



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Resident Participation in Seattle's Jobs-Plus Program

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Since the 1990s, ambitious new approaches have been undertaken to transform the nation's public housing developments. Prominent among these are strategies designed to broaden the income mix of public housing residents by encouraging work. Also, in the case of some of the most severely distressed public housing, new redevelopment initiatives call for tearing down the original buildings and replacing them with new housing that includes a mix of subsidized and unsubsidized rental units for tenants with a broader range of incomes.

The Seattle Housing Authority has been at the forefront of these reforms. This report chronicles its strategies, struggles, and accomplishments in implementing a new, place-based employment intervention at its Rainier Vista housing development, while at the same time launching a far-reaching plan to rebuild that development under a federal HOPE VI grant.¹ The Rainier Vista development was originally one of seven participating in the national *Jobs-Plus Community Revitalization Initiative for Public Housing Families* ("Jobs-Plus" for short), a research demonstration project jointly developed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), The Rockefeller Foundation, and MDRC. The challenges of operating Jobs-Plus at Rainier Vista — an environment in which residents had to contend with the anxieties, uncertainties, and disruptions associated with losing their homes — were magnified by the considerable ethnic and cultural diversity of the development's residents, who include many immigrants and collectively speak 22 different languages. Seattle's experiences are thus instructive for other communities seeking to boost public housing residents' progress toward self-sufficiency, particularly against the backdrop of redevelopment initiatives, and where — as is increasingly true in many cities — public housing populations are becoming more diverse.

¹"HOPE" stands for "Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere."

Adapting Jobs-Plus to Become the Self-Sufficiency Component of HOPE VI

In 1998, the Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) — in partnership with the local welfare department, workforce investment agency, social service providers, and resident leaders — began operating Jobs-Plus at Rainier Vista. This innovative initiative offered all nondisabled, working-age public housing residents three types of services and supports: (1) *employment and training services*, including assistance with job search, education and training, and services focused on career advancement; (2) *financial incentives*, designed to help “make work pay,” particularly by changing rent rules so income gains from higher earnings would not be eroded by rent increases; and (3) activities under a *community support for work* component, which was designed to strengthen social ties and activities among residents in ways that would help them join and remain in the workforce. The program was operated by an on-site team of staff, which included several residents, at a facility based in the housing development. The facility included a Job Resources Center, where residents could take part in meetings and workshops and could use computers to get access to information about job vacancies and to prepare résumés. As needed, program staff referred residents to other community organizations for education, training, or social services.

In 1999, the role of the Seattle Jobs-Plus program expanded beyond implementing these three core components of the Jobs-Plus model when HUD awarded the housing authority a HOPE VI grant supporting redevelopment at Rainier Vista. This grant meant that, during the demolition and construction process, some residents would be relocated, at least temporarily, to other public housing developments in Seattle or to private housing (with rent subsidies), while other residents would remain at Rainier Vista, though they would be shifted to apartments slated for later demolition. Whether residents stayed or left, however, their personal and family well-being were not to be ignored. In fact, under federal law, HOPE VI redevelopment efforts must extend beyond architectural and land-use changes to include a “community supportive services” component, the purpose of which is to promote residents’ progress toward self-sufficiency, address the needs of individual families, encourage community-building among residents, and assure that any household’s decision to relocate is well informed.

Because all but the last of these objectives were already within the mission of the existing Jobs-Plus program, SHA designated Seattle Jobs-Plus as the vehicle for implementing this component. In doing so, it expanded the Jobs-Plus target population to all residents (not just those of working age), and it added relocation-related assistance to the program’s menu of services and supports. Taking these steps meant that a program whose planners originally saw it as “place-based” — designed to capitalize on the opportunity to assist residents where they live — would need to become an intervention that was targeted to a community in which many tenants

were focused on moving out, either temporarily or permanently, and that continued assisting relocated residents after they left the development.

