

# SUPPORTIVE SERVICES:

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FIELD


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# Introduction

## Finding a job has often been described as a job in itself.

For many people, particularly women and people of color, entrenched and systemic barriers to employment may make the job search process even more arduous, often affecting their chances of securing and retaining a good-paying job. These systemic and structural barriers can manifest as limited access to quality education, affordable healthcare, stable housing, and flexible childcare options - and that only



**Black workers in Chicago spend 63% longer commuting on public transit to their jobs than the average commuter in the region.**

scratches at the surface. Compounded with the intersections of racial and gender-based discrimination, these barriers can also exclude people from accessing the very workforce development programs and services designed to support people in reaching employment goals. Black workers in Chicago, for example, spend more money and 63% longer commuting on public transit to their jobs than the average commuter in the region, a symptom of the larger issues of geographic segregation of job opportunities and lack of affordable housing and transportation at hand.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of many workforce development or employment preparation programs is to assist job seekers' return to the workforce, advance to their next career level, or build their skills through educational or vocational training opportunities.

<sup>1</sup> [Advancing Workforce Equity in Chicago: A Blueprint for Action, 2021.](#)

"...the workforce development system has started to grow its supportive services offerings to fill the gaps, and research shows that supportive services improve employment outcomes for workforce program participants. However [...] these still fall short of meeting job seeker needs."

While the structure and details of these workforce development programs vary, many have similar core components, including supportive services - which can include assistance like access to counseling services, legal assistance, housing assistance, transportation resources, healthcare, or direct cash assistance - that for many jobseekers, may be as essential as the skills training itself. As such, workforce development programs have the potential to offer a lynchpin of resources for people facing multiple and complex systemic barriers,

while preparing for and securing a job. Over the years, as public disinvestment has led other safety net systems to fray, the workforce development system has started to grow its supportive services offerings to fill the gaps, and research shows that supportive services improve employment outcomes for workforce program participants. However, as this report will demonstrate, these still fall short of meeting job seeker needs.

## Background

There is a wide breadth of research supporting how effective supportive services are at addressing barriers that hinder the success of job seekers during and after job preparation and training programs. Studies have shown that women who received supportive services earned on average \$389 more per quarter than those who did not.<sup>2</sup> In addition, single parents across Cook County who enrolled in subsidized childcare programs had longer employment spells than those without childcare.<sup>3</sup> Despite the evidence that expanding supportive services has widespread positive impact on equity across the field, it's clear there are many areas for improvement in what services are provided and how they are distributed.

<sup>2</sup> [New Survey of Job Training Administrators Indicates Supportive Services are Critical to Completing a Program, Mathematica, 2016.](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Employment Outcomes for Low-Income Families Receiving Child Care Subsidies in Illinois, Maryland, and Texas, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2009.](#)

In 2020, the Chicago Jobs Council created a survey to gather insights and hear directly from community-based workforce service providers about the challenges they face providing supportive services to job seekers and clients, and asked them to identify ongoing unaddressed barriers that their program participants face. Program administrators, frontline staff, and other workforce development professionals confirm supportive services are an essential element of completion for job and skill training programs. Responses from these staff show that budget constraints and lack of staff capacity often make providing supportive services difficult and leave participants with unmet needs.



**"The Center for Disease Control reported that the pandemic disproportionately affected Black and Latinx communities across Chicago and Illinois, having worse health consequences and experiencing more of the economic fallout."**

It's impossible to isolate our survey results from the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on many individuals and families across Illinois. The Center for Disease Control reported that the pandemic disproportionately affected Black and Latinx communities across Chicago and Illinois, having worse health consequences and experiencing more of the economic fallout. The shelter-in-place order challenged service providers' ideas around accessibility and widened pre-existing cleavages within social safety nets, leading to more people than ever falling through the cracks of an already fractured system. The emergency response to the pandemic showed that flexible direct assistance to enhance economic stability in a crisis - for example, through stimulus payments - helped reduce food insecurity by over 40%, financial instability by over 45%, and adverse mental health symptoms by 20%. While the pandemic created exceptional challenges - especially for women and BIPOC people - the lessons learned from offering flexible assistance can and should be carried forward to support an equitable recovery and address longstanding systemic inequities.

This report offers recommendations for legislators, elected leaders, and program administrators for how to narrow supportive services gaps and advance policy to eliminate structural barriers that keep people out of work and in poverty.

<sup>4</sup>[Wilke, Christina, Stimulus checks dramatically reduced hunger and hardship, Census data shows, CNBC, 2021.](#)

# Policy & Systems Change Recommendations

## 01 Change local, state, and federal policies that create or reinforce systemic barriers to employment disproportionately faced by women and BIPOC people.

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- a. Expand public investments in equitable child and family care, affordable housing, public transportation, health and mental health care, education, and access to technology,
- b. End permanent punishments against people with a criminal record,
- c. Stop suspending driver's licenses and impounding vehicles due to inability to pay fines, fees, and other public debts.

