

Seattle Jobs Initiative

Seattle Jobs Initiative and Neighborhood House Vocational English as a Second Language Project

Three-Year Evaluation



Written by Seattle Jobs Initiative

Seattle Jobs Initiative/Neighborhood House Vocational English as a Second Language Project

3 year evaluation

Introduction

The diverse cultural and social backgrounds represented in White Center, along with the area's sizeable and growing immigrant population, make this part of King County unique. A demographic comparison of White Center residents with King County residents as a whole illustrates the distinctive character of the area. White Center residents are more likely to be multi-racial.¹ Moreover, according to the 2000 Census, White Center residents are more likely to be foreign born (27% compared to 15%), and those who are foreign-born are less likely to be U.S. Citizens.

The large immigrant population in White Center possesses a wide range of language and communication skills, employment skills, and other economic and social barriers. Twice as many residents report a language other than English as the primary language spoken at home than King County residents as a whole (36% v. 18%). At the same time, White Center families earned roughly a third less on average than King County families², with twice as many White Center families falling below the federal poverty level (12% v. 5%). Residents are also less likely to have any post secondary education: 58% of the population 25 and older are high school graduates or less, compared to only 29% of King County residents.

For the large number of White Center residents with either no or low-level English skills, acclimating culturally and securing employment that can support themselves and their families represents a significant challenge. Limited language skills and education, combined with the likelihood that many of these families are also low-income, means that many individuals are less likely to find jobs that pay decent family supporting wages, and are therefore less likely to be able to cover the mounting expenses of basic needs like housing, transportation and child care. In order to make the connection to jobs that support themselves and their families, skills training and support services are essential to these individuals.

The Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL) program offered to White Center residents through Neighborhood House is a program that seeks to accomplish just this. The VESL program aims to empower low-income White Center residents through a combination of vocationally-oriented English language training and literacy services to provide the skills residents need to support themselves and their families. This includes place-based employment training, job placement and retention services, and continuing opportunities for skill development. At the same time, the program recognizes the challenges and barriers specific to this population, and aims to address these barriers by offering access to a variety of case management services and supports as individuals work toward their language and employment goals.

This report examines the effectiveness of the first three years of the Neighborhood House VESL employment and training program for White Center residents, with special attention given to the issues identified by participants and case managers as significant barriers to securing training and employment and their assessment of the VESL program's effectiveness. A brief review and evaluation of the On-Site

¹ Seattle/King County Making Connections. A Profile of White Center.

² U.S. Census 2000 – White Center CDP Median family income: \$43,038; King County Median family income: \$66,035.

Vocational English as a Second Language program at Highline Medical Center and its partnership with Neighborhood House is also included. Policy recommendations are offered based on input from participants and program staff in conjunction with research on larger systemic issues affecting the target population.

Data & Methodology

Data for this report was culled from a variety of sources. Quantitative information for SJI clients in the Neighborhood House VESL program enrolled between 2005 and 2007 was pulled from SJI’s JOBSTAT MIS system, which houses demographic, training, placement and retention information for all participants. In addition, language ability scores, as well as information on program funding and staffing, were provided by Neighborhood House.

Qualitative information on clients’ opinions of program effectiveness, employer satisfaction with the quality of placements, and insight into both client and program effectiveness/success were garnered through focus groups and individual interviews with staff, employers, instructors, and participants.

Funding

Funding for the first three years of the project totaled \$285,000. It was provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation-sponsored Making Connections project, the United Way Venture Fund, the Seattle Foundation, and Seattle Jobs Initiative. English as a Second Language (ESL) instructional staff are currently paid for and provided by Highline Community College at the Greenbridge Housing Community.

Staffing

Neighborhood House, a century-old, place-based social and employment services provider, is the focal point for service delivery. The VESL project is staffed by 7 Neighborhood House staff who work wholly or in part on the project, including the program director, one VESL instructor, one program manager, and two part-time case managers. There are also support staff, one of whom enters data into SJI’s JobStat MIS. Staff totaled to 1.85 FTE in 2005, increasing to 2.35 and 2.8 for 2006 and 2007, respectively.

Neighborhood House VESL Project Staff			
	2005	2006	2007
Personnel	FTE	FTE	FTE
Case Manager	0.8	1	1.25
Career Developer	-	0.1	0.1
VESL Instructor	0.65	0.65	0.65
Program Manager/Director	0.3	0.4	0.5
Data Mgmt./IS Support	0.1	0.2	0.3
FTE Total	1.85	2.35	2.8

While the project is led jointly by SJI and Neighborhood House, other organizations also involved in the Making Connections project help deliver specialized training to White Center residents, including the YWCA, International District Housing Authority (IDHA), Airport Jobs, Public Health – Seattle & King County, and Washington State Department of Social & Health Services.

Program Structure

The VESL program was started to strengthen employment outcomes for limited English speaking clients who live in the White Center area of King County, and is designed to take advantage of studies that demonstrate improved training and employment outcomes when language training has a vocational focus.³ Since many of the participants need immediate employment, the program emphasizes quick job placement, ideally followed by opportunities to move onto career tracks that allow for long-term advancement.

Coursework involves intensive up-front language training, focusing on fundamental words and phrases useful in a variety of entry-level positions for basic industry-specific interactions, as well as workplace problem-solving techniques and employability skills, including time management, health and safety, customer service, and workplace culture. Job readiness training is the major focus of training, and is therefore woven into the entire curriculum.

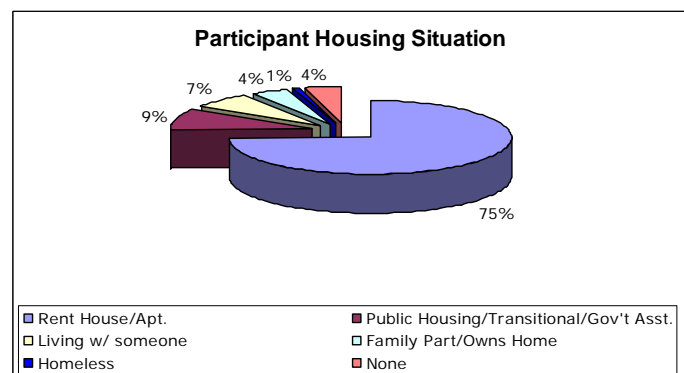
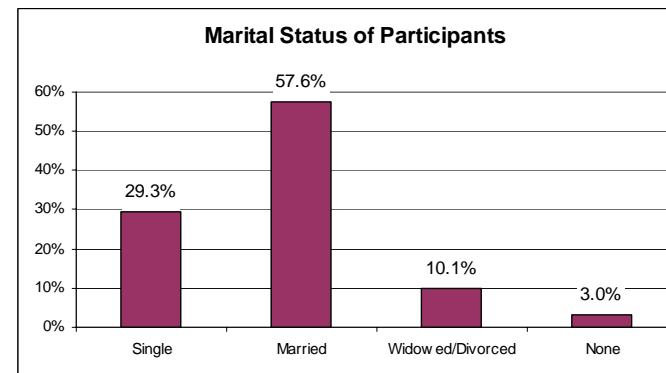
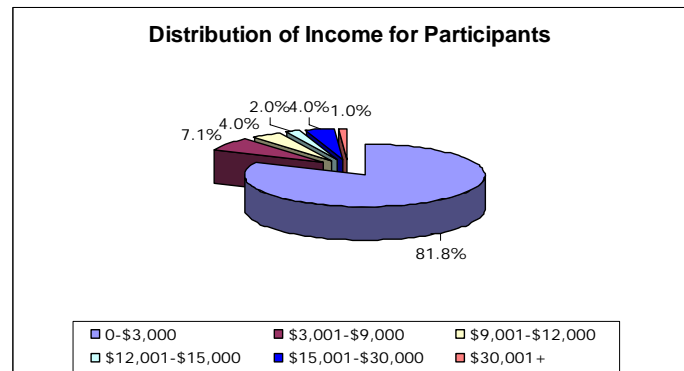
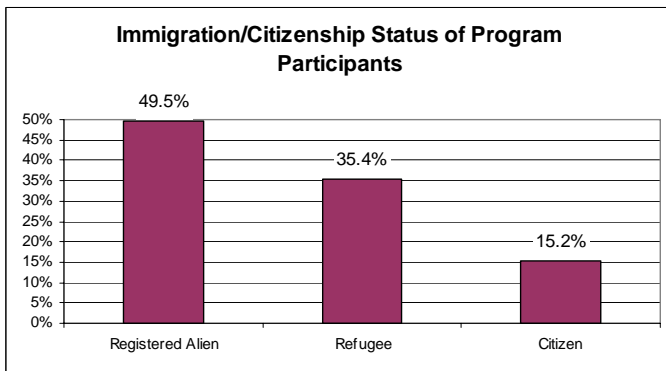
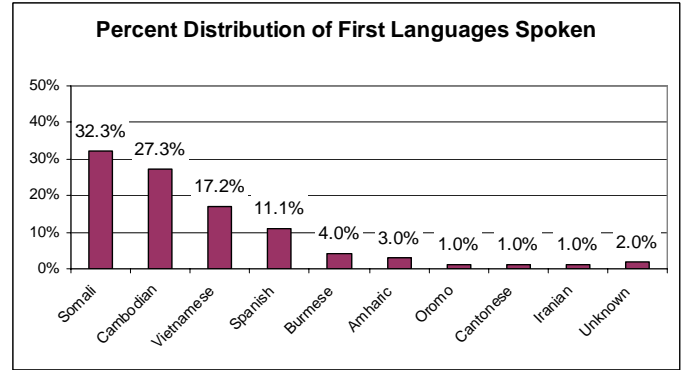
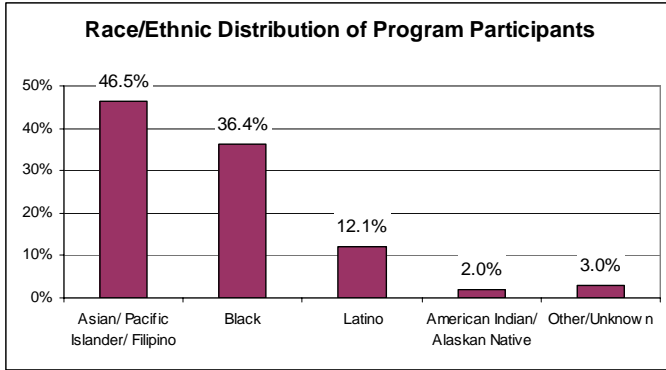
The program originally started with a 10-week training program for SJI job seekers, with full vocational contextualized language instruction as part of a larger janitorial training. To increase retention in the program, a module format was adopted in 2006, whereby participants could join training at any time, taking the requisite 4 weeks of training at times that fit their schedules. This new format also dropped the hands-on vocational training, but continued to train for the vocational terminology central to the language skills piece, alongside the other components of job readiness training. This new format provided more flexibility, allowing participants a more individualized experience and access to work opportunities as needed. In its current iteration, the program consists of 10 weeks of training at 12 hours per week – 3 hours of instruction over 4 days, as well as a makeup lab for individuals to take advantage of.

Participants interviewed reported that they learned about the program primarily through word of mouth – either through family or friends who had been through the program themselves. Others reported learning about the program through outreach materials, such as flyers and local postings.

Program Participant Profile

The largest race or ethnic group among participants in the VESL program is Asian, followed by Black (of African decent) and Latinos. The most common first languages spoken by participants are Somali, Cambodian, and Vietnamese. The majority of participants in the first 3 years of the program have been recent immigrants, with almost half being resident aliens of varying immigration status, and more than a third having refugee status. The majority of participants reported renting their current home or apartment. Fifty-eight percent reported being married, while over half – 56% - have lived in households with at least one child (data not shown). The average age of participants has been 38 years old, with ages ranging from 19 to 68. Average income of participants pre-program has been very low, with 82% of participants reporting income of less than \$3000 annually.

