

Scaling Up a Place-Based Employment Program: Highlights From the Jobs Plus Pilot Program Evaluation

Executive Summary



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Public housing developments are among the most economically challenged communities in the United States. In fact, many public housing residents face substantial personal and other challenges, all of which could be barriers to employment and advancement. Jobs Plus aims to help address this problem by providing employment services, offering earned income disregards—so that earnings increases are not counted when determining rent—and building community support for work.¹

The original Jobs Plus demonstration,² which was the subject of a rigorous evaluation, found that program operators faced many daunting implementation challenges. The Jobs Plus developments that fully implemented the model (three of the six demonstration sites) saw the program boost annual earnings.³ Having achieved these positive results, Jobs Plus was replicated through the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) of the Corporation for National and Community Service in 2011 in the Bronx, New York, and in San Antonio, Texas.⁴ The City of New York expanded Jobs Plus to seven additional locations in 2013. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awarded \$24 million to nine public housing authorities (PHAs) to operate the model as part of its Jobs Plus Pilot program, with funding ranging from \$1.9 million to \$3 million to each of the sites, along with their leveraging additional resources through cost sharing or matching. To date, HUD has awarded approximately \$62 million to 24 PHAs to implement Jobs Plus.

The first nine public housing authorities to be awarded 4-year grants—from April 2015 to March 2019—are the subject of an implementation study. The grantees include housing developments operated by PHAs in Boston, Massachusetts; Charlotte, North Carolina; Chicago, Illinois; Cuyahoga County, Ohio; Houston, Texas; Memphis, Tennessee; Roanoke, Virginia; St. Louis, Missouri; and Syracuse, New York. These sites were selected because their proposals demonstrated strong partnerships, ties to community organizations, and experience running adult education, workforce, and economic self-sufficiency programs to meet the needs of public housing residents.⁵ The developments in these nine sites represent a wide diversity in terms of size, geographic location, and the degree of employment in these communities. They range in size from 240 to more than 1,500 residents who are working age and able to work, and their employment rates range from 21 to 49 percent.

To begin documenting HUD's expansion, or scale-up, of Jobs Plus, this first report looks at the early startup phase from April 2015 to October 2016 for the first cohort of nine sites, when their programs were in operation for roughly 1 year. Past iterations of Jobs Plus have shown that

¹ The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Rockefeller Foundation, and MDRC conceived the original Jobs Plus demonstration in the mid-1990s. See Bloom, Riccio, and Verma (2005) for a detailed description of the original Jobs Plus model and its results based on a random assignment evaluation. Longer-term results are available in Riccio (2010). For a complete list of MDRC publications on Jobs Plus, see www.mdrc.org/project/jobs-plus-community-revitalization-initiative-public-housing-families#related-content.

² The original model was named Jobs-Plus (with a hyphen), but the current program being replicated by HUD is referred to as Jobs Plus (without the hyphen). This report uses the current treatment, Jobs Plus, for all iterations of the program.

³ Riccio (2010).

⁴ The Social Innovation Fund targets public-private funds to expand effective solutions across three issue areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development and school support.

⁵ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2014).

programs often needed 1 to 2 years to reach operating scale. In the original demonstration, the model development and implementation process took about 2 years, and its replication during the SIF intervention underwent a startup period of about 9 months, with improvement often noted over time.

Sites in the current Jobs Plus Pilot were given 6 months to start up operations and begin serving residents. The report examines their experiences launching Jobs Plus and the progress they made getting staff in place, building partnerships, delivering services, and structuring the program on the ground during this initial roll-out period. These early insights and observations may help inform the sites, HUD, and other stakeholders on practices that may be worth emulating and obstacles that may be encountered, as HUD continues to build and strengthen the intervention.

Program Model

Jobs Plus is a place-based program that is rooted and operationalized in a specific locale, to serve the needs of that particular population. The program is designed to help people living in public housing increase their levels of employment and earnings.

