

Is Anything Working?

by Jeff Kelly Lowenstein

June 30, 2010

Tyrone Washington is tired of not working. The trim 27-year-old with braids and a thick mustache has been looking for work ever since he got out of prison for what he believes is the fifth and final time in 2008.

"I'm a fast learner and good with people," says Washington, who has four children under 7 and a fifth on the way in July. Confidence, frustration and a tinge of desperation mingle in his bass voice. "I'm able and willing to work at any time."

The native of the West Side's North Lawndale community was sitting in a chair at Creative Salon, a local barber shop that serves as an unofficial community center, on a rainy Sunday afternoon in early March. The sounds of a dozen boys who receive twice-monthly haircuts and meals of fried chicken and French fries from a local fish joint echoed down the long, dimly lit space.

Washington has never held a full-time job that paid with a check. In order to find a job he so covets, he reads the paper Employment Source because it "shows me what's there," he said. He knows few people in North Lawndale with jobs, and, thus far, networking has yielded no results.

In his neighborhood, and in others around it, his situation is far from unique.

In fact, the unemployment rate among young people in a census region that includes North Lawndale is so chronic and pervasive that it ranked the worst in the nation in 2008, the latest year for which the data are available. A region on the South Side similarly recorded a high unemployment rate—among the nation's worst 1 percent. To remedy, the city has steered millions of public dollars to job placement programs, much of which has been aimed at these neighborhoods, but has little in the way of results to show for it.

"The reality is we do not have a workforce development safety net for our workforce," said Carrie Thomas, associate director at the Chicago Jobs Council. "Chronic unemployment is bad in a population, but in a young population, it's a crisis. If you hit 25 and you are not connected to the mainstream market in any way, that can have catastrophic consequences."

On paper, the scale of the city's effort to tackle this issue seems immense. In 2009, the city spent about \$366 million on a range of workforce development programs citywide, according to the Chicago Workforce Investment Council, an organization that Mayor Richard M. Daley created in July 2009 to oversee these programs. The figure included more than \$44.2 million for programs specifically designed to provide job placement services and training.

Service providers located in the regions on the South and West Sides received \$1.38 million of the \$44.2 million—in addition to the \$11.1 million that they received from 2005 to 2008. And more people in these regions received job placement services and training—often from providers based outside of the areas—than those in other areas of the city.

Evelyn Diaz, CEO of the Chicago Workforce Investment Council, said her agency has been using the question—"What are we getting for all this money?"—as a guiding framework for all of its activities.

To advocates, the answer to that question is simple: not enough.

The Rev. Robin Hood, pastor of Redeemed Outreach Ministries and an activist on the city's South and West Sides, called the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars a failure.

"It's got to be a failure—you still have the highest rate of unemployment in the country," he said. Diaz acknowledged that the city's workforce development system has not had much impact on chronically unemployed young people like Washington, "not because the programs aren't good but because we have to make do with what we've got, and it's never, ever enough," she said. She explained that the city is considering a strategy that may focus closely on distressed neighborhoods like North Lawndale.

Such a strategy can't come soon enough for Atry Phillips, who sees the consequences of the current system in his community. "It's a direct relation to the amount of violence and criminal activity," said Phillips, senior director of TARGET Community Development Corp., an organization that does workforce development in the Auburn Gresham area. "If we had ... even our fair share for this part of Chicago, we would not be experiencing the level of shootings and criminal activity. Instead, our youth are on the street selling drugs and trying to make it."

Washington says he got into the drug trade in high school because he had no father to guide him. He dropped out of high school during his sophomore year and hit the streets doing "knuckleheaded stuff." Eventually, he was incarcerated. He got out of prison and went back to the streets. The cycle repeated.

He also started a family with his wife, Timesha. The babies have kept coming—they are now 6, 3, 2 and 1 years old—and Washington's inability to find work has created a simmering tension with his wife. "She's not upset, but it makes it difficult," he said ruefully.

Since his latest release from prison in 2008, he has searched unsuccessfully for a job. Throughout his job search, Washington has had no interaction with the city's workforce development system.

His fruitless search for work is a shared one.

In 2008, 18,600 of the 35,700 people between ages 16 and 30 in a census region that includes East Garfield Park, Humboldt Park, North Lawndale and West Garfield Park had not worked during the previous five years or longer, according to a *Chicago Reporter* analysis of census data.

The figure of 52 percent was the nation's highest. A region of Mississippi that includes Tallahatchie County, where the body of Chicago-area native Emmett Till was found in 1955, came second, with 50 percent.

The second highest rate of long-term unemployment in Chicago was recorded in a South Side region that includes Auburn Gresham, Englewood, Washington Heights and West Englewood. In 2008, 14,700 of 36,000 residents there between ages 16 and 30—or 41 percent—had not worked during the previous five years or longer.

In order to gauge the level of funding for the city's job placement services and training, the Reporter examined three major sources of funding: The Workforce Investment Act, which provides the framework for the nation's workforce development system and is a major funding source; federal stimulus money; and the Community Development Block Grant, which funds local community development activities like affordable housing, anti-poverty programs and infrastructure development.

In all, the Reporter found that the three sources provided the city with \$171.6 million between 2005 and 2009. This funding led to 27,600 people receiving job placement services and training citywide during those years, according to the Reporter analysis of Chicago Department of Family and Support Services records.