³ For a Washington state-specific review, see *I-BEST: A Program Integrating Adult Basic Education and Workforce Training*, Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, December 2005.

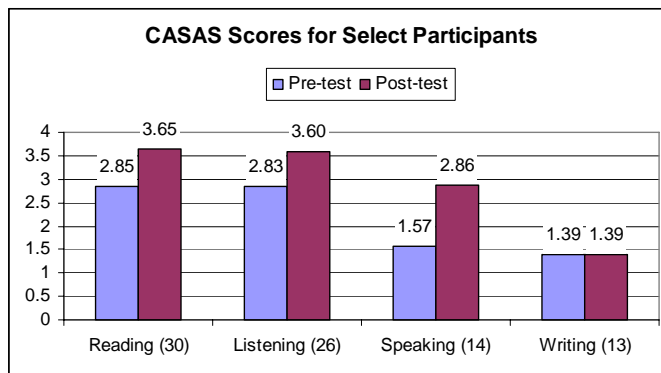


The VESL program has also served a range of participants in terms of language abilities. As one instructor noted, a given class can range from students who have never sat in a classroom before to students who are already equipped with basic language skills and are ready for job search assistance, such as developing a resume. The majority of participants start at beginning levels of English language proficiency. The average starting language level for most of the program participants is relatively low, primarily CASAS levels 1 and 2. In general, participants have minimal ability to communicate in English, recognizing solely basic words and phrases.

Program Results: Language Improvements, Placement & Retention

As stated above, the majority of participants enter the program with very low language skills, with average CASAS scores between 1 and 2. Students are CASAS-tested again at the end of their participation to measure language gains. The following chart shows CASAS scores at pre- and post-test for a select group of individuals where scores were available for both time points. While writing ability seems to have been

stagnant for these individuals, significant gains are apparent in speaking, listening and reading skills of participants.



Program participants are placed in a variety of entry-level jobs, with program requirements dictating the standards of these placements. Neighborhood House job placements must currently meet the following standards⁴:

- 30 or more hours per week
- Employer-provided medical benefits within 6 months
- Expected to last more than 6 months
- For 2005, starting wages must be at least \$8.00.
- For 2006 and 2007⁵, starting wages must be at least \$8.50

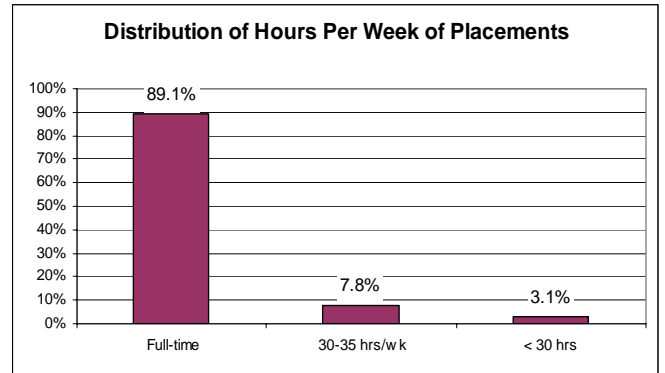
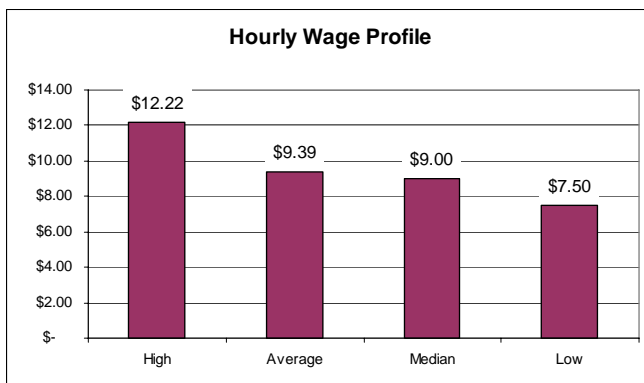
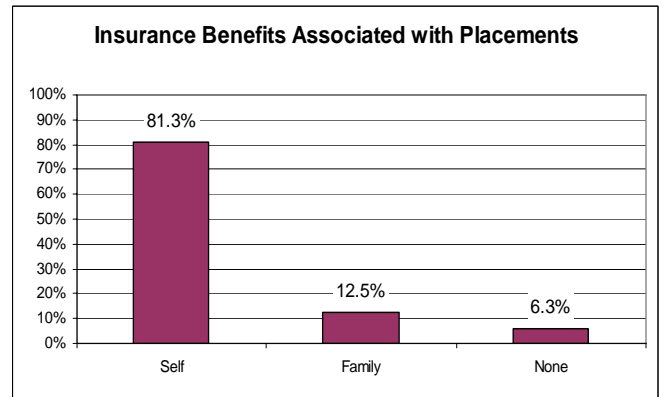
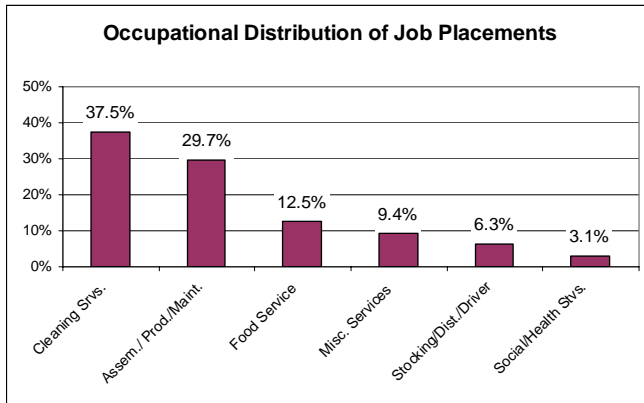
For participants who enrolled in 2005, 19 out of 23 participants who completed the training were placed in jobs – a rate of 83%. In the second year, all 22 completions were placed. Not surprising, due to the nature of the employment and economic environment in 2007, total placements remained the same, even with a larger number of participants completing the program, resulting in a 62% placement rate.

