

Housing Urban Development (HUD)/Workforce Development Grant
Chester Housing Authority/Neighborhood Network Center
Final Report
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I. Introduction

This report summarizes the external evaluation of the Chester Housing Authority's Neighborhood Network Center that was funded through the Housing Urban Development's Workforce Development Grant. The Neighborhood Network Centers (NNC) was funded to provide a workforce development program to public housing residents in the City of Chester (Chester, Pennsylvania). The workforce development program offered an array of courses that included goal setting, literacy, job readiness, and computer technology to both adult and adolescent residents. Chester housing residents (adults & adolescents) had to take part in at least one of the four program components to be eligible to take part in the evaluation (participants were able to take part in the program without taking part in the evaluation). The goal of the program evaluation was to evaluate the effectiveness of the program components, so that the program could improve participants' educational attainment and economic self-sufficiency.

A time-series design with an intent-to-treat sample was planned to measure potential changes in participants' employment intention, economic and financial strain, employment barriers, and sense of mastery before to after the program and then again at 3, 6, and 12-month after program completion from January of 2009 to January of 2012. Quantitative and qualitative measures were used to evaluate change with both adult and adolescent participants. A total of four adult participants took part in the first cohort. For this reason,

quantitative analyses were not performed. Only qualitative data generated from focus groups was used. Additional barriers associated with participant recruitment, varying literacy levels, and the lack of incentives for participation in the program evaluation led to a revision of the original survey and to a modified pretest-posttest design. Although the survey and design were modified, there were unequal groups of participants at pretest and posttest (i.e., less than half of all participants completed posttest surveys). Many participants also skipped questions on either the pretest or the posttest survey. For this reason, statistical inferences were not made, because any detected change would be a result from a Type II error (i.e., finding statistical significance in pretest and posttest differences due to homogeneous limitations). Therefore, the data presented below describes the aggregate data of participants who completed the pretest and the posttest surveys from January of 2009 through June of 2010.

II. Quantitative Data

A. Adult Cohort

A total of 97 adult participants took part in the program evaluation. Four participants were in the first cohort, Eleven were in the second cohort, 20 were in the third cohort, and 52 participants were in the fourth cohort (i.e., less than half ($n=31$) of participants completed the posttest). Of these participants, 22% were male and 78% were female. Most participants were African-American (95%), single (54%) and had an average age of 48 years ($SD=11.52$). Few participants were Caucasian (1%) or Hispanic-American (3%) and either married (12%), widowed (6%), separated (9%), or divorced (19%). Sixty-four percent of participants had a high school diploma or GED and 36% of them had an education beyond (9% had post-secondary education) or less than a high school diploma (27% did not have a high school diploma or

equivalent). Eighteen percent of all participants also reported having some technical or vocational training.

Of these participants, 38% had a full-time employment and another 15% had a part-time employment pattern over the past three-years with a monthly average income of \$608.97 (SD=\$832.56). Thirty-four percent of participants did not have gainful employment over the past three-years. Out of these participants, 23% reported disability and 3% reported being in a controlled environment as reasons for lack of employment. Participants who were currently or previously employed had administrative (9%), small business (9%), skilled-manual (27%), semi-skilled (9%), and unskilled (27%) positions.

Six percent of participants were on probation or parole. Of participants, 12% had reported experiencing conflicts with family members, 8% had conflicts with other people (beyond family), and another 50% had reported experiencing medical problems in the past 90-days. Legal, medical, and family issues may be barriers for identifying and obtaining gainful employment. In addition, housing (44%), medical coverage (55%), and basic needs such as clothing (52%), ability to purchase diapers (53%) or school supplies (50%) were identified by participants as forms of economic strain. Food insufficiency (53%), termination of utilities (42%) or phone service (38%), and potential eviction from an inability to pay rent (56%) were identified by participants as additional sources of economic or financial stress.

Almost all (73%) participants reported experiencing a financial strain and 82% of participants also expected to live with only the bare necessities over the next three-months. Lack of education (55%) or experience (47%), child care (27%), transportation (43%), jobs with too little pay (55%) or without health benefits (60%), and lack of basic (i.e., literacy) (22%) or

computer (57%) skills were identified as participants as factors that contribute to their financial strain. Slightly more than half (55%) of participants reported reading the newspaper to identify employment opportunities. Participants also identified private (67%) or public (56%) employment agencies and networking through friends or family (75%) as additional ways to seek and obtain employment.

Few (16%) participants reported taking part in the workforce development program during the past 14-days. However, out of participants who took part in the program beyond the past 14-days, 16% took part in the job readiness component, 16% took part in the goal setting component, and 19% took part in the computer-training component of the program. Thirty-five percent of participants also reported taking part in meetings to obtain employment and 86% of participants reported using the computer lab at one of Neighborhood Network Centers. Twenty-percent of participants reported continuing to take part in the job readiness program at post-test (i.e., 90 days).