Seattle is one of six cities across the country helping to test the feasibility and effectiveness of the Jobs-Plus approach.² (The other cities are Baltimore, Dayton, Chattanooga, Los Angeles — two sites — and St. Paul.) This report is one of a series of studies that examine the sites' implementation experiences. It relies mainly on field research and qualitative methods to observe the implementation of Jobs-Plus in the HOPE VI redevelopment context, and it uses quantitative program records data to estimate residents' participation in Jobs-Plus activities and their use of financial incentives. An analysis of the program's effects on residents' employment and earnings will be published separately.

Findings

- **Despite the special challenges of serving a highly diverse tenant population facing mass relocation, Seattle Jobs-Plus had considerable success connecting residents to the program. Nearly two-thirds of the tenants whom the program sought to reach with its employability services and financial incentives used at least one of these components.**

Residents of Rainier Vista became engaged in Jobs-Plus either when they formally enrolled in the program — and got help finding a job, pursuing a better job, dealing with employment barriers, or enrolling in an education or training course — or simply by living in a household that signed up for the Jobs-Plus rent incentives, which were available to households with wage-earners. (This rent option offered households a “flat rent” that did not increase as household earnings increased. It thus gave *all* members of the household an incentive to work or increase their working hours or wages, whether or not they participated in Jobs-Plus activities.) Of the targeted residents — that is, those who were of working age and not disabled — who were living in Rainier Vista at some time between 1998 and 2000, 64 percent had made this connection to Jobs-Plus by December 2002. This is a substantial rate of engagement, and it is within the range of rates observed at other Jobs-Plus sites that had no redevelopment under way and were far less diverse ethnically.

A separate look at the use of Jobs-Plus's rent incentives reveals that 41 percent of all targeted households at Rainier Vista had taken advantage of this important program benefit. Of course,

²The HOPE VI grant introduced a change in circumstances that so distinguished Seattle from the other Jobs-Plus sites that a decision was made to withdraw it from the national demonstration. However, recognizing the important opportunity to continue learning from Seattle's experiences, HUD, SHA, and the Stuart Foundation have funded an MDRC evaluation that is separate from but closely aligned to MDRC's national evaluation of Jobs-Plus.

not all target-group households had working members, so not all were eligible for the rent incentives. Among those households with an employed resident, over half (59 percent) participated.

- **Seattle Jobs-Plus operated an energetic employability program that offered highly personalized assistance. Even so, a considerable proportion of residents did not believe that the program could help them.**

Through one-on-one consultations and, when appropriate, referrals to other agencies in the community, Seattle Jobs-Plus staff tried hard to help residents overcome barriers to employment and to identify good-quality jobs, given their skill levels. As an added support, the program's job developer often escorted job-seekers to interviews, in addition to helping them locate job openings and prepare for interviews. The program also ran "Paperwork Nights" — evening sessions that offered residents help in understanding and coping with various social service, employment, and immigration forms and other bureaucratic documents.

Overall, residents who enrolled in Jobs-Plus were much more likely to take advantage of the program's offer of job search assistance than its offer of help finding and entering education or training programs. Some residents also used the program informally, seeking employment advice or help with personal problems when encountering staff walking through the development or at community events and meetings or when dropping in at the program office. Residents welcomed these kinds of encounters, which were made feasible by Jobs-Plus's location on-site.

Although a substantial proportion of residents participated in Jobs-Plus or benefited from its rent incentives, many did not. Some residents avoided the program because they felt that they did not need its assistance to find work or they did not think that the program would enable them to get better jobs than they could find on their own; others had reasons to stay out of the labor market — for example, an inability to find suitable child care, or health or substance abuse problems — that they believed Jobs-Plus could not help them overcome. The deep and persistent downturn in the Seattle economy that followed an unparalleled regional boom was also cited by some residents as a reason for avoiding Jobs-Plus. Seeing so many highly qualified workers competing for Seattle's entry-level and low-skilled jobs apparently discouraged some residents from turning to Jobs-Plus for assistance with job search or career advancement.