	Enrollments	Completions	Placements	Placement Rate
2005	30	23	19	82%
2006	26	22	22	100%
2007	46	37	23	62%
TOTAL	102	82	64	78%

Placements are heavily weighted towards cleaning services, including housekeeping and janitorial services, which makes up more than 1 in every 3 job placements over the 3 years examined. The next largest set of jobs is in assembly, production or maintenance occupations. The average hourly wage for placements across the 3 years examined was \$9.39. Almost 90 percent of the job placements to date in the program have been full-time, with 94% providing some form of employer-based insurance benefits, either exclusively for the employee or covering his or her family as well.

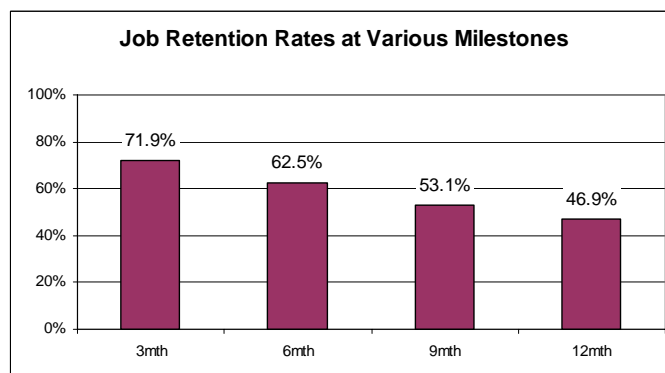
⁴ The agency is allowed to place a certain number of individuals in occupations that do not meet these criteria. Specifically, 25% of placements in 2005 could qualify for exception, making less than \$8.00 but more than minimum wage (\$7.35 in 2005), or taking a position that is less than 30 hrs per week if they are working more than one job and the average wage from both jobs is at least \$8.00. Similar exceptions were allowed for 2006 and 2007, though the substandard placement rate decreased to 15%, and the minimum wage standard increased to \$8.00.

⁵ 2007 included 2 separate starting cohorts. For 1 cohort, \$8.50 was the minimum placement wage for all, for the other, 50% of placements had to have a starting wage of \$8.50, while the other 50% had a minimum starting wage of \$9.00.



All participants are tracked for one year post-job placement, with support services provided by Neighborhood House throughout. The retention activities conducted by Neighborhood House include maintaining contact with participants and continuing to work with participants to solve emerging problems (e.g. lack of child care) that may affect employment. Support services are provided for participants throughout this year. Frequency of contact post-placement varies by need (as determined at the placement interview). As is common with many retention efforts, though most clients do respond to case managers' outreach efforts and continued assistance with job retention and advancement, some do not or are impossible to locate.

The following chart demonstrates the job retention rates for program job placements over the 2005-07 period. Most notably, after 9 months, 53% report continued employment. Since retention is defined by a combination of employment, wage and hour standards, and benefits, some people may still be working but not count for positive retention.



Unfortunately, due to the often low-skill entry-level nature of many of these jobs, wage progression and career advancement opportunities are minimal within the first 12 months of employment. Many of the jobs participants obtain are low paying, have few opportunities to advance, and are in difficult environments. Statistics for clients reveal very few cases of increases in wages during the first year of employment. In general, the likelihood of beginning level limited English job seekers, many of whom are in their first U.S. jobs, to experience wage or job progression is low.

Barriers

Despite the fact that participants are enthusiastic to learn new skills and find sustainable employment, for many, personal and systemic issues continue to create barriers to success in both the program and in job placement and retention. For many participants, the most significant barriers to both successful training and job placement are child care and transportation. Other issues related to housing and health care also arise. In many cases, emotional barriers may surface during training, such as issues related to domestic violence or refugee experiences. When these issues surface, both instructors and case managers are quick to help identify appropriate supports so that individuals can continue to pursue their language and employment goals.

The support services provided by Neighborhood House and other service providers in the community are essential to the success of program participants while in training, during job search and job retention. Still, while some participants are able to juggle the issues they face with help from family, friends, and/or additional resources provided by Neighborhood House and SJI, for others these issues become overwhelming in a matter of weeks. For those who are able to obtain child care, in some cases that care may not be culturally competent and sensitive to the wishes and needs of the parents. In other instances, it is the parents, in particular single mothers, who are strained by the time away from their kids. Case managers have found that in these cases it is difficult to retain students in training for longer periods of time.

A larger, policy-related barrier to the child care issue is the fact that, while SJI's program covers participants in White Center, Seattle-sanctioned child care programs do not reach into this section of unincorporated King County. This leaves parents with few options for care that are both affordable and accessible. And, as one program manager noted, even if child care were more accessible, more funding is required to meet the care needs of participants. Ideally, smaller, local multicultural and multilingual child care facilities would provide the accessibility needed by participants to juggle training and child care needs.

Transportation barriers include access and availability. While the place-based nature of the program provides the opportunity for many White Center residents to take advantage of services close to home, for many, participation still requires the use of either public transportation or their own vehicle. This issue becomes more salient once a participant is placed into a job, in some cases further from home and harder to get to via public transit. It is also a difficult reality for those who may be employed in occupations that require working non-traditional work schedules (swing and graveyard shifts). Neighborhood House strives to address these transportation issues by helping participants obtain a driver's license, providing gas vouchers to assist with the sometimes prohibitive costs of driving, and offering bus passes for access to public transportation.

Finally, cultural differences in approaches to education and training present a barrier for some participants. Many students enter training with little experience with formal education in the Western sense. As one instructor noted, some of the skills required to succeed in training, such as timely arrival and being prepared with the appropriate

supplies (notebooks, pens, etc.), are unfamiliar concepts to individuals who have not had contact with Western education system and its expectations.

