms for placements.</li> <li>• Refer clients to local organizations that provide free clothing.</li> <li>• Provide access to a space where clients can bathe or change prior to an interview or work shift.</li> <li>• Identify employers who offer onsite gym memberships or showers that homeless employees can temporarily use prior to reporting to work.</li> </ul>

## Addressing Hygiene Barriers with *Missoula Works*

The inability to maintain good hygiene and anxiety about hygiene are frequent concerns vocalized by *Missoula Works* clients and may result in missed work. In response to this barrier, *Missoula Works* provides access to shower facilities (made available through a church where they rent space).

<sup>73</sup> [https://thehygienebank.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Hygiene\\_Poverty\\_2022\\_Summary\\_Report-1.pdf](https://thehygienebank.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Hygiene_Poverty_2022_Summary_Report-1.pdf)



BARRIER	DESCRIPTION	PROMISING PRACTICES AND SUPPORTS
<b>Necessary ID &amp; Contact Information</b>	Many jobs require certain forms of identification and other information to hire a person, including a mailing address, driver's license, social security number, and more. For a variety of reasons, individuals who are unhoused may not have access to this documentation and can face extreme difficulty in securing it (i.e., often proof of identification is required to replace a lost or stolen ID). Furthermore, including a blank or shelter address in a job application can lead to stigma and discrimination in the hiring process. <sup>74</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Securing new identification or documentation can be an extremely frustrating process. Help individuals identify what steps they need to take and support them through the process.</li> <li>• Provide financial assistance or help individuals secure fee waivers for IDs.</li> <li>• Set up a mail program that provides individuals with a temporary mailing address they can use on applications and to receive mail (for an example, click <a href="#">here</a>).</li> </ul>
<b>Phone</b>	Being reachable is critical to finding and retaining employment. While many individuals who are unhoused do have cell phones, charging stations are not always readily available. Furthermore, phones are more likely to be stolen or damaged by weather without access to secure storage. <sup>75</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer technical &amp; soft skills training on using the phone for professional purposes.</li> <li>• Set up a free charging station for electronics/phones.</li> <li>• Connect individuals to free/low-cost government phone programs if they don't have a phone.</li> </ul>
<b>Email</b>	Individuals who are homeless may also face obstacles in consistently checking and communicating via email, which can result in delayed responses to interview or job opportunities. Common barriers include a lack of technical skills, limited access to a phone or computer, or loss of account/password information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide access to a computer lab.</li> <li>• Offer computer skills and email training.</li> <li>• Help identify or provide a safe place for individuals to store their account, username, and password information.</li> </ul>
<b>Credit, Finances &amp; Subsidies</b>	Many individuals experiencing homelessness have a history of financial instability and/or reliance on the cash economy. In addition to the immediate barriers that come with debt and a lack of financial resources, this can lead to a low credit score, which can subsequently act as a roadblock to securing a car, affordable housing, or even some jobs. <sup>77</sup> An additional financial consideration is related to income limits for state and federal benefits, subsidies, and income limits. At times, taking on a low-paying job may result in a loss of overall income due to these limits.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help individuals identify their credit score &amp; access support/resources on how to improve it.</li> <li>• Provide financial management workshops teaching accessible best practices for managing income and working towards savings.</li> <li>• Provide clear information on income limits related to benefits (such as SSI) so that individuals can make informed decisions.</li> <li>• Offer flexible funding assistance to support clients' individual and time-sensitive needs and help prevent these issues from causing significant financial disruption (i.e. include covering costs of transportation, hygiene products, or work-related attire).</li> </ul>

<sup>74</sup> [https://thehygienebank.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Hygiene\\_Poverty\\_2022\\_Summary\\_Report-1.pdf](https://thehygienebank.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Hygiene_Poverty_2022_Summary_Report-1.pdf)

<sup>75</sup> <https://shelterforce.org/2023/11/01/cellphones-are-a-lifeline-for-unhoused-people-but-barriers-abound/>

## Phones & Young Adults

Interestingly, while *Missoula Works* and *Uplift NW* mentioned lost phones, stolen phones, and changing phone numbers as significant barriers for jobseekers, this was not the case for *UTEC*, an organization that works with young adults aged 17 - 25. *UTEC* shared that they would not consider communication to be a major barrier and that most of their teens consistently have access to a phone. This may, in part, be due to the younger generation's strong relationship with phones. Additionally, *UTEC*'s focus on justice-involved young adults, rather than on explicitly supporting individuals experiencing homelessness, may contribute to a smaller percentage of individuals facing this specific barrier.

## Health Barriers & Supports

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION	PROMISING PRACTICES AND SUPPORTS
<b>Physical Health</b>	Individuals with physical disabilities often face limitations in the types of employment opportunities they can consider and the distances they can travel. As many people do not have access to a car, they might also be restricted to work sites that are near public transportation stops.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intentionally consider and clearly communicate what types of accommodations your program and employer partners can make and not make for physical disabilities. Have these conversations to improve the fit of potential referral candidates from workforce development organizations to specific employers. (i.e., Are there certain roles/placements that don't require heavy lifting?)</li> <li>• Provide connections and support linking individuals to jobs that offer accommodations or align with their needs.</li> </ul>
<b>Mental Health</b>	Mental health may affect a person's ability to obtain and retain a job. Interviewing, communication, and consistent performance on the job may be especially difficult for various reasons, underscoring the need for targeted support and services. Additionally, societal stigmas surrounding mental health can hinder individuals from seeking necessary support, leading to retention issues in the long run. <sup>79</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer therapy or counseling services (provided by an LCSW, LMFT, or otherwise appropriately licensed professional) in-house.</li> <li>• Develop referral partnerships with public agencies and service providers who offer free or low-cost mental or behavioral health services or vocational rehabilitation.</li> <li>• Thoughtfully assess and clearly communicate the accommodations that employer partners of your workforce development organization can—and cannot—provide for individuals with developmental or behavioral disabilities (i.e., Are there roles that have more consistent support or can accommodate individualized needs better? What safety concerns exist?)</li> <li>• Cultivate employer partnerships with organizations that have a positive record for supporting employee mental health.</li> </ul>

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/public-health/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2021.810064/full>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.charlotteiscreative.com/access-denied-the-barriers-associated-with-having-a-low-credit-score/>

<sup>78</sup> <https://redf.org/wp-content/uploads/Heartland-Alliance-REDF-All-Home-Literature-Review-and-Recommendations-11-18-2022.pdf>

<b>Substance Use &amp; Addiction</b>	<p>Substance use and addiction challenges can significantly affect individuals' ability to secure and retain employment, particularly when intertwined with mental health issues and a lack of adequate treatment.<sup>80</sup> Unfortunately, accessible treatment options are often lacking, and individuals are prone to prioritize immediate needs like food and shelter.</p> <p>Substance use and addiction challenges can affect punctuality, reliability, and/or performance. Certain situations—such as a stressful encounter, jobs that require proximity to substances, or a work culture that encourages drinking—can also trigger substance use or a relapse.<sup>81</sup> These challenges may result in recurring gaps in employment history, which in turn diminish a candidate's prospects of securing employment in the first place.<sup>82</sup> This said, consistent employment is proven to be an important factor in sustaining recovery and building financial independence.<sup>83</sup></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer therapy or counseling services (provided by an LCSW, LMFT, or otherwise appropriately licensed professional) in-house or refer to external providers.</li> <li>• Offer support groups for individuals in recovery to connect with peers.</li> <li>• Establish, communicate, and consistently enforce clear policies internally around substance use.</li> <li>• Stay abreast of how approaches to substance use policies and drug testing vary across employers in your community, and across industries and occupations of focus. Educate your clients about the implications of any changes in state law regarding marijuana use pertaining to worker screening and employment</li> <li>• Consider aligning with a harm-reduction approach, to the extent possible (reference program design section for more information)</li> </ul>
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## Additional Supports for Job Seekers

The job search can be an intimidating process, especially for individuals with inconsistent or limited employment experience or those who have had traumatic employment experiences. Below are several job preparation, skill-building, and retention supports to help individuals achieve their desired employment objectives and goals.

BARRIER	PROMISING PRACTICES AND SUPPORTS
<b>Community &amp; Peer Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Host regular community meals or support groups to provide concrete opportunities for connection.</li> <li>• Establish a job club for individuals to network, exchange feedback and support, and hold each other accountable on tasks.</li> <li>• Create meaningful ways to celebrate progress and milestones (i.e., announce when a person gets a job, send a welcome basket when a person secures housing).</li> <li>• Offer an alumni program or services to keep people engaged and connected, even after they've completed the program (see examples <a href="#">here</a>).</li> </ul>

<sup>79</sup> <https://socialinnovation.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Homelessness-and-Employment.pdf>

<sup>80</sup> <https://socialinnovation.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Homelessness-and-Employment.pdf>

<sup>81</sup> <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/workforce-addiction>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.caedge.org/identifying-barriers-to-employment-after-substance-use-disorder-treatment/>

<sup>83</sup> [https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/SAMHSA\\_Digital\\_Download/pep21-pl-guide-6.pdf](https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/SAMHSA_Digital_Download/pep21-pl-guide-6.pdf)

<b>Job Search</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer resume-building and interview preparation support.</li> <li>• Offer one-on-one coaching for individuals to discuss their concerns regarding employment.</li> <li>• Offer open office hours to provide individualized support as needed.</li> <li>• As an organization, focus on building partnerships with employers who offer clear career ladders.</li> <li>• Provide coaching to clients on how to grow professionally and continue to develop new skills over time.</li> </ul>
<b>Employment &amp; Skills Gaps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coach individuals on how to talk about gaps in their employment history by drawing on non-traditional experience and/or highlighting soft skills.</li> <li>• Offer free, and preferably paid, vocational or technical skills training pre-employment and to support ongoing skill building post-employment.</li> <li>• Facilitate self-assessment of individuals' hard and soft skills.</li> <li>• Develop trusting relationships with employers who are interested in inclusive hiring practices to facilitate referrals for employment.</li> <li>• Provide referral letters and references for individuals seeking employment.</li> <li>• Provide paid workshops offering training on socioemotional and soft skills.</li> </ul>
<b>Job Performance &amp; Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide training on how to receive and ask for feedback at work.</li> <li>• Offer self-advocacy and knowing your rights workshops.</li> </ul> <p>Encourage employer partners to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pair new employees with longer-term employees to foster peer connection and mentorship.</li> <li>• Hold regular (i.e., monthly) evaluations / feedback sessions to applaud achievements and positive progress, as well as address any constructive feedback or barriers.</li> <li>• Provide frequent on-the-job feedback. Invite employer partners hosting interns or offering temporary work experiences to maintain coaching relationships with alumni.</li> <li>• Offer opportunities for new hires to submit grievances without retaliation.</li> </ul>
<b>Job Retention</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek out and prioritize employer partners that offer schedules that accommodate individuals with parole restrictions or shelter curfews.</li> <li>• Offer access to support services without time constraints, even once individuals have moved on to employment.</li> <li>• Offer financial incentives for consistent attendance of workforce development programming or for employment retention.</li> </ul>

## Compensation for Skill Development

Consider how workforce development organizations can offer stipends or other financial incentives to clients who continue to utilize skill-building or retention supports after they start working. All three organizations interviewed for this brief financially incentivize skill development or goal planning to varying degrees. For example, one organization pays clients for 2 hours of time spent on goals each week, and another organization fully compensates clients for participation in programming.

## **PUBLIC PROGRAMS SUPPORTIVE OF INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS**

There are many public benefits that support individuals experiencing homelessness, either directly or through funding provided to local service providers, nonprofits, and municipalities. Some of these are listed in Appendix A.

### **Housing-First Alignment**

The housing-first framework is widely recognized as the dominant evidence-based approach to homeless services and has been endorsed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development as a best-practice model. This method prioritizes stabilizing the lives of individuals experiencing homelessness by providing immediate housing support, as well as access to supportive services.

Connecting individuals with housing is a critical step in removing barriers to getting and keeping a job and should be considered a priority when developing sustainable long-term solutions for serving individuals experiencing homelessness. The housing-first model prioritizes connecting individuals to housing when they determine they are ready, rather than when it is determined by a service provider or case manager.<sup>84</sup>

Workforce development organizations can support the housing-first approach by facilitating direct connections to housing, offering case management support, and/or providing referrals to partner organizations in the housing space.

### **Zero Exclusion & Use of Assessments**

An additional program design aspect to consider is whether and how individuals are screened upon entry into the program. People with more barriers to employment may require more time and support than those who are job-ready upon entry into a workforce program, but they can still succeed. Studies suggest that workforce development programs that include transitional job programs offer the greatest advantages to job seekers who have more barriers to employment. A zero-exclusion approach seeks to minimize factors that could disqualify individuals from participating in the program, thereby avoiding additional barriers to accessing employment and related supports.

This might entail changing how workforce development organizations use assessments intended to determine eligibility for employment services. Traditional “job readiness” assessments are often completed by staff, essentially outsourcing the decision-making process rather than empowering individuals to evaluate their “readiness” themselves.

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<sup>84</sup> <https://redf.org/wp-content/uploads/Heartland-Alliance-REDF-All-Home-Literature-Review-and-Recommendations-11-18-2022.pdf>



Furthermore, such assessments often leave a lot of room for subjectivity and bias.

Transitioning towards a more participant-centered approach to determining “job readiness,” workforce development organizations could encourage individuals to self-assess their interest and give them agency in establishing their readiness for employment.<sup>85</sup>

## Harm-Reduction

Workforce development organizations may also consider incorporating harm-reduction practices in their program design.<sup>86</sup> This might include:

- Not mandating abstinence from substance use as a condition of program enrollment or requiring drug tests at intake.
- Providing time for individuals to prepare for drug testing, when required.
- When necessary, connecting individuals unable to participate in programs due to substance use disorder with treatment options, and inviting their return when they are able to engage.<sup>87</sup>

### Substance Use Policy at *Missoula Works*

*Missoula Works* shared that they ask job seekers to be sober for 24 hours before showing up for a job. They do not drug test but will address any issues that are affecting an individual’s ability to appear or perform at work as needed.

## Establishing Referral Network

Developing a robust referral network is vital for workforce development organizations serving individuals experiencing homelessness, as it facilitates access to a diverse array of support services and resources.

A referral network not only enhances the effectiveness of interventions but also ensures that clients receive comprehensive care tailored to their unique needs (i.e., domestic violence, Spanish-language). Moreover, forging partnerships with community organizations strengthens the workforce development organization’s capacity to address various challenges faced by its clients, fostering long-term stability and success.

<sup>85</sup> <https://redf.org/wp-content/uploads/Heartland-Alliance-REDF-All-Home-Literature-Review-and-Recommendations-11-18-2022.pdf>

<sup>86</sup> According to the [National Harm Reduction Coalition](#), “harm reduction incorporates a spectrum of strategies that includes safer use, managed use, abstinence, meeting people who use drugs ‘where they’re at,’ and addressing conditions of use along the use itself.”

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/housingsearchtool/?housingsearchtoolaction=public:main.making-the-case-why-provide-housing-search-services>

## Lessons Learned

When asked to share any lessons learned, representatives of the organizations with whom we spoke shared the following:

*“The most valuable thing I can give somebody is listening to them and **accepting what they actually want** from this place...my idea of what somebody truly needs might not be their idea of what they truly need”*

*“Strike a **healthy balance** between robust support and high accountability [for clients] ... And **hold that accountability** while making sure that they're loved, supported and guided through the process to success, because it's a favor to them. It's a favor to [the] health of your whole organization.*

*“Focus on your mission. Understand what that is. Be clear about what it is that you're doing, but also understand that **you can't necessarily help everyone** and [that your organization] is not the only organization in the area that exists. So sometimes, in order to help our folks more, that might involve saying **let's help less people, but in a more meaningful and substantial way**”*

## INDUSTRY AND OCCUPATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

### Triggers & Accommodations

When evaluating suitable job and industry prospects for homeless individuals, workforce development organizations should consider both general barriers and factors specific to the individual such as safety, triggers, and health needs. For instance, women and LGBTQ+ individuals are likely to face increased risks of harassment or violence in specific job roles or locations. Additionally, for individuals in recovery, positions that involve proximity to or handling of substances may not be appropriate. Physical and mental health limitations also need to be factored into where and how individuals are placed.

