

Summary and Ranking of Training Recommendations for the Job Creation Investment Fund

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Job Creation Investment Fund (JCIF) was created to facilitate the transition of welfare clients from welfare dependency to economic self-sufficiency. Given the extremely low levels of unemployment in the County, the best way to accomplish this goal was to focus on job matching, retention, and advancement. As a first step, we investigated where CalWORKs clients were already finding jobs, and the skill sets of some CalWORKs clients who were having difficulty finding jobs. We then interviewed 31 County employers in order to learn employers' requirements for entry-level employees, what opportunities and prerequisites exist for advancement in their companies, and what experiences they have had hiring current and former CalWORKs clients. These results were described in an earlier report.

Employers raised a number of concerns about the gaps in training and experience they noticed among both recent applicants and hires for entry-level positions. In this report, we describe in more detail the types of training programs employers would value most for their entry-level employees and entry-level job applicants. Addressing common skill deficits is the way to most improve job matching, job retention, and job advancement for current and former welfare clients. First, we categorize those skills most important to employers and describe them here. Next, we describe how these training needs mesh with the advancement strategies we described in the earlier report, and give example career ladders with the necessary training. Finally, we assess the extent to which these skill deficits are addressed by existing training programs in the County. In the cases where it appears more could be done to match the training provision to the stated needs of employers, we mention them here as well. In some cases, the recommendations and needs of employers lead us to make suggestions regarding ways in which County training and education programs might be adapted or expanded in order to improve job matching, retention, and advancement for current and former welfare clients.

During the interviews, it was clear that employers believed there were a number of skill deficits among entry-level applicants and employees. In this report, we summarize the skill sets employers found to be most lacking. Employers find that welfare clients attempting to enter the workforce in any industry could most benefit from improved work/life, customer service, computer, and English communication skills. In addition, employers mentioned deficiencies in basic skills (reading, writing, and basic math) and also indicated that some occupational training or credentialing programs are lacking in the County, particularly in the health care professions.

Each of these types of training needs have different degrees of relevance for the three primary strategies for advancement described in the Labor Market Study. Specifically, we identified the following training programs in regards to job advancement strategies:

- ***Advancement on the job:***
Employees who seek to advance within a company would benefit from training programs that emphasize initiative and communication skills, in addition to work/life skills. Supervisory training programs may also be helpful in service-oriented industries, where promotion often requires management skills.

- ***Advancement by changing employers:***
Employees who seek to advance by changing employers primarily obtain skills through job experience, although training in initiative, communication, job search skills, and job networking facilitate job changes. Work/life skills are crucial to obtaining both the initial job and the next one.
- ***Advancement by pursuing education:***
Employees who seek to obtain further education or training in order to advance should pursue the relevant occupational training programs for their industry. The greatest challenge for these employees is finding affordable training at convenient hours.

A brief overview of both County-provided work/life skills classes (STEPS and JOB\$ NOW) – which are required of CalWORKs clients – and private basic skills and occupational training programs suggests that while many available programs meet some of the needs of area employers, improvements might be made to better prepare current and former CalWORKs clients for entry into the workforce. STEPS and JOB\$ NOW both address three of the four skills areas our analyses found employers desire in entry-level job applicants: work/life skills, such as attendance and punctuality, self-presentation, interview, and job search skills; customer service skills; and computer skills. These courses do not address the fourth area, ESL. The following points summarize our findings:

- While trainers emphasize punctuality and daily attendance for both the classes and work, there are few consequences for students who are tardy or absent. Indeed, trainers were sometimes late to the classes we observed, setting a bad example.
- Students are taught job search skills such as completing an application, creating a resume, and how to conduct oneself in an interview (appropriate physical appearance, listening skills, and how to convey skills and abilities). Job networking is also discussed, which is important to both finding a job and advancing by changing employers. Based on the second mock interviews we observed, students showed improvement in this area by the end of the course.
- While initiative is illustrated and rewarded in the classes, the frequency with which employers mentioned it as the key to advancement suggests that this could be emphasized more explicitly in the classes.
- The course emphasizes immediate work and places little emphasis on long-range career planning, such as saving for further training or identifying what skills and education a student will need to obtain their ideal job.

A quick review of English as a Second Language (ESL), General Equivalence Diploma (GED), and Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes indicates that these classes are free, abundant, and are offered in several locations throughout the county and at several different times, including evenings and weekends. Basic computer familiarity classes (courses that give instruction in mouse, email, and internet use, for example) are somewhat less available, and can be quite expensive.

Occupational training programs were in general less available than basic skills classes. More specifically:

- Clerical training programs are common, with costs similar to computer familiarity classes.
- Early Childhood Education training programs are available at community colleges for \$11/unit, but most are not on major public transportation routes. Consequently, transportation may be an issue preventing the utilization of these classes by CalWORKs clients.
- Specialized training programs in the medical professions are relatively rare despite the high demand for their graduates. Often, programs are offered only as full-time courses on weekdays, making them difficult to complete while holding a full-time job.
- Many employers noted that they prefer to hire graduates of training programs with a work component; however, many programs offered in the county do not incorporate on the job training.

Based on the above analyses, we make the following recommendations for training programs in San Mateo County, which are categorized by their relevance to STEPS/JOB\$ NOW, basic skills classes, and occupational training programs:

STEPS/JOB\$ NOW Classes

- 1. Courses could be more closely aligned with the demands of the workplace, and have real and enforced consequences of increasing severity for failing to meet performance expectations.**
- 2. Courses could incorporate training on the role of initiative in advancement for each of the three strategies for advancement (on the current job, in changing employers, and in pursuing additional education).**
- 3. Courses could provide information about how to pursue more advanced training while working, which would help clients plan more effectively for advancement in careers requiring certification or additional education.**
- 4. More role-playing in customer service and communication skills may help clients deal with conflict on the job.**
- 5. Including more mock interviewing in the courses (with actual employers) would better prepare clients for actual job interviews. Ideally, these mock interviews would require “applicants” to display initiative and desire for advancement.**

Basic Skills

- 1. Providing ESL courses at employer locations would bring English language instruction to some of those most in need of and most able to benefit from increased English proficiency. Employers with large numbers of non-native English speaking employees were very interested in this idea.**
- 2. Other basic skills courses (reading, writing, basic math, and computers) could also be welcome at employer sites.**

Occupational Training Programs

- 1. More health-related training programs are necessary, and more programs that hold classes in the evenings and weekends are essential for participants who are currently employed.**
- 2. One trainer noted that working students have a much higher completion rate in training programs if they work on campus. Further work could be done to investigate the possibility of leveraging work-study as a way to combine work and school while receiving CalWORKs.**
- 3. Employers and trainers repeatedly noted the difficulty entry-level workers have in maintaining reliable childcare and means of transportation. This impacts the ability to complete training programs and retain jobs. It is possible that additional promotion of already available services through the STEPS and JOB\$ NOW classes would be sufficient, but there may be a role for the County in providing additional support services, such as emergency childcare and emergency transportation assistance for those who have left CalWORKs.**