Program Design

Staffing

A significant concern of Neighborhood House staff throughout the implementation of the VESL program has been around issues of turnover in both instructors and case managers. Part of the difficulty in staffing was the need to accommodate for many languages on a very limited budget, while maintaining both productivity and consistency for both staff and students in terms of program effectiveness and delivery of support services. While program participants interviewed did not report negative results due to staff turnover, consistency remains a key element of program effectiveness.

VESL program staff were also challenged by the demands associated with the high-touch nature of the relationships desired between case managers and their clients. Case managers were often working with clients from multiple programs at Neighborhood House, creating a heavy workload that required significant travel within and beyond the White Center area to address their clients' multiple needs. This resulted in limited time spent with any individual client. In addition, the program has gone through changes in delivery and services as it has matured in its first years. Again, while participants did not report this as an issue, it remains a reality of the work for the majority of program staff.

Finally, staff reported some issue with the data-heavy processing of SJI clients. Fortunately, Neighborhood House is able to staff a data analyst who takes on the brunt of the work. Otherwise, this task would be delegated to case managers, who are already stretched thin.

Curriculum & Class Structure

There is a paucity of ESL programs which cater to low-level basic language skills. Further, though some ESL programs exist in a variety of formats, the Neighborhood House model works, according to both staff and participants, because of its high touch approach. Participants report that the support provided throughout the program from both Neighborhood House staff and support services agency staff is a significant reason for their success.

A major hurdle for any ESL program is the reality that language training often becomes a last priority for job seekers who need to work, resulting in high attrition rates. Another significant barrier for this population is the prohibitive nature of the original 10-week model in which the program was administered. The reality for many of these individuals is that they must return to work before they are able to complete a full 10-week cycle. Recognizing that balancing when language gains happened for clients – at roughly the 4-5 week point – and the reality of employment needs for this population led to the modification in the program delivery structure into its present module format.

Instructors found that the real-world application of language acquisition through workplace content and jobs skills is a key element to the success of program participants. In addition, the basic life skills piece that is inherent in all the training is extremely valuable. Participants are not only taught the basic language skills needed for obtaining and performing a job, but also essential skills for self-sufficiency.

In some cases, the requirements of the course structure became difficult to administer to participants. For instance, one instructor reported that the mandated cover letter writing portion of the curriculum, while a valuable skill for some, is a challenge to incorporate into the class because of its inapplicability to the work and jobs participants are likely to go into, at least initially.

Limitations based on initial funding allotments meant that the program had to function under certain constraints, most notably in terms of the single classroom format. Both instructors and students noted that the blended nature of the class has some impact on the capacity to address everyone's language and skill needs. Staff noted that the more advanced students were more likely to become disinterested in the basic skills components. Further, in trying to address the varied abilities of participants, instructors reported difficulty in being as effective as they'd like in terms of instruction. Instructors suggested that a potentially more effective program might include level-focused courses to provide more specialized programming for clients who share common characteristics. This format has since been adopted, due to leveraged funding from sources outside of SJI, including Highline Community College and LEP Pathways.

Partnerships & Supports

Due to the potentially significant barriers participants and their families face to successful training and employment, the varied partnerships and supports available through Neighborhood House have been extremely helpful.

A significant partnership to note is the very successful one between Highline Community College and Neighborhood House. The ability of Highline Community College to pay for and provide language instruction for both the Neighborhood House and Highline Medical Center programs has allowed for more instructional support and larger capacity for participants.

Other partnerships help to bolster the success of the Neighborhood House VESL program. For example, the Port of Seattle provides opportunities for participants to gain additional interview skills through its Interview Preparation class, as well as providing access to other employment services at the airport. The YWCA provides short-term computer instruction at its computer lab, and Seattle Public Library regularly sends someone to show the class how to obtain a library card and what additional language services are available at various branches. Public Health-Seattle & King County provides instruction on workplace safety. Many participants are sent to PortJobs for an Interview Preparation class as well as to employment services available at the airport itself. The International District Housing Authority provides financial literacy classes for SJI participants. Neighborhood House has also been contracting with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Pathways, which

Highline Medical Center On-Site VESL Training

Initiated by Neighborhood House as an opportunity to bridge the skills needs of a large local employer and the language needs of its workforce and community, the Highline Medical Center On-Site VESL training serves as an example of an experimental partnership for the South Seattle region between local education, social service and employment resources. Highline Medical Center (HMC) has put into place an on-site vocational English as a second language program specific to the medical workplace. In addition to language training instruction provided by Highline Community College, participants are offered on-site career counseling and case management through Neighborhood House. Funding for this program is provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The majority of participants in the HMC VESL program are existing Highline Medical Center Nutritional and Environmental Services department employees, with others coming from other nursing and volunteer positions. Participants are a mix of both employees that have been encouraged by supervisors to attend the training, employees who have heard through fellow staff about the training, and employees who were encouraged to participate based on initial contact with the Neighborhood House case manager available on-site. They represent a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, and bring with them a variety of language abilities and tenures at Highline Medical center.

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provides English language training and employment services to WorkFirst clients. The program allows clients to combine WorkFirst services with up to 20 hours per week of ESL instruction. Many SJI participants take advantage of this additional language skills training and support services. This partnership has been a good addition in providing resources for WorkFirst clients in White Center.

Employment Connections – Placement & Retention

Neighborhood House staff use a variety of employer outreach strategies to help place program participants in jobs. As part of determining jobs that are both a good fit and a family-supporting opportunity, information about wages, application processes, and qualitative aspects of the jobs are garnered by staff. A better fit ultimately translates into greater opportunity for employee satisfaction and job retention.

The Career Developer uses a variety of methods to engage employers, link participants to appropriate good jobs, and optimize retention for both parties:

- familiarizing participants with careers and pathway potentials;
- organizing quarterly client job fairs with employers;
- site visits for participants to employer sites to meet with staff and tour work locations;
- bringing employers in regularly to talk to students about available jobs, desired skills and career pathway potential;
- internship opportunities;
- on-going regular check-ins with employers and placed participants.

