

## **Increasing Homeless Persons' Access to Workforce Services Through Improvements to the Workforce Investment Act July 2009**

An estimated 3.5 million Americans experience homelessness annually. Many factors combine to force so many to subsist without permanent housing, and too often without even basic shelter. Not only is there a shortage of affordable housing, but also wage and public benefits often yield incomes insufficient to obtain and maintain housing while simultaneously meeting the high costs of health care, child care and other support services. Although some people who experience homelessness are employed, they have jobs that pay wages too low to afford permanent housing. Others are not working due to job loss, child-caring responsibilities, age, disability, trauma, incomplete education or insufficient occupational skills.

The public workforce investment system was established to help all Americans prepare for employment and re-enter the workforce. Some publicly funded programs do reach people who are homeless, but serious impediments limit this population's access to workforce programs. A key barrier is the current emphasis on providing "core" services at the expense of "enhanced" services and vocational training. Training and intensive services are essential to many persons experiencing homelessness who seek to join the workforce. Admittedly, many of these individuals offer a constellation of challenges that exceed those presented by the majority who use the workforce system. Far from receiving incentives to meet these needs, however, workforce authorities are neither rewarded for serving people who experience homelessness nor encouraged to do so. Moreover, workforce system planners and practitioners lack the information, resources and support they need to implement evidence-based workforce development practices that have proven successful with homeless populations.

Without leadership that promotes collaboration and effective cross-systems planning to address and remove these barriers, the workforce investment system—including workforce investment boards and one-stop career offices, as well as the range of entities that participate in continuums of care for the homeless—are unlikely to fund effective services that create opportunities for individuals to qualify for, find and maintain employment. Policymakers and workforce authorities at all levels of government must take steps to increase this population's access to workforce services and improve long-term outcomes. Reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) provides an opportunity to open pathways to livable incomes that are currently closed to homeless populations.

The undersigned organizations recommend the following improvements to the public workforce investment system and urge Congress and the Administration to advance them through reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act.

***Require Workforce Authorities' Plans to Address the Needs of Persons who are Homeless.*** The Act should require State and local workforce investment boards to include in their WIA plans a detailed "homeless subplan" that explains how the authority will conduct outreach, secure services and create employment pathways for people experiencing homelessness. These targeted subplans should be developed in consultation with people experiencing homelessness, Homeless Continuums of Care, Emergency Solutions Grants jurisdictions, project sponsors and advocates for homeless persons.

***Require Workforce Authorities to Report the Housing Status of those Served.*** The Act should require State and local workforce authorities to collect and report the housing status of all persons who request services funded by the WIA (e.g., case management and referral, services research, and access to workforce services). Recent experiences with the recession underline the relevance and importance of monitoring the housing status of customers who seek help from the public workforce system.

***Authorize Homeless Navigators at One Stop Centers.*** The Act should give States the authority to dedicate staff positions in local workforce One Stop Centers to assisting persons who are experiencing homelessness. These specialized “Navigators” should not only provide job development and other services to those who seek their assistance, but also proactively conduct outreach to people experiencing homelessness through the many public and community organizations that assist these persons.

***Enable Unaccompanied Homeless Youth to Access Workforce Services.*** The Act should require State and local workforce authorities to establish service enrollment criteria that enable minor-age youth who are experiencing homelessness to participate in workforce-related activities without requiring parental consent.

***Authorize the Development of Appropriate Performance and Outcome Measures.*** Because the current performance tracking approach discourages the expenditure of financial resources to assist people who have greater needs, the Act should authorize the Department of Labor to establish alternative methods for measuring the performance and outcomes of the workforce system for hard-to-employ persons. This group would include many of those who experience homelessness. Outcomes and timeframes applied to homeless persons should reflect the unique nature and challenges of residential instability. Housing stability should be valued as a positive benchmark toward the attainment and maintenance of education and employment.

***Offer Homeless Workforce System Development Grants.*** We encourage Congress to authorize and appropriate funds under WIA for grants to local workforce authorities for the purpose of implementing innovative workforce development interventions that address the unique life circumstances of people experiencing homelessness. Grant funds would be used to tailor the mainstream workforce system to make it more accessible to and supportive of homeless populations, rather than to establish alternate systems targeted to people experiencing homelessness. Grant funds would also be used by States to coordinate, plan and integrate their workforce, housing and homeless assistance systems.

***Create a National Center to Support Workforce Development for the Homeless.*** The U.S. Department of Labor should be directed to create an Information and Technical Assistance Center on homelessness and workforce development to help local authorities, including workforce boards and Homeless Continuums of Care, to improve their collaboration and services for homeless persons who seek to enter or re-enter the workforce. The Center should also develop the evidence base for the most effective workforce practices to employ homeless job seekers and retain them in the workforce by conducting research to identify, document, evaluate and disseminate such practices that have demonstrated positive results. The Technical Assistance Center would act to help workforce and homeless systems make best use of evidence-based and proven approaches to employ homeless people.

***Increase Funding for Essential Services.*** To produce successful outcomes for persons experiencing homelessness and others with serious barriers to employment, WIA should include appropriations for adult, youth, dislocated worker and special needs populations at a level commensurate with the needs in American communities. Increased resources are essential to enable local workforce investment boards to provide a greater volume of intensive services and vocational training to homeless and other job seekers with significant employment barriers.

**Endorsing Organizations.** This statement is endorsed by the following organizations:

Advocates for Human Potential

Building Changes

Corporation for Supportive Housing

National Alliance to End Homelessness

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

National Center on Family Homelessness

National Center for Housing and Child Welfare

National Coalition for the Homeless

National Health Care for the Homeless Council

National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty

National Network for Youth

National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness