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Job-Retention and Advancement Services for CalWORKs Participants: Initial Survey of County Practices

Jacquelyn Anderson, Jennifer Miller, and Johannes M. Bos

As a result of federal and state welfare reform legislation, a strong economy, and local commitment to effective programs, welfare recipients in California have been moving into the workforce at a much higher rate than in the recent past, and welfare case-loads have declined substantially. Despite this success, many welfare recipients do not earn enough to become independent of cash assistance, and many of those who become independent remain poor.

Nationally, research shows that many welfare recipients do not achieve self-sufficiency because their low levels of education and skills preclude them from getting stable jobs that pay well. Others cycle in and out of jobs, sometimes because the jobs are temporary or very difficult to get to, sometimes because of family obligations, and sometimes because of personal issues such as substance-abuse problems or depression. These factors are prompting public agencies to provide low-income families with new services aimed at promoting job retention and advancement.

Until recently, two additional factors—an economic downturn and the imposition of federal time limits on receipt of welfare—raised hypothetical concerns. At present, both are real enough and their effects will be felt simultaneously. In this environment, it becomes increasingly important that welfare recipients find jobs, retain them, and, over time, secure better-paying jobs. This sequence of events is important to welfare households making the transition to work because stable earnings that rise over time can lift their families out of poverty.

These outcomes are no less important to the state and counties of California. Families that exhaust their federally time-limited benefits and that cannot manage on their low or sporadic earnings will almost surely require further public assistance that the state and counties would have to fully fund. This added fiscal burden would be unwelcome in good economic times, much less during a recession.

Although state and local welfare and workforce officials—the respective administrators of the CalWORKs and Workforce Investment Act programs—indicate that they are developing and implementing new programs and service strategies to encourage steady employment and career advancement among CalWORKs participants and other low-income workers, little is known about the kinds of programs that are being implemented across the state, or about whether they are effective. (Following the terminology used by the state of California to describe the CalWORKs program, which combines the former AFDC and GAIN programs, we do not distinguish between CalWORKs participants who receive only a cash grant and CalWORKs participants who also receive employment services, child care, or other CalWORKs benefits.)

Nationally, there has been only one rigorous evaluation of job-retention and advancement services. The Post-Employment Services Demonstration (PESD) evaluation found that a variety of case-management-based services had no impact on



retention or advancement outcomes, leaving county welfare and workforce programs little information to guide them in designing this critical set of new services.

In face of this knowledge gap, the Welfare Policy Research Project has identified job-retention and advancement services as a priority research area for California. We were engaged to conduct a study identifying *promising* job-retention and advancement programs and services that, if proven to be effective using a rigorous impact evaluation, could serve as a model for policymakers and program administrators in California and across the country.

Methods

This *Brief* focuses on the results of a statewide, self-administered, paper-and-pencil survey of each county welfare department and workforce agency in California. The survey, conducted between September and December 2000, was used to collect information on barriers that clients face in keeping jobs and advancing in careers; the type and scale of job-retention and advancement services; the perceived effectiveness of these services; and collaboration with other agencies and service providers. Also collected were short descriptions of or prepared brochures/handouts describing innovative program strategies. The survey response rate for county welfare agencies was 93% (54 out of 58), representing coverage of 99% of California's total welfare population. For workforce agencies, the survey response rate was 71% (37 out of 52), for an overall response rate of 83%.

Respondents were asked to identify the job-retention- and advancement-related services they provide, both before CalWORKs participants are employed and after they find a job. We refer to these services as pre-employment and post-employment services. For both the welfare and workforce agencies, the questions focused almost entirely on services that are provided to current CalWORKs participants. Only a few questions were asked about services that are being provided to non-CalWORKs participants, including former CalWORKs participants, Food Stamp-only or Medi-Cal-only participants, and other low-income people with no prior enrollment in the CalWORKs program.

Key Findings

The survey findings tell a mixed story of the job-retention and advancement services available to CalWORKs participants. Overall, the survey shows that job-retention and advancement services are offered in all or almost all California counties. (All 54 counties that responded offer these services.) However, the range and depth of these services vary. Five key findings emerged from the survey:

- **Pre-employment services, traditionally focused on helping applicants get a job, are now increasingly focused on how one keeps a job and advances in a career.**

These services, offered almost universally in California, include assessment, career counseling, and workshops that address job-retention issues such as attendance and balancing work and family responsibilities. Some form of pre-employment services has been in place in both the welfare and workforce systems for 20 years or longer. It is not surprising, then, that this is a starting point for a new set of job-retention and advancement services.