A network of employers has been created to ensure that opportunities are available for clients in a variety of entry-level positions. To help to strengthen placement rates, an SJI employment broker is assisting Neighborhood House case managers to develop employer contacts. Employers targeted by the program have changed and expanded over time, mirroring changes in those

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Training is made available to any interested staff in the afternoons at two different campuses. Afternoons were chosen as the most ideal operating time to capture employees interested in participating either at the end of morning shifts or at the beginning of evening shifts. The specialty campus of HMC houses the beginner level language skills course for students testing below level 2 CASAS, while the main HMC campus houses the intermediate level course for students testing above level 2 CASAS.

Instruction is provided by Highline Community College ESL staff, and therefore follows the college quarter system. Neighborhood House staff worked closely with Highline Community College instructors to develop a curriculum that was appropriate for both the medical profession and for limited English speakers.

Though attendance is not mandatory, staff report that there is a significant commitment by participants to the training. Both center staff and case managers report that the class is greatly appreciated by participating employees, and hopes are that this is a program that can be maintained and potentially grown.

Like the program at Neighborhood House, a significant barrier for participants in this training, which is undertaken in addition to their current employment, centers around the issue of child care. While participants have been able to coordinate appropriate services around their current work schedule, the additional time away translates into a need for more flexible hours in child care and potential added expense to the employee.

One of the bigger logistical difficulties reported by HMC staff and case managers in operationalizing this program was scheduling. Finding a time that fit around the varied needs of department staffing, quarterly academic instruction and personal release time issues meant that no one time would be sufficient for all interested parties. This issue is complicated further by the difficulty experienced in coordinating with Highline Community College to secure an instructor.

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employers willing to employ program graduates with limited language skills. Currently, employers include companies representing various grocery and hotel chains, as well as those based at the Sea-Tac airport.

The program has made great strides in guiding its employer base through a much greater understanding of the limited English job seeker and the cultural competency that goes along with working with them. Many employers recognize the value of continued language training as part of a retention strategy. Realizing the difficulties of finding workers with the desired skills, employers are starting to offer ESL training on-site as a means of holding on to their workforce. One example of such an opportunity is the Highline Medical Center On-Site VESL Training program. A significant employer connection has been the targeted partnership between Neighborhood House and Highline Medical Center. This relationship has bloomed into an ongoing partnership that provides on-site language training to medical center employees.

Ultimately, the connections created with employers who support the program by hiring participants can be strengthened. As one case manager noted, it is key that more employers understand that the participants are people who truly want to work. One suggestion to strengthen the bridge between training and job placement is to create a more hands-on, interactive employer piece as part of the training - such as a shortened version of an internship - where employers can see the eagerness of program participants to work, and where participants can get a better understanding of the work involved, the workplace environment, and employer expectations.

The same disconnect between the completion language abilities for students and the levels of competency desired by many employers still exists. This has presented a challenge for the program in finding jobs that are both accessible to program participants and that provide a family-wage. In part, continued efforts to strengthen relationships with employers as well as expose them to a deeper understanding of the abilities and eagerness of these individuals are essential in maintaining opportunities for program participants.

Certain elements of the job search and hiring process are considered non-negotiable for employers looking to fill openings in their workforce. These issues result in

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Both supervisors and case managers report a variety of positive outcomes for participants of the on-site VESL program at HMC. Along with recorded language gains and wage progression, increased confidence and ability of participants to communicate effectively with coworkers has translated into measurable improvements in worker safety, a stronger sense of workplace community, and better communication between supervisors and employees regarding standards of performance.

In a few cases, participants have been able to apply their new found skills and language confidence as they move up career ladders within the Medical Center. For instance, one individual has moved from a housekeeping position onto Certified Nursing Assistant training and placement, and hopes to continue on into a Registered Nurse position.

All parties involved report that this has been a great partnership. Highline Medical Center considers its diverse employee population to be one of its greatest assets, and therefore values the additional services and expertise this program brings to its campus to help empower its employees. This gesture on management's part is a positive step for labor relations between staff and the Center. The increased sense of community between employees who have participated in the program has created a support network that is valuable to a positive work environment. While there is still room for improvement, HMC views the partnership with Neighborhood House as a very positive one, and hopes to see the program continued and expanded. ■

sometimes significant barriers for the program participant, even after they've received the relevant basic life and job readiness skills. The application process for some employers can be complicated. Many participants, even after they have successfully completed the interview and application process, are presented with difficult job readiness situations. For instance, one case manager noted that for some jobs, higher language proficiency levels are required due to safety requirements on the job. Though efforts are made to prepare participants for these situations through job readiness training, interview coaching, and employer input around employment expectations, the challenges are still a significant reality for these job applicants. Further, a waning economy means a harder time finding available opportunities. While many participants may continue training while in job search, the realities of a difficult job market can become burdensome.

A larger barrier that many low-income job seekers have faced over the last year is the softening of the economy in general and the market for entry-level labor specifically. Many participants who have been in the United States for many years already have found it relatively easy to find work without significant language training. But the realities of a faltering economy have disheartened many. Participants continue to search eagerly for employment but are finding themselves, despite taking the appropriate steps in their job search, becoming disillusioned. With many already having a history of being unable to find stable work, these realities begin to quickly erode their confidence. As the economy worsens, case managers are finding that there are fewer employers willing to hire applicants with lower language abilities.

Neighborhood House staff and SJI continue to work together to involve employers that are engaged and interested in the building of their workforce through outreach and engagement efforts. It continues to be a challenge to find employers that understand the nature of the workforce training system. In addition, some case managers report that there remain only a few employers who are sensitive to issues of cultural competency when working with a diverse population like the one served by this program.

