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## Participating in a Place-Based Employment Initiative Lessons from the Jobs-Plus Demonstration in Public Housing

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In 1998, the Jobs-Plus Community Revitalization Initiative for Public Housing Families (“Jobs-Plus” for short) was launched in several cities around the nation in an effort to address the concentration of poverty and joblessness in public housing.<sup>1</sup> The Jobs-Plus approach seeks to transform “low-work, high-welfare” public housing developments into mixed-income communities by significantly raising the employment and earnings of the current residents. Jobs-Plus follows on a series of self-sufficiency initiatives sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and local public housing authorities over the past 30 years to help public (as well as Section 8) assisted housing residents to secure employment. Jobs-Plus also draws on various service features and strategies of comprehensive community initiatives that have targeted urban areas of concentrated poverty over the past decade with employment and social services.

However, the Jobs-Plus approach is much more complex and ambitious than previous housing authority self-sufficiency initiatives. Jobs-Plus offers residents a novel combination of (1) *employment-related services and activities* to help residents secure and retain employment; (2) *financial work incentives* consisting of changes in public housing rent rules that help “make work pay” by reducing the extent to which higher earnings from work are offset by increases in rent; and (3) *community support for work*, which seeks to strengthen social ties and activities among residents that support their job preparation and work efforts. Furthermore, Jobs-Plus is *place-based* in providing these services and activities from offices located on-site at the housing developments where residents live. Additionally, Jobs-Plus utilizes a bold *saturation strategy* that seeks to inform all working-age residents about the program and then to accommodate every resident who comes forward. Finally, Jobs-Plus relies on *local collaboratives* to design and implement the

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programs. In addition to the housing authority as the lead agency, the collaboratives are composed of representatives of the residents, the welfare agency, and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) entity as mandatory partners, and they include other local service providers and employers who are recruited in response to the needs of the individual Jobs-Plus sites.

Through these efforts, Jobs-Plus seeks to infuse an entire housing development with its “employment message” and thereby to engage a high proportion of residents in its work-promoting services and activities. Since there was considerable uncertainty at the outset of the demonstration about how to implement this untried program approach and about whether residents would take advantage of it, the *feasibility* of the program approach has been a key question for the demonstration research.

This report on residents’ participation in Jobs-Plus addresses that question as part of a comprehensive, multiyear evaluation of the Jobs-Plus demonstration that is assessing through 2004 the implementation of the initiative and its effectiveness in improving the employment-related outcomes and well-being of public housing residents. Looking at the experiences of the Jobs-Plus programs in six cities (or demonstration “sites”) around the nation — Baltimore, Chattanooga, Dayton, Los Angeles, St. Paul, and Seattle — the report offers a detailed examination of what it takes to involve large numbers of public housing residents in Jobs-Plus’s services and activities. The report presents quantitative data showing the extent to which residents enrolled officially in the program and took advantage of its services and financial incentives. In addition, detailed qualitative data explore the variety of ways in which residents utilized the program and the reasons they gave for participating in the program or for staying away.

The findings of this report are therefore critical for establishing with confidence whether or not the Jobs-Plus approach received a fair test in this demonstration and in the effort to draw conclusions about its impacts on residents’ employment and well-being. More broadly, the findings begin to address critical gaps in the limited research that currently exists on place-based employment initiatives — for instance, by specifying some reasonable expectations for service take-up in response to a saturation-of-services strategy. The report also offers lessons on implementation that would be important to consider in any future efforts to replicate Jobs-Plus or some of its features at other public housing developments or even in low-income neighborhoods that do not include public housing.