### Language Accessibility

Depending on geographic location and demographics, jobseeker clients of workforce development organizations may face barriers in speaking and/or understanding English. In these cases, offering services in more than one language can significantly enhance the impact on the community.

This linguistic diversity should also be considered when developing programs around job readiness. Workforce development organizations will need to provide or partner with language education providers. Any occupational training programs will need to include a Vocational ESL component. To effectively support individuals who are not fluent in English, workforce organizations will need to provide paperwork, training, and any essential communications in clients' native languages. Employer partnerships will need to be cultivated with awareness of which vocational opportunities can offer workers with limited English a path to success. Furthermore, ensuring that job seekers and workers can fully understand work instructions is crucial for their safety and adherence to protocols.

## Employer Relationships

Employer partners are critical to workforce development organizations. They serve as future destinations for alumni with newly cultivated skills. Employers are often partners who provide internships or short-term work experiences. They can also serve as critical volunteers, providing insight on programming, industry presentations, and feedback to prospective new hires. Workforce development organizations can help educate employers on various hiring incentives available to private sector employers who hire individuals with specific barriers.

Building these partnerships is not always easy, as employers may have biases and/or fears about hiring individuals who do not have “traditional” work backgrounds, have criminal records, or are experiencing homelessness. As such, building these relationships intentionally is crucial.

The team at *Uplift Northwest* emphasized that they focus on being completely transparent with employers about the people who are available to work while also clearly outlining their organization's mission. In their experience, partnerships that fall through often do so because the partner was merely focused on their business needs and was not aligned with the work from a values standpoint (“their heart wasn't in it”). Similarly, *UTEC* has found success in specifically targeting and working with companies that identify as “second-chance employers.”

## Industry Considerations

Given that skill sets, educational backgrounds, career aspirations, barriers, and interests vary so widely from person to person, it's impossible to make specific industry recommendations focused on individuals experiencing homelessness. That said, here

are some considerations that may be helpful:

- *UTEC* has focused on developing highly transferable skill development opportunities that are accessible to individuals with lived experience/prior justice involvement. Transferable skills of focus include quality control, forklift operation, loading/unloading, culinary skills, and more, which exist across a range of business types and industries.
- *Missoula Works* shared that they have seen success in hotel housekeeping positions, as these generally pay decently and provide a place for individuals to be for the duration of the day. Some of their clients have been able to make agreements with hotels that enable them to live there (sometimes this is only possible during the off-season).
- *Uplift NW* sees individuals gravitate towards shelter monitoring positions (within local housing) as well as stadium jobs. Stadium jobs have proven to be a good option for people with backgrounds, as these jobs have minimal restrictions. When it comes to shelter monitoring jobs, they have found the need to clearly set expectations, as many people think this will be an easy role; but it often turns out to be quite tough, with clients being exposed to mental health, substance use, and homelessness on the job.
- Another observation shared by *Missoula Works* is that they tend to see individuals gravitate towards back-of-house positions, rather than front-facing customer service roles.
- *Uplift NW* acknowledged that it can be challenging to balance wanting to meet clients where they are while also wanting to pave pathways to higher-paying, in-demand careers. The organization is exploring opportunities to offer “career pathways internships,” which may help bridge the gap that sometimes exists. However, there are also concerns that employers in these industries may be less willing to hire from organizations like *Uplift NW*.

## Success Metrics

Workforce organizations supporting individuals who experiencing homelessness are often required to report on a range metrics, most often employment attainment. However, other metrics can be considered including housing stability and autonomy.

- *Self-sufficient wage*: Does the job attained offer a livelihood long term?
- *Stability and Mobility*: Are there opportunities for mobility and long-term employment as a result of the job attained?
- *Job retention*: Is the person able to stay in a job for a significant period of time?
- *Employee secured permanent housing*: Do clients have stable housing and reasonable income thresholds for public assistance benefits? Workforce development may need to advocate for reasonable thresholds.
- *Autonomy*: Does the client possess a greater sense of self-agency?

# EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS IN BRIEF: Survivors of Domestic Violence

## Key Context: Survivors of Domestic Violence

REDF defines survivors of domestic violence as those individuals who have been in a relationship that included a pattern of behaviors meant to maintain power and control over them by the other person. These behaviors include physical violence, sexual abuse, threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, and financial control.

Domestic violence (DV) is a widespread issue. More than 12 million women and men experience domestic violence each year in the U.S.<sup>88</sup> Specifically, about 3 in 10 women and 1 in 10 men experience rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by a partner. Further, about 96 percent of employed survivors report being victims of economic abuse.

Overall, domestic violence is a widespread issue, and the physical, psychological, financial, and other types of abuse faced by survivors can create significant barriers to employment and beyond. Workforce development organizations and employers can play a role in supporting survivors to build independence. In this brief, we detail services, programs, and other factors workforce development organizations should consider offering to support survivors.

While the term “domestic” may suggest that this issue only arises at home, this notion is false. About 18,700 people are assaulted on the job every year by partners.<sup>89</sup> Forbes estimates that domestic violence creates \$2.5 billion in lost productivity every year.<sup>90</sup> Throughout the field of supporting survivors, several other terms are used to reference domestic violence:<sup>91</sup>

- **Intimate Partner Violence** – This term underscores that the abuser does not necessarily have to live with or be a part of the victim’s home/family.
- **Domestic Abuse** – The word “abuse” might allow for more focus on non-physical abuse, whereas “violence” might elicit images of physical harm.
- **Family Violence** – This term focuses more on abuse by family members.

<sup>88</sup> Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M.R. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<sup>89</sup> Duhart, D. (2001). *Violence in the workplace, 1993–99* (No. NCJ 190076). Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>90</sup> Pearl, R. (2013). Domestic violence: The secret killer that costs \$8.3 billion annually. *Pharma & Healthcare* (5 December 2013) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertpearl/2013/12/05/domestic-violence-the-secret-killer-that-costs-8-3-billion-annually/?sh=6c3141c4681f>

<sup>91</sup> Snyder, V., Webster, J., & Kupfer Schneider, A. (2022). *A Guide to Better Understanding and Supporting Domestic Violence Survivors in Our Workplaces: When ‘Safer-At-Home’ is Not Actually Safe*. Institute for Women’s Leadership at Marquette University. [https://www.marquette.edu/womens-leadership/documents/iwl\\_wsahinas-employ\\_2022-04-26\\_wrefpgs.pdf](https://www.marquette.edu/womens-leadership/documents/iwl_wsahinas-employ_2022-04-26_wrefpgs.pdf)



- **Battered Women** – This is an outdated term that is not asset-based. We do not recommend using this term.

However, as Snyder et al. (2022) write: “All [these terms] describe a pattern of abusive behaviors utilized by a current or former partner or spouse to exert power and control.”

### *Additional Factors and Experiences to Consider*

While domestic violence is a widespread issue, there are some key subgroups for workforce development organizations to consider when building support services. One of these is the degree of separation from the abuser(s):

- **Survivors Recently Leaving Abusive Relationships** – Survivors are 500 times more at risk of violence (including homicide) when they leave an abusive relationship.<sup>92</sup> It is also important to note that it takes, on average, survivors make seven attempts at leaving an abusive relationship before succeeding in leaving for good.<sup>93</sup> This period of increased violence can last a long time; and some estimates suggest it can last as long as two years.<sup>94</sup> Workforce development organizations should consider if they are serving survivors who are trying to or have recently left abusive relationships. This may mean this subpopulation will need additional support in safety planning and leaving.
- **Survivors Who Have Been Out of Abusive Relationships** – As stated, it can take two years for the increased risk of violence to subside after leaving an abusive relationship. However, survivors might still carry trauma throughout their lives and face numerous barriers even beyond this period. Serving this subpopulation still requires attention to safety but may also have an added focus on counseling and preventative strategies to avoid future unhealthy relationships.

Additionally, workforce development organizations that want to serve survivors of domestic violence should also consider disproportionalities across demographics. For example:

- Black women and Black men are significantly more likely to experience domestic violence at some point in their lives when compared to their non-Black counterparts. Forty-five percent of Black women experienced domestic violence, as compared to the national average of 33 percent.<sup>95</sup> Black women are also more likely to be criminalized when navigating violence through the justice system.
- Individuals who identify as LGBTQ are also at greater risk of violence: “44% of lesbians and 61% of bisexual women experience rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner, compared to 35% of [heterosexual] women.”<sup>96</sup> Individuals who are transgender or nonbinary also experience domestic violence at higher rates [54%].<sup>97</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Clarion-Ledger, J. M. (2017, January 29). Most dangerous time for battered women? When they leave. The Clarion-Ledger. <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2017/01/28/most-dangerous-time-for-battered-women-is-when-they-leave-jerry-mitchell/96955552/>

<sup>93</sup> LeTrent, S. (2010, January). When a friend won't walk away from abuse. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2013/01/10/living/friend-domestic-abuse>

<sup>94</sup> Communications. (2020, June 11). Eighteen Months After Leaving Domestic Violence is Still the Most Dangerous Time. BWSS. <https://www.bwss.org/eighteen-months-after-leaving-domestic-violence-is-still-the-most-dangerous-time/>

<sup>95</sup> Get Help - Abuse in the Black Community - The Hotline. (2021, September 23). The Hotline. <https://www.thehotline.org/resources/abuse-in-the-black-community/>

<sup>96</sup> LGBTQ People are More Likely to Experience IPV. (2020, June 25). Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/report-shows-lgbtq-people-are-more-likely-to-be-victims-of-interpersonal-vi>

<sup>97</sup> LGBTQ People are More Likely to Experience IPV. (2020, June 25). Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/report-shows-lgbtq-people-are-more-likely-to-be-victims-of-interpersonal-vi>

- **People with disabilities are at a higher risk** of domestic violence compared to people without a disability.<sup>98</sup>

All forms of domestic violence towards any individual are heinous. It is a fact that different demographics are more likely to experience domestic violence due to various systemic and institutional factors. Support organizations should recognize these nuances within sub populations. Some organizations may choose to focus on specific demographics in their mission.

**The key takeaway here is that workforce development organizations need to consider these subgroups and disproportionalities by demographics when serving survivors.** REDF has historically observed that organizations that are not precise in whom they serve have struggled with outcomes because they try to serve everyone uniformly without designing their programs for specific subgroups. For example, organizations that know they work with survivors who have recently left abusive relationships will need to develop capabilities or referrals to create a safety plan.

## Employment Barriers and Service Delivery Interventions

There are multiple barriers to employment that survivors might face. These include, but are not limited to:

- **Gaps in Resume / Work Experience:** Abusive partners may attempt to isolate victims financially and socially to make them dependent. This abuse can include getting victims to stop working. Hence, it is possible for survivors to have resume gaps or limited work experience, which can pose a barrier to future employment.
- **Mental Health:** “Securing and maintaining employment can be problematic for persons who experience intimate partner violence (Villarreal, 2007),<sup>99</sup> especially when psychiatric symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) negatively affect work performance.”<sup>100</sup> Ongoing participation in training programs can also be negatively impacted by mental health issues.
- **Physical Violence:** Studies show that whenever an employed woman is assaulted and survives the attack, she misses an average of 7 days of work and requires \$816 worth of medical and mental health care.<sup>101</sup> The physical violence experienced by some survivors, in addition to being harrowing, can also manifest into an employment barrier by causing involuntary absenteeism. Absenteeism may be as relevant for participation in training or job preparation programs as it is for paid employment.

<sup>98</sup> Breiding, M. J., & Armour, B. S. (2015). The association between disability and intimate partner violence in the United States. *Annals of epidemiology*, 25(6), 455–457. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annepidem.2015.03.017>

<sup>99</sup> Villarreal, A. (2007). Women's employment status, coercive control, and intimate partner violence in Mexico. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 418–434

<sup>100</sup> Keim, J., Strauser, D. R., & Olguin, D. L. (2009). Enhancing employment outcomes for survivors of intimate partner violence: A developmental work personality perspective. *Journal of employment counseling*, 46(3), 136–144.

<sup>101</sup> Rothman, E. F., Hathaway, J., Stidsen, A., & de Vries, H. F. (2007). How employment helps female victims of intimate partner violence: a qualitative study. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 12(2), 136.

- **Transportation:** Survivors might have been prevented from obtaining driver licenses or a means of transportation, making it more difficult to travel to and from work, training programs, and appointments.
- **Financial Literacy & Managing Money:** Survivors might face economic abuse, such as not being allowed to handle their own money and finances. This lack of financial know-how can in turn make it harder to have savings, manage payments and earnings, or handle job requirements such as having a direct deposit account.
- **Sabotage:** Current and previous abusive partners might actively try to sabotage a survivor's prospects of obtaining a job or completing a training program. This can happen through spreading misinformation about the survivor online, contacting employers to discredit the survivor, sharing revenge porn, and other actions meant to discredit survivors.
- **Homelessness & Unstable Housing:** Safe housing and the economic resources to maintain it are primary concerns for survivors who have left or are planning to leave abusers.<sup>102</sup> Without safe housing, it can be difficult to sustain participation in training programs or maintain employment.
- **Childcare:** Survivors may also be navigating parenthood while juggling education and training programs, job search or employment, court dates, counseling, etc. For parent survivors, reliable childcare is critical.
- **Substance Use:** Some studies show that individuals who have experienced DV are more likely to have symptoms of substance abuse disorders.<sup>103</sup>
- **Justice System Involvement:** Survivors may need to navigate the justice system as they seek to gain independence. Additionally, some survivors, especially Black women, can be criminalized while trying to navigate this system. Likely, this means survivors need to attend court dates (which can disrupt work and training programs) and obtain help navigating the complex justice system.

The table below summarizes the barriers to employment and obstacles to successful program completion that survivors of domestic violence may face, as well as the program services that can work to remove or mitigate these barriers. This information has been compiled based on our research from academia, as well as interviews with field experts.


**The goal is not to do everything below!** The most effective programs offer some combination of the activities listed, depending on the specific needs of their clients. There can also be service considerations beyond what is included below.