At its core, Jobs Plus is structured around three mutually reinforcing parts, all of which focus on improving residents' employment, earnings, and well-being:

1. **Employment-Related Services and Activities.** This component can include help with job searches, coaching to help residents adjust to the world of work, referrals to educational and training courses, subsidized supported work positions to help especially hard-to-employ residents make the transition to the world of work, and a range of support services (such as childcare) that make it easier for residents to work. Additionally, as a place-based initiative aiming to serve everyone in the housing development, the employment services are also intended to help people, who are already employed or who eventually become employed, stay in their jobs, advance to better jobs, and become reemployed if they lose their jobs. The program provides some services onsite, at a job center in the housing development, while others are available in the broader community. In contrast to the original demonstration, HUD's current Jobs Plus Pilot program places more emphasis on employment services and training that lead to advancement and career opportunities over time.
2. **Rent-Based Financial Incentives To Help "Make Work Pay."** To counter the extent to which higher earnings from work result in increases in rent, which could discourage work, the Jobs Plus rent-based incentive allows for families to see a higher net financial return from work. HUD's Jobs Plus Pilot program includes the Jobs Plus Earned Income Disregard (JPEID), which offers a 100-percent disregard of incremental earned income for the entire period of the program and is available to all residents of the Jobs Plus development.
3. **Community Support for Work.** Inspired by a growing recognition of the importance of social networks and social capital, this component seeks to strengthen social ties and activities among residents to support job preparation and work efforts. Examples of mutual support could include everything from sharing information about available jobs to carpooling to work to watching after each other's children during different job shifts. Another function of the community support for work component is to propagate the message that "work pays" and that "employment goals are attainable," thereby creating an environment where the theme of work is more pervasive than it had been previously.

As a self-sufficiency initiative, a distinctive facet of Jobs Plus is its attempt to operate this multicomponent model at *saturation levels* within the target public housing developments—that is, not just target a small share of residents but, rather, everyone who lives in the development and is of working age and able to work. By bringing together the three mutually reinforcing components of the model, Jobs Plus seeks to boost employment levels in public housing communities that have high rates of joblessness, support those who are already working, and help those who become employed to stay employed.

Moreover, unlike other employment programs, the Jobs Plus employment services are uniquely situated to reap the benefits of being part of a *place-based* initiative, which could potentially include opportunities for staff to know the context in which participants live, to know their families, and to have informal interactions at the housing developments. Additionally, by being a place-based initiative, Jobs Plus offers the potential to provide continued support after residents find work. Whereas many traditional employment programs only provide assistance through job placement or perhaps provide retention services for up to 90 days after employment, Jobs Plus participants are eligible for program support as long as they live in the development (until the end of the Jobs Plus grant).

HUD’s current Jobs Plus Pilot program has made slight changes to the original model in an effort to incorporate lessons learned and adapt to new contexts and circumstances. One feature of the original demonstration that was not replicated in the current version was the “mandatory collaborative,” a feature of the model promoting governance, accountability, and support and that was intended to craft, fund, and operate this comprehensive initiative. Mandatory collaboratives in the original Jobs Plus sites included local public housing authorities, resident representatives, local human services agencies, and local workforce development agencies, which worked together and were accountable to one another. In the HUD replication, sites are encouraged to build local partnerships and develop governance structures to manage the collaboration with partners.

Evaluation

In 2015, HUD selected MDRC to lead the implementation evaluation of the scale-up effort. Jointly with the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the National Initiative on Mixed-Income Communities at Case Western Reserve University, the evaluation team is documenting the efforts of the first cohort of Jobs Plus grantees, including how they have begun to operationalize and implement Jobs Plus in their particular settings, the partnerships they have established, how their programs have matured over time, and the extent to which they have achieved saturation; that is, the extent to which all eligible residents living in the developments are exposed to and receive employment services, rent incentives, and community support for work (CSW). The evaluation will also examine participation outcomes and the cost of implementing Jobs Plus. The diverse characteristics of the sites offer a good opportunity to further understand the program’s operation in different environments. The evaluation will end in 2018.

The findings and observations in this first report are meant to characterize the early implementation experiences of the programs. The report draws on site visits and interviews that the research team conducted between August and October 2016, roughly 16 to 18 months after the grantees were selected to operate Jobs Plus. Programs had been in operation for roughly one

year—some a bit more, some less—at the time of the site visits. Quantitative data included in this report were reported to HUD by the sites from April 2015 through September 2016.

Key Findings

Within the first 18 months of followup, all nine sites had begun structuring their programs, building partnerships, and implementing the core components of the Jobs Plus model. While they continued to make refinements, the early implementation experiences of the nine Jobs Plus grantees suggest the following key findings.

Developing Partnerships

- All sites had begun to develop partnerships to implement Jobs Plus; however, they varied in terms of the types of partners involved, their roles in delivering Jobs Plus services, the value that they brought to the program, the formality of the partnerships, and the level of ongoing engagement of the partner organizations.