## **Key Findings About Participation in Jobs-Plus**

### **Challenges to the Jobs-Plus Approach**

- **Jobs-Plus encountered unexpected delays in program implementation, skepticism among residents, crime and safety problems, and wide variations in residents’ employment histories and service needs.**

Each of the Jobs-Plus sites experienced lengthy, unexpected delays in implementing the three Jobs-Plus components — including the much-anticipated rent incentives — which were

rolled out incrementally instead of all together at the same time. Furthermore, the sites found that Jobs-Plus's place-based saturation strategy presents a host of operational challenges. At first, the Jobs-Plus programs encountered widespread suspicion and cynicism among residents who had repeatedly seen service programs come and go in their communities without making good on promises to substantially improve their lives. The Jobs-Plus programs also found that a geographically defined target population can encompass a range of employment backgrounds and eligibility for categorical services, as well as a variety of cultural backgrounds in multiethnic developments in Los Angeles, St. Paul, and Seattle. These factors complicated efforts to provide residents with appropriate on-site assistance and off-site service referrals to address their needs and circumstances. High resident turnover in Baltimore, Chattanooga, and Dayton required Jobs-Plus to continuously direct staff and resources toward outreach efforts to inform incoming residents about the program. Serious problems with safety and crime undercut program operations at a few sites. Finally, like many welfare-to-work programs, Jobs-Plus had a harder time engaging various subgroups of residents, such as working residents who needed help with job retention and career advancement, substance abusers, and victims of domestic violence.

### **Programmatic Accomplishments**

- **Residents were widely aware of Jobs-Plus, and over half of those targeted enrolled officially in Jobs-Plus and took up its employment services and financial incentives. Almost two-thirds of targeted households were connected to the program in these ways.**

The field research offers preliminary indications that extensive outreach efforts across the sites made residents widely aware of Jobs-Plus as a source of employment assistance and of the program's rent incentives. Furthermore, data from Jobs-Plus participant case files and housing authority administrative records indicate that, as of June 2001, Jobs-Plus managed to attach over half the *targeted residents* (that is, all those who were of working age and were not disabled) across the sites, either through individual enrollment in Jobs-Plus or through membership in a household that was receiving the rent incentives. In addition, 58 percent of the *targeted households* were connected to the program in these ways. Moreover, these rates were higher among residents living in the Jobs-Plus developments later in the demonstration (for example, the 2000 cohort) than among those living in the development earlier (for example, the 1998 cohort).<sup>2</sup> For example, the attachment rate of the 2000 cohort was higher (61 percent) than that of the 1998 cohort (51 percent) since Jobs-Plus could offer later cohorts the full complement of its services and rent incentives as well as a track record of success.

As shown in Figure 1, some sites' attachment rates were particularly impressive. For instance, the Dayton and St. Paul programs had the greatest success of all the sites in attaching

