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DESPITE RECESSION, ‘OPPORTUNITY CHICAGO’ PLACES MORE THAN 5,000 PUBLIC-HOUSING RESIDENTS IN EMPLOYMENT IN FIVE YEARS, EXCEEDING ITS GOAL

Five thousand jobs in five years. That was the goal of workforce development initiative Opportunity Chicago when it set out in 2006 to help 5,000 public housing residents prepare for and find quality employment by 2010. Opportunity Chicago not only met its goal but exceeded it, despite the most challenging economic climate since the Great Depression.

A new report, [*Opportunity Chicago: 2006-2010 - Improving Access to Employment for Public Housing Residents in Chicago*](#), evaluates the work and outcomes of this innovative public-private partnership. Using data analysis and interviews, it explores the various job training and education strategies tested by the five-year initiative as well as Opportunity Chicago’s unique collaborative structure.

Co-founded by The Partnership for New Communities, Chicago Housing Authority and City of Chicago, Opportunity Chicago was a public-private partnership that sought to identify and dismantle the barriers many public housing residents face when seeking employment. The Chicago Jobs Council led and administered the initiative.

“Opportunity Chicago got the right people around the table asking the right questions about why employment had become such a challenge for many public housing residents,” said Maria Hibbs, executive director of The Partnership for New Communities, which concluded last month. “The evaluation’s analysis is tremendously helpful in exploring how well we were able to answer and address some of those questions. Much work remains, but we know that Opportunity Chicago made real headway in improving programs and systems that help low-skilled people prepare for quality jobs.”

The evaluation is replete with lessons about which training strategies and other interventions have proven most effective in connecting public-housing residents to work. Among those is that case management and support services significantly improved participants’ ability to succeed in the job market.

Further, Transitional Jobs, which provide temporary subsidized employment and other supports, show particular promise. A companion report, [*The Promise and Challenge of Transitional Jobs: Opportunity Chicago’s Transitional Jobs Experience*](#), details the initiative’s experience with this workforce training model.

“The outcomes from Transitional Jobs programs were very encouraging and revealed a great deal about what pieces need to be in place to get someone with limited work experience and other employment barriers on the path to a career,” said Charles Woodyard CEO at the Chicago Housing Authority.

The evaluation also explores Opportunity Chicago's efforts to improve the public workforce system, which historically has been poorly structured to support public housing residents. Leaders pushed for inclusion of public housing residents as a priority population in city workforce development programs, and Opportunity Chicago resulted in what the evaluation calls unprecedented levels of collaboration across city agencies, which gives residents easier access to employment services.

In just a few years Opportunity Chicago became a national model for helping public housing residents – as well as other low-skilled, low-income people – overcome hurdles that can make permanent employment difficult. As the economy and employment rates struggle to recover, Opportunity Chicago leaders hope that the lessons shared in this report might aid policymakers and workforce colleagues in meeting challenges in their own communities.

Opportunity Chicago: 2006-2010 - Improving Access to Employment for Public Housing Residents in Chicago can be found at: http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/OC-Evaluation_July2012.pdf

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Opportunity Chicago was a collaborative, citywide effort launched in 2006 to help place 5,000 public housing residents in quality employment in five years. Co-founded by The Partnership for New Communities, Chicago Housing Authority, and the City of Chicago, and [supported by 19 private foundations, corporations, and government entities](#), it has become a national model for housing authority resident services and workforce programming for low-skilled, low-income people. For more information, visit www.cjc.net/opportunity-chicago/.