- **The program's active, multiethnic outreach efforts helped immigrants at Rainier Vista understand and use its services. An unintended consequence of these efforts was that some U.S.-born residents initially concluded that Jobs-Plus was not meant to assist them.**

A strong need at Rainier Vista was to make immigrants who had limited English proficiency aware of supports that were available to them. Steps taken to ensure that they knew about

Jobs-Plus included translating printed materials into various languages and publicizing program services at Rainier Vista's numerous cultural celebrations. Also, using a strategy in the spirit of the Jobs-Plus community support for work concept, the program hired residents from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to serve as outreach workers. Furthermore, in delivering services, the program developed partnerships with social service agencies that specialized in assisting immigrant and refugee populations. As a result of all these efforts, Jobs-Plus was able to draw participants from across the wide spectrum of ethnic and cultural groups represented at Rainier Vista.

At the same time, the program's emphasis on multicultural outreach initially left some U.S.-born residents with the impression that it was mainly for immigrants. Only gradually, as some nonimmigrants became more familiar with Jobs-Plus and were eventually attracted by its financial incentives component — which was phased in later than the employability services — did more native-born residents enroll in the program.

- **The program's efforts to empower residents and build their capacity for collaboration was important in enabling Jobs-Plus to function well and establish roots at Rainier Vista. It also strengthened the influence of residents on the HOPE VI planning process.**

As was the intention for residents at all the Jobs-Plus sites, the residents of Rainier Vista were to be involved in planning how the Jobs-Plus program model would be adapted and operated. Commitment to this principle was strong among the housing authority and other partners in Seattle's Jobs-Plus Collaborative — the planning and oversight body for Jobs-Plus that included resident representation. The principle was also championed by the first project director, who came to the job with a community-organizing background. The director and staff invested much time and energy in helping to recruit and train a new group of residents for positions on the Rainier Vista Resident Leadership Team (RVLT), a formal body representing tenants on matters concerning housing and community life at their development. With assistance from Jobs-Plus, new elections of resident leaders were held; capacity-building technical assistance was provided; and RVLT was incorporated as a nonprofit organization to raise funds independent of the housing authority. These efforts yielded a leadership team that was significantly reshaped and energized, that much better reflected the broad ethnic and cultural diversity of the tenant population, and that assumed responsibility for overseeing the operation of the on-site Job Resources Center — with considerable authority over its funding, management, and contracts. Such actions built a sense of resident ownership of Jobs-Plus, giving the program a more secure place in the housing development than would have been the case if residents had viewed it as wholly imported.

When the HOPE VI project was launched at Rainier Vista in 1999, residents were able to draw on the community-organizing and management skills that they had been developing

under the aegis of the Seattle Jobs-Plus program. Even before the HOPE VI grant was awarded, Jobs-Plus encouraged residents to get involved in the HOPE VI planning process. During this period and subsequently, the revamped and strengthened RVLТ proved to be an effective advocate for residents' interests. For example, it negotiated with and convinced the housing authority to commit to reserving some of the units in the rebuilt and enlarged Rainier Vista for all residents in good standing who wanted to return to the development. RVLТ also took a lead role in establishing widely accepted priorities for which categories of residents could elect to remain in the development during the rebuilding process.

- **Seattle's experience suggests that the Jobs-Plus approach can function well as the main vehicle for delivering HOPE VI community and supportive services. However, the experience also highlights the potential tension between serving residents who have been relocated and serving those who remain at the development.**

Overall, building on Jobs-Plus to realize the HOPE VI promise to help residents make progress toward self-sufficiency goals, get access to needed social services, and secure assistance with relocation needs and choices turned out to be a valuable approach. However, near the end of the period observed for this study — following the demolition of more than half of Rainier Vista's apartment units in connection with HOPE VI redevelopment — the housing authority determined that, with fewer residents to serve at Rainier Vista, it could give Jobs-Plus staff new responsibilities to provide services at three other Seattle housing developments. Facing increased workloads and the greater challenges of maintaining contact with residents who had moved away, Jobs-Plus staff tended to concentrate on the residents who remained at Rainier Vista during the rebuilding process, at the expense of those who had left. This points to the need for clear guidelines and accountability mechanisms to ensure that, within the limits of available resources, residents who are relocated off-site under the Hope VI program get a fair share of assistance with their self-sufficiency and social service needs after moving.