## 02 Establish a cross-agency Employment Barrier Support & Job Retention Fund to help job seekers overcome acute barriers to employment and meet their career advancement goals. The fund should:

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- a. Be adaptable to meet various needs of job seekers,
- b. Offer service providers discretion in funding supportive services to meet client needs,
- c. Allow service providers to access funds within a shorter turnaround time, and
- d. Have fewer administrative tasks for service providers and job seekers.

## 03 Expand and modernize supportive services funding attached to workforce development grants by:

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- a. Increase amount and flexibility of available funding by leveraging existing funding streams
  - i. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment & Training (SNAP E&T), Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), etc.,
- b. Award multi-year grants and increase renewal periods,
- c. Reduce the complexity of administering funds,
- d. Provide updated guidance and technical assistance to service providers to facilitate equitable implementation of funds,
- e. Update guidelines about allowable expenses and what can be funded by supportive services,
- f. Reduce eligibility determination timelines to prevent service gaps,
- g. Extend the period for supportive services to cover alumni and participants post-placement into a job, and
- h. Distribute supportive service funds through stipends and direct cash assistance payments.

## 04 Increase funding for systems navigation and case management positions.

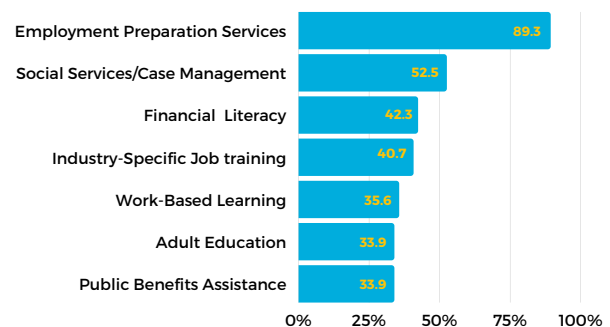
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# Survey Findings

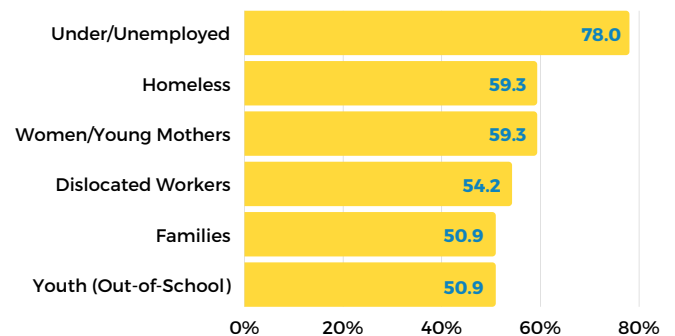
## Organization Demographics

In analyzing the results of our survey, we first wanted to get a sense of what services organizations provided and who they served. An overwhelming majority of respondents worked in organizations providing Employment Preparation Services (89.3%). While a majority (44%) of organizations did not specialize in any one industry, the data suggests many organizations offered at least one specialized industry training in fields such as *manufacturing* (13.6%), construction (6.8%), transportation (6.8%), hospitality, and healthcare. Several organizations provided multiple specialized job training programs across several industries. Programs varied in length based on the range of specific program design and services provided.

Graph A: Services Provided By Respondent Organization



Graph B: Populations Served



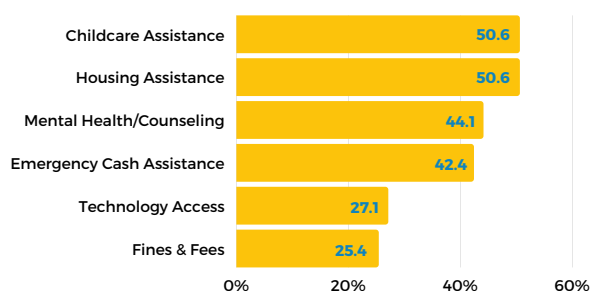
On average, organizations served slightly more women than men, with a small percentage of gender non-conforming clients. Over half of the programs had 50% or more Black participants and almost all the programs served majority non-white clients. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of organizations served under/unemployed individuals, with homeless populations, women/young mothers, dislocated workers, families and out-of-school youth coming in as the next most-served populations. The size of the organizations varied - just under half (45.8%) had more than 51 employees, 23.8% had between 26-50 employees, and the remainder of organizations had fewer than 25 employees.

# Services Provided & Unmet Needs

We asked focus group and survey respondents to name what they thought their participants' top unmet needs were. Our survey results showed child care assistance and housing assistance tied for the top unmet need. Mental health counseling and emergency cash assistance were the third and fourth

top unmet needs. Additionally, over a quarter of survey respondents named access to technology and addressing fines and fees in the top unmet needs of their clients.

Graph C: Top Unmet Needs



During the focus group, respondents observed that state investments in child care assistance do not provide the number of slots necessary to meet the childcare needs of their program participants. Many childcare providers aren't open when clients, especially those in hospitality or retail industries, may need them most, making options very limited. Notably, only 13.6% of organizations surveyed provide child care assistance, which could be because most refer their clients to state child care programs. The state-run Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) has separate eligibility criteria, restrictions, and often considerable gaps between applications and receipt of assistance. This poses challenges for parents who face urgent childcare needs in order to enroll in a program or take an employment opportunity. Oftentimes, providers cannot cover child care costs unless they find the client to be ineligible for CCAP. The eligibility process for CCAP can often take as long as 90 days, with some organizations working to reduce the determination period to 30 days. Both are incredibly long waiting periods for parents seeking to secure a job, as well as parents trying to retain new employment.

