

## Obstacles and Opportunities:

### Improving Survivors' Access to Education, Training, and Jobs

Program completion, industry recognized credentials, and job placement are critical measures for workforce development programs. As a result, ensuring program participants are able to achieve these goals is a driving factor in program design and execution. Programs strive to address a broad range of known barriers to success such as financial constraints and family obligations, however, programs are rarely equipped to recognize and respond to the impacts trauma has on the ability of individuals to pursue programs and thrive once enrolled.



To better understand the systemic and institutional obstacles workforce development programs face when integrating trauma-informed policies and practices as well as identify opportunities to improve education and employment outcomes for survivors of human trafficking, Futures Without Violence (FUTURES) convened representatives from community colleges, apprenticeship programs, and non-profit job training programs for a roundtable discussion.

The goals of the meeting included:

- Determining areas in which workforce development services can be improved to better support individuals who have experienced gender-based violence and trauma;
- Identifying promising practices and models cross-sector collaboration that best support individuals with complex needs;
- Creating recommendations for both victim service providers and workforce development service providers on how they can come together to form effective cross-sector partnerships.

## Determinants of Participant\* Success

Workforce development programs that recognize and respond to the potential obstacles that can impact students' ability to complete a program and secure a job are better positioned to support participant success. Roundtable participants shared a number of programmatic elements and environmental factors that can increase the likelihood of participant success.

\*The workforce development system uses a number of names for individuals who enroll in education and job training programs including student, program participant, job seeker, client, and customer, depending on the type of organization providing services. This report will use the term, participant.

1. Recognizing financial and family pressures are key. Participants who have their physical and material needs met, such as housing, transportation, childcare, food, physical and mental health care, and program fees, are more likely to successfully complete education and training programs. Absent economic security, these students are more likely to take available jobs despite lower wages or limited career pathways out of a need to support themselves and their families. Participants who are shielded from family pressures, such as having access to affordable childcare for parents or mentors with shared life experiences for participants pursuing pathways that conflict with families' desires, are not able to balance family and their career priorities.
2. Participants with emotional and social supports, such as mentors and career networks, are better positioned to thrive. It was particularly critical for individuals from marginalized communities to see individuals like themselves, who have similar lived experiences, backgrounds, and communities, succeeding in their educational and

"I needed more one on one time and attention. I needed the one on one for different reasons. First of all because of the daily affects my trauma it was hard for me to really pay attention and obtain information. So being able to sit down one-on-one with an employment specialist, go over my employment history or lack of employment history, and go from there was a huge part for me."

SURVIVOR of Human Trafficking

career pursuits. This is especially true industries which have a demographically homogenous workforce.

3. Flexible and responsive programming that recognizes that one-size does not fit all provides individuals with certain obstacles to enrolling in and completing a program opportunities to access opportunities that otherwise would have been out of reach. For example, having multiple training sessions options helps to accommodate caretaking responsibilities and work schedules. In addition, having trained staff who are able to recognize obstacles and provide intensive case management not only shows individuals that they matter and will be supported, but also that seeking help is expected and not an indication of failure.
4. Institutional commitments to equity for all program participants, with particular attention to the impacts of discrimination and oppression based on race and ethnicity, has helped to increase access and success for individuals from marginalized communities.

While there are some workforce programs that are beginning to screen for and address the impacts of trauma resulting from gender-based violence, such as the Brighton Center in northern Kentucky and Clark State Community College in Ohio, the majority of workforce development programs lack the awareness and infrastructure to adequately respond to gender-based violence and harassment experienced by individual participants. Because the impacts of gender-based violence are often hidden or may present

“He would show up at my school and physically remove me from class or lie and say one of my kids is in the hospital. He would also quit his job to make me get another job so I have to drop out of school. He would also delete my homework or mess up my study time by waking up the kids and leave so I would have to attend to my kids instead of studying or he would mess my computer up so I would not be able to access my work and notes for school.”

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themselves as other issues, programs may not recognize gender-based violence and harassment as a significant problem. However, we know that survivors' efforts to pursue education and employment opportunities are negatively impacted by violence. Experiencing violence and abuse increases the likelihood of dropping out of school and job training programs,<sup>1</sup> job loss,<sup>2</sup> and resulting chronic health conditions, fear, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder can interfere with academic and work performance.<sup>3</sup>

## Internal and External Challenges

While the workforce development system understands the many factors that can that improve participant success, individual programs often face a number of financial and operational constraints that make program design and the practicalities of implementing supportive environments to support the needs of individuals who face complex obstacles as a result of trauma particularly difficult.

The workforce development system, funded primarily by the US Department of Labor under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA), was designed with a goal “help job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market and to match employers with the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy.”<sup>4</sup> Because of increasing federal and state work requirements to receive public assistance, many are now viewing the system's primary goal as moving individuals from welfare recipients to taxpayers with less of an emphasis on providing support services to ensure long-term economic stability. Moreover, because programs are evaluated based on the number of individuals that complete programs and

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<sup>1</sup> Curcio, William. (1996). The Passaic County Study of AFDC Recipients in a Welfare-to-Work Program: A Preliminary Analysis. Paterson, NJ: Passaic County Board of Social Services; Partners for a Competitive Workforce. (2016). Domestic Violence Pilot Project Report. Cincinnati, OH: Partners for a Competitive Workforce; and, Hess and Del Rosario. (2018). Dreams Deferred: A Survey on the Impact of Intimate Partner Violence on Survivors' Education, Careers, and Economic Security. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

<sup>2</sup> Ridley et al. (2005). Domestic Violence Survivors at Work: How Perpetrators Impact Employment. Augusta, ME: Maine Department of Labor and Family Crisis Services.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell, Jacquelyn. (2002). Health Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence. *The Lancet* vol. 359, no. 9314: 1331–1336.