<sup>102</sup> Clough, A., Draughon, J. E., Njie-Carr, V., Rollins, C., & Glass, N. (2014). "Having Housing Made Everything Else Possible": Affordable, Safe and Stable Housing for Women Survivors of Violence. *Qualitative Social Work: QSW: Research and Practice*, 13(5), 671–688. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325013503003>

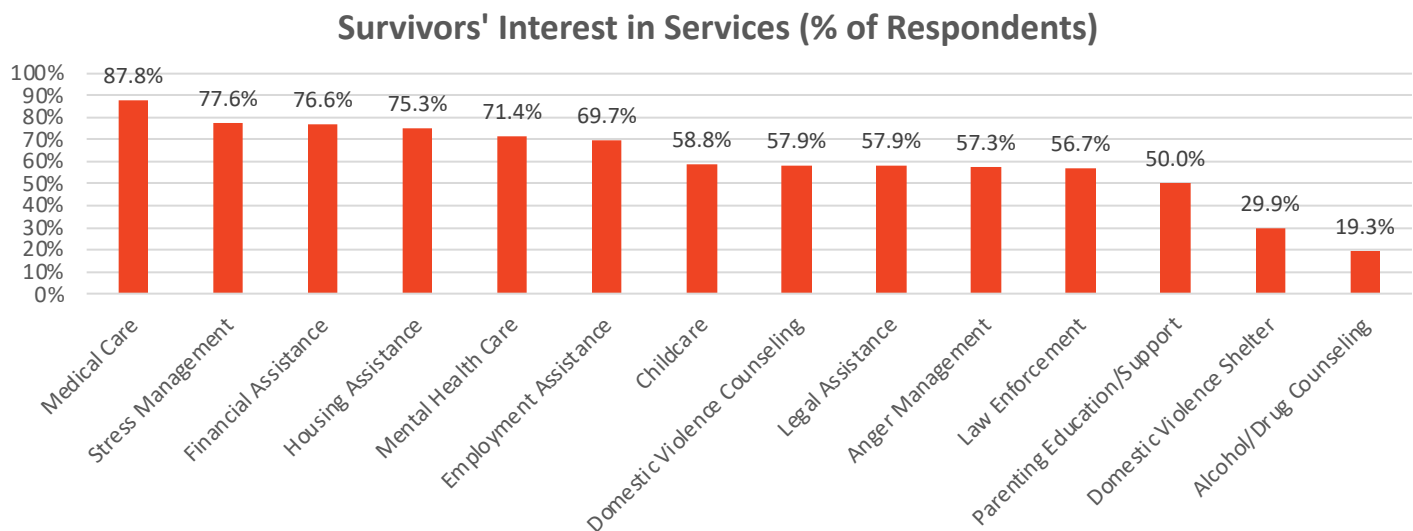
<sup>103</sup> Bonomi, A. E., Anderson, M. L., Reid, R. J., Rivara, F.P., Carrell, D., & Thompson, R. S. (2009). Medical and psychosocial diagnoses in women with a history of intimate partner violence. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 169, 1692–1697

BARRIERS TO PROGRAM PARTICIPATION AND EMPLOYMENT	PROMISING PRACTICES AND SUPPORTS
<b>Gaps in Resume (i.e., limited professional work experience)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support with obtaining work documentation and IDs.</li> <li>• Support in building resumes with a focus on navigating employment gaps.</li> <li>• Mock interviewing that practices how to answer questions around resume / employment gaps and navigating these questions if they are a trigger.</li> <li>• Design different pathways within your program to support the exploration of varied occupations and careers.</li> <li>• Conduct goal-setting activities, self-assessments, and workplace personality assessments to explore careers.</li> </ul>
<b>Mental Health Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health services and specialists focused on survivors.</li> <li>• Trauma-informed practices and trained staff.</li> <li>• Support getting access to Medicaid or other health insurance.</li> <li>• Advocate for hiring employer partners to offer these supports within their organizations as well.</li> </ul>
<b>Physical Violence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support survivors in developing and executing a <a href="#">safety plan</a>.</li> <li>• Support getting access to Medicaid or other health insurance.</li> <li>• Flexibility around scheduling and absentee policies for survivors.</li> <li>• Emergency cash fund to help assist with medical bills.</li> <li>• Encouraging employer partners to incorporate policies allowing flexibility for employees who are survivors into its Leave Policy. <a href="#">Click here to download a model survivor leave policy template</a> by FreeFrom, an organization focused on building financial security for survivors.</li> </ul>
<b>Transportation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing public transportation vouchers and cards.</li> <li>• Organizing carpooling among clients and compensating drivers accordingly.</li> <li>• Support in applying for and obtaining a driver's license.</li> <li>• Emergency cash support to help with car maintenance or registration and tax costs.</li> <li>• Car down payment matching program.</li> <li>• Build partnerships with employers who are easily accessible via public transportation or who offer transportation benefits to their employees.</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Literacy &amp; Managing Money</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a stipend or other financial incentives to clients so that they build experience managing their own resources.</li> <li>• Support in opening free/low-cost banking accounts.</li> <li>• Provide financial incentives for reaching milestones (e.g., providing payment for completing training).</li> <li>• Offer financial safety planning services for survivors on how to protect their credit and recover from coerced and fraudulent debt.<sup>104</sup></li> <li>• Partner with employers who provide a living wage to their interns and employees.</li> <li>• Encourage employer partners to provide the option to receive a payroll advance but combine this with behavioral-based financial literacy support and low-fee account access.</li> </ul>
<b>Sabotage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure <a href="#">safety plans</a> include components related to work and digital abuse.</li> <li>• Build employment partnerships that are aware of safety risks and have mitigations in place (please see safety notes in the program design section).</li> </ul>
<b>Homelessness + Unstable Housing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referrals and connections to local domestic violence shelters. <a href="#">This directory of domestic violence shelters can be helpful</a>. Some emergency shelters can reserve beds for nonprofit partners (sometimes for a fee).</li> <li>• Basic needs assistance such as groceries &amp; hygiene items.</li> <li>• Pay for helping with other miscellaneous housing costs (such as rental insurance, rental assistance, etc.).</li> <li>• Encourage employer partners to offer these supports to their employees as well.</li> </ul>

<sup>104</sup> FreeFrom, Before and Beyond Crisis: What Each of Us Can Do to Create A Long-Term Ecosystem of Support for All Survivors. August 17, 2022, <http://freefrom.org/beyond-crisis>

<b>Childcare</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childcare subsidy, savings account, or access to childcare.</li> <li>• Design the program with childcare in mind, with a goal of ensuring parent success. For example, consider childcare when deciding on training hours per week.</li> <li>• Partner with employers who offer onsite childcare.</li> </ul> <p><i>While this workforce development organization does not serve survivors exclusively, here is an example of childcare support from Massachusetts-based UTEC:</i></p> <div> <p><b>2Gen Center</b></p> <p>More than half of UTEC's young adults are also young parents. UTEC operates an on-site early childhood education center to help young families break the cycle of poverty. With a child-centered, social-emotional based curriculum, the 2Gen Center is inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy that encourages children to direct their own learning.</p>  </div>
<b>Substance Abuse</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counseling services either in-house or by referral.</li> <li>• Specific resources for individuals who relapse.</li> <li>• Encouraging employer partners to make counseling services available through employee assistance programs (EAP) or other means.</li> </ul>
<b>Justice System Involvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility built into program schedule to attend court dates.</li> <li>• Connection to <a href="#">legal expungement resources</a> and covering the cost of expungement (explore local legal aid offices or pro bono clinics by law schools).</li> <li>• Financial resources for paying court fines or traffic tickets.</li> <li>• Build employer partner awareness of justice system involvement and how to support employees in this position.</li> </ul>

Workforce development leaders may be curious about how to prioritize the above. While the true answer depends on your specific population, we wanted to elevate client voice by including data on how survivors ranked interest in services. This is from a 173-person survey (all respondents identified as women and survivors).<sup>105</sup>



<sup>105</sup> Dichter, M. E., & Rhodes, K. V. (2011). Intimate partner violence survivors' unmet social service needs. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 37(5), 481-489.



## Public Policies and Community Resources Supportive of Survivors of Domestic Violence

In addition to support services your organization can provide directly or via a partner, there are also some public resources that workforce development organizations can help survivors connect to. Workforce organizations can also ensure that employer partners are aware of these resources and promote them among staff.

- **Local domestic violence shelters:** Your municipality or county may have a domestic violence shelter that can serve as a resource for survivors. These shelters may also provide other wraparound supports, such as helping survivors create a safety plan. [This directory of domestic violence shelters can be helpful starting point in tapping into these services.](#)
- **Legal Aid & Legal Clinics:** Not all survivors will want to pursue recourse through the justice system. That said, for individuals who would like legal assistance, connection to local Legal Aid offices or law school clinics focusing on domestic violence could be helpful.
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH):** Federal advocacy organizations such as the NDVH can be a helpful resource if survivors urgently need someone to talk to. This resource is available 24/7.
- **Employment Support:** The California Employment Development Department (EDD) offers temporary benefits (unemployment insurance or State Disability Insurance) to victims of domestic violence if one qualifies. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) uses the The Violence Against Women Act definition of homelessness which explicitly includes people who are without safe residence because they are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence.
- **Federal Laws & Regulations:** Although not a direct resource, educating local employers and survivors about their legal rights pertaining to domestic violence could be beneficial. We recommend reading pages 17-20 of [A Guide to Better Understanding and Supporting Domestic Violence Survivors in Our Workplaces](#) as it provides a helpful overview of the laws and regulations supporting survivors:
  - Unfortunately, there is no federal employment protection law specific to survivors. That said, **injuries and health conditions related to domestic violence are covered under the 12-week protected leave of the Family and Medical Leave Act.**
  - The guide details how different states have varying levels of protection for survivors.

Before connecting clients to public and community resources, REDF recommends vetting any potential partnerships. Ensure that your partners are effective at delivering supports and knowledgeable in working with your focus population. [Click here for a partnership comparison tool](#) that can help workforce development organizations rate and contrast partners.

## Program Design Considerations

In addition to the supports mentioned above, workforce development organizations serving survivors should also consider the design factors detailed below when building their service model. Many of these design considerations are also applicable to employers and workplaces.

Workforce development organizations should prioritize partnerships with employers that already have practices reflecting these considerations. They can also educate additional employers about these topics and support them in adopting related practices and policies.



## Prevention vs. Protection vs. Intervention

As workforce development organizations build out their programs to support survivors, they should consider to what extent their programs are designed to provide prevention versus protection versus intervention. These strategies can generally be defined as:<sup>106</sup>

STRATEGY DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
<b>Prevention strategies</b> are those designed to educate clients so both potential perpetrators and potential survivors can recognize and understand which behaviors constitute domestic violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Educational training for survivors on how to identify unhealthy relationships vs. healthy ones.</li><li>• Training for managers on the warning signs of domestic violence.</li></ul>
<b>Protection strategies</b> are measures that protect clients who are survivors of domestic violence and have reported their abuse to their respective organizations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Safety policies in place, such as not allowing uninvited guests into organizational facilities or training centers.</li><li>• Non-discrimination policies for survivors of domestic violence</li></ul>
<b>Intervention strategies</b> are those that are implemented to assist victimized clients in obtaining resources to combat the abuse, as well as supporting survivors in various ways while they are experiencing these terrible situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Internal or referral services to counseling services specifically designed for survivors.</li><li>• Housing support or referral services to DV shelters.</li></ul>

As previously mentioned, it takes, on average, seven attempts at leaving an abusive relationship for a survivor to leave for good. Sometimes a survivor can find themselves in new abusive relationships even after leaving a previous abuser. That is to say, it might be misleading to focus solely on protection services if an organization works with survivors who have left abusive relationships. Organizations working with survivors will probably need to offer (or refer) services across all three categories; however, the depth of each should depend on the needs of specific subpopulations.

<sup>106</sup> Snyder, V., Webster, J., & Kupfer Schneider, A. (2022b). A Guide to Better Understanding and Supporting Domestic Violence Survivors in Our Workplaces; When 'Safer-At-Home' is Not Actually Safe. In <https://www.scribbr.com/citation-generator/folders/7JDHCW0EQJ6CcSFqjcuBCS/lists/13RVUzqVApe9MpFpYmrYjy/cite/report/>. Institute for Women's Leadership, Marquette University.

## Safety

It is imperative for workforce development organizations that serve survivors to design for physical safety and maximize it for clients and staff. Workforce organizations should encourage employer partners to adopt similar practices that promote safety on the job and at work sites. The value of doing so is reinforced by a somber statistic: **20% of workplace deaths result from domestic violence.**<sup>107</sup>

Adoption of the following strategies can increase safety:

- **Undisclosed Location** – having a policy of not publicly disclosing the address of the service location, training facility, or worksite (whether online or to anyone who calls).
- **Safety Devices** – this includes providing clients or workers with a cellphone or personal alarm device if they do not have one. It also includes setting up silent alarms and security cameras at the program or work site.
- **Safety Escorts** – offering clients and employees the option to have someone walk with them to and from the subway or other transportation sites near work or training.
- **Transportation Proximity** – having a location that minimizes the walking distance from the site to parking garages or bus/train stops. Additionally, if there are multiple parking locations, it might be beneficial to give survivors priority access to the closest parking site.
- **Multiple Exits** – ensuring that multiple exits are available and allowing their use (so that potential perpetrators waiting outside will not know exactly where someone is exiting from).
- **Relocation Support** – for training and service providers, or employers with multiple locations, if the site to which a survivor is assigned has been breached by a perpetrator, the organization can consider helping the survivor relocate to a new site.
- **Anti-Violence Policy** – establishing a zero-tolerance violence policy and clear repercussions.

## Economic Safety

In addition to deliberately designing for the physical safety of survivors, workforce development organizations and employers can also adopt strategies to help protect their financial safety:<sup>108</sup>

- **Payment alternatives** – for how to access earnings (e.g., pay card, new bank account, etc.).
- **Storage space** – to keep their important documents safe (e.g., IDs, passports, birth certificates, immigration documents, etc.).

<sup>107</sup> National Council for Home Safety and Security | “Women are Being Murdered on the Job at an Alarming Rate”

<sup>108</sup> FreeFrom, Before and Beyond Crisis: What Each of Us Can Do to Create A Long-Term Ecosystem of Support for All Survivors. August 17, 2022, <http://freefrom.org/beyond-crisis>

- **Banking services** – help survivors bank with financial institutions that offer specialized services for survivors.

## Privacy

Survivors might not want or be ready for the world to know that they experienced DV. Workforce development organizations can protect individuals' privacy by adopting strategies such as:

- **Having a mixed group of clients or program participants** – some organizations default to serving a mix of survivors and non-survivors so that partners, visitors, and the public cannot discern who is a survivor and who is not.
- **Not disclosing names or pictures of clients or program participants** – whether online or to funders or other stakeholders.
- **Consent process** – if sharing information about a client publicly, having a process in place to obtain genuine consent.
- **Industry selection** – Build partnerships with employers in industries with little customer visibility (i.e., businesses where survivors might not need to engage with the public).

## Flexible Hours and Leave Time

Survivors must juggle several different priorities. For instance, a survivor might need to balance childcare, court order dates, therapy, and work. Workforce development organizations can support survivors by offering flexible schedules/hours. Internships can be designed to include flexibility, and partnerships should be prioritized with employers that offer flexible schedules and paid time off (PTO).

However, having flexible hours does not mean being lax on professional skills such as attendance, punctuality, and communication. It is possible for workforce development organizations to simultaneously have flexibility without sacrificing teaching clients about communication best practices.

## Support Networks

Due to the social isolation that some survivors face, building a community in which survivors feel supported and not judged can be beneficial to their overall well-being. Some workforce development organizations seek to build this community within the organization and its programs. Others create alumni groups to keep the network support going beyond participation in a training program or workshop. Some of these support networks can also be designed to foster mutual aid.

## **Trained Managers in Trauma-Informed Practices**

For survivors, engaging with people in positions of power can be triggering. Managers and caseworkers should be coached to understand why. For example, a conversation about salary might trigger negative reactions in survivors who have experienced economic abuse from a partner, making discussions about money particularly sensitive. Client-facing staff should not only be trained to recognize triggers but also to create a safe space for survivors to identify their triggers and work collaboratively to develop an action plan. Workforce development organizations can assist employer partners in training staff and hiring managers to implement trauma-informed practices.

## **Trust-Based Supports**

Some organizations inadvertently prevent survivors from seeking the resources they need by demanding difficult-to-obtain evidence that they are a survivor (e.g., court documents). If your organization requires evidence, design your program to accept letters from friends, therapists, and advocates as sufficient verification that an applicant is a survivor.<sup>109</sup> If hiring employer partners offer benefits or programs for survivor employees, workforce development organizations can help them develop documentation practices that will not exclude survivors from accessing services.

## **Clearly Documented Anti-Discrimination Policies**

Workforce development organizations can vet employer partners to ensure that their workplace anti-discrimination policies and procedures are clearly documented and easy to understand. This will help ensure that domestic violence survivors do not feel abandoned or discriminated against. Without clear workplace policies, survivors might be too afraid of losing their jobs to ask for the time or resources they need. As Keim et al. (2009) write: “Written workplace policies are essential for survivors of IPV [intimate partner violence] so that they can feel some sense of safety and protection, that their productivity is not affected, and that their chances of voluntarily leaving or being terminated are lessened.”<sup>110</sup>

Below is an anti-domestic violence workplace policy template that can be shared with employer partners from [A Guide to Better Understanding and Supporting Domestic Violence Survivors in Our Workplaces](#).

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<sup>109</sup> FreeFrom, Trust Survivors: Building an Effective and Inclusive Cash Assistance Program, <https://www.freefrom.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TrustSurvivorsReport.pdf>

<sup>110</sup> Keim, J., Strauser, D. R., & Olguin, D. L. (2009). Enhancing employment outcomes for survivors of intimate partner violence: A developmental work personality perspective. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 46(3), 136-144.



## WHAT SHOULD AN ANTI-DOMESTIC VIOLENCE WORKPLACE POLICY INCLUDE?

A workplace anti-domestic violence policy should include the following sections:

- A statement of confidentiality,
- The employer response to survivors,
- Reporting procedures for employees with information about violence,
- Response to employees who commit violence,
- Reporting procedures for employees who are survivors, and
- The reporting procedure for a violation of the policy.

Below is a summary of what should be included in an organization's domestic violence spillover policy and examples of initiatives under each section.<sup>93</sup>

### *Summary of Fundamental Policy Points*

- **Statement of Confidentiality**
  - Maintain the employee's right to privacy as well as the need for confidentiality and autonomy.
- **Employer Response to Survivors**
  - Non-discrimination and non-retaliation
  - Leave and other reasonable accommodation and assistance
  - Access to unemployment insurance benefits
  - Support if work performance is declining
  - Enforcing Protection and Restraining Orders
- **Reporting by Employees with Information About Violence**
  - Information on any kind of act of violence against an employee or perpetrated by an employee must be reported.
- **Response to Employees Who Commit Violence**
  - Immediate investigation of any allegation
  - Employees are prohibited from utilizing workplace resources to harm another person.
  - Any employee who is subject to a protection/restraining order must notify Human Resources immediately.
- **Reporting by Employees Who are Survivors**
  - Employees who are survivors of domestic violence will report to a designated person as determined by the employer.
  - The designated person will provide community referrals and resources to employees.
- **Reporting Violation of Policy**
  - Any allegations of violations of this policy will be immediately investigated.

## Industry and Occupational Considerations

REDF's support for workforce organizations serving survivors of domestic violence is still relatively new. We continue to learn from our network and seek to expand our knowledge. While we do not feel comfortable singling out specific industries and roles that could be good focuses for workforce development organizations serving survivors, **here are some general criteria that organizations might consider when selecting industries, employers, or roles to target for job training and placements:**

- **Privacy** – Can the work be done in private, away from the public, or does it require engagement in a place where perpetrators can easily gain access?
- **Medical Insurance** – Do employers in the industry typically offer health insurance,

Including insurance options that cover mental health supports?

- **Schedule Flexibility** – Does the industry or employer allow for the work to be completed with flexible working hours?
- **Social Connectedness** – Does the nature of the job allow for work in teams and break cycles of social isolation?
- **Triggers Avoidance** – Does the industry or business accommodate workers seeking to avoid certain types of triggers (e.g., catering for weddings)?

There are many other criteria (both social and financial) that organizations can consider when choosing which employer partnerships to cultivate or which industries or occupations to focus on for training programs. However, the criteria used to evaluate opportunities should ultimately connect to the needs of specific populations and/or sub-populations.

## Success Metrics

When measuring the success of workforce development organizations that serve survivors, consider the following metrics suggested by experienced practitioners:

- Healthy relationship knowledge: % of clients that understand what healthy relationships look like.
  - Do clients know what a healthy relationship is?
  - Do clients believe they can have one?
- Domestic violence rates: Are rates of domestic violence decreasing among the community served or clients?
  - Note: An interesting relationship to consider here is that the more awareness people have about what domestic violence is, the more reports might be made.
- Employment retention: The percentage of clients working or in school 90/180/365 days after leaving the workforce development organization or graduating from its program.
- Certification: The percentage of clients who gained marketable certification or skills.
- Living wage obtained within X years of completing the program.
- Earnings gained over time.
- Hope for the future: The percentage of clients who answer positively to “Do you have hope for the future in terms of reaching your dream?”
- Improvement in the [CFPB’s financial well-being score](#).

## Helpful Resources

- **Publications:**
  - [A Guide to Better Understanding and Supporting Domestic Violence Survivors in Our Workplaces by the Institute for Women's Leadership at Marquette University](#) *(Covers what domestic violence is, how it can affect the workplace, and how employers can support survivors).*
  - [Support Every Survivor – How Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, and Disability Shape Survivors' Experiences and Needs by FreeFrom](#) *(Shares the voices and needs of survivors served by the organization.)*
- **Prevention Resources:** Nonprofit organizations such as the One Love Foundation often provide free and [publicly available training resources on identifying unhealthy relationships.](#)
- **[The Trevor Project](#):** Provides confidential and secure 24/7 service to LGBTQ youth when they are struggling with issues such as coming out, LGBTQ identity, depression, and suicide. While not specifically focused on domestic or family violence, this can be a helpful additional resource for LGBTQ individuals who may be at risk of family violence.

# EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS IN BRIEF: Individuals With Justice System Involvement

## Key Context: Individuals with Justice System Involvement

REDF defines an individual who has been justice-involved as someone who has been arrested, charged with a crime, and/or incarcerated (in jail or prison).<sup>111</sup> While REDF acknowledges the broader impact of the justice system on families and communities, this brief will specifically focus on individuals who meet this definition. Individuals involved in the justice system often have life experiences that disconnect them from education and employment opportunities. These experiences may include mental health challenges, family separation, interrupted work or schooling, or exposure to violence.

A study of hiring practices of employers reveals that only 5% of managers and 3% of human resource professionals said their company actively recruits people who have been justice involved. Of those who do, 82% of managers and 67% of human resource professionals think that the value new employees with records bring to the organization is as high as or higher than that of workers without records.<sup>112</sup> The managers and Human Resource professionals were surveyed on perception of work and revealed hopeful outcomes for individuals with justice system involvement.

Many terms have been used to identify individuals who are or have been involved in the justice system. In recent years, this language has evolved. REDF is committed to using person-centered and asset-based language that recognizes an individual's wholeness rather than defining them by a single experience. REDF aims to foster increased respect, dignity, and understanding for individuals who have experienced involvement in the justice system.

Terms used to describe individuals who have been justice involved are listed here.<sup>113</sup>

DEFICIT-BASED	EXAMPLES
Offender, inmate, felon, criminal, convict, prisoner, delinquent	A person with justice system involvement, a person impacted by the justice system
Ex-offender, Ex-con, Ex-prisoner	A person with a history of justice system involvement, a formerly incarcerated person, a re-entering/returning citizen
Parolee, Probationer, Detainee	A person under judicial supervision
Juvenile offender, juvenile delinquent	A young person impacted by the justice system

<sup>111</sup> REDF [Lived Experience Definitions](#).

<sup>112</sup> SHRM [Employers Willing to Overlook a Criminal Record to Hire the Right Person](#)

<sup>113</sup> Fortune Society [Words Matter: Using Humanizing Language](#)

## System Involved Intersectionality & Sentence Types

Each year, more than 600,000 individuals in the U.S. reintegrate into their communities, many seeking employment.<sup>114</sup> However, this population is far from homogeneous—their experiences with incarceration and arrest vary greatly depending on offense type, sentence length, facility type, demographics, socioeconomic background, health status, and other factors. Workforce development organizations that serve individuals with histories of justice-involvement can provide more effective support when they take into consideration these diverse and intersecting realities.

Women, who comprise 10% of the justice-involved population,<sup>115</sup> may require gender-responsive programming to address challenges more prevalent among women. Many justice-involved women have experienced trauma and often hold primary caregiving responsibilities. Beyond demographic factors, the nature of an individual's sentence and conviction also influences their reentry experience. While individuals who have served long sentences may have gained work experience during incarceration, they often need support in articulating transferable skills to employers, adapting to technological advancements, and navigating modern job markets. Individuals with highly stigmatized convictions, such as sexual assault or violent offenses, may face additional barriers in accessing workforce development programs and supportive service, securing occupational licenses, and qualifying for jobs in certain industries

These nuanced experiences and identities frequently intersect, shaping the re-entry and job search experiences of individuals. Workforce development organizations that recognize these complexities and their impact on employment prospects can design programmatic experiences that more effectively support job seekers' diverse needs and career goals.

## Employment Barriers and Service Delivery Interventions

The table below summarizes barriers to employment commonly faced by people with justice system involvement, as well as related supports that can remove or alleviate these barriers. This information has been compiled based on our research as well as interviews with field experts.<sup>116</sup>


Remember – the goal isn't to do everything below! The most effective programs offer some combination of the below activities depending on the specific needs of their focus population. There can also be supports beyond what's included below.

<sup>114</sup> NCDA [Employment after Prison](#): The Importance of Supporting Workers Who are Seeking Work after Incarceration

<sup>115</sup> Prison Policy [Institute Women and Gender](#)

<sup>116</sup> CDCRA [Report](#)



COMMON BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT	PROMISING PRACTICES AND SUPPORTS
<p><b>Mandated court dates or meetings with Parole Officers during work hours (may be with little to no notice)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide flexibility around court dates/supervision requirements. Some workforce development organizations structure their training or internship programs to run only four out of the five days of the week and use the fifth day for individuals to meet with their job coach, job developer, or for external appointments.</li> <li>• Have discussions with your employer partners about your clientele and how they might add flexibility with minimal impact to operations.</li> <li>• Encourage employer partners to consider less traditional scheduling practices, e.g. have a rotating scheduling approach to ensure business operations has enough team members on any given day, while allowing flexibility at the individual level.</li> <li>• At enrollment, schedule 1:1 conversations with your clients to understand time off needed. Continue the communication throughout the client's enrollment to stay connected and engage with the individual as their situation may evolve. Share this approach with employer partners to facilitate successful transitional into the workforce.</li> <li>• Maintain an open, communicative relationship with parole officers, including organizing site visits, encouraging them to come to your organization with any issues (instead of re-arresting), and sharing more about how your program is helping your clients.</li> <li>• Work with your clients to set up a schedule of their court dates and appointments with parole officers; create automated reminders for each one.<sup>117</sup></li> </ul>
<p><b>Financial instability</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek to minimize the time it takes a new client to begin earning income, whether from a program (stipends or other incentives, a work experience opportunity, or a job).</li> <li>• Encourage employer and other partners to implement daily pay for those earning wages or other financial compensation. Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), a national workforce development organization provided transitional jobs to reentry job seekers pays its workers daily.</li> <li>• Provide resources for navigating child support payments.</li> <li>• Cultivate partnerships with employers that pay a living wage or offer raises based on performance.</li> <li>• Consider a discretionary fund (e.g., barrier removal fund) for supporting with initial fees such as transportation, ID costs, fines and fees, etc. especially in the first month of employment.</li> <li>• Build financial competency by covering concepts such as the cost of credit, how to open a bank account, and how to manage finances. Connecting literacy support to financial products (e.g., credit building tools) can enhance the impact.</li> <li>• Educate clients about and divert them from predatory financial practices to avoid exploitation.</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="584 1688 1435 1883"> <p>Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program (FFRP)</p> <p>FFRP partners with JPMorgan Chase to provide financial competency workshops to educate their participants on how to effectively manage their finances and build their wealth.</p>  </div>

<b>Disconnection to access to credentials and previous work history (ex: no high school diploma)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer certification opportunities &amp; skill training.</li> <li>• Provide in-person / online access to high school diploma (HSD) / GED classes (note: some organizations decide to outsource the actual teaching of classes).</li> <li>• Consider offering digital literacy training.</li> <li>• Help clients update their resume to honor work experience and skills gained at the workforce development organization (including training and internships) and during incarceration.</li> <li>• Know what occupations in your state restrict the employment of individuals who have been incarcerated or have prior criminal convictions.</li> <li>• Conduct goal setting activities, self-assessments, and workplace personality assessments to support career exploration.</li> <li>• Continue to offer these programs to alumni, possibly at non-traditional times, so that they can continue to bolster their skills after they graduate from programming and are working.</li> </ul>
<b>Unstable housing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish partnerships with nonprofits and reentry organizations for housing search support (referral or internal).</li> <li>• Develop a direct referral partnership with an emergency shelter or temporary housing provider. Some emergency shelters can reserve beds for nonprofit partners (sometimes for a fee).</li> <li>• Offer basic needs assistance such as groceries &amp; hygiene items.</li> <li>• Pay for helping with other misc. housing costs (such as rental insurance, rental assistance, etc.).</li> <li>• Where appropriate, offer temporary housing with a path towards more stable housing.</li> </ul>
<b>Stigma in the application process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support clients in developing a skills-first narrative that emphasizes the accountability, resilience, and fortitude it took to overcome obstacles.</li> <li>• Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) suggests crafting a conviction statement with a job candidate to embody principles of partnership, collaboration, and evocation, emphasizing that an interview is not the time to retry one's case. Support individuals with being able to share their story and progress through a job application and interview. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Ex: CEO outlines parts of the statement as the past, the consequences, steps taken, and the future, with a recommended emphasis on steps taken and the future.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Promote accountability around Ban the Box practices with employer partners. Identify employer partners to champion this idea and their experience within their industries.</li> <li>• Ensure HR training includes an onboarding with techniques such as motivational interviewing specific to individuals with justice system involvement.</li> <li>• Consider offering tattoo removal services to address any former gang affiliation potential concerns.</li> </ul>
<b>Record implications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with legal aid organizations to provide legal support for cleaning records (e.g., expungement, removing of arrest &amp; conviction from court records), fines &amp; fees, etc.</li> <li>• Make use of legislation passed from and resources created by the Clean Slate Initiative, an organization that passes and implements laws to automatically clear eligible records for people who have completed their sentence and remained crime-free.</li> </ul>

## Trauma informed

- Increasing understanding and awareness of the impact of trauma, developing trauma-informed responses, and strategies for developing and implementing trauma-informed policies are important to provide this type of support.<sup>118</sup>
- Peer mentoring: Thoughtful mentoring programs as a supplement to critical reentry needs may be a way to support community and belonging for returning workers. Although the research on its impact is relatively small at this point, there is a growing call to invest in resources for mentoring as a component of reentry.<sup>119</sup>
  - Ex: RecycleForce, an Indiana-based recycling jobs program offering transitional employment for long term offenders, has a peer 1:1 mentoring program that its workers often benefit from.
- Cognitive based intervention: Access to mental health supports such as Cognitive Behavioral therapy (CBT) which teaches individuals to identify and manage thoughts that contribute to emotional problems, altering their behavior in the process is also proven to support individuals with justice system involvement in reducing recidivism.<sup>120</sup>
- Motivational interviewing: An evidence-based and goal-oriented style of communication designed to strengthen intrinsic motivation in an environment of acceptance and compassion.<sup>121</sup>

EMERGE Connecticut, Inc.



EMERGE Connecticut, Inc. offers 'Real Talk' every Friday, where participants and staff share their feelings and discuss their mental health in a group therapy session. Further, most of their staff is justice involved and in therapy, and openly talks about their experiences with program participants to normalize mental health discussions and remove stigma.

## Public Policies and Programs Supportive of Individuals with Justice System Involvement

Workforce development organizations serving individuals with justice-system involvement should stay informed about relevant government programs. Leveraging these resources can help maximize support and assist clients in navigating them effectively. These programs vary by state and, in some cases, by county. However, understanding these resources can enhance support for job seekers with justice involvement while potentially reducing organizational costs.

The Shriver Center on Poverty Law outlines the following government programs that address barriers experienced by people with justice system involvement:<sup>122</sup>

- Public Housing: Public housing authorities are required to give applicants with justice system involvement the chance to explain why their convictions will not affect their ability to be a good tenant. However, the housing authority can

<sup>118</sup> SAMHSA Trauma [Training for Criminal Justice Professionals](#)

<sup>119</sup> CSG: [Mentoring as a Component of Reentry](#)

<sup>120</sup> SSIR [A Better Way to Keep People From Going Back to Prison](#)

<sup>121</sup> MINT [Understanding Motivational Interviewing](#)

<sup>122</sup> Shriver [Center on Poverty and Law](#)

automatically deny applications based on:

1. Conviction of manufacturing methamphetamine on federally assisted property at any time, or
  2. Requirement to register because of a past sex offense, (this requirement is for life), or
  3. Current use of illegal drugs or abuse alcohol, or
  4. An eviction from federally assisted housing within the last 3 years for drug-related criminal activity (if the individual cannot show that they have successfully rehabilitated from drugs).
- Health Care: Individuals who are at or below an income level are eligible for free or low-cost medical benefits even if convicted of a crime. The individual can apply for Medicare or Medicaid (must meet income and age requirements) before they are released, or they can apply as soon as they are released from incarceration.
  - Food and Nutrition: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides food benefits to low-income individuals and families to supplement their grocery budget so they can afford the nutritious food essential to health and well-being. Eligibility is determined on a state-by-state basis, but in many states, including California, SNAP benefits are available regardless of prior justice system involvement if other conditions are met.<sup>123</sup>
  - Government Issued ID: Availability of government issued identification for previously incarcerated individuals varies from state to state. California allows individuals who are justice impacted to receive their state identification cards upon reentry. The California Identification Card (CAL-ID) Program provides a valid CAL-ID to eligible incarcerated individuals upon their release from prison.<sup>124</sup> Formerly incarcerated individuals in California may qualify for a low-cost or free ID card if they provide documentation that they receive public benefits or are homeless.<sup>125</sup>
  - Government backed employer support: The federal bonding program<sup>126</sup> established in 1966 provides fidelity bonds to employers who hire individuals with barriers to entry in the workforce, including individuals who have been justice involved. The intention of the bond is to protect the employer against losses caused by potential fraudulent acts by the bonded employee(s). Additionally, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) offers a federal tax credit for employers who hire individuals with barriers to employment, including people with justice system involvement.<sup>127</sup>

## Program Design Considerations

REDF research and data from the National Transitional Jobs Network suggests workforce development organizations serving job seekers with histories of justice involvement consider adopting the following practices relevant to recruitment, job design, and operations.