**Lack of access to cellphones, laptops, and reliable Wi-Fi** also came up as a recurring issue, especially for individuals on the South and West sides of Chicago, where Wi-Fi deserts are more prevalent. In these situations, access to a hot spot can be a lifeline.



## In Cook County, IL:



25%  
Of residents lack high-speed internet



17%  
Of Black and Latinx households lack a computer

In Cook County alone, 25% of residents lack high-speed internet and 17% of Black and Latinx households lack a computer. One in 10 homes across the rural communities in the southern, southeastern, and east central regions of Illinois lacks access to a computer.<sup>5</sup> Across Illinois, about 10% of households lack broadband, and about 14% of households lack a computer and internet connection.<sup>6</sup> Our respondents agreed that even the list of supportive services their organizations could provide, specifically WIOA-funded supports, was too outdated to address these needs, often excluding technology and other key resources for the modern job search and workforce.

Providers raised access to transportation as a critical area for investment in our follow-up conversations. Transportation barriers show up in several ways, including fines and fees, car repairs, lack of public transportation or ability to afford public transportation, and unreliable sources of transportation. A 2008 study found that single mothers' mobility status had a bigger impact on their employment prospects than either their education or work experience.<sup>7</sup> Job opportunities in the Chicago Cook County region are also disproportionately in the city, on the north side or downtown. In fact in Chicago, up to 700,000 jobs are within a 30-minute commute on public transit coming from downtown or the North Side, but only 50,000 jobs are within the same commute time from the South Side.<sup>8</sup> Youth-serving organizations in our follow-up conversations stated young people who do not live near public transportation have greater difficulty getting to job-placement sites.



...In Chicago up to 700,000 jobs are within a 30-minute commute on public transit coming from downtown or the North Side, but only 50,000 jobs are within the same commute time from the South Side."

<sup>5</sup> [Digital Equity, Cook County Government, Accessed 2021.](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Broadband Ready, 2021 WIOA summit.](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Sara Lichtenwalter, Gary Koeske & Esther Sales \(2006\) Examining Transportation and Employment Outcomes: Evidence for Moving Beyond The Bus Pass, Journal of Poverty, 10:1, 2008.](#)

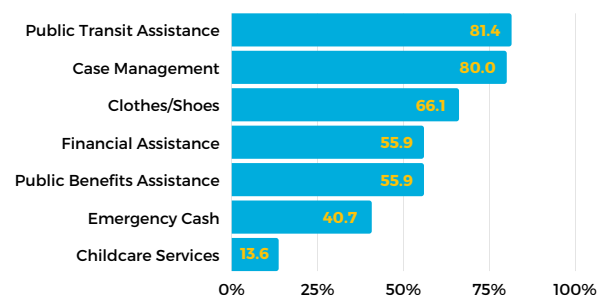
<sup>8</sup> [Semuels, Alana, Chicago's Awful Divide, The Atlantic, 2018](#)

Finally, our respondents raised an additional barrier we did not include in our survey: **language access barriers**, such as lack of accessible translations and reduced availability of in-person interpreter services, came up as obstacles for non-English speakers. Despite the fact that over 1 million Illinoisans speak English “less than very well,” resources relating to public benefits and relief funds were only distributed in English, making them challenging for non-English speakers to know about, much less access, without the work of interpreters or ethnic social service agencies.<sup>9</sup> Older, less technologically savvy, clients dealt with reduced access to services as offices moved towards online and tele-services.<sup>10</sup> While workarounds like automated phone systems with multiple language options helped staff remotely meet some needs of ESL clients, the lack of languages available, outside of Spanish, failed to provide information or relief to clients from underrepresented languages.

The most common supportive services provided by respondents’ organizations are, in order: public transit assistance, case management, clothes/shoes, financial assistance, and public benefits assistance. These services do not directly or fully address the top unmet needs of participants. One reason this could

be because coordinating resources for the top unmet needs, like housing, child care or mental health counseling, requires more thorough and long-term investment, whereas providing short-term assistance is easier and more accessible for workforce development organizations and nonprofits.

**Graph D: Services Provided**



<sup>9</sup> [Yoon-Ji Kang, Esther, For Non-English Speakers, Language Is A Barrier During The COVID-19 Pandemic, WBEZ, May 2020.](#)

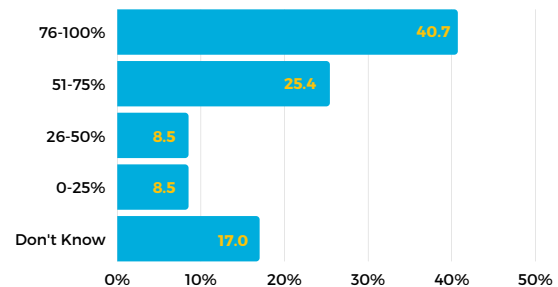
<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