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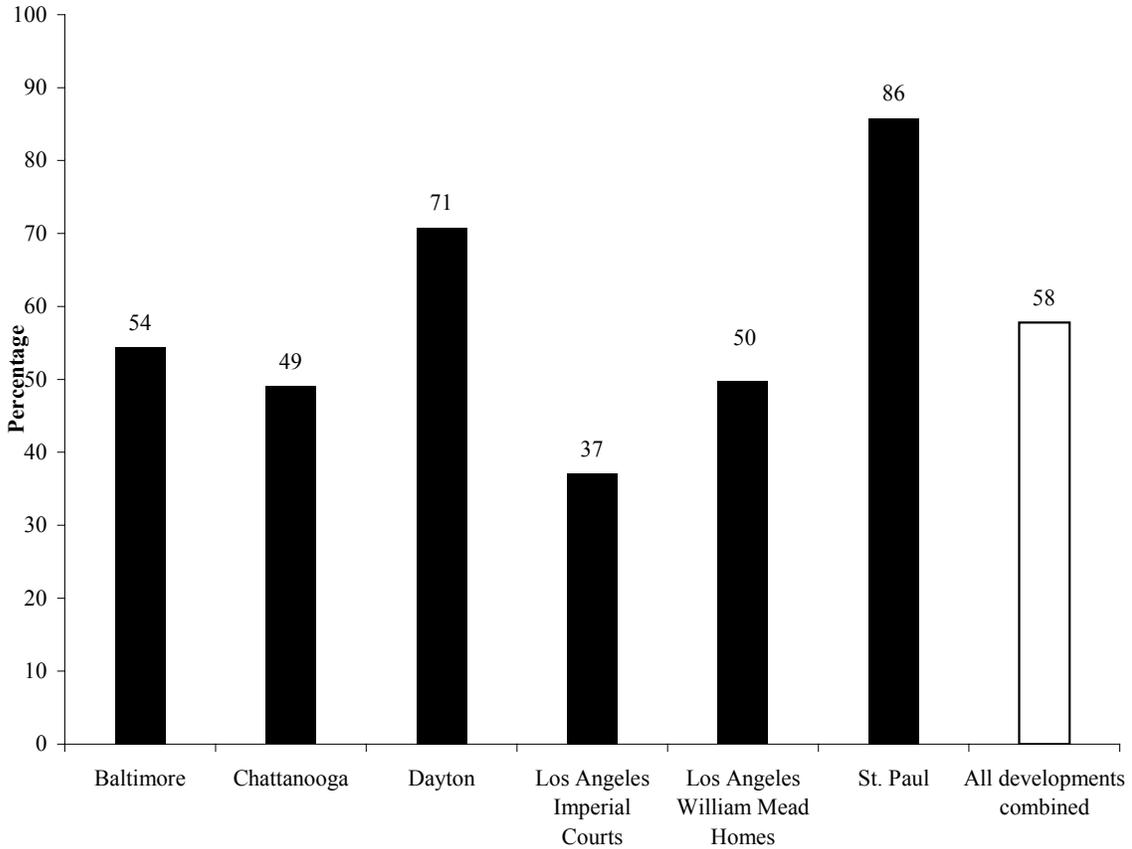
<sup>2</sup>The term "cohort" refers to all residents, ages 18 to 61 years, whose names appeared on the housing authority's 50058 forms as a resident of the Jobs-Plus development in October 1998 and/or 1999 and/or 2000. Thus, a resident who did not move would be counted in each cohort.

**The Jobs-Plus Demonstration**

**Figure 1**

**Attachment Rate Among All Targeted Households  
Living in the Jobs-Plus Developments at Any Time Between 1998 and 2000, by Development**

*What percentage of targeted households had a member enrolled in  
Jobs-Plus or received its rent incentives by June 2001?*



SOURCES: MDRC calculations from MDRC-collected Jobs-Plus case files, Jobs-Plus rent incentives data, and housing authority (50058) records.

NOTES: The term “targeted households” refers to households headed by a nondisabled resident between the ages of 18 and 61. Characteristics are as of the earliest year of residence between 1998 and 2000.

In the average for all developments combined, the results for each housing development are weighted equally.

targeted households (71 percent and 86 percent, respectively). The attachment rates were even higher for the 2000 cohort: 92 percent in Dayton and 78 percent in St. Paul.

Finally, more than half the residents who enrolled in Jobs-Plus looked to the program for employment assistance. Residents were most likely to seek employment services that could directly address their pressing need for work — such as job search and job referral assistance — and, to a lesser degree, help with job skills development.

- **Jobs-Plus was able to draw participants from both currently employed and unemployed residents and from those who were currently welfare recipients and those who were not welfare recipients.**

Although no single demographic characteristic distinguished the Jobs-Plus participants from the nonparticipants, Jobs-Plus did make inroads at most of the sites among *working residents*, who were drawn by the rent incentives as a key benefit, as well as among *nonworking residents*, who needed help getting a job. Jobs-Plus was also moderately to very successful at most of the sites in involving *welfare recipients* — a key target group for the demonstration — including almost two-thirds of those who reported AFDC/TANF income in the period between 1998 and 2001 in Dayton and nearly three-fourths of such residents in St. Paul. At the same time, Jobs-Plus also drew residents who were *not current or recent welfare recipients* and who therefore were not eligible for employment assistance from the welfare agency.

