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Transitional programs work wonders

Finding work in a lagging economy is tough enough for anyone with a diploma, vocational skills, work experience and a good performance record. Imagine the hurdles people lacking these credentials face.

Michelle, 34, can tell you about this burden first hand. After her home in Waukegan burned down, she moved with her three children to Chicago to try to find new opportunities. She applied everywhere, from large retail stores to doughnut shops, but had no success finding a job. She tried several employment assistance programs and they told her she worked too slowly. And, as if that weren't enough, Michelle couldn't find affordable housing. She ended up moving into a shelter with her kids.

Michelle, sadly, isn't alone. She's part of a growing number of individuals with significant barriers – including learning disabilities, domestic violence, homelessness and inadequate education – who are being left behind as they attempt to get their lives on track. The July 1 cut-off date has come for individuals who have reached their five-year lifetime limit on welfare benefits. These hardest-to-employ individuals face growing pressure to get work. But how does a person with no work experience, no training and multiple barriers find and keep a stable, full-time job?

One proven model for success is transitional jobs programs. For example, the Chicago Heartland Alliance's Transitional Community Service Jobs pilot program is showing that there is hope for the hard-to-employ. It combines on-the-job training, a minimum wage, individually tailored case management and diligent, ongoing coaching and mentoring to prepare participants for – and help them retain – permanent employment.

In spite of the fact that the program works with individuals who are among the hardest to employ, its track record is remarkable. Nearly 80 percent of those who complete the program find permanent jobs. Participants also realize significant growth in earnings – 196 percent, on average, in just six months. And well over half of participants are able to reduce their reliance on welfare; overall, individuals completing transitional jobs and moving to permanent employment achieve a 68 percent reduction in the amount of welfare payments received. Employers are even beginning to prefer transitional program graduates to hires off the street.

More than 40 transitional jobs programs are in place right now in forward-thinking cities and states around the country. But there's no committed, government funding for transitional jobs initiatives and, as a result, the programs are at risk.

Transitional jobs programs work. Transitional jobs must be part of the second wave of reform that Congress will formulate this summer. We urge the Illinois delegation to support a dedicated block grant for transitional jobs programs as part of Congress' funding of temporary assistance for needy families.

Over the last six years, thousands of welfare recipients in Illinois have obtained employment. Yet, there are as many as 50,000 to 100,000 individuals in Illinois – current and former welfare recipients, ex-offenders and others-who, like Michelle, need targeted services before they can successfully navigate the challenges of day-to-day employment. These are people who want to work, but who face barriers that are insurmountable without the help transitional jobs programs provide. The social and economic consequences of ignoring this population are staggering.

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