# Program Participation & Retention

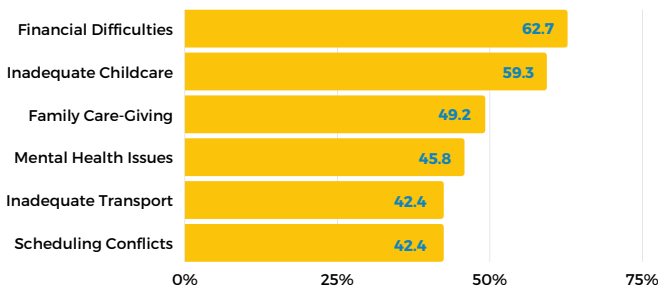
One of the motivating factors in constructing this survey was to identify key areas of improvement for programs and job retention for program participants. We asked respondents about three key benchmarks that many workforce funding streams require them to report on: initial enrollment, program completion, and job retention after 90

days of employment. A majority of the organizations surveyed had medium-high rates of applicants successfully enrolling, at 45.8% of organizations with 75-100% enrollment. The average rate of program completion was similarly medium-high, with 40.7% at 76-100% completion.

Graph E: Percent Enrolled That Complete Your Workforce Program



Graph F: Barriers That Prevent Program Completion



Given that 35% of our respondents reported that fewer than 50% of clients complete their program, we can assume that structural issues are preventing widespread programmatic success. Indeed, providers report that the most

common barriers for participants completing their programs largely revolve around financial difficulties, lack of access to child care, mental health, and transportation barriers. These barriers almost mirror the top unmet client needs providers described. In the focus group, providers emphasized mental health as a challenging barrier to address, noting that during the pandemic and subsequent shelter-in-place orders, the intersections of mental health

"...providers report that the most common barriers for participants completing their programs largely revolve around financial difficulties, lack of access to child care, mental health, and transportation barriers. These barriers almost mirror the top unmet client needs providers described."

challenges with inconsistent housing and insufficient income took a heavy toll on clients, who may not have recognized the help they needed. Providers shared that without proper mental health supportive services, some clients were not ready for programming or struggled to succeed in their programs. In the focus group, providers emphasized mental health as a challenging barrier to address, noting that during the pandemic and subsequent shelter-in-place orders, the intersections of mental health challenges with inconsistent housing and insufficient income took a heavy toll on clients, who may not have recognized the help they needed. Providers shared that without proper mental health supportive services, some clients were not ready for programming or struggled to succeed in their programs.

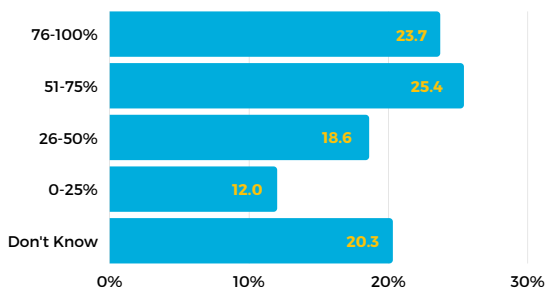
Most survey respondents (71.2%) shared that 75-100% of their participants received supportive services during the program. However, providers in our focus group repeatedly mentioned that losing supportive services during the gap of time between when a client becomes employed and gets their first paycheck can make it hard for participants to meet their own needs. Adjusting to losing access to means-tested benefits programs often compounds these challenges. Providers reported that participant success is positively affected when supportive services are distributed past probationary periods with regular frequency. Extending these services until clients are past the probationary period is critical, but challenging because of insufficient supportive service funding and staff capacity. One provider we spoke to described how pre-COVID, their retention coach would meet with participants at their place of employment to check-in on how they were doing and reassure them they had access to a lifetime of services if they needed to come back for more help, but this kind of direct one-on-one follow-up may not be possible for organizations with less funding and fewer staff. Overall, participant success requires that providers anticipate the smaller obstacles a client might face on the day-to-day, such as having a cell phone to call their child while at child care or longer-term bus passes, instead of daily or weekly passes.

**"PROVIDERS REPORTED THAT PARTICIPANT SUCCESS IS POSITIVELY AFFECTED WHEN SUPPORTIVE SERVICES ARE DISTRIBUTED PAST PROBATIONARY PERIODS WITH REGULAR FREQUENCY."**

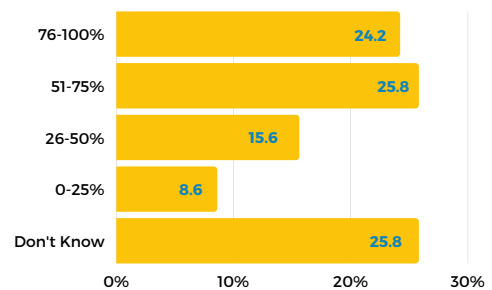
# Employment Placement & Retention

Following completion of the program, the rates of participants who are employed within 90 days of completing the program and those retained at 90 days of employment are more varied. The data showed that 23.7% of organizations had 76-100% of participants employed within 90 days, and nearly 20.3% of our respondents answered “did not know,” which brought up questions about staff capacity for participant follow-up. Similar to program completion, 25.7% of our respondents did not know what percent of participants were retained at 90 days of employment.