<sup>4</sup> Employment and Training Administration. (2019). Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act. <https://www.doleta.gov/wioa/about/overview/>

obtain work, many programs are incentivized to serve target populations who are most likely to succeed and obtain any job, even if that job do not provide economically secure wages. These incentives have resulting in increasing enrollment requirements to screen out those who may need additional supports and accelerating program timelines to move individuals though quickly regardless of what program administrators know students need to succeed.<sup>5</sup> Some concern was also shared that the pressures programs face to produce successful participants, not only because of funding but because of employer relationships, may deter some programs from working with individuals who have severe and complex challenges because they could be perceived as a significant risk.



While many workforce programs recognize the need to address the complex needs program participants have, trauma resulting from human trafficking and gender-based violence – which is often the cause of many complex issues facing participants – isn't understood as an underlying factor behind these complex needs.

Greater awareness is needed to address the impacts of trauma, particularly among adult serving programs. Programs that do recognize the impacts of trauma often lack the resources necessary to hire case managers, integrate case management into teaching and training programs, or provide professional development to build the capacity of staff to recognize and respond to the many impediments individuals may face when participating in their programs. Some programs have developed relationships with community based organizations to address common needs such as housing, childcare, and transportation, but partnering with victim service agencies to address the impacts of trauma and gender-based violence was for the most part unheard of among the group. A lack of awareness of how to identify and reach out to these programs, as well as structural and language differences across sectors, were cited as obstacles to collaboration.

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<sup>5</sup> Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools. (2014). One Size Fits None: The Skills Gap and America's On-Going Workforce Development Challenges. Washington, DC: Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools.

## Identifying Solutions: Strengths and Opportunities

There are a number of strategies that have helped support those who have multiple challenges that can impede participant success. The two primary success fell into two categories: external social supports and internal case management.



1. Mentorship with individuals who have shared backgrounds and experiences, facilitated networking opportunities, and exposure to success stories from individuals with similar identities was particularly important for individuals from under-represented and marginalized communities, those who were the first in their family to pursue such opportunities, and those in need of strong social supports. Having a mentor and strong network not only created a sense of belonging but helped coach participants through the challenges they faced.
2. Case management also played an important role in addressing the many obstacles participants may face when enrolled in an education or job training program. Case managers were trained to respond to a variety of needs and were equipped with tools and resources to help. Case management was most successful when it was structured as a regular part of programming and not a resource individuals could choose to pursue if needed. This helps reduce the stigma of help-seeking and normalizes the need for support.
3. Co-locating health services, child care, and other key needs that has been shown to greatly increase access and utilization. This reduces the need for participants to seek such supports elsewhere and generally allows for greater coordination of services.

While these practices have shown to support the success of program participants, there are a number of opportunities that can further augment those approaches. First is through building the capacity of all program staff – from community outreach to training faculty – about trauma and how to support individuals in a trauma informed way. This can help ensure that there are multiple points of intervention and reduce the potential for re-traumatization due to a lack of awareness and understanding of gender-based violence. Second, more is needed to strengthen individuals’ resiliency in addition to technical skill building. Including training components that focus on health and empowerment could foster healing and improve overall well-being and self-advocacy. Finally, building a stronger relationships with a variety of local community based organizations, not only to increase knowledge around available supports and resources, but to also make warm referrals, was seen as opportunity to improve outcomes for participants.

## Recommendations

A number key recommendations were put forth by the group to as necessary steps to help build a more trauma responsive workforce development system.

1. Utilize large national organizations such as the National Council for Workforce Education, to educate federal, state, and local workforce agencies about the impact of trauma on the ability to participants to succeed.
2. Identify and target workforce development programs that are best positioned to integrate trauma-informed practices into their work, such as community colleges and youth servicing agencies, to engage in efforts to build institutional capacity and cross-sector partnerships with victim service providers.
3. Conduct research to collect more data and stories on the impacts of gender-based violence and trafficking has on program participation and success to identify top areas of need and prioritize interventions.

4. Produce a promising practice guide for the workforce system on serving survivors of gender-based violence.
5. Advocate for multi-year funding and more flexibility within grant programs, including resources for partnerships and time for project planning prior to implementation, to reduce funding constraints and outcome requirements that have impeded programs ability to support participants with complex obstacles to success.

While systems change will take time, incremental steps can be taken to raise awareness about trauma and the needs of survivors of gender-based violence and to advocate for practical changes through resources and technical assistance that can build the systems' capacity to provide trauma-responsive services. Cross system leadership is needed to move these efforts forward. In partnering with the right organizations, the Promoting Employment Opportunities for Survivors of Human Trafficking project can help to catalyze these efforts through its training and technical assistance.

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