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<sup>123</sup> [Collateral Consequences Resource Center](#)

<sup>124</sup> [California Identification Card Program](#)

<sup>125</sup> [Root and Rebound](#)

<sup>126</sup> [Federal Bonding Program](#)

<sup>127</sup> [IRS Work Opportunity Tax Credit](#)

## Recruitment

- Conduct outreach to other institutions and nonprofits focused on serving individuals with justice system involvement and engaging in second chance or fair chance employment.
- Encourage employer partners to provide salary and job description transparency from the beginning to facilitate early interest in employment and specific job opportunities.
- Consider including people with lived experience with justice involvement in the recruiting process to provide a credible message about your workforce development organization.<sup>128</sup>
- Adopt people-first humanizing material in collateral.
- Depending on the subgroup population, consider recruiting individuals from before they are released from jail or prison.

## Job Design

The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) outlines three foundational pillars that will affect program design: transitional job experience, job readiness (digital skills, career navigation, etc.), and job search support. Best practices in job design for individuals with justice system involvement include:

- Support parole conditions by allowing flexibility in your program's schedule for requirements like drug testing or court mandates.
- Provide a mentor for clients by matching alumni with those who have had similar lived experiences - there is not significant data around mentorship support impact, but there is interest in growing opportunities here.
- Establish flexible absentee policies for court mandated appearances or parole requirements.
- When offering paid work experience or financial incentives, structure pay schedules to ensure clients have timely access to funds.
- Offer rolling admissions (applications available at any time for individuals) versus a cohort-based model (applications only for certain start dates for a group to start together) as fewer time restrictions associated with the former may help increase accessibility.
- Focus on a range of different jobs and career pathways. Individuals who are justice system involved have varying degrees of experience. Consider cultivating partnerships with employers to explore different job roles that can accommodate varied experiences.



## Operations

- Build in time and resources for filling out paperwork and administrative items.
- Build partnerships for offering a continuum of services (ex: legal services, housing nonprofits, child support, probation/parole officers, etc.).
- Provide paid orientation and compensation for any extracurricular activities (e.g., focus groups, storytelling on behalf of the organization).

## Industry and Occupational Considerations

When choosing target industries, employers, and jobs for programs serving individuals with justice-system-involvement, it is important to consider who you are serving, your intended program design, and how this is impacted by the industry or occupational focus. Consider the goals of your clients and your program as well as whether certain industries will enable achievement of these goals. Suggested considerations are listed below. Please note this is not an exhaustive list. Engage your clients in identifying additional considerations.

- **Legal & regulatory considerations** – some employers might be barred by state laws/regulations from employing persons with specific convictions in certain roles. Understanding this upfront is important for any career planning with an individual.
- **Education required** – As with job seekers who do not have criminal records, it's critical to understand the education required for the roles that job seekers with justice involvement are pursuing. Likewise, it's important to consider the educational qualifications needed for career advancement within a given occupation or industry.
- **Job Design** – Consider the physical, technical, and soft skills required for the occupations that interest the job seeker. It is also important to understand the flexibility the individual may need to meet their parole/probation officer or childcare obligations.
- **Career Path Progression** – The potential opportunities for growth within a given occupation or industry is another consideration when thinking about job placement. Understanding and anticipating job seekers' current and future financial and career goals can help inform job placement opportunities. Honest and informed goal-setting conversations can also help them understand what they need to earn over time to meet their personal goals.

## Success Metrics

Workforce organizations supporting individuals who have been justice system involved are often required to report on a range of funder-mandated metrics. However, it may

be worthwhile to consider supplementing required metrics with additional metrics reflecting outcomes desired by the target population and program.<sup>129</sup> The metrics below were developed in conversation with REDF staff, leaders of partner organizations who have been justice-impacted. These metrics specifically focus on employment attainment. If a workforce development organization is also supporting training and skill development, it would need to add other metrics to capture this progress.

- *Self-sufficient wage*: Does the job attained offer a livelihood long term?
- *Stability and Mobility*: Are there opportunities for mobility and long-term employment as a result of the job attained?
- *Family reunification*: Are families able to reunite because of a more stable livelihood?
- *Low recidivism rate*: Is the individual able to re-enter society effectively?<sup>130</sup> While a valuable measure, recidivism alone doesn't tell the full picture of success.<sup>131</sup>
- *Job retention*: Is the person able to stay in a job for a significant period of time?
- *Employee secured permanent housing*: Do clients have stable housing and reasonable income thresholds for public assistance benefits? Workforce development may need to advocate for reasonable thresholds.
- *Wellbeing and other positive outcomes*: Does the individual have an improved sense of wellbeing? How have they progressed in other positive areas, such as health, educational attainment, income, and civic engagement?<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> ASPE [Predictors of Reentry Success](#).

<sup>130</sup> Urban Institute [Improving Recidivism as a Performance Measure](#).

<sup>131</sup> [The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison](#)

<sup>132</sup> [The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison](#)

# EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS IN BRIEF:

## Opportunity Youth

### Key Context: Opportunity Youth

REDF defines the opportunity youth population as individuals aged 16 to 24 who have life experiences that create barriers to employment. These experiences are known to increase the likelihood of disconnection from education and employment. They encompass a wide range of environmental and familial situations, including a history of foster care, involvement with the justice system, family violence, substance use within the family, homelessness, interrupted schooling, and parental incarceration.

A study in New York City found that the groups at highest risk of being disconnected from education and/or work include:<sup>133</sup>

- Immigrant young people who have had limited time to learn English and earn the credits required for high school graduation.
- Young people with learning disabilities or a mental health challenge.
- Young people involved in the justice system.
- Young people who are mothers.
- Young people aging out of foster care.

Other subgroups not included above are children of incarcerated parents, Native American youth, young people with gang involvement, and young people with a substance use challenge.

A previous term in the field for opportunity youth was “Disconnected Youth.” However, this term reflects a deficit-based perspective. Other deficit-based terms you may occasionally encounter use include:<sup>134</sup>

- Dropout
- At-Risk Youth
- Juvenile Delinquent

**Note:** These terms are listed here to raise awareness of other terminology used by service providers or policymakers. REDF is committed to asset-based language.

There are an estimated 5+ million opportunity youth in the United States at any point in time.<sup>135</sup> That said, this group is not homogeneous. As mentioned, many factors

<sup>133</sup> Laura Wyckoff, Siobhan M. Cooney, Danijela Koram Djakovic, and Wendy S. McClanahan, *Disconnected Young People in New York City: Crisis and Opportunity* (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 2008)

<sup>134</sup> History of Opportunity Youth. <https://action-lab.org/opportunity-youth/video-page/>

<sup>135</sup> Who are Opportunity Youth? <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/who-are-opportunity-youth/>

can lead to barriers to employment and disconnection from education or work for opportunity youth. As a result of these barriers, there are varying levels of job readiness among the opportunity youth being supported by workforce development organizations. For example, a youth involved with or impacted by gangs may have issues related to personal safety and may be less job-ready in terms of making independent decisions. A youth who has faced homelessness may be particularly good at making independent decisions but may be “less job-ready” in terms of their ability to show up on time and appropriately dressed if they don’t have stable housing. These lessons can be translated applied to the programs that workforce development organizations offer to opportunity youth and will shed light on how to construct pathways to a first-time job for these individuals.

**The key takeaway here is that it’s important for workforce development organizations to consider the different life experiences within the opportunity youth population and define for themselves the specific subpopulation(s) of opportunity youth they intend to serve.** Subgroups have different barriers that pose unique challenges for obtaining school and/or work for these youth. Therefore, an opportunity youth -serving organization should **design its program to serve these specific needs.** REDF has historically observed that organizations that are not precise in whom they serve have struggled with outcomes because they try to serve everyone uniformly without designing their program for specific subgroup youth populations. Using the previous example, an organization working with youth involved with or impacted by gangss must consider the safety of its youth when evaluating job sites.

## **Employment Barriers & Service Delivery Interventions**

The table below summarizes the typical barriers to employment that opportunity youth may face, as well as related support services that can be deployed to remove or mitigate these barriers. This information has been compiled based on our research of what services previous and current grantees have provided, as well as interviews with field experts. Many of the organizations interviewed offer paid work experience, among other services and opportunities, to their youth and young adult clients. There are parallels between the lessons organizations learned offering paid, in-house work experience and how a broader array of youth-serving workforce development organizations can support clients transitioning from job readiness and training programs to a new job and workplace.

**Lastly, it is important to remember that these subgroups are *not* mutually exclusive.** For example, you could serve a youth who faces gang involvement AND is a foster youth. The barriers that individuals face are complex and interwoven. While it is a best practice for a workforce development organization to know which subgroups its program is designed for, it is also important to understand how other needs can show up and to have referral resources for common intersecting needs (e.g., access to mental health services even if your population of focus has no known history of mental health issues).

**The goal isn't to do everything below!** The most effective programs offer some combination of the activities listed, depending on the specific needs of their population of focus. There can also be service considerations beyond what's included below.

BARRIERS FACED TO EMPLOYMENT	PROMISING PRACTICES AND SUPPORTS
<p><b>Disconnection to education (i.e., no high school diploma or interrupted schooling)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extending financial incentives to clients to encourage completion of online education classes.</li> <li>• Providing in-person/online access to high school diploma (HSD) / GED classes (note: some organizations decide to outsource the actual teaching of classes).</li> <li>• Mirroring instruction in GED courses on the job. For example, using real world examples in the workplace to reinforce math, reading, and writing skills.</li> <li>• Offering financial support for GED testing and study materials.</li> <li>• Adopting practices such as motivational interviewing, cognitive behavior therapy, and growth mindset to help youth overcome feelings of educational anxiety.</li> <li>• Making available a lab where youth can use computers or providing laptops/tablets.</li> <li>• Facilitating access to free tutoring (often by vetted volunteers) to help advance youths' literacy and numeracy skills, assist with practice tests, and cultivate a growth mindset.</li> <li>• Rotational program in which opportunity youth can experience or shadow various job roles (e.g., front vs. back office) and explore their interests. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ The objective of a rotational job program is for youth to gain a broader understanding of job types and career-building opportunities.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Whether or not they provide internal work experience, workforce organizations serving opportunity youth should develop partnerships that educate them about various jobs and facilitate exposure through shadowing, tours, videos, and informational interviews.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support with obtaining work documentation and IDs.</li> <li>• Design different job experiences within programs to support exploration of occupations and careers.</li> <li>• Conduct goal-setting activities, self-assessments, and workplace personality assessments to support youth in exploring careers.</li> <li>• Recruit volunteers who reflect the gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or lived experiences of the youth, and have volunteers share their educational and career paths.</li> <li>• Implement a curriculum that leverages gamification to build soft skills.</li> </ul>




<b>Homelessness + Unstable Housing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing search support (referral or internal).</li> <li>• Create a housing plan alongside foster youth who are aging out. One out of every four youth in foster care will become homeless within four years of aging out of foster care.<sup>136</sup></li> <li>• Develop a direct referral partnership with an emergency shelter or temporary housing provider. Some emergency shelters can reserve beds for nonprofit partners (sometimes for a fee).</li> <li>• Offer basic needs assistance such as groceries and hygiene items.</li> <li>• Pay for helping with other miscellaneous housing costs (such as rental insurance, rental assistance, etc.).</li> <li>• Develop an opt-out savings program where youth can automatically save a part of their paycheck. After a milestone, youth can use their savings for first month's rent.</li> <li>• Offer a safe space for youth to store their belongings while working or in programming.</li> </ul>
<b>Developing Decision-Making Skills (e.g., prefrontal cortex is in development<sup>137</sup>)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt <a href="#">restorative practices</a> rather than punitive consequences.</li> <li>• Offer Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="459 646 1453 858"> <p>“CBT is a way to understand how situations affect what we think and say in our heads, what we feel in our bodies, and what we do in response. Practicing CBT helps young people identify negative patterns, pause, and make a choice before they act.” - Roca (workforce organization serving opportunity youth in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maryland).</p> </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop internal practices for how to treat youth as active participants and leaders rather than passive recipients (e.g., leadership roles, use their feedback on the look/feel of workspaces, etc.).</li> <li>• Partner youth new to the program with more experienced ones to receive advice and support.</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for community service experiences to encourage youth to see themselves as healers in the community and increase self-esteem.<sup>138</sup></li> <li>• Reflect on the job requirements at key employer partners and identify decision-making opportunities that exist within these jobs. Make these decision-making opportunities clear for youth and support them in improving these skills.</li> </ul>
<b>Childhood Trauma &amp; Mental Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to mental health services and specialists focused on youth and childhood trauma.</li> <li>• <a href="#">Trauma-informed practices</a> and related ongoing training for staff.</li> <li>• Support in obtaining access to Medicaid or getting on a parent's health insurance (if applicable).</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Literacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support in opening free/low-cost banking account or debit card.</li> <li>• Provide financial incentives for reaching milestones (e.g., providing payment for completing training).</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for youth to learn about the cost of credit, how to open a bank account, and how to manage their finances.</li> </ul>
<b>Young Parenting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childcare subsidy or access to childcare. Below is an example from a Massachusetts-based workforce organization called UTEC.</li> <li>• Parenting and nutrition classes.</li> <li>• Providing access to basic needs such as laundry, computers, internet, printers, and groceries.</li> <li>• Determine the number of program or training hours that are reasonable for a young parent to consistently meet. Support the young parent in determining the number of work hours that will be realistic for them given their other responsibilities and help them seek employment consistent with this decision.</li> </ul>

<sup>136</sup> [National Foster Youth Initiative](#)

<sup>137</sup> [National Institute of Mental Health](#)

<sup>138</sup> Piliavin, J. A., & Siegl, E. (2015). [Health and well-being consequences of formal volunteering](#)

	<p>2Gen Center</p>  <p>More than half of UTEC's young adults are also young parents. UTEC operates an onsite early childhood education center to help young families break the cycle of poverty. With a child-centered, social-emotional based curriculum, the 2Gen Center is inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy that encourages children to learn through their learning.</p>
<b>Gang Involvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a plan of services, resources, and/or help for individuals who may relapse into gang involvement and leverage it as a learning moment.</li> <li>• Offer safe, fun, and affordable spaces that youth can spend time in rather than passing free time on their own.<sup>139</sup> Important here is to make spaces and activities truly attractive to youth with an intentional design towards building relationships.</li> <li>• Consider the safety of youth when determining the physical location of your programmatic services. Assist them in identifying job opportunities in locations safe for them, for both their commute and work.</li> </ul>
<b>Justice System Involvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The gang involvement strategies such as CBT also apply here, as well as offering:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Connection to <a href="#">legal expungement resources</a> and covering the cost of expungement (explore local legal aid offices or pro bono clinics by law schools).</li> <li>◦ Financial resources for paying court fines, fees, or traffic tickets.</li> <li>◦ Services in repaying bail bonds.</li> <li>◦ Pulling background checks of all youth.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Walk through background checks and coach youth on how to speak to their RAP sheet.</li> </ul>
<b>Substance Abuse</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counseling services either in-house or by referral (if referral, develop coordination with other service providers and secure signed releases for the exchange of information).</li> <li>• Relapse planning or specific resources for individuals who relapse.</li> <li>• Drug testing to inform support services (e.g., connection to counseling) rather than being punitive.</li> </ul>

## Public Policies and Community Resources

Local school districts often offer HSD/GED programs for opportunity youth, including free night classes. The maximum age limit for school district services varies by state. The average age we identified was 20-21 years old. Non-school district organizations sometimes also offer HSD/GED classes. This [search engine](#) can help you locate free resources in your community.