B. Adolescent Cohort

A total of 20 adolescent participants took part in the study. Eleven participants took part in cohort one and nine participants took part in cohort two (i.e., half of participants completed the posttest). Of these participants, 40% were male and 60% were female. Most participants were African-American (88%), resided in a single-parent home (62%), and were an average age of 16.76 (SD=.72). Few participants were Caucasian (6%) or Hispanic-American (6%) and resided with either grandparents (18%), both parents (12%), and other family members (8%). Most (70%) were satisfied with their relationships with family members.

Few (06%) participants were currently employed, but 18% of them were employed in the past three-months. Participants demonstrated knowledge of job-seeking skills. Of these participants, 32% reported that they made a list of all the skills they had, spoke with friends or other contacts (30%), prepared an application or resume (30%), and knew how to make a good impression (49%) to identify and obtain employment. In addition, participants identified the newspaper (45%), networking with family and friends (67%), and visiting potential employers (14%) as additional methods to obtain employment.

Participants identified one's ability to purchase clothing (36%), school supplies (47%), and other personal items (40%) as factors that contribute to their economic strain. Slightly more than half (54%) also noted that their ability to take part in special activities was a source of economic strain or stress. Less than half (34%) of participants felt that it was difficult to live on their household income.

Participants reported that lack of education (30%) or experience (24%), child care (50%), transportation (43%), and lack of basic (60%) or computer (33%) posed as barriers for gainful employment. Fifty-seven took part in the job readiness component, 28% took part in the goal-setting component, and 57% took part in the computer-training component of the workforce development program. Seventy-five percent of participants continued to take part in computer classes and 60% continued to use of the computer labs at the Neighborhood Network Center at post-test (i.e., 90 days after program completion).

III. Qualitative Data

Focus groups were initially designed to be conducted at posttest sessions. However, pretest focus groups were developed and implemented to gather additional data. This data was

used to provide feedback about the program so that the program could be modified to meet participants' needs and further engage them.

A. Adult Participants

1. Pre-Focus Groups

When asked about interest in taking the computer skills course, participants stated they joined simply because they were looking for ways to improve their skills with computers. They wanted to increase confidence and self-growth. They were especially interested in learning how to use the internet in order to use social networking and keep in touch with others, as well as they wanted to learn how to use the computer for business and schoolwork goals.

When asked what computer skill level they had, participants reporting experience levels ranging from none to being able to type and use e-mail, although no one knew how to use office programs such as Microsoft Office. Non-computer related skills that they named were good organization and writing skills.

One student said that her main goal related to computers was to go to school for training as a medical assistant. Another participant said computers could help him to keep in touch with his kids. The participants also reported that they felt the class might assist them because computer skills are required in a modern workplace, "even to be a secretary." One participant said that she traded computer skills with her grandchildren and hoped that the computer course would be helpful to them and her.

The student who hoped to become a medical assistant said that she did not expect the course to help her with learning medical programs, but that she was satisfied with learning more about the basics of operating a computer.

Resources that they were interested in included being able to come to a computer lab at any time of day as a matter of convenience. There was also interest in morning classes.

2. Post-Focus Groups

Participants reported many practical benefits they received from taking the computer training class, including the ability to use search engines to research topics important to them, such as recipes and health issues, as well the advantages computer skills offer when trying to manage a small business. They also reported less tangible benefits such as personal growth, resulting in greater self-esteem. The participants said that attending the course offered them a positive place to go where they could learn something new and meet more people. They valued learning how to access the Internet, saying that it was a great source of information and a way to meet others with similar goals. One participant said that her new skills had already earned her a job interview.

Participants suggested that the classes should be available to people outside the community. They expressed interest in having classes be available during both the morning and evening to expand options for people who were busy for much of the day, with the option for Participants to drop in on either class. They noted that they would appreciate longer classes, giving them more time to practice their skills. Other suggestions included a shuttle for transportation, computer access for those without access to one at home, and a smaller class size.

The participants reported that their favorite aspects of the course were meeting new friends and the cooperation between everyone in the class. They also noted that the course's location in the Chester Learning Center, in central Chester, was convenient. One participant

cited that she benefited from the instructor's patience, helpfulness, and effort to give all members individual attention and instruction. Participants suggested that classes at night might offer more flexibility. The participants suggested that colorful flyers were the advertisements that would be most likely to attract their interest to the course. They said that listing what topics would be covered would be beneficial. They said that sign-up should be easy, a schedule should be provided at the start of the course, and that during inclement weather, and participants should be notified whether class will be held or not.

