HEARTS AND MINDS IN HOUSTON:

Implementing and Evaluating Cross-Trainings on the Value of Employment for Ending Homelessness

November 2020

HEARTLAND ALLIANCE