Graph G: Employed Within 90 Days of Completing Program



Graph H: Retained at 90 Days of Employment



We asked our focus group: what makes client retention successful? We found that relationship-building was a key to success in both program completion and job retention, whether those relationships are between client and provider or amongst clients themselves. Respondents in our focus group emphasized cohorts proved effective as a way to facilitate connections between participants that lasted even past their program completion. Some of these providers stated they received positive results after pairing clients with both an employment specialist and a case manager to better connect clients with staff who could more wholly support their needs. Youth providers at Youth Guidance mentioned during our follow-up interview with them that well-trained mentors (either a supervisor at a job or volunteers) could be an additional support structure.

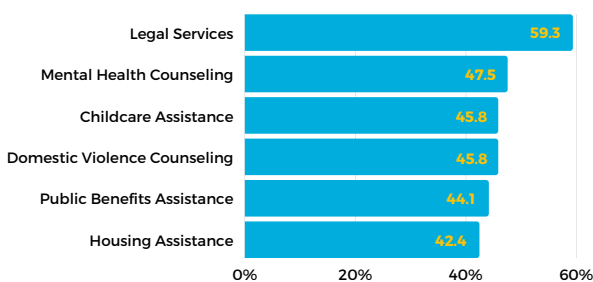
In order to support alumni post-placement or after job loss, providers reported needing to customize their approach to each person and the structural and systemic barriers they may face based on their circumstances and identity. Providers in our focus group stated that it was difficult to distinguish the definitive reason that participants were not retained at their new positions: it

could be related to supportive services ending, but also could be due to other factors on the job, such as employers releasing new hires after probation. An under-prioritized necessity is both supporting employer-provider relationships and supporting employers that work with clients to meet their supportive service needs. Providing services while clients are newly employed is key for retention, but is challenging due to lack of funding and limited staff capacity. Evidently, support for clients, through check-ins and extended supportive benefits, is needed for longer than 90 days.

## Referrals

Because many organizations reported being unable to meet all the needs of the clients they serve, they often referred clients to other agencies better suited to meet their specific needs. Over 59% of organizations we surveyed referred clients out for legal services, and over 47% referred out for mental health counseling and services. Forty-five percent of survey respondents additionally referred clients out for both child care assistance and for domestic violence counseling. Assistance with obtaining clothes and shoes, as well as housing assistance, were also referred out by over 40% of surveyed organizations.

**Graph 1: Supportive Services Referred Out to Other Organizations**



Focus group respondents described that “warm hand-offs/linkages” were the most effective referral process. Although a majority of organizations in our focus group had dedicated staff for these handoffs, respondents agreed that there was still a lack of capacity and staff support to consistently meet all of their clients’

needs. This echoes the learning that relationships are critical to retention. Providers found positive results when pairing clients with a team of support staff to help with both employment and supportive service needs to wholly support individuals.

During the pandemic and shelter-in-place orders, many organizations couldn't facilitate referrals in this manner for safety and health reasons. Similarly, clients faced the challenges of having fewer providers as viable options to receive referrals, either due to closed operations, reduced hours, or organizations not accepting new referrals.

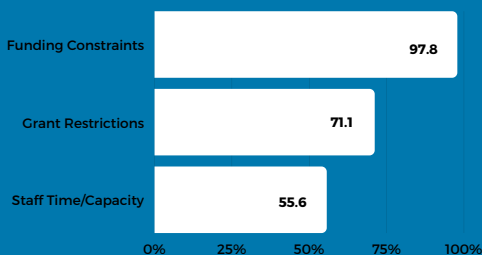
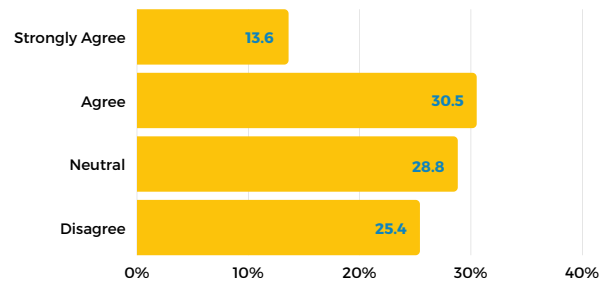
## Barriers to Organizations Providing More Services

Nearly all respondents wished their program could provide more supportive services, but faced barriers in actually doing so. The most common barriers to providing more supportive services were: funding constraints (97.8%), grant restrictions (71.1%), and lack of staff time/capacity (55.6%). Our survey

found that organizations with more employees saw higher rates of clients employed within 90 days of completing their programs.

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that additional funding would allow them to better serve their clients' needs. Our focus group and individual conversations revealed that some staff lacked training and adequate information on how to access and use discretionary funds, creating administrative uncertainty around what resources were available for clients.

Graph J: The Support Services Our Participants Receive Meet All or Most of Their Needs



"The most common barriers to providing more supportive services were: **funding constraints (97.8%)**, **grant restrictions (71.1%)**, and **lack of staff time/capacity (55.6%)**."