- **Residents were involved in Jobs-Plus in complex ways that the quantitative data cannot capture. For example, as a place-based initiative, Jobs-Plus could offer assistance in a variety of informal and ad hoc ways outside the program office.**

The quantitative findings on formal participation in Jobs-Plus are likely to be conservative estimates of residents' use of and involvement in Jobs-Plus across the sites. The case file review for this report was conducted at a time when several sites were still struggling to get staff and program components on-line. Furthermore, the place-based, saturation strategy permits Jobs-Plus to assist residents in a variety of informal ways besides providing formal program services. For instance, residents got job search counseling in ad hoc exchanges with staff in the courtyard or heard about job openings at community activities that Jobs-Plus sponsored. These forms of participation cannot readily be captured by case file records and administrative data, and they are documented instead for this report by field research that was conducted through summer 2003.

The field research also shows that, in their use of the Jobs-Plus components, the residents looked for help with pressing needs and for services that added value to their existing “portfolio of service providers,” including such support services as assistance with transportation, food, and child care. Participation therefore took the form of a high level of drop-in visits or calls to the program office rather than continuous involvement over an extended period of time. Furthermore, residents looked to Jobs-Plus for help in accessing services from other agen-

cies. Jobs-Plus helped to cut through the red tape and followed up referrals to ensure that residents did not fall through the cracks. Residents appreciated Jobs-Plus's individualized, flexible assistance in response to the wide array of issues that influenced their employment, and those who lived in multiethnic housing developments liked the program's culturally specific offerings, which ranged from translation services to classes in English as a Second Language (ESL) and U.S. citizenship, to a General Educational Development (GED) course for Spanish speakers, to accompanying residents to immigration hearings in order to secure work permits. Finally, residents applauded Jobs-Plus's use of resident outreach workers and staff, which made the program more approachable and enhanced its credibility.

Nonetheless, this report emphasizes that much of what the residents described as being helpful about Jobs-Plus's service approach — ongoing outreach, personalized attention, responding to the wide array of issues that influence employment, and tracking of referral agencies and employers — required the Jobs-Plus staff to undertake considerable investments in time, training, and administrative support.

- **There was considerable variation across the sites in the extent to which the Jobs-Plus programs were able to get residents to join the program. This cross-site variation was attributed primarily to organizational factors, including differences across the sites in securing stable program leadership, adequate professional staffing, local housing authority support, and welfare agency cooperation in recruiting and assisting welfare recipients.**

There was also considerable variation across the sites in the levels of participation that Jobs-Plus was able to achieve. For instance, attachment rates of targeted residents of the combined 1998-2000 cohorts through June 2001 ranged across a spectrum, from lows of 29 percent (William Mead Homes) and 33 percent (Imperial Courts), to midpoints of 48 percent (Chattanooga) and 52 percent (Baltimore), and finally to highs of 69 percent (Dayton) and 78 percent (St. Paul). (This report emphasizes that the lower rates of enrollment and service take-up at the two Los Angeles sites through June 2001 were the consequences of programmatic and local problems at Imperial Courts and William Mead Homes.)

The sites differed in the extent to which Jobs-Plus enrollees participated in various services and activities. For instance, in regard to the rent incentives, even through December 2002, Jobs-Plus in Baltimore consistently remained at the low end of the spectrum, managing to engage only 12 percent of targeted residents of the combined 1998-2000 cohorts. Jobs-Plus in Chattanooga and Dayton and at Imperial Courts hovered around the middle, engaging 23 percent, 36 percent, and 28 percent, respectively. In contrast, rent incentives receipt at William Mead Homes shot up once the program was fully staffed, rising from 27 percent in June 2001 to 46 percent in December 2002 — second only to St. Paul, where rent incentives receipt among targeted residents reached a high of 58 percent.