An estimated 4,600 of the people were in the West Side region made up of East Garfield Park, Humboldt Park, North Lawndale and West Garfield Park—the second-highest total among the 19 census regions. And an estimated 5,100 people were in the South Side region made up of Auburn Gresham, Englewood, Washington Heights and West Englewood—the highest total.

Despite these workforce development efforts, the rate of long-term unemployment among young residents in these communities didn't budge from 2006 to 2008, remaining among the nation's highest, the Reporter analysis shows.

For many, this is evidence that's crying out for a comprehensive reform. "The City of Chicago has some of the highest rates of chronic unemployment in the country, but the current workforce system is ill-equipped to meet the needs of far too many of the city's young people on the South and West Sides," Hood said.

The workforce development system's decentralized and chaotic nature is one of several reasons that contributed to its lack of results, experts say.

In an effort to assess how workforce development services are delivered throughout the city, the Reporter contacted dozens of organizations that received funding at some point during 2005 to 2009 through the Workforce Investment Act, stimulus funding, the Community Development Block Grant or some combination of these sources.

Some organizations declined to share much information. "I don't want to crucify myself," said Phyllis Offord, vice president of family services and community building at the Jane Addams Hull House Association, about her hesitation to give information to the Reporter about Workforce Investment Act services the agency had already reported to the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services.

Others appeared not to have accurate information about their funding sources. Chicago Housing Authority spokesman Matt Aguilar said the agency did not receive any Workforce Investment Act funding, despite records from the Department of Family and Support Services indicating that the CHA received \$1.9 million from that source.

Carmen Tomshack Brenner, vice president of programs and policy at the Chicago Workforce Investment Council, attributed the lack of forthrightness to some agencies' hesitation to share information with the media and a possible lack of information about federal funding sources. But Thomas of the Chicago Jobs Council said it also is a reflection of the fact that many sites providing job placement services are run by nonprofits, with affiliates being given grants to serve the neediest neighborhoods. There is decentralization, and that can appear chaotic, she said.

This apparent chaos is just one of a series of obstacles Diaz and others at the Chicago Workforce Investment Council face in their efforts to realize their vision of higher employment levels in the city's most distressed neighborhoods.

One of the biggest: There is not a clear definition of success. These definitions can vary from agency to agency, depending on what the state or federal government's requirements. Some grants emphasize the number of people trained, while others focus on job placement, and still others discuss the need for retention. While understandable, given organizations' interest in receiving funds, this can lead to inconsistent standards, Diaz said. "Until now, everybody's been doing what they need to do to be in compliance with the funding source," she said.

On the other hand, the Workforce Investment Act has explicit performance measures, but their emphasis on successful job placement creates a built-in incentive to "cherry pick" those people who the agency believes are more likely to find work, Tomshack Brenner said. "You have to make decisions as a provider," she said. "Do you take a person who is in poverty and has a chance, or do you take someone who will need a case manager for the next two years?"

Then there's the issue of coordination.

Workforce development is a field widely known for lengthy acronyms and many interlocking funding agencies operating at different levels of government.

Diaz said the city took a first step to increase coordination in 2007, when Daley set up Chicago LEADS, a body that sought to make the workforce development system work for businesses and residents, and a second in July 2009, when he created the Chicago Workforce Investment Council.

But both Chicago and Illinois have acknowledged in reports the need for higher levels of coordination between workforce agencies, and Tomshack Brenner wrote in an e-mail, "There is still much work to do to improve interagency coordination."

Some of that coordination materialized in late April, when Gov. Pat Quinn unveiled the Put Illinois to Work program.

Funded by federal stimulus money, and the product of collaboration between the Illinois Department of Human Services, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, and Heartland Human Care Services, the program will place more than 15,000 Illinois youth between ages 18 and 21 in subsidized work for up to six months.

Tomshack Brenner explained that the Chicago Workforce Investment Council had coordinated collaboration between the public schools, community colleges, area hospitals and agencies funded by the Workforce

Investment Act to train and place close to 500 nurses to address the city's nursing shortage.

Help may also be coming through a program proposed by Sen. Kimberly A. Lightford. Working with the Illinois Department of Transportation, she proposed an apprentice and training program for 18- to 35-year-olds as part of the rehabilitation of the Eisenhower Expressway. Lightford said she raised the age level from 25 to 35 precisely because of the need to reach people like Washington. State Rep. La Shawn K. Ford, who represents several West Side communities, said it is taking too long to fund workforce programs and to integrate the workforce development system.

"The pace is very slow," he said. "The unemployed that had jobs have to be aggressive, [but] there's nothing for the formerly incarcerated. If you never worked before and you have a background, you are done."

Ford sponsored legislation that would create a source of microloans to give people the capital necessary to start their own businesses. Passed by both chambers, the bill received Quinn's signature earlier this year but has yet to be funded. None of these programs came in time for Washington, who, by late March, decided he had had enough.

He and his family packed up their apartment in North Lawndale and moved first to Louisiana and then to Des Moines, Iowa. In April, he secured a job working for the spring and summer at Adventureland amusement park. Training began in April, and in late May, he started working five to six days per week. "If I had stayed in Chicago, I would have never gotten a job," he said.

Contributing: Kayla Bensing, Sean Cooley, Matt Field, Jared Hoffman, Natalie Southwick, R. Thomas

Copyright 2010 The Chicago Reporter