# Funding

"... private funding ... was the most flexible and adaptable stream, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic"



To better understand how supportive services are funded, we asked respondents to select the most common funding streams they used for their programs. Eighty-four percent of responding organizations reported getting some kind of public funding for their programs. The most common

sources included Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act grant (WIOA), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) program, Illinois Community College Board (Adult Education program), Federal Department of Labor grants, Cook County Justice Advisory Grant, and the Community Development Block Grant.

In addition, we found that over half of organizations (62.7%) used private and philanthropic funding sources for their programs, and 40.7% used private dollars to fund the supportive services directed towards clients. Providers in our focus group confirmed that private funding (foundations, individual donors, public charities, etc.) was the most flexible and adaptable stream, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with few limitations on how they could spend the funds. Providers also appreciated that there was less of an administrative burden required for private funding, freeing up time for staff members often working at the limit of their bandwidth.

However, providers also expressed that though private donations and philanthropic giving had fewer limitations, the dollars were also harder to build a budget around due to short grant periods, which created difficulty to sustainably source services and programs. Grants given over multiple years and increased renewal periods for supportive services might better support job seekers with the most barriers to employment.

Members of our focus group viewed WIOA as the least flexible stream to navigate, noting high administrative burdens and long wait times for the approval of supportive service vouchers, which providers must submit and have approved by the state agency before they can get reimbursed for services rendered. Many federal grants varied widely in their flexibility and administrative requirements. Department of Labor grants outside of WIOA



offered some additional flexibility when providers intentionally wrote supportive services into their grant requests. SNAP E&T was also highlighted as a more flexible funding stream for funding supportive services.

Providers also found that staff had inadequate information on how to access supportive service dollars and needed extensive training on how to do so due to the administrative complexity of accessing those resources. Clients had to wait both for staff to navigate the process and for the state's long eligibility determination timelines to have their specific supportive services covered. Providers even reported clients having to drop out of their programs due to barriers that could not be addressed in time. To avoid this, one organization we spoke to would front assistance money in hopes that the voucher for reimbursement was approved.

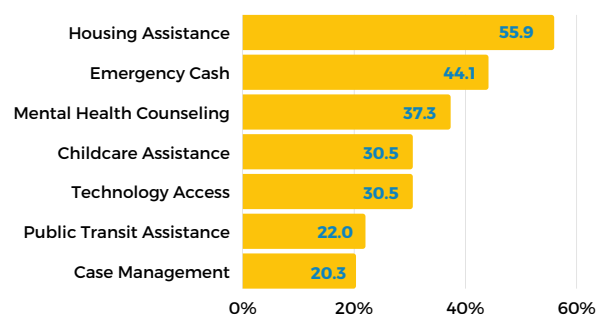
Providers also expressed frustration at the fact that the list of supportive services covered by WIOA seemed outdated, and failed to accurately reflect the most relevant and pressing needs of clients. One participant in the focus group flagged that the Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity (DCEO) had limitations on what could be funded, specifically mentioning that childcare was unlikely to be covered.

## Priorities for Future Funding

Finally, we prompted survey respondents to use their imagination to picture what supportive services could look like if additional funding were granted to them and their organizations. When prompted to choose the three supportive services they would implement if they had

more funding, over 55% of respondents chose housing assistance, 44% chose emergency cash and over 37% chose mental health counseling. Child care assistance, technology access, public transit assistance, and case management were additionally chosen as top services to fund next. Follow-up conversations from respondents in our focus group reflected similar needs as the survey.

Graph K: What Should Be Funded Next?



Though focus group respondents were quick to flag rental assistance and child care as the first services they would fund if they had additional supportive service dollars, they highlighted that providing more technology and digital literacy for participants were also critical areas for investment. Providers noted, especially given the experience during the COVID-19 pandemic when many services and jobs transitioned into remote work, that the ability to provide hotspots or buy clients laptops or cell phone plans accelerated their ability to connect to the labor market and other critical services. Respondents highly favored emergency cash and stipends over restricted funds, so that program participants could cover costs like utility or cell phone bills that supportive services often fail to cover. Aside from increasing services for participants, respondents also wanted to use additional funding for a dedicated staff member to navigate the referral network for clients in order to provide better supportive services.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Federal Reserve found in 2018 that nearly 40% of Americans could not afford a \$400 emergency.<sup>11</sup>

The disastrous effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded with pre-existing inequities, leaving millions without work or safety nets. Those dynamics, affirmed by the data from this survey, make it clear that the workforce development field joins other public service systems in needing new and improved funding streams that proactively account for the intersecting challenges people face. In particular, workforce development systems must better account for the systemic barriers differentially experienced across race and gender, in order to better support people in their transition into family-sustaining career pathways and skills training programs.

Based on our research, analysis of survey data, and conversations with service providers (many of whom have themselves experienced systemic barriers to employment), we conclude that providing job seekers access to flexible financial assistance, including unrestricted cash, would address systemic barriers that help people reach their employment goals. **They ranked financial difficulties as the top barriers to program completion** for their clients. Respondents in our survey and focus group ranked **emergency cash assistance** as both one of their clients' top unmet needs and **as the first thing they would fund next**. To that end, we offer the following recommendations:

<sup>11</sup> [Youn, Soo. 40% of Americans don't have \\$400 in the bank for emergency expenses: Federal Reserve. ABC News, 2019.](#)

# Policy Recommendations

## 01 Change local, state, and federal policies that create or reinforce systemic barriers to employment disproportionately faced by women and BIPOC people.