It is important for workforce development organizations to **vet any potential partnerships**. Ensure that your partners are effective at delivering services and knowledgeable in working with your population of focus. [Click here for a partnership comparison tool](#) that can help you compare partners.

The federal [Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)](#) allocates funds to states and localities for workforce services for opportunity youth and may be a resource your organization can leverage. Your local [American Job Center](#) and the [California Workforce Development Board](#) are good starting points to learn more.

## Program Design Considerations

In addition to the discrete services mentioned above, workforce development organizations serving opportunity youth should also consider the following program design considerations:

### ***Relentless Recruitment & Outreach***

As stated by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration:<sup>140</sup> “Youth most likely to benefit from educational and employment training programs are often the least likely to enroll for services based on flyers or public service announcements (PSAs). This is particularly true if the service delivery environment resembles training institutions in which they have experienced difficulties, such as public schools or the juvenile justice system.”

This means that workforce development organizations serving opportunity youth, especially those with the highest risk factors, need to conduct relentless outreach. The approach of having job seekers come to you may work for adults but doesn’t always make the most sense with young people who are hesitant toward a system that has failed them.

Here are recommendations for recruiting opportunity youth:

1. Consider developing a referral program and a culture where youth are excited to bring others into your organization. For example, Bay Area-based New Door Ventures provides youth who refer others with a small gift card or other items, such as earphones.
2. Connect with youth where they are; go to those places where young people are most likely to be found, such as parks, recreation centers, shopping malls, clubs, movie theaters, community-based and faith-based organizations, homeless shelters, etc. It may take time and repeated visits to establish your trustworthiness, as many opportunity youth feel disappointed by adults in their lives.
3. Canvass homes door-to-door, as well as stores and community centers, particularly in neighborhoods where youth are most likely to be eligible for services.

<sup>140</sup> Improving Demand-Driven Services and Performance: Toolkit for Effective Front-Line Services to Youth. Spring 2007. <https://virginiacareerworks.com/wp-content/uploads/for-website-TOOLKIT-Youth-Staff.pdf>

4. Use a “sector approach,” dividing the community geographically into areas and assigning recruitment teams to each one.
5. Schedule recruitment activities during evening and weekend hours to target those youth who may have been missed during the day.
6. Always carry identification when recruiting.
7. Collaborate with partner agencies, community and faith-based organizations, local government and non-government entities, and schools to recruit the hardest-to-reach youth.

### ***Encourage Strong Youth/Adult Relationships***

Research shows that sustained and caring professional relationships with adults play a key role in the healthy development of young people.<sup>141</sup> In addition, many workforce development organizations demonstrate that mentorship with other youth is also imperative. Seeing people who have walked in their same shoes and have since charted their own path is infinitely more effective than hearing about that journey from a staff member.

Moreover, designing your organization to focus on youths’ strengths rather than labeling them by their deficits can go a long way in developing healthy relationships.

### ***Mentorship & Cohorts***

Youth benefit from a supportive community and mentorship, so program designs that favor cohorts (for peer learning and the development of group bonds) and peer mentorship can be particularly impactful.

### ***Flexible Work Hours***

Having flexible hours that accommodate opportunity youth’s schedules can help individuals attain their high school diplomas or GEDs.

However, having flexible hours does NOT mean being lax on professionalism, such as attendance, punctuality, and communication. For example, some workforce development organizations offer flexible schedules for their programming or work experience opportunities but also require clients to adhere to strict and clear policies on attendance and punctuality. Moreover, these organizations empower young professionals to provide input on what the attendance and punctuality policies should be.

<sup>141</sup> U.S. Department of Education and Office of Vocational and Adult Education. (2008). Bring them back, move them forward: Case studies of programs preparing out-of-school youths for further education and careers, Washington, D.C.

## **Feedback & Coaching**

Providing helpful coaching and feedback plays an integral role in helping youth develop key skills. Here are practices in this area that some workforce development organizations have adopted:

- Having regularly scheduled 1:1 feedback sessions
- Giving public “shout-outs” to reinforce achievements and positive behavior, but only sharing suggested improvements during private sessions
- Collating feedback from alumni employers/intern supervisors and sharing it with individuals currently in the program

To have a baseline for providing feedback, workforce development organizations have found it helpful to **delineate clear rules and policies**. Oregon-based [New Avenues for Youth](#) has a clear rulebook and three-strike policy, but after that, youth can return if they draft a corrective action plan. Organizations should establish policies that focus on skill building and making progress toward the end goal of employment. Coaching can help youth stay on track with the goals they set at enrollment, supporting their skill development and improving their chances of finding employment.

## **Business and Occupational Considerations**

When selecting an industry focus for a workforce program serving opportunity youth, it is essential to consider the youth population, your program’s design, and how industry dynamics may affect both. Assess how well different industries align with the goals of participating young people and your program, ensuring they provide viable pathways to success.

Below are criteria that REDF has observed workforce organizations using when selecting focus industries for opportunity youth programs. Your organization should evaluate these factors, alongside any other relevant criteria, to align with program’s needs and priorities.

- **Fun and Appealing Industry to Youth** – Is this an industry that most youth would be excited to learn about and work in?
- **Minimum Education Required OR Attainable Certification** - Does this industry have minimal education requirements (e.g., No HS diploma requirement) or does it require a certification that can be easily taught to the youth?
- **Work can be performed in crew /cohorts** – Is this industry’s work able to be performed in a group setting?



- **Flexible hours to allow for concurrent participation in education or training** – Can the work enable flexible scheduling (evening or weekend work hours)?
- **Career Path Progression and Skills Obtained** – Does this industry lend itself to meaningful promotions and wage increases?

Additionally, **consider the different job development and wraparound supports needed for various jobs** – once a workforce development organization chooses an industry of focus for skills training or the development of internships, work experience, or jobs, the next step is to consider what occupations within that industry might be appropriate for your clients. Will you seek out jobs that are temporary vs. permanent roles, part-time vs. full-time, customer-facing vs. back-office, etc.? What would best suit the needs and skills of the opportunity youth in your program? How will programming be altered depending on what occupations are the focus?

### Success Metrics

In addition to measures required by their funding sources, workforce development organizations serving opportunity youth may wish to consider using the following metrics to assess the effectiveness of their program design and services:

- Percentage of opportunity youth completing work experience opportunities
- Percentage working or in education 90/180/365 days after exiting the program
- Percentage graduating from high school or earning an equivalent (GED)
- Percentage gaining marketable certifications or skills
- Percentage attaining a living wage within a specified time period
- Average and median earnings gains
- Recidivism rate
- Rates of enrollment, persistence, and graduation from post-secondary education

### Helpful Resources

We hope that the information in this brief has been helpful to you. As you continue to explore how to best serve opportunity youth, here are additional helpful resources:

- [Shaping the Narrative: Community Stories of Effective Practice and Impact Across the OYF Network](#), by Monique Miles, Yelena Nemoy, and Nancy Martin
- [Connected by 25](#), by Michael Wald and Tia Martinez
- [Two Futures: The Economic Case for Keeping Youth on Track](#), by Kristen Lewis & Rebecca Gluskin
- [Apples to Apples: Making Data Work for Community-Based Workforce Development Programs](#), by Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW)

# EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS IN BRIEF:

## Survivors of Sex Trafficking

### Key Context: Survivors of Sex Trafficking

Human trafficking is defined as the act of compelling someone through force, fraud, threat, or coercion to provide labor or perform a commercial sex act.<sup>142</sup> Human trafficking is sometimes referred to as ‘modern-day slavery’ as victims must provide services in exchange for partial or no compensation. Victims are denied freedom of movement, closely surveilled, stripped of legal and personal documentation, and subject to physical or psychological abuse to maintain cycles of control.<sup>143</sup> Trafficking can occur in virtually any industry, and some of the most prevalent include: the commercial sex trade, domestic services, agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and adult entertainment industries.<sup>144</sup> Though it is difficult to accurately quantify the prevalence of human trafficking, it is estimated that more than **1 million** people in the United States are living in modern slavery.<sup>145</sup>

**The needs of trafficking survivors vary greatly depending on the type of trafficking they experience, their nationality, and their age.** While human trafficking can take many forms, forced sex and forced labor are the most prominent. The needs of sex trafficking survivors can be very different from those of labor trafficking survivors given the nature of the exploitation they endured. Further variance exists between domestic and international sex trafficking, as foreign nationals trafficked in the U.S. may require additional legal support related to immigration status and documentation. Additionally, minors who experience sexual exploitation under the age of 18 are also subject to different legal protections, often navigate different justice systems, and may require unique services and interventions.<sup>146</sup>

**This brief is focused on populations who have experienced sex trafficking.** A working definition for this population is any person who has been induced by force, fraud, or coercion to commit a commercial sex act. A more inclusive definition of this population is anyone who has ever been sexually exploited in exchange for basic human needs, such as food, shelter, or money, recognizing that anyone who is victimized even once is still a victim. Organizations are increasingly adopting an inclusive definition for this population to account for the complex vulnerabilities, histories, and psychological states of survivors who may or may not self-identify as victims of trafficking.

<sup>142</sup> [US Department of Justice: What is Human Trafficking?](#)

<sup>143</sup> [US State Department: About Human Trafficking](#)

<sup>144</sup> [Exploitation And The Private Sector](#)

<sup>145</sup> [Modern Slavery In United States](#)

<sup>146</sup> [Provider Perspectives on Sex Trafficking: Victim Pathways, Service Needs, & Blurred Boundaries](#)

Individuals who have been sex trafficked are typically recruited or coerced into sex work by ‘pimps’ who capitalize on their victims’ vulnerabilities and seek physical, financial, psychological, or emotional control over them. A list of groups found to be particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking is included below:<sup>147, 148, 149</sup>

- Women, girls, and people who identify as female
- Children, adolescents, and young adults
- Members of racial or ethnic minority groups
- People facing poverty or economic needs
- People with less access to education, resources, or connections
- People with a history or family history of drug abuse
- People with a history of sexual abuse or domestic violence
- Young people who experience unstable living conditions or homelessness
- Young people with experience in child welfare or juvenile justice systems

**Victims of sex trafficking can be particularly hard to identify.** Forced sex work is not always overt and physical; rather, victims are often coerced through subtle, psychological, manipulative tactics.<sup>150</sup> At a larger scale, the sex trafficking population is difficult to accurately quantify given the ‘underground’ nature of the crime, a lack of public awareness, inconsistent reporting, and varied law enforcement practices. This issue is compounded by “blurred boundaries between trafficked victims and offenders,” resulting in “some trafficked persons not identifying as such or not being recognized as such by criminal justice or human service professionals.”<sup>151</sup> Practitioners in the field confirm that many individuals they serve do not self-identify as victims or survivors of trafficking, which reflects the complexity of this population’s lived experience and needs.

**A general lack of dedicated programs and resources for sex trafficking survivors creates a major obstacle in meeting the needs of this population.** Individuals forced into commercial sex have historically been criminalized by law enforcement rather than recognized as victims of fraud, coercion, or slavery. When trafficked persons are identified as victims, they are usually directed to services that address ‘symptoms’ of their condition, such as domestic violence programs, homeless shelters, or drug treatment centers. Researchers note that when survivors don’t have access to dedicated programming, they may experience a care gap due to the unique “financial exploitation, participation in a particular subculture, specific societal stigma, exposure

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<sup>147</sup> [Polaris: Vulnerabilities & Recruitment](#)

<sup>148</sup> [Empowerment and Employment for Survivors of Human Trafficking](#)

<sup>149</sup> [Identification of Victims/ Persons ‘At-Risk’ of Trafficking in Human Beings](#)

<sup>150</sup> [US Department of Justice: What is Human Trafficking?](#)

<sup>151</sup> [Provider Perspectives on Sex Trafficking: Victim Pathways, Service Needs, & Blurred Boundaries](#)

to victimizers outside of the primary relationship, and sexual activity outside of the primary relationship” that is inherent<sup>152</sup> to sex trafficking.

## Barriers and Service Delivery Interventions

### Common Barriers to Employment

Though the demographics, circumstances, needs, and challenges of individuals who have been sex-trafficked vary from person to person, the survivor population is likely to face a complex set of physical, mental, emotional, and financial barriers to employment.

### Individuals who have experienced sex trafficking are usually justice-impacted.

Because sex work is illegal in most parts of the United States, any person found to be committing a commercial sex act can be arrested and criminally charged.<sup>153</sup> Studies show that a ‘vast majority’ of survivors have a criminal record resulting directly from their trafficking experience.<sup>154</sup> Law enforcement personnel often fail to distinguish between the ‘victim’ and the ‘perpetrator’ of sex crimes. Though in recent years there have been concerted efforts to educate first responders on indicators of sex trafficking, pathways into forced commercial sex often intersect with the criminal justice system, with research showing that victims “may engage in criminalized behavior via pathways stemming from childhood” related to “deficits in social capital and social support.”<sup>155</sup> Additionally, sex trafficking victims are also at high risk of pregnancy,<sup>156</sup> which can lead to their further involvement with legal systems relevant to child welfare and custody cases.<sup>157</sup> Justice involvement, criminal records, and other legal complications may prevent survivors from finding jobs, qualifying for housing, obtaining education or professional licenses, and maintaining custody of children.

### It is important to understand that many sex trafficking survivors were first victimized as minors, which has significant impacts on their development.

Keeping in mind the general lack of and discrepancies within population data, the Department of Justice has claimed that the “average age of entry into commercial sexual exploitation is 13 years” in the United States.<sup>158</sup> Given the early age at which many survivors were first subjected to trafficking, many have not continued secondary education or completed high school. Anecdotes from service providers in the field suggest it is not uncommon for survivors to have a middle-school education level and to lack basic reading, writing, and math skills.<sup>159</sup> Being trafficked at an early age also

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<sup>152</sup> [Provider Perspectives on Sex Trafficking: Victim Pathways, Service Needs, & Blurred Boundaries](#)

<sup>153</sup> [The Economic Drivers and Consequences of Sex Trafficking in the United States](#)

<sup>154</sup> [Criminal Record Relief for Trafficking Survivors](#)

<sup>155</sup> [Provider Perspectives on Sex Trafficking: Victim Pathways, Service Needs, & Blurred Boundaries](#)

<sup>156</sup> [The Economic Drivers and Consequences of Sex Trafficking in the United States](#)

<sup>157</sup> Field Interviews

<sup>158</sup> [A five-year analysis of child trafficking in the United States](#)

<sup>159</sup> Field Interviews

has implications for survivors' psychological and emotional development. Practitioners in the field characterize this population as sometimes emotionally dysregulated and in need of counseling, coaching, or other support to learn healthy self-regulation practices.

**Survivors face complex mental health challenges given the traumatic nature of the exploitation they've endured.** Victims of sex trafficking are often isolated, psychologically manipulated, dependent on their trafficker, and living in constant fear.<sup>160</sup> Survivors can face 'severe psychological disorders' ranging from depression and anxiety disorders to dissociative disorders, eating disorders, or substance abuse disorders.<sup>161</sup> Sex trafficking survivors may also develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These collective mental health challenges manifest as behavioral symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, sudden outbursts, or flashbacks; being emotionally reactive, easily startled, and unable to concentrate; and seeming guarded, disinterested, or unmotivated. In addition, survivors are known to experience intense shame and fear around failure, which can be attributed to suffering abusive consequences while trafficked.<sup>162</sup> Those who work with this population cite a universal need for individual counseling to address traumas, triggers, and emotional dysregulation.