When asked how attending the computer course affected their career goals, the participants said that they felt more confident. One participant who did not know how to turn on a computer when she began the course said that that now she felt comfortable performing basic tasks like signing in and out and using e-mail. The participants also said that they felt the computer course would help to advance their career goals and was useful in general.

The participants said that the entire content of the course was helpful to them. One student said that others should enroll in the course to learn and make productive use of time. One said that her friends and family already possessed computer skills but could now come to her with questions of their own. Some skills that they listed as most valuable were creating an e-mail address, knowing how to get online, and knowing strategies for blocking children from unsafe sites. Participants said that this course assisted their confidence in dealing with computers.

The course also had benefits outside of computer skills. The goal-setting program held in conjunction with the course helped Participants to set goals for themselves. A participant said that this program taught how to use time and gather initiative for her goals, and that now she

was more confident about attempting things that she might want to do. Another participant said that she had learned to communicate if there was a problem, rather than silently letting it escalate.

The instructor, Beth, was praised because she took the time to help with any problems or misunderstandings, never got angry or impatient with the participants, and left the participants confident in their own abilities and trusting in her ability and willingness to help them.

B. Adolescents

1. Pre-Focus Groups

The participants said that the program could benefit them because it was difficult for them to find jobs and they hoped the program could help them with this. They listed some of their skills as being good at athletics, singing, and hairdressing. They said that money was the principle reason they would be interested in a job. Jobs they listed as desirable were professional baseball player and business owner.

They felt the course could help them by giving them an idea of opportunities in the workforce and greater familiarity with what a job might be like. They felt that the course as a whole would be useful to them.

2. Post-Focus Groups

The participants said that they found the program to be complete, and did not suggest ways that it could be improved. The participants said that the main benefit they experienced was getting some financial experience and being able to observe role models.

The main obstacle that was reported was that participants experienced peer pressure to avoid getting a job or putting any effort into school. They said that the best way to get around

this was to try reversing peer pressure, being self-reliant, and working hard when trying to get a job. Many participants had difficulty finding employment. One participant worked at a small business and another was a lifeguard for the YMCA. Participants maintained employment through treating their jobs seriously, making time for the job, and getting job experience.

IV. Evaluation Summary

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that adult participants had a great deal of both economic and financial stress, family conflict, and medical problems at the beginning of the program. However, most of them identified job seeking skills associated with best practice models for gainful employment. Participants set personal or educational goals to acquire employment. Participants' goals were associated with gaining computer skills. The program was successful at providing computer skill classes to assist participants. The program incorporated participant feedback about personal challenges to attend these courses such as the time of classes, transportation, childcare, and other logistical issues. The incorporation of participant feedback may have further engaged them in taking part in the program and their continued participation in additional classes and use of the computer labs at the Neighborhood Network Center at follow-up.

Similar results were detected with adolescent participants. Adolescent participants described economic hardships, identified job seeking skills associated with best practice models, and the necessity of acquiring computer skills for attainment of educational and employment goals. Almost all of them continued to take part in computer classes and to use of the computer labs at the Neighborhood Network Center at follow-up. The computer classes, Neighborhood Network Center, and role models were key components of the program.

Despite the mentioned benefits, there were some limitations associated with this program. First and foremost, participants presented with different literacy and computer skills (although different levels of computer classes were added to meet participants' needs). Basic and computer skills should be assessed prior to offering courses. Additional vocational and technical courses should be offered. These suggestions would assist participants' educational and personal goals. Second, the use of surveys and focus groups does not prevent participant bias in written materials. There is the potential for testing and social-desirability effects to be associated with participant responses that were collected with multiple methods at different points in time. Third and finally, there were unequal groups of participants who took part in the pretest and the posttest survey. The lack of incentives for participation in these survey sessions may have contributed to the low response rates at posttest.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion and despite the mentioned limitations of this research, the program was successful in designing and implementing a workforce development program for residents who reside in the Chester Housing Authority in the City of Chester. The use of participant feedback to improve the program and then actually modifying it to meet participants' needs was a key factor for engaging participants. Program instructors, flexible hours and location, and the content of the computer courses were also critical components in fostering engagement among both adult and adolescent participants. Moreover, program instructors served as a role model for adolescent participants. The relationships between instructors and participants, as well as those that developed among participants may have also influenced participants to continue to take part in the program. It appears that these relationships served as support, which in turn

enhanced participants' confidence and their ability to set personal goals. Finally, the computer component appears to be the key element of the workforce development program that was beneficial to participants. Most participants continued to take part in computer classes and almost all of them continued to use the computer labs at the Neighborhood Network Center at posttest.

Respectfully submitted,

Lori Simons, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
Social Science Division
Widener University
One University Place
Chester, PA 19013-5792