- a. Expand public investments in equitable child and family care, affordable housing, public transportation, health and mental health care, education, and access to technology,
- b. End permanent punishments against people with a criminal record,
- c. Stop suspending driver's licenses and impounding vehicles due to inability to pay fines, fees, and other public debts.

Workforce organizations provide supportive services that address challenges encountered by individual job seekers during the job search and after securing employment, but they may not be equipped to transform the many systemic and structural barriers to employment that marginalized job seekers and communities face. Our survey of the common unmet needs of job seekers shows non-skill-related barriers such as adequate childcare, housing, and transportation impact the ability to find and retain work. This is a direct result of a fractured and chronically under-resourced safety-net system, lack of critical investments in communities of color, and other formal and informal systemic practices that keep people out of work and in poverty along lines of race, gender, ability, and other markers of identity. The pandemic has exacerbated the gap for already marginalized workers, pushing them further away from work and deeper into poverty. Women and BIPOC people, historically impacted by inequality within the labor force, have been disproportionately impacted during the pandemic.<sup>12</sup> The urgency for resource investments must also be met with policy reforms that address systemic and structural barriers to employment.

<sup>12</sup> [Long, Heather et al. The covid-19 recession is the most unequal in modern U.S. history, Washington Post, 2020.](#)

## 02 Establish a cross-agency Employment Barrier Support & Job Retention Fund to help job seekers overcome acute barriers to employment and meet their career advancement goals. The fund should:

- a. Be adaptable to meet various needs of job seekers,
- b. Offer service providers discretion in funding supportive services to meet client needs,
- c. Allow service providers to access funds within a shorter turnaround time and,
- d. Minimize administrative tasks for service providers and job seekers.

As noted in the survey findings, job seekers may experience emergencies or have unmet basic needs which supersede job readiness. Until those issues are addressed, they may be unable to enter or keep a job. A flexible emergency fund could address the systemic barriers many economically marginalized Illinoisians face when seeking employment. Flexible funds for workers can help increase family stability and job retention by covering accumulated emergency costs for basic needs, such as housing-related expenses (rent, utilities), transportation, child-care, digital technology needs, and work-related supplies that are not typically covered by programmatic supportive services.

This fund could function as a way to provide program participants with flexible emergency cash assistance, a supportive service that our survey respondents ranked as the second highest priority for what to fund next. Such a fund would also give service providers discretionary flexibility in how to disperse existing supportive dollars strategically as part of a set of holistic and human-centered supports. Besides being navigable for job seekers, it is essential that this fund reduces administrative barriers for providers, making it easier to distribute funds that respond to clients' emergencies, structural barriers, and unmet needs.

**"A flexible emergency fund could address the systemic barriers many economically marginalized Illinoisians face when seeking employment. Flexible funds for workers can help increase family stability and job retention by covering accumulated emergency costs...not typically covered by programmatic supportive services."**

### 03 Expand and modernize supportive services funding attached to workforce development grants:

- a. Increase amount and flexibility of available funding by leveraging existing funding streams (SNAP E&T, WIOA WIB requirements, etc),
- b. Award grants over multiple years and increase renewal periods,
- c. Reduce the complexity of administering funds,
- d. Provide updated guidance and technical assistance to service providers to facilitate equitable implementation of funds,
- e. Update guidelines about allowable expenses and what can be funded by supportive services,
- f. Reduce eligibility determination timelines to prevent service gaps,
- g. Allow supportive services to cover alumni and participants post-placement into a job, and
- h. Distribute supportive service funds through stipends and direct cash assistance payments.

Although over 75 percent of our survey respondents wished their program could provide more supportive services, when asked what the biggest barrier their agency faced in providing more services, funding constraints (98%) and grant restrictions (71%) were shared as the top two reasons. Our focus group respondents agreed that current federal and state funding structures were also too restrictive and out-dated in what supportive services could be covered. Additionally, providers from the focus group mentioned it was challenging to fund supportive services for a longer period of time when a majority of grants renewed annually, leading to extensive paperwork for staff. To address these areas for improvement, state and federal policymakers can encourage the use of WIOA and SNAP E&T funds for supportive services, extend the period of grant cycles, and intentionally build more flexibility into the amount and type of expenses that can be covered in order to address demonstrated barriers. Also, additional dollars being made available via the state-wide Employment Barrier Support & Job Retention Fund would create more avenues for flexible spending.

Providers in our focus group additionally shared that guidelines for public funding sources were complex and their staff may not have adequate information or training on how to use them. Providing training or accessible online instructions on how to use discretionary funds will help staff access these resources from new or existing sources.

Also, clear information about the different sets of restrictions placed at each government level would allow providers more opportunities to advocate for reduced restrictions at the local level. However, though providing thorough training is critical, reducing the complexity of the grant process and accessing these funds would streamline the process of responding to clients' needs.