**Many survivors grew up in distressing, dysfunctional, or abusive environments that create lasting impacts on trust and psychological safety.** Sex traffickers prey on vulnerable individuals with unstable home lives. According to UNICEF, "the experiences of violence, abuse, and exploitation within families," such as domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and physical or sexual child abuse "are some predominant risk factors that exacerbate vulnerabilities to human trafficking."<sup>163</sup> Sex trafficking survivors who entered the commercial sex trade as minors are likely to have spent time in foster care, juvenile detention centers, or the child welfare system.<sup>164</sup> One study estimates that 85% of women in the sex trade had involvement with child welfare services.<sup>165</sup> In addition, contrary to sensationalist narratives and media depictions about how people fall victim to sex trafficking – survivor reports reveal that their pimps are usually intimate partners, relatives, or friends.<sup>166</sup> These factors and others create unique social barriers in a survivor's future, underpinned by a general mistrust of people, relationships, or systems that society inherently views as 'trustworthy.'<sup>167</sup> This mistrust can manifest behaviorally as fear, suspicion, aggression, anger, hesitancy, or an unwillingness to cooperate in settings where power dynamics are at play.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> [Working with Victims of Human Trafficking](#)

<sup>161</sup> [Working with Victims of Human Trafficking](#)

<sup>162</sup> [Treating the Hidden Wounds: Trauma Treatment and Mental Health Recovery for Victims of Human Trafficking](#)

<sup>163</sup> [Identification of Victims/ Persons 'At-Risk' of Trafficking in Human Beings](#)

<sup>164</sup> [Services to domestic minor victims of sex trafficking: Opportunities for engagement and support](#)

<sup>165</sup> [Services to domestic minor victims of sex trafficking: Opportunities for engagement and support](#)

<sup>166</sup> [Provider Perspectives on Sex Trafficking: Victim Pathways, Service Needs, & Blurred Boundaries](#)

<sup>167</sup> [Treating the Hidden Wounds: Trauma Treatment and Mental Health Recovery for Victims of Human Trafficking](#)

<sup>168</sup> [Identification of Victims/ Persons 'At-Risk' of Trafficking in Human Beings](#)



**Sex trafficking survivors commonly struggle with addiction and sobriety.** People who have experienced sex trafficking often report parental or familial drug and alcohol abuse,<sup>169</sup> and family history is known to be a risk factor for drug addiction. Victims forced to perform commercial sex acts may turn to drugs to cope or dissociate from their experiences. Furthermore, it is common for sex traffickers to introduce and facilitate drug use to coerce their victims into sex work, prolong their exploitation, and maintain control over them.<sup>170</sup> After experiences in dysfunctional homes, on the streets, and in abusive relationships, many survivors need treatment to establish and maintain sobriety as they transition out of commercial sex work.

**Trafficked persons are financially exploited, and survivors struggle afterward with economic security and independence.** It is well established that people with lower socioeconomic status are more vulnerable to traffickers, who capitalize on their victims' financial insecurities.<sup>171</sup> Victims may be coerced into sex work to achieve financial stability but end up being economically controlled by pimps and traffickers who directly or indirectly take control of any money collected in exchange for sex acts. It is also not uncommon for their abusers to further exploit their victims financially by opening credit cards and running up expenses in their victims' names. When survivors ultimately escape their trafficking situation, they typically do so with little to no money, assets, or resources to their name, and potentially with bad credit and debt. The extent of a survivor's financial insecurity can create a barrier to finding employment. Furthermore, after being financially manipulated, exploited, and controlled through wage theft, survivors may develop a difficult or unhealthy relationship with money,<sup>172</sup> some may need counseling to develop new tools for achieving and sustaining financial independence.

**In addition to mental health challenges, sex trafficking survivors must overcome physical health challenges.** Commercial sex work takes a toll on the body, and survivors may struggle with a range of physical complications, leaving some with a need for extensive medical treatment or procedures.<sup>173</sup> Survivors may have been 'physically hurt via rape, beatings, sexual assault, or torture' while being trafficked, potentially resulting in 'prevalent and even chronic' medical needs.<sup>174</sup> The bodily harm that survivors experienced may impact the activities and roles they pursue in the future.

**Survivors of sex trafficking frequently experience housing insecurity.** A study surveying human trafficking survivors found that "64% of respondents experienced

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<sup>169</sup> [Services to domestic minor victims of sex trafficking: Opportunities for engagement and support](#)

<sup>170</sup> [Traffickers' Use of Substances to Recruit and Control Victims for Sexual Exploitation](#)

<sup>171</sup> [The Economic Drivers and Consequences of Sex Trafficking in the United States](#)

<sup>172</sup> Field Interviews

<sup>173</sup> Field Interviews

<sup>174</sup> [Working with Victims of Human Trafficking](#)

homelessness or housing insecurity at the time they were recruited into their trafficking situation,” indicating that housing insecurity is often a pre-existing challenge for this population.<sup>175</sup> When sex trafficking victims leave ‘the life,’ they are likely to be transitioning from unsafe living environments, correctional facilities, emergency shelters, or the streets. Given these dynamics, it is unsurprising that housing insecurity is a major barrier to employment for this population. Moreover, without a stable living environment, some survivors may struggle to avoid recidivism and feel that they have no choice but to reenter the commercial sex trade to achieve basic living necessities, falling into a vicious cycle of vulnerability and exploitation.

**Similarly, survivors may not have reliable access to transportation.** A key characteristic of human trafficking is that victims’ freedom of movement is restricted or denied. Traffickers control their victims’ legal documents and any possessions they are permitted to keep. It is common that survivors who have exited their trafficking situation to be left without means of transportation.

### **Emerging Practices and Service Interventions**

As highlighted in sections above, there is currently little to no data on the true number of sex trafficking victims, along with few organizations that offer capacity building programs specifically for sex trafficking survivors. This translates to a lack of definitive research or proven best practices for employee success interventions for this subgroup.

The table below summarizes emerging practices and potential interventions to consider for supporting and empowering sex trafficking survivors to succeed in job training programs and ultimately in the workplace. Some of these proposed interventions can be implemented as part of programming at workforce development organizations, while others are attributes to seek out in potential employer partners. Ultimately, organizations working with sex trafficking survivors might create a ‘certification’ for employers who offer a broad range of supports that foster a positive culture for trafficking survivors in their workforce.

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT	PROMISING PRACTICES AND SUPPORTS
<b>Justice Involvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish partnerships with trusted attorneys and legal professionals to provide ad hoc referrals to clients navigating legal issues.</li> <li>• Identify pro bono attorneys to work with job seekers on record expungement.</li> <li>• Engage in state and local advocacy efforts for record expungement.</li> <li>• Work with employer partners to implement flexible working hours and/or training schedules to allow clients or graduates time to pursue legal remedies and fulfill any court-mandated obligations.</li> <li>• Hire an on-staff attorney to hold regular office hours or to offer on-site support to clients with legal needs.</li> </ul>
<b>Education &amp; Skill Gaps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct individual skill gap assessments and co-create a professional development plan to build clients' foundational skills (i.e., computer skills, reading and writing, etc.).</li> <li>• Schedule regular (i.e., weekly) check-ins between clients and case managers to set short-term goals, provide positive and constructive feedback, and cover any outstanding needs. Support employed clients in gathering input from their direct supervisor on areas that could benefit from additional skill development.</li> <li>• Coach clients to help them identify their strengths and opportunities for improvement relative to their own goals (i.e., weekly or twice-weekly check-ins).</li> <li>• Compensate clients – especially those who are working – for time spent in classes and/or trainings so they don't have to choose between professional development and a paycheck.</li> <li>• Provide regular (i.e., twice monthly) onsite group training and workshops to upskill clients who have retained employment in specific industries or with employer partners.</li> <li>• Promote repetition and consistency in task-oriented training.</li> <li>• Have a clear plan for addressing language and literacy diversity.</li> <li>• Implement flexible training hours and develop jobs with flexible schedules to allow individuals to pursue their personal and professional development goals.</li> <li>• Encourage employer partners to accommodate clients' ongoing participation in training when scheduling work shifts.</li> <li>• To the degree possible, compensate clients for time spent in training.</li> </ul>
<b>Trauma &amp; Mental Health Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a network of trusted mental health providers and resources for referrals that can be shared when needed.</li> <li>• Provide regular counseling to help clients manage triggers and develop healthy mechanisms for emotional regulation at work.</li> <li>• Normalize counseling and therapy by facilitating regular check-ins with all staff and creating spaces to talk about mental health.</li> <li>• Hire trauma-competent supervisors and managers who can identify trauma responses and help clients learn to self-regulate.</li> <li>• Offer employer partners professional development for their supervisors and managers to learn how to identify trauma responses and support survivors' self-regulation in the workplace.</li> <li>• Partner with employer partners to offer in-house organizational trauma competency training to educate the entire staff on identifying trauma responses in the workplace; repeat quarterly.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer employer partners professional development for their supervisors and managers to learn how to identify trauma responses and support survivors' self-regulation in the workplace.</li> <li>• Partner with employer partners to offer in-house organizational trauma competency training to educate the entire staff on identifying trauma responses in the workplace; repeat quarterly.</li> <li>• Offer employer partners additional training for managers on communication and conflict resolution to equip them to support employees in their healing journeys.</li> <li>• Encourage employers to create physical safe spaces in the workplace so that employees can step away when experiencing triggers or trauma responses; create these safe spaces in training/programmatic areas as individuals prepare to enter the workforce.</li> </ul>
<b>Mistrust of Systems &amp; Lack of Psychological Safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide counseling to help clients understand thought and behavior patterns stemming from experiences in harmful systems and develop healthy ways to manage them.</li> <li>• Set clear boundaries and standards for confidentiality around in-house counseling so clients feel comfortable engaging with program resources.</li> <li>• Implement a peer mentor program pairing clients with staff or community members who are further along in their healing journey. This may help mentees navigate toward their goals and foster safe, trusted relationships.</li> <li>• Develop a transparent, collaborative, coaching-based performance improvement process with a clearly identified protocol for "infractions."</li> <li>• Sponsor in-house organizational trauma competency training to educate the entire staff on identifying trauma responses in the workplace; repeat quarterly. Offer to employer partners as well.</li> <li>• Create physical safe spaces in the organizations so that clients can step away when feeling psychologically unsafe. Encourage employer partners to do the same for their employees.</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Insecurity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If possible, partner with employers who will provide a full living wage to employees. Build stipends into training programs.</li> <li>• If possible, compensate clients for some or all time spent in training, counseling, professional development, and other resources designed to remove barriers.</li> <li>• Sponsor financial literacy and economic empowerment training for staff.</li> <li>• Establish partnerships with financial institutions that advise survivors one-on-one on saving, budgeting, debt management, and credit building.</li> <li>• Recognize client achievements with financial incentives and encourage employer partners to do the same (i.e., spot bonuses).</li> <li>• Provide asset-building opportunities like matched savings programs or microloans.</li> <li>• Supplement additional financial needs with gift cards based on the specific needs of individuals (i.e., offer a grocery store gift card for a client facing food insecurity).</li> <li>• Consider program models that support stability by incorporating compensation or financial incentives for clients and facilitate timely access to funds.</li> </ul>

<b>Drug History &amp; Addiction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form partnerships with drug addiction and recovery programs, centers, specialists, and other resources for client referrals if necessary. Share this resource list with employer partners.</li> <li>• Routinely create access to sobriety coaches for clients and alumni pursuing sobriety.</li> <li>• Establish and communicate clear policies around drug use. Support employer partners in developing and communicating their own protocols.</li> <li>• Prohibit drugs and alcohol from the program setting.</li> <li>• Accommodate clients who attend drug therapy, counseling, or other activities to maintain sobriety by offering flexible hours for services and training.</li> </ul>
<b>Physical Health Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand and recognize signs of physical abuse, trauma, and disabilities that can result from sex trafficking.</li> <li>• Facilitate individual conversations with job seekers to identify any special accommodations required, and support them in initiating these conversations with new employers.</li> <li>• Build relationships with employer partners that provide health care, paid time off, and medical leave benefits that allow employees to pursue necessary treatment and procedures.</li> <li>• Develop employer partnerships with organizations that support flexible working hours to accommodate employees who may require regular care or treatment outside of work for chronic conditions.</li> </ul>
<b>Housing Insecurity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish partnerships with local apartment complexes or housing communities to connect clients with safe and stable housing options.</li> <li>• Hire a housing resource manager to help clients with housing applications, background checks, home furnishing, etc., for partner and non-partner communities.</li> <li>• Build relationships with developers in the community to explore symbiotic relationships between workforce development organizations and future housing communities.</li> </ul>
<b>Lack of Transportation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider public transportation options when choosing a space for services, prioritizing employer partners, and encouraging submission of job applications. Try to maximize accessibility to the location from public transport.</li> <li>• Provide clients with free bus passes and gas cards.</li> <li>• Cover license and insurance costs to help clients secure a personal vehicle.</li> <li>• Establish a workforce ridesharing system to connect clients with safe and reliable rides to work as needed.</li> </ul>

## Public Policies and Community Resources Supportive of Survivors of Sex Trafficking

Survivors of human trafficking are generally entitled to a range of public benefits. [Read here for a comprehensive view](#) of different federal and state provisions, which vary based on factors such as nationality, immigration status, and age.



Workforce development organizations working with adult survivors who are US citizens should be aware of:

- **Criminal Record Relief** – Expungement is a key focus for anti-trafficking organizations, service providers, and activists working with this population. Although expungement is not currently offered at the federal level, most states offer some degree of record relief for victims of trafficking.<sup>176</sup> [See Polaris’ interactive map](#) for state-by-state legislation.
- **Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)** – This landmark federal legislation offers protections for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and other gender-based crimes. Although this legislation is not specific to survivors of sex trafficking, it calls for the expansion of resources that survivors may be able to access, including housing protections. [Keep up with VAWA housing provisions](#) and other resources.
- **Survivor Reentry Project** – Part of Freedom Network USA, this national program provides criminal record relief for survivors of trafficking by connecting them to a nationwide network of pro bono lawyers. They also provide training and technical assistance on criminal record remedies.

## Program Design Considerations

Research and data around program design for sex trafficking survivors is nascent; among the relatively few studies that have been conducted, even fewer have focused on post-intervention analysis and long-term outcome measurement.<sup>177</sup> We do know that programs for survivors must be designed to address their complex needs while also accounting for the “high level of secrecy, discrimination, shame, and stigma” they experience, which complicates efforts to reintegrate into the workforce.<sup>178</sup> A National Economic Justice Report put the power of a well-designed workforce development program into perspective: “Because most survivors experienced exploitation under the guise of entrepreneurship or employment, the workplace has the potential to be a place for tremendous healing.”<sup>179</sup>

Below are emerging best principles and practices to consider when designing a workforce development program for survivors of sex trafficking.

### 1. Build a trauma-competent team and culture.

It is paramount that programs are led by trauma-competent leaders. The term “trauma competency” encompasses a wide range of abilities but can be distilled down to (1) appreciating the significant impact of trauma on health and life outcomes of survivors; (2) understanding that trauma-informed care is critical for survivors; (3) recognizing trauma reactions in survivors and tailoring interventions

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<sup>176</sup> [Criminal Record Relief for Trafficking Survivors](#)

<sup>177</sup> [Helping Survivors of Human Trafficking: A Systematic Review of Exit](#)

<sup>178</sup> [Helping Survivors of Human Trafficking: A Systematic Review of Exit](#)

<sup>179</sup> [National Economic Justice Report: Beyond Workforce Development for Survivors of Trafficking](#)

in a way that honors the individual; (4) enhancing the survivors' and organizations' sense of physical and psychological safety; and (5) assessing trauma survivors' strengths, resilience, and potential for growth (abbreviated definition from [American Psychological Association](#)). The ability of organizational staff and leaders to truly empathize, communicate, and empower survivors of trafficking could be the determining factor in the success of this kind of program.

*Recommended strategies:*<sup>180, 181, 182, 183, 184</sup>

- Hire trauma-competent or trauma-informed clinical and non-clinical staff.
- Provide routine trauma response and trauma-competency training to all staff.
- Provide educational resources on human trafficking to non-survivor staff.
- Center inclusion and belonging via workplace policies, organizational norms, staff training and education, and business practices.
- Host regular forums and conversations about trauma for all staff.
- Promote and normalize counseling and therapy.
- Practice curiosity and assume good intent when clients behave poorly.
- Right-size and contextualize information to minimize impacts of stress.
- Foster trusted relationships by promoting transparency and consistency.
- Implement trauma-informed design into physical space (*more below*).

To learn more about how a workforce development organization implements trauma-informed practices, see [this article on REDFWorkshop](#).

## 2. Place special emphasis on safety, discretion, anonymity.

Survivors of sex trafficking have an acute need for physical safety after living in fear, danger, and under constant threat. Even after exiting their trafficking situation, survivors who were trafficked locally are at risk of encountering former traffickers, abusers, or Johns. Workforce development organizations must prioritize safety and privacy in their program design. Programs supporting sex trafficking survivors must balance marketing and promotional efforts with maintaining discretion about the population they serve and protecting the anonymity of individual identities. There is precedent for an employment and training organization designed to support trafficking survivors to integrate individuals *without* this lived experience into its client population for the sake of personal privacy.