Some sites faced tougher working environments and more residents who had serious barriers to employment than other sites did. This report, however, contains no obvious or clear evidence to indicate that these conditions drove the cross-site variation in Jobs-Plus participation. In contrast, more influential factors seem to be the organizational conditions that affected the programs' capacity to capitalize on being on-site to administer services and conduct outreach effectively and consistently. At least three organizational factors played a prominent role in contributing to this cross-site variation: (1) stable program leadership and appropriate professional staffing, (2) the continued support for Jobs-Plus of the local housing authority — especially the on-site management office — and (3) the cooperation of the local welfare agency in helping Jobs-Plus recruit and assist welfare recipients at the housing developments. For instance, the success of the programs in Dayton and St. Paul in attaching substantial numbers of targeted residents underscores the importance of strategic cooperation with the housing management office in enrolling residents in the rent incentives plans. In contrast, the Jobs-Plus programs in Los Angeles were “late bloomers,” experiencing a substantial increase in program activity, enrollments, and take-up of services and rent incentives only after receiving a full complement of staff and stable leadership at both housing developments in the latter half of 2001.

## **Conclusion and Selected Recommendations**

This report provides preliminary but important evidence in support of the feasibility of the Jobs-Plus approach and its place-based saturation strategy for assisting sizable numbers of public housing residents with employment. The ultimate determination of whether the Jobs-Plus approach should be replicated will depend on the final research findings concerning its employment and income effects. However, this report offers lessons that are also relevant to the efforts of employment programs to locate in low-income communities outside of public housing and to assist residents with a broad array of employment-related backgrounds and circumstances. The following are selected recommendations for using the Jobs-Plus approach in whole or in part in either public housing or other low-income communities.

### **CAPITALIZING ON PLACE IN OFFERING EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE**

- Take advantage of informal, ad hoc ways available to a place-based program to engage and assist residents wherever they live and “hang out.” For instance, hold community events and conduct door-to-door outreach to inform residents about employment opportunities and services, and make home visits to assist them.
- Offer individualized assistance to residents as well as standardized group services on-site, and develop referral partnerships with local service agencies to address residents' various employment needs, cultural backgrounds, and eligibility for different categorical services.

- Form partnerships with local ethnic organizations to develop culturally specific outreach and employment services for the various languages, cultural practices, and immigration-related problems of residents in multicultural communities.
- Recruit residents to help with program outreach and service delivery in order to draw on their social networks and knowledge of local conditions and needs, to win the trust of the community, and to attract participants to the program.
- Designate a program staff member to coordinate residents' outreach and service activities, and provide training for those responsibilities, such as instructions for conducting door-to-door outreach and handling confidential information.
- Use employment-related support services, such as monthly bus tokens or passes, as a "hook" to bring working residents regularly into the office to ask them about their employment and help them with career advancement.

#### **COORDINATING WITH THE HOUSING AUTHORITY**

- Arrange for the management office to send the program monthly updates of incoming residents, and have a program staff member attend move-in interviews with new residents and annual lease renewal interviews with current residents, in order to orient and enroll them into the program.
- Have the housing management office inform the program of job gains and losses among the residents and incidences of domestic violence, substance abuse, and other problems that can undercut their employment, so that the program can follow up.

#### **PARTNERING WITH THE WELFARE AGENCY AND THE WIA ONE-STOP CENTERS**

- Arrange for the local welfare agency to identify welfare recipients who reside in the housing development or neighborhood and who might be recruited by the program.
- Have the local welfare agency recognize participation in the program's employment activities as a way for welfare recipients to fulfill their work requirements.

- Consider substituting participation in Jobs-Plus as the mandated work activity for welfare recipients, thereby requiring recipients to visit the program office to enroll and to check in regularly to receive their benefits.
- Colocate welfare-to-work caseworkers with the program staff at the housing development or in the neighborhood, and integrate them into the program's efforts to recruit welfare recipients, to develop and implement individual service plans, and to monitor job retention and career development needs.
- Arrange with the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) One-Stop Center for program staff and participants to have on-line access through the program's computers to the One-Stop's database of employment openings.
- Train program staff in the procedures for processing applications for local WIA funds and programs so that the staff can knowledgeably help residents assemble the required paperwork and supporting documents before going to the One-Stop.
- Where there is gang activity or other dangers, make arrangements to ensure the safety of residents when traveling to and from the One-Stop Center to utilize services.