Participants wait anywhere from a couple of weeks to over a month to hear on their eligibility for supportive services. Auditing these processes to minimize eligibility turnaround time will create a more responsive support system that helps meet people's immediate needs. Providers distributing funds through the Employment Barrier Support & Job Retention Fund would also be able to quickly meet the needs of clients, due to the fund's fast timeline and low administrative burden.

Trauma-informed workforce systems recognize that six months or a year is not enough time for people who have experienced trauma, such as mental illness, homelessness, or incarceration, to seamlessly transition back into the workforce. Providers also repeatedly mentioned that losing supportive services during the gap of time between when a client becomes employed and gets their first paycheck can make it hard for participants to meet their own needs. Extending the duration of supportive services past probationary employment periods (90 days) gives clients more time to get back on their feet. The organizations we surveyed agreed that this measure was key to ensure clients' long-term success. Many programs simply lack the dollars to continue supportive services past enrollment in a program. State and philanthropic funding partners can prioritize longer investment of dollars for case management staff and supportive services that intentionally cover current participants and alumni for periods longer than 90 days after a program ends. The Employment Barrier Support & Job Retention Fund could, for example, cover alumni and current participants of programs for upwards of two years.

Providing individuals with stipends and cash assistance directly, as opposed to itemized reimbursements from service providers, grants them the agency to make financial decisions based on their own needs. These funds, absent subjective restrictions, acknowledge and respect



Americans' personal choice and autonomy and entrust them to make the best decisions for their families, unlike existing welfare programs that assume the worst of recipients. The funds aren't enough for people to stop working, but they do alleviate stress about basic needs.

## 04 Increase funding for systems navigation and case management positions.

Relationship-building and warm handoffs between providers are critical to program participants receiving the support they need to be successful in programs and the labor market. Over 50% of the participants in our focus group reported that a top barrier to providing more services was the lack of staff capacity to take on more clients. Funding positions for **systems navigators** and case managers, who specialize in informing clients about their options and the career pathways tailored to their unique situation, leads to better-supported clients and more successful outcomes.

Additional hours of engagement with employers and participants require staff time. With staff time being so limited, organizations need additional funding sources from state or philanthropic funding streams to prioritize dollars that fund essential staff members and increase employee retention.



# Conclusion

Increasing investment in supportive services has the potential to greatly benefit the livelihoods of people enrolled in workforce development programs.

However, merely increasing funds is insufficient. Supportive services and direct support to job seekers must be responsive and flexible enough to meet their needs. Results from our survey and insights from providers in our focus group emphasized the importance of increasing the ease to which providers can respond and adapt to both clients' goals and the barriers they face in achieving them. The providers we spoke to advocated for structural shifts in current supportive service programs towards human-centered services that are adaptable enough to respond to complex barriers in a timely manner. Supportive services are one piece of the societal and structural changes needed to alter the "social determinants of work" in our communities. While these resources are necessary we also must change local, state, and federal policies that create or reinforce systemic barriers to employment. Despite all the progress made thus far, there is always room to improve how we support job seekers and hope the policy recommendations above can serve as a starting block for the work to come.

# Appendix

## Key Terms

A **dislocated worker** is an individual who has been terminated or laid off, or who has been notified of termination from employment.<sup>13</sup>

**Supportive services** are generally defined as a coordinated set of services provided to individuals by community service organizations or government agencies that aim to grant immediate relief and increase the self-sufficiency of individuals. Many clients need multiple types of assistance to address the intersecting challenges that they face in gaining and maintaining employment. These services often take the form of subsidized transit fares or childcare services, access to legal aid, career counseling, cash assistance, and a number of other services.

**System navigators** help clients reach their own goals by fostering relationships between stakeholders and clients across service areas, like housing, education, and workforce development, and streamlining the provision of services.<sup>14</sup>

An **out-of-school youth** is either a youth between 16-24 years old who is not in school, or a low-income youth who has received a secondary school diploma, but is deficient in basic skills, or is unemployed. Youth in contact with the justice system also fall under this category.<sup>15</sup>

**Underemployed individuals** are individuals who are either employed less than full-time, but seeking full-time employment, or who are employed in a position that is inadequate with respect to their level of skills and/or training.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>[Key Terms and Definitions, United States Department of Labor Employment & Training Administration.](#)

<sup>14</sup>[Career Navigation Report, Seattle Jobs Initiative, 2015.](#)

<sup>15</sup>[Out-of-School Youth Definition, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2015.](#)

<sup>16</sup>[Definition of Underemployed Adults & Dislocated Workers, WIOA, 2020.](#)

# Survey Questions

Click [here](#) to see a full list of the survey questions and responses.

## Method

The Chicago Jobs Council developed this survey in partnership with our partners at Women Employed, JARC, YI, and RW, in conjunction with our participation in the National Skills Coalition’s Supportive Services Academy. In November 2020, the Chicago Jobs Council distributed a 34 question survey to our statewide network of workforce development service providers. Over six weeks, 59 individuals and 45 unduplicated organizations completed the survey. We also completed a focus group with 7 people in April, completed an interview with a youth-focused organization, and completed an interview with a provider in Rockford administering WIOA workforce services for their region.

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