<sup>180</sup> Field Interviews

<sup>181</sup> [Building Trauma-Informed Communities](#)

<sup>182</sup> [National Economic Justice Report: Beyond Workforce Development for Survivors of Trafficking](#)

<sup>183</sup> [Principles of a Trauma-Informed System](#)

<sup>184</sup> [Trauma Responsiveness in an Integrated Workforce Service Delivery System](#)

*Recommended strategies:*<sup>185, 186</sup>

- Be selective in choosing the neighborhood, particularly distancing an organization from areas where commercial sex is known to take place.
- Given the underground nature of commercial sex, consult local practitioners on location considerations for due diligence.
- For non-customer-facing ventures, do not list the workforce development organization's physical address online.
- Hire both survivor and non-survivor employees to protect individual privacy. Recruit both survivor and non-survivors to participate in programs.
- Integrate survivors and non-survivors into similar roles, functions, or components of the organization to further anonymize personal histories.
- Take extra precautions to secure client data, including names, contact information, addresses, and other details.
- Seek consent from clients before taking photos and again before posting photos to websites, social media, or sharing them on other public platforms.
- Make employer partners aware of these precautions so that they can be implemented in their workplaces as well.

### **3. Implement trauma informed design.**

Research shows that the physical design of spaces can significantly impact productivity.<sup>187</sup> Trauma-informed design principles seek to create environments that provide a sense of safety and tranquility and minimize re-traumatization for survivors. The arrangement of spaces is crucial for fostering a sense of safety, security, and comfort, ultimately contributing to increased client engagement and success.

*Recommended strategies:*<sup>188, 189, 190</sup>

- *Implement open floor plans and high ceilings to ensure survivors perceive and experience freedom of movement.*
- *Clearly mark entry and exit points so survivors can maintain spatial awareness.*
- *Arrange seating and workspace with entry/exit points in mind so survivors have clear visibility and can maintain situational awareness of the room.*
- *Use added safety measures such as key door codes so survivors feel safe inside the building.*
- *Create dedicated safe spaces, such as a meditation room, where survivors can retreat when activated or triggered.*
- *Maximize natural light; supplement with soft, adjustable lighting where needed.*
- *Incorporate natural materials, such as plants, into decor for a calming effect.*

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<sup>185</sup> Field Interviews

<sup>186</sup> [National Economic Justice Report: Beyond Workforce Development for Survivors of Trafficking](#)

<sup>187</sup> [Physical workplaces and human well-being](#)

<sup>188</sup> Field Interviews

<sup>189</sup> [Trauma Informed Design](#)

<sup>190</sup> [Physical workplaces and human well-being](#)

- *Use high-backed or wrap-around chairs to create a sense of refuge for users.*
- *Avoid blind corners and large streaks of white walls.*

#### **4. Seek opportunities to empower survivors in the work.**

Members of this population may have complicated relationships with hierarchy and management due to having been physically, mentally, emotionally, and financially controlled by traffickers and abusers. Programs serving this population should focus on building trust and instilling confidence in clients through empowerment. There are many opportunities to embed empowerment into the fabric of an organization, and doing so for this population is critical to their long-term success.

*Recommended strategies:*<sup>191, 192, 193, 194, 195</sup>

- *Bring in survivor voices and perspectives to inform program design.*
- *Consider power dynamics in the organization and seek opportunities to level power inequities between staff and clients.*
- *Schedule appointments around clients' other commitments. Encourage clients to pursue employment in industries that also offer flexible work hours.*
- *Trust clients when they remove themselves from a triggering situation.*
- *Offer hands-on, practical training, which is shown to yield better results.*
- *Co-create development goals to support personal learning and development.*
- *Share the “why” behind information or instructions provided.*
- *Create to-do lists for relevant activities so clients can work at their own pace and feel a sense of accomplishment when complete.*
- *Use pictures or recordings with instructions and guidelines to empower individuals who are still developing reading skills.*
- *Provide acknowledgment and positive feedback for ‘little wins’ (i.e., completing the first month of work).*
- *Partner with survivors to develop career progression roadmaps.*
- *Build opportunities for client choice into the workforce development program to give survivors an opportunity for agency and autonomy within structured programming.*

#### **5. Establish a network of local service providers.**

Survivors have complex needs that require holistic, comprehensive solutions. Workforce development programs can play a critical role in healing, developing, and empowering survivors; however, to achieve self-sufficiency and reintegrate

<sup>191</sup> Field Interviews

<sup>192</sup> [National Economic Justice Report: Beyond Workforce Development for Survivors of Trafficking](#)

<sup>193</sup> [Guiding Principles to Inform Economic Empowerment Programing for Survivors of Human Trafficking](#)

<sup>194</sup> [Principles of a Trauma-Informed System](#)

<sup>195</sup> [Trauma Responsiveness in an Integrated Workforce Service Delivery System](#)

into society, they will likely need additional support. Workforce development organizations can position their clients and alumni for long-term positive outcomes by establishing strategic partnerships with local service providers and creating a network of experts to provide wraparound services.

## **6. Continue to support and strengthen the relationships created**

Growing evidence suggests that peer support groups are an effective program design element that can help survivors maintain stability in their lives. Peer support is a process through which people who share common experiences or face similar challenges come together as equals to give and receive help based on knowledge gained through shared experience.<sup>196</sup> Workforce development organizations offering alumni programming often refer to peer support as a key reason they're able to remain connected to graduates who have left for employment.

Ohio-based Freedom a la Cart developed their 'Butterfly Continuum of Care' program to support survivors by providing long term support. Interested survivors must sign a commitment letter outlining their commitment to the program after they graduate, which includes quarterly meetings, a pledge to remain sober, and promise to stay out of sex work. This Butterfly program has been a critical tool for Freedom a la Cart to stay in touch with graduates and support their long-term employment and stability.

## **Industry and Occupational Considerations**

Interviews with workforce development organizations, service-providers, and survivors of human trafficking did not identify any industries that are particularly well-suited for the employment of sex trafficking survivors. Insights, trends, and recommendations for workforce development organizations serving this population include the following:<sup>197</sup>

- Avoid alcohol-centric or alcohol-adjacent industries (i.e., bars, nightclubs, catering for weddings, galas, or other events where alcohol may be consumed).
- Depending on where they are in their recovery journey, survivors may have difficulty interacting with strangers. Consider industries where there are 'behind-the-scenes', non-customer-facing positions for employees to start in.

It is important to recognize that survivors were forced into sex work through coercion, manipulation, or perceived necessity. What most survivors need is to experience a healthy work environment, develop basic professional skills, and ultimately gain the empowerment to pursue their own career goals.

<sup>196</sup> Riessman, F. (1989). Restructuring help: A human services paradigm for the 1990's. New York, NY: National Self-help Clearinghouse.  
<sup>197</sup> Field Interviews

## Success Metrics

Organizations that seek to empower and enable sex trafficking survivors as they transition to freedom and economic independence highlight the following metrics as key indicators of program success:<sup>198</sup>

- Recidivism
- Securing long-term employment
- Securing and sustaining short-term employment
- Maintaining employment
- Developing financial independence
- Completing GEDs, degrees, licenses, or other professional certifications
- Establishing and maintaining sobriety
- Demonstrating self-sufficiency (i.e., reducing reliance on support resources)
- Happiness

## Helpful Resources

We hope this brief has been helpful! To learn more about human trafficking, sex trafficking, or population needs and opportunities, please refer to information and resources provided by leading organizations in this field:

- [Polaris Project](#)
- [National Human Trafficking Resource Center](#)
- [Freedom Network](#)
- [Futures Without Violence](#)
- [Office for Victims of Crime](#)
- [International Justice Mission](#)



## APPENDIX A: PUBLIC BENEFITS

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS	LINK TO MORE INFO
Children & Youth	Transitional Living Program for Homeless Youth	Must be between the ages of 16 and 22 to enter the program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">TLP Fact Sheet</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Program Information</a></li> </ul>
	Head Start	Must be low-income, according to the Poverty Guidelines published by the Federal government.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Center Locator</a></li> </ul>
Housing	Housing Choice Voucher Program Section 8	Eligibility is based on total annual gross income and family size and is limited to US citizens and specified categories of non-citizens who have eligible immigration status. Eligibility is determined by the public housing authority.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Housing Choice Vouchers Fact Sheet</a></li> </ul>
	Public Housing	Limited to low-income families and individuals. Eligibility based on: 1) annual gross income; 2) whether you qualify as elderly, a person with a disability, or as a family; and 3) U.S. citizenship or eligible immigration status.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Public Housing Fact Sheet</a></li> </ul>
	HUD – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH)	US. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) determines eligibility. Generally, eligible candidates must be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• VA healthcare eligible</li> <li>• Homeless or chronically homeless, and</li> <li>• Able to meet income restrictions for their local Public Housing Authority (PHA).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">VA Locations Finder</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">HUD-VASH Vouchers</a></li> </ul>
Food	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program	Also referred to as CalFresh in California. Individuals must meet federal income eligibility rules.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">SNAP Eligibility</a></li> </ul>
	Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	Must be pregnant, breastfeeding, postpartum, or a child 5 years old or younger.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">WIC Eligibility</a></li> </ul>
Healthcare	Medicaid	Low-income people and families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Medicaid Eligibility</a></li> </ul>
	Consolidated Health Centers	All people are eligible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Consolidated Health Centers</a></li> </ul>
	The Children's Healthcare Insurance Program	Children in low-income families that earn too much money to qualify for Medicaid. Eligibility specifics vary from state to state.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Medicaid &amp; CHIP</a></li> </ul>

<b>General Assistance</b>	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	Low-income families with children. Generally called CalWorks in California.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">TANF Program Contact Information</a></li> </ul>
<b>Veterans</b>	Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP)	Must be a veteran experiencing homelessness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">TANF Program Contact Information</a></li> </ul>
<b>Disability</b>	Social Security Income (SSI)	Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is for people who have little to no income. Must also either have a disability or be 65 or older	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Benefit Eligibility Screening Tool</a></li> </ul>
	Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)	Individuals may be eligible for Disability if they have: 1) A disability or blindness, and 2) Enough work history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Disability Eligibility</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Disability I SSDI</a></li> </ul>

# **PART 3:**

## **TRIED AND TESTED:**

The Employment Social  
Enterprise Model and REDF

## A Unique Workforce Development Solution

Employment social enterprises (ESEs) are a workforce development solution offering paid work experience and supportive services to job seekers overcoming barriers to employment. Whether standalone or part of a larger organization, ESEs operate as businesses that generate revenue by selling goods or services. They provide job seekers with supports similar to those of other workforce development providers, but their unique model differentiates ESEs and offers several additional benefits to job seekers:

- **Meaningful Work Experience:**

ESEs provide job seekers with genuine job experience and on-the-job training in a business setting. While in these roles, individuals develop practical, in-demand skills while meeting workplace expectations for productivity and accountability. To support their success, ESEs offer coaching, support, and flexibility. These time-limited positions, typically lasting between 3 and 12 months, motivate career growth and create opportunities at the ESE for additional job seekers. Moreover, having recent work experience and an employer reference boosts confidence and strengthens competitiveness when pursuing long-term employment with growth potential.

- **Earned Income and Worker Rights**

ESEs hire job seekers into W-2 roles, giving them valuable work experience while ensuring they receive the same rights and protections as other workers in their community, including minimum wage, overtime pay, and workers' compensation. Their employment also makes them eligible for tax credits contingent on earned income, assuming they otherwise qualify.

## Integrating Work and Support Services

ESEs combine paid work experience with career and supportive services. Sometimes referred to collectively as an Employee Success Program, these are usually delivered as a structured set of activities and services that integrate with and wraparound the ESE job. Services vary among ESEs but often include:

- **Pre-Employment Support:** Focus on job readiness and barrier removal.
  - Soft skills workshops

- Personal and professional goal setting
- Case management to address personal barriers
- During Employment at the ESE: Emphasis on professional development.
  - Constructive feedback on job performance
  - Skill-building opportunities
  - Regular meetings with a coach or case manager
  - Job search assistance
- Spanning the Transition to Permanent Employment: Aims to ensure employment retention.
  - Assistance with workplace or personal issues
  - Retention incentives
  - Re-employment support

## Focus on Job seekers Needing Income and Experience

ESEs focus on job seekers who need to gain work experience and demonstrate their employability but are often excluded from even entry-level jobs due to stigmas associated with their life experiences. The opportunity to earn income also makes ESEs a good fit for job seekers who do not qualify for cash assistance. Focus populations vary but often include:

- Young adults from low-income households who are disconnected from school and work
- Individuals experiencing homelessness or housing instability
- Individuals recently released from incarceration
- Refugees lacking prior US work experience or higher education

Unlike other employers who hire based primarily on their perception of who can do the job best, ESEs also consider whether the jobseeker needs and will benefit from the opportunity and environment.

## Contributing to an Inclusive Economy

ESEs are a specialized subset of workforce development organizations, characterized by a revenue and operating model that integrates paid work experience with career and supportive services. This approach is especially appealing and effective for job seekers facing barriers to employment. Evaluations show ESEs help job seekers:

- Obtain and maintain employment – ESE workers experience both an immediate



increase in employment rates,<sup>199</sup> and employment rates remain higher up to seven years post-ESE engagement than at any point prior to joining an ESE.<sup>200</sup>

- **Grow their earnings** – Earnings for working individuals climbed through an approximately seven-year follow-up period.<sup>201</sup> Additional studies showed an ESE group earning nearly a third more than a comparison group a year after intake.<sup>202</sup> Total monthly income rose 91%, while receipt of government funds fell 46 percentage points (71-25%).<sup>203</sup>

ESEs use a unique combination of strategies to boost career success for diverse and often overlooked job seekers, thereby advancing the workforce development sector's goal of a more inclusive and equitable economy.

## Who is REDF?

For over 25 years, REDF has been a springboard for the social enterprise sector, equipping nearly 300 mission-driven businesses with the capital, capacity, and community they need to grow, increase their impact, and thrive. REDF believes in businesses that balance purpose, profit, and the power of untapped human potential to create a more inclusive economy.

REDF provides grants, loans, and capacity-building services to both nonprofit and for-profit businesses nationwide that employ individuals striving to build a better life and overcome employment barriers. There are four ways to partner with REDF as an ESE and build the REDF Community:

1. [REDF Accelerator](#) - REDF Accelerator is a five-month program for ESE leaders to develop and test strategies to strengthen operations, programs, and financial longevity within their businesses, learning with and from their program peers.
2. [REDF Impact Investing Fund \(RIIF\)](#) - RIIF is a debt fund that provides working and bridge loan capital and technical assistance to nonprofit and for-profit employment social enterprises so they can seize opportunities, attract new sources of capital, and better serve their employees.
3. [Growth Portfolio](#) - Growth Portfolio is REDF's strategic investment portfolio of ESEs with strong growth potential. Grantees receive a three-year, \$300K investment in general operating support combined with customized, one-on-one capacity-building consulting.
4. [Government Partnerships & Policy \(GP&P\)](#) - Through REDF's GP&P work, we aim to grow and strengthen the national field of employment social enterprises and increase economic mobility for their employees.

<sup>199</sup> Analysis of Long-Term Employment and Earnings in Employment Social Enterprises in CA by Mathematica Policy Research

<sup>200</sup> CA Employment Social Enterprise Long-term Earnings Analysis by REDF

<sup>201</sup> Ibid

<sup>202</sup> [Employment Social Enterprise Evaluation: Economic Self-Sufficiency and Life Stability 18 Months After Starting Work with an Employment Social Enterprise by RTI International](#)

<sup>203</sup> [Economic Self-Sufficiency and Life Stability One Year After Starting a Social Enterprise Job by Mathematica Policy Research](#)



## BUILD THE REDF COMMUNITY

All ESEs that are a part of a REDF program are invited to join the REDF Community— a place for learning, leadership development, and relationship-building opportunities between and among our vibrant network of nearly 200 current and alumni ESEs.



**REDF** COMMUNITY



WE RECRUIT FOR GROWTH PORTFOLIO  
FROM THE REDF COMMUNITY

**GROWTH PORTFOLIO**

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*Examples of ways organizations in REDF's network combine work experience opportunities with supporting skill-building and education of opportunity youth*