Partnerships are critical to running a successful Jobs Plus program, since each partner brings its own area of expertise to the program, and the program requires an array of partners to work with residents who may have multiple needs and barriers to employment. In addition to tapping into existing relationships, sites sought new organizations as partners to deliver services to residents. Some structured formal agreements with their partners and others kept the arrangements informal. Given the program's focus on employment, most sites had developed partnerships with their local Workforce Investment Boards and education, training, and support services organizations but had not yet put in place direct relationships with employers and business-related organizations; this connection with the business community is even more important for the Jobs Plus programs that had yet to employ job developers, which would have been another way to connect with employers.

Delivery of Employment Services

- Employment services were more generic and not especially tailored to meet the specific needs and skills of individual participants. In addition, although staff are interested in preparing participants for career-path jobs, they have found this goal difficult to achieve.

All sites provide general pre-employment services such as job-readiness assessments, résumé writing assistance, and interview preparation. Job search assistance is offered in a variety of ways that can be found in most employment programs. In some sites, case managers post job lists in the main office so that residents can scan the list. When asked, case managers provide assistance with job searches, but for the most part participants conduct their own job searches. In this early period, a few sites had developed strong relationships with their workforce development agencies, but most sites had yet to begin working with job developers—either hired by the program or through partnerships—or otherwise engage employers to help identify career-path jobs or in-demand industries; rather, job searches tend to be for any jobs that are available, regardless of pay or career opportunity provided. Site-reported data covering July 2015 through September 2016, the early implementation period, indicate moderate levels of participation in employment services and relatively low levels of reported employment gains.

JPEID Implementation

- The JPEID has served to generate resident interest in Jobs Plus and getting residents connected to program services. However, many sites found it challenging to implement this component.

By disregarding any additional earned income from the rent calculation, the JPEID provides a generous financial incentive to “make work pay.” Staff responded positively to the JPEID and its potential to help recruit program participants, to motivate them to increase their earned incomes, and to help them make progress toward self-sufficiency. Staff, however, struggled with various aspects of implementing the JPEID component of Jobs Plus. They expressed confusion over *how* residents enroll to receive JPEID and *which* income sources are subject to the JPEID exemptions. Additionally, several sites struggled to develop data systems to track and report JPEID outcomes and to get the “buy-in” of property managers, who were critical to its implementation. In early 2017, HUD released extensive guidance to address many of these concerns. In addition, to address sites’ enrollment concerns, HUD sanctioned automatic enrollment for all residents at the site, dropping the requirement to enroll in JPEID and Jobs Plus separately. The ongoing implementation research will look at the extent to which the sites embrace this option.

Community Support for Work

- Grantees launched various types of discrete CSW activities, but most expressed a need for more clarity about what counts as CSW.

Community support for work intends to create “sustained support for work during and beyond the period of the Jobs Plus program” (HUD, 2014)—in other words, creating an environment where there is mutual support among residents to help each other become employed and stay employed. Despite the language that clearly describes the *goals* of CSW in HUD’s Notice of Funding Availability, expectations for exactly *how* to implement this component have been less clear. This elusiveness has contributed to a challenging dynamic in which most sites are grappling with how to define CSW activities. HUD, Jobs Plus PHAs, and other stakeholders are working to more clearly define the efforts to implement CSW and come to a clear agreement on how to operationalize and effectively measure outcomes. In early 2017, HUD released new guidance on what counts as a CSW activity.

- As intended, some sites are beginning to take a “universal” approach to implementing CSW, one that requires the commitment and engagement of all staff, residents, and partners (and not the sole responsibility of particular Jobs Plus staff members).

One facet of CSW is its central role in contributing to the Jobs Plus goal of saturation by infusing the entire public housing development with messages about the importance of work, the availability of employment, and the opportunity for support in obtaining it. Many sites had been relying on community coaches—residents of the developments hired to promote Jobs Plus and a “culture of work” and to facilitate mutual support—to carry this out. Over time, some sites began to operationalize CSW as an effort to establish a more holistic approach to surrounding residents with formal and informal supports. Conceived in this way, CSW becomes more universal, in that it is built into everything that everyone does and touches all aspects of the community, rather than being the responsibility of only certain members of the Jobs Plus staff. A recent HUD CSW

policy overview document for grantees also reflects this same orientation: “CSW is something that engages the entire public housing community” (HUD, 2016).

In addition, sites reported logistical challenges as they relate to operationalizing this component. Issues of trust and personal barriers also have surfaced that keep participants from engaging in activities related to Jobs Plus. For example, the perception of the community coaches as employees of the PHA (or a contracted organization) sometimes presented difficulties when it came to their ability to build trust or relationships with other residents.

Technical Assistance

- Overall, site program staff voiced the need for more frequent and concrete guidance and clearer program standards to guide their implementation of Jobs Plus.