- **Fewer welfare and workforce agencies are following up with job-retention and advancement services after CalWORKs participants become employed.**

Most welfare and workforce agencies offer post-employment case management and support services such as child care and transportation, but other services such as mentoring, peer support, and financial incentives for keeping a job are less likely to be available. Case managers are most likely to assist workers with referrals, information, and counseling, but are less likely to intervene with employers on behalf of their clients. Although case management is an important component of post-employment services, the PESD evaluation shows that case management alone may have little impact on job-retention and advancement outcomes. Moreover, although supportive services such as child care and transportation are widely available, they are often inconvenient for some participants who live or work in remote locations and work swing shifts or weekends. Child care is often unavailable when children are sick.



► **Participation rates in pre-employment job-retention and advancement services are reported to be much higher than in post-employment services, for a number of likely reasons.**

Because of work-participation requirements, pre-employment services are mandatory for most CalWORKs participants, while post-employment services are voluntary for participants who are working full-time and required only if they work fewer than 32 hours a week. Further, the survey responses suggest that low participation levels in post-employment education and training may also be due to minimal encouragement or marketing on the part of case managers, along with a lack of interest on the part of CalWORKs participants. A lack of client interest, however, may reflect the difficulties of working, rearing children, and attending classes at the same time, as well as limited availability of support services such as child care at the training site or adequate evening transportation. Boosting participation rates in post-employment services poses a major, ongoing challenge to welfare and workforce agencies.

► **Services appear to be much more focused on job retention than on career advancement.**

CalWORKs participants are likely to receive services that are designed primarily to keep them employed, including counseling, child care, and other support services. Participants are less likely to receive support intended to advance their careers, such as continuing education or skills training after they have been employed for a period of time. It appears that education and training services remain mostly a pre-employment fallback option for participants who do not secure employment after completing initial job-club activities (e.g., assistance preparing résumés, interview preparation, and a supervised job search).

► **Post-employment services—including child care and transportation—are more likely to be available to current CalWORKs recipients than to those who leave the program because of increased earnings or those who never sought benefits.**

Families with a connection to social services are more likely to be eligible for job-retention and advancement services than working-poor families with the same household income but no history of receiving cash assistance, food stamps, or Medi-Cal. As increasing numbers of CalWORKs participants begin to encounter time limits, post-employment services for former participants and other low-income working families may become increasingly important.

Next Steps and Need for Further Research

The survey results provide suggestive, but only initial and inconclusive information about the types of job-retention and advancement services that are being provided to CalWORKs participants. We know that pre-employment services and post-employment case management are the primary job-retention and advancement program components in most counties, while other post-employment activities such as mentoring, peer support, and offering financial incentives to recipients who are already working (such as stipends for attending skills-training programs) are less common. Education and training, although widely available, are rarely used as career-advancement tools once a participant has obtained a job.

We cannot draw any solid conclusions about the depth, quality, or effectiveness of the services currently being provided. Many questions, therefore, remain unanswered. For example, because the reported participation rates rely on respondent perceptions rather than actual client-participation data, the survey results do not give us reliable information about how many people are receiving job-retention and advancement services. Nor do the results tell us the depth or intensity of the services provided. Most importantly, we cannot infer from the survey results whether the services being provided boost participants' job retention and wage progression in a cost-effective way.

We will partially address some of these questions in the study's second phase, which will take a more in-depth look at the job-retention and advancement services being provided in at least four counties. The counties will be selected based primarily on an assessment of the promise of their programs and their administrators' willingness to participate in a longer-



term and more rigorous study. Demographic and geographic diversity will also be considered in the selection process. Interviews will be conducted with administrators, program staff, and employers to learn more about the programs being provided. Although the second phase will provide us with more information about service strategies in four counties, a more rigorous impact evaluation would be needed in order to determine whether and to what degree the programs are effective and for whom. The question of program effectiveness will become increasingly important as welfare and workforce agencies in California develop more-comprehensive service strategies to promote job retention and advancement among CalWORKs participants.

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WPRP is a program of the California Policy Research Center in the University of California, Office of the President. Among its legislatively mandated activities, WPRP administers a research grants program to answer welfare-related questions posed by state and local officials.

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This summary was drawn from one of several current studies; the full study will be available as a PDF file in February at www.welfarepolicy-ca.org or may be ordered at (510) 642-7083.

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