Continued Training, Education & Career Pathways

According to Neighborhood House staff, roughly 80% of program participants report that once they get placed in a job, they want to continue language training and are interested in pursuing furthering schooling as well. Still, once employed, the difficulty of keeping a job while continuing any kind of training, even if on-site, on top of individual barriers faced, presents an ongoing hurdle. The added strain of working plus training on a participant's family in terms of time and resources is still prohibitive. For others, the nature of their jobs (e.g., graveyard shift) leaves little opportunity to pursue further training, even if all other barriers are manageable.

A reality of many of the low-skill entry-level jobs secured by participants is that options are limited in terms of advancement. Many of these occupations do not have a clear career pathway associated with them, and therefore employees may find it difficult to rise out of such jobs based on work experience and wage progression. Rather, they are more likely required to return to school for additional training to upgrade skills so that they can find higher skill opportunities that are linked into more transparent career pathways.

For those interested in continuing their learning process at the local community college with additional language training, the same barriers apply. For one participant, the combined nature of timing of classes and the availability and cost of child care became a difficult hurdle. For another participant who completed the program and was placed at an employer that offers evening ESL classes, the issue of safety – returning home at night as a woman - made it difficult and even uncomfortable to continue training. The same participant reported that she would consider morning classes at the local community college, but would be unable to

afford the child care necessary to do so. For another participant, while training has led to a job, going back to school is still a goal. The link for this participant to get back to school will be his ability to become financially stable enough to afford additional training.

For those individuals interested and able to continue on to the next levels of training, there are limited level-appropriate opportunities available. The next logical step for many would be to matriculate into a community college I-BEST program. Most I-BEST programs, however, report that they are not suitable for low-level ESL students, with the typical student being at level 4. The disconnect between the language levels achieved by community programs like this one and the lowest language levels served by the community college system create a void for those wanting to continue to improve their language abilities.

Independence, Confidence and Gratitude

Despite the current economic conditions making employment opportunities that much more rare for this population, many participants report having greater confidence in their abilities to maneuver beyond their own homes, more independence in their work and social interactions, pride in their increased knowledge and language improvement, and sincere gratitude to the program and providers who have supported their journey and success. Participation in the program for many translates into an infusion of confidence, both in their abilities to perform their jobs and in their level of comfort in general interactions with English speakers. They share their success with others, and encourage family, neighbors and friends to use this local resource as a means to advance their skills and obtain jobs.

Policy Issues & Recommendations

The above evaluation presents great insight into larger policy issues that may exacerbate certain barriers for this population. The following section attempts to outline the broader system policy issues within which these barriers exist, and provides recommendations on areas where these policies can be improved upon.

Increasing Accessibility to Culturally Appropriate Child Care

As mentioned, a significant systemic issue for many families interested in participating in language and job skills training is the availability and accessibility of adequate, affordable and flexible child care. While efforts like the White Center Early Learning Initiative, funded by grants from Thrive by Five Washington and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, aim to improve the amount, accessibility and quality of child care through supports and resources directed to providers in White Center, there remains a paucity of smaller local multicultural and multilingual child care facilities that are desired by the participants of programs like this one. Further, such child care settings need to be flexible in terms of the hours required by parents who are working second- or third-shifts, taking evening classes, and reliant on the vagaries of public transportation schedules. Increased accessibility to flexible and culturally competent child care can provide participants with peace of mind and opportunities for more training. Finally, simply more funding is required to address the prohibitive costs of child care and limited supports available to cover these costs.

Creating Bridges between VESL and other Education and Training Opportunities

The gap between where participants are in terms of language ability after completing programs like the Neighborhood House VESL program and where they need to be to take advantage of more advanced training opportunities at community colleges, such as the I-BEST program, supports the notion that community and college-based programs are needed to fill this gap to create better linkages to continued training and education.

For many of those interested in continuing their training, the next rung on the ladder is simply too much of a leap. Specifically, while participants of the VESL program finish, on average, at level 3, the next level of training available – IBEST – normally requires at least a level 4 or 5. While the I-BEST program is very effective at moving limited-English speakers up career pathways by combining English with basic and work skills, it doesn't reach low enough to pick up those leaving programs like the one at Neighborhood House. The creation of more programs that fill this void or the expansion of I-BEST to include these lower levels may be an appropriate next step in ensuring there are opportunities for training at every language level.

Another complementary strategy may be to consider changing the focus of current Adult Basic Education/English as a Second Language programs to more explicitly include work skills on a path towards a better job. This broadening of the focus of such programs from being strictly literacy-based allows for better bridges to other opportunities in work training, pre-apprenticeship, and certificate and degree programs. This would require additional services to students to help them understand and navigate available career pathways and how this ABE/ESL training links in, as well as modifying the current curriculum to include more basic, life and work skills specific to particular trajectories in training.

As noted earlier, the Neighborhood House program has recently been contracting with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Pathways, which provides culturally appropriate services to Workfirst clients. While this partnership has been a good addition for resources for clients, providing training and services for up to 12 months, it is limited in that it requires covered clients to enter training within 30 days of approval for WorkFirst assistance, as well as be participating full-time (32-40) in job search or training by that time in order to maintain receipt of benefits.

Expanding & Simplifying Financial Aid Opportunities

For many, the cost of paying for additional training opportunities is a prohibitive barrier. While financial aid exists to lighten the load, this particular population has few options for financial aid.

A significant systemic barrier for many in this population is related to citizenship. Students are required to be a U.S. citizen or appropriately documented U.S. permanent resident or refugee/asylee, with a valid Social Security number not only for employment, but also to qualify for many types of traditional financial aid for low-income students, namely Pell, Perkins, State Need Grants and Opportunity Grants, Other federal sources available to cover training costs, such as Basic Food Employment & Training and TANF, have similar residency requirements. State Need Grants and Opportunity Grants also require that someone have been a Washington State resident for the previous year. Further, most funding programs require a high school diploma, GED or equivalent, but will not fund someone who already has a B.A. or the equivalent from another country. Finally, for the small proportion that qualify for these traditional sources, their funding cannot be used for ABE, ESL, or short-term training. Opportunity Grants, for example, are specifically aimed at long-term training in high-demand industries. Expanding requirements for funding to include a broader population as well as more types of training can help ameliorate this significant coverage barrier.