In addition to funding the program, HUD provides technical assistance and support to sites, holds sites accountable for good performance, and ensures that sites are compliant with the grant requirements. HUD also provides feedback so sites can make corrections and continuous improvements to their program delivery. HUD staff provide some of this assistance directly, along with modest support from a technical assistance subcontractor. HUD liaisons make in-person visits and coordinate remotely with sites to support planning activities, to troubleshoot contractual or operational issues, and to offer general advice. The liaisons also hold standing monthly check-in meetings with sites by telephone, and HUD uses conferences and periodic webinars to provide guidance to the sites. While most sites reflected positively on their relationships with HUD liaisons and program management staff and appreciated the creativity and flexibility afforded by HUD during the startup phase, they also noted significant gaps in HUD guidance during the early startup phase.

HUD provided guidance in January 2016 encouraging, but not requiring, sites to dedicate 4 to 5 percent of their budgets to procure the services of technical assistance providers to help them effectively implement the Jobs Plus program. The final report will describe the way in which, if at all, sites sought out technical assistance and engaged providers.

Recommendations

The findings discussed in this executive summary suggest the following recommendations for program managers, practitioners, and HUD to consider:

- Sites might benefit from deeper, earlier, and more frequent technical assistance that is focused squarely on helping to strengthen implementation quality.

Some sites struggled to operationalize the more technical aspects of the model—for example, the JPEID—and to conceptualize CSW. Given some of the complexities, early stages of implementation of these Jobs Plus components might have benefited from timelier, more frequent, and more direct technical assistance guidance and support.

- To meet HUD’s goal that Jobs Plus be demand-driven—that is, informed and shaped by employers’ needs for individuals with certain skills to fill available jobs—sites ultimately need input from employers and business-oriented organizations that can help them understand which industries and occupations are in local demand. Although some sites receive this kind of input and information, many do not, and room exists for improvement at all sites.

This information could then help guide residents toward a focus on occupations for which they are more likely to be hired, hopefully at a better wage than what one site called “survival jobs” —entry-level jobs without much promise of advancement. To achieve this objective, sites would be best served by hiring job developers who have or can develop the necessary relationships with employers or by deepening their relationships with the local Workforce Investment Boards and workforce agencies, which can serve as intermediaries with employers, as well as a link to training, or both.

- Sites should strive to minimize residents’ confusion about enrolling in the JPEID. This effort requires that sites ensure that they are ready to implement JPEID and that property managers both understand and endorse it. They might also identify messaging about work incentives that appeal to those who are working and those who are not.

HUD’s provision for automatic enrollment, which was not yet in place at the time of the field research visits, offers one way to simplify the JPEID enrollment process. Jobs Plus staff should also ensure that JPEID messaging is both consistent and accurate. One way to do this is to designate certain individuals—perhaps the community coaches—as lead messengers for JPEID and provide them with additional training on the disregard. Staff reported that some residents, who were working before the launch of Jobs Plus, feel the JPEID is unfair to them, as their baseline rents were set higher than rents for those who began working after enrolling in Jobs Plus. Staff should clarify that those who are already working can still benefit if they increase their earnings through working more hours or increasing their wage rates, which may also be an incentive to get training to help them do so.

- HUD, Jobs Plus sites, and other stakeholders could enhance implementation by working collaboratively to define CSW efforts and coming to clear agreement on how to operationalize and measure outcomes effectively.

In line with the current direction that HUD offers, staff, residents, and partners should consider CSW through a universal lens, engaging a wider range of people to contribute to CSW efforts. Stronger resident engagement in the planning and execution of CSW efforts may be necessary to achieve sustained support for work within public housing communities beyond the grant period. Finally, creating bridges between residents and new social networks and career opportunities needs to be more concretely operationalized through strategic innovations. For example, in addition to bringing resources from the broader community *into* public housing developments, more opportunities should be sought for residents to engage in activities *outside* of the developments—for example, to attend offsite job fairs, workshops, and classes—where they can hopefully meet and network with people connected to employment.

The focus of this initial report is on elevating overall early startup experiences in the HUD Jobs Plus Pilot program evaluation, rather than exploring individual site-level experiences in depth. The second and final report for the evaluation, scheduled for mid-2018, which will look at the nine programs through late 2017, will describe longer-term implementation and how the programs mature over time, the extent to which they saturate the communities, and whether or not they take full advantage of the opportunities afforded them by being place based. The final report will also examine the costs of the initiative and draw lessons for future scale-up of the program.

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