For a variety of reasons, an "uptake" gap also exists between those low-income families that qualify for a variety of public benefit/financial aid programs that can provide training support and those who actually receive them. For many, and in particular those immigrant and refugee populations with language challenges, the

difficulty in completing the very complicated process required to obtain funding⁶, including the myriad of necessary forms and required documentation, can be overwhelming and dissuasive. It can also be viewed as invasive, humiliating, or intimidating. Further, many individuals remain reluctant to apply for benefits, even if they qualify, because of the social stigma attached to receiving help from the government. This is especially true for immigrants, who may avoid interacting with government officials for fear of perceived potential repercussions (i.e. green card status issues, issues with sponsor, deportation). Finally, for some individuals it may be that they simply do not know about the aid potentially available to them. To overcome these hurdles, simplifying the eligibility and application process with consideration to this population may result in more individuals getting the coverage they need. Options to apply for services online and increased coordination between many types of public benefit programs so that a single application allows a person to enroll in all programs for which they are eligible may also prove useful. Finally, improved outreach and education about access, as well as multiple avenues for gaining eligibility (“no wrong door”) can also increase aid for this population.

Decreasing Penalties to Sponsors

Almost half of the participants in the Neighborhood House VESL program are registered aliens. Many of these individuals, in order to reside in the U.S., are living with and sponsored by a U.S. citizen. Often, the sponsor is also a family member of the resident alien. While the terms of sponsorship are complicated, a general point to note is that the sponsor’s income and assets are deemed available to the alien. For some sponsors, their income and assets qualify them for public benefit receipt for both themselves and their sponsored alien(s). However, should the alien find employment and raise the total household income above eligibility for benefits, the sponsor may lose certain public benefits. Further, should an alien receive benefits when the total viable assets are above eligibility, the sponsor is responsible for reimbursement or potential legal suit. A potential policy recommendation may consider modifying penalty to sponsors, separating sponsor income and alien income once an alien has attained a certain amount of employment retention. Such a recommendation, however, runs counter to the central notion of sponsorship being a mechanism to provide opportunities for aliens while preventing them from becoming public charges.

Conclusion

The Vocational English as a Second Language program at Neighborhood House proved very successful during the three-year period evaluated. The program attracted participants from the White Center area interested in increased language acquisition and job skills. The program’s success is largely attributed to the integration of vocational skills and language skills, but could not be as successful without its ability to provide significant supports to participants and their families while they are involved with the program. In addition to the economic and social benefits reaped through increased wages and employment stability, program participants also come away with an increased sense of independence and confidence that will continue to serve them well as they reach for self-sufficiency.

Overall placement numbers continued to be fairly small but significant based on the limited size of the program. Partnerships with Highline Community College have allowed the program to increase its capacity, though there is room for consideration of splitting out classes based on skill level. Placement rates increased substantially in the second year, demonstrating the efficacy of language learning tied directly to job placement. Rates have, however, tapered off in the third year, in part due to the faltering economy and tightening labor market. For those who have been placed into

⁶ Other training and work supports, including child care, housing, and healthcare coverage, present the same difficulties for applicants. For more information, see [Bridging the Gaps in Washington: A Research Brief of Findings and Policy Recommendations for Work Supports that Work](#). Seattle Jobs Initiative 2007.

jobs through the Neighborhood House VESL program, retention has been good. Over half of participants hitting a 12 month milestone have demonstrated positive retention. Still, based on the low-skill entry level nature of these occupations, wage progression is minimal.

The Neighborhood House Vocational English as a Second Language program is now into its fifth operating year, and continues to thrive. The program has modified many of the items noted in this evaluation subsequent to the evaluation period, including curriculum, approach, staffing structure, and many other pieces to support and accommodate its clients. It continues to provide valuable life and employment skills for a diverse population of Seattle area residents, eager for self-sufficiency and grateful for the opportunities and supports provided to them to achieve these goals.

Case managers and instructors credit the success of the program in part to the openness and flexibility of the program. Key to the success for many clients is access to skilled case managers who speak their language, who empathize with their situation and work above and beyond to help these clients succeed. This work is aided by a variety of financial supports and resources made available through valuable partnerships that help alleviate barriers for participants and provide vital skills training and information for participants.

While the program has shown success in providing important life and job skills for its participants to strive for self-sufficiency, there is a larger ever-present tension between the reality of placing people in jobs versus helping individuals structure goals around movement towards a career. The Neighborhood House VESL program and the multitude of short-term training programs like it emphasize both of these outcomes, teaching participants how to navigate various workforce and employment issues while helping them connect quickly to employment. The two goals, however, may find themselves at odds when, for instance, a key outcome for potential funds rests solely on job placement, and does not always consider skill gains as achievement on pathways towards livable wage careers. Ultimately, this is a dichotomy that programs like these struggle with in serving the needs and best interests of their clients.

Broader systemic issues around access to supports and viable career pathways suggest opportunities for policy change. Specifically, more funding for flexible and culturally appropriate child care can significantly help families juggling work, family and training on their road towards self-sufficiency. While on that road, more opportunities along the way for level-appropriate training through bridge programs can help create opportunities for every language need. Aid for both short- and long-term training for this particular population can be increased, with outreach aimed at destigmatizing and demystifying the application process for a variety of supports. Removing potential roadblocks to employment based on current immigration policy as it pertains to sponsorship can help alleviate tensions between attaining work and losing supports. Finally, making sure that opportunities exist and are communicated to employers and employees about career pathways and skill improvement can ensure that the participants in programs like that at Neighborhood House continue to work towards family-sustaining careers and remain vitally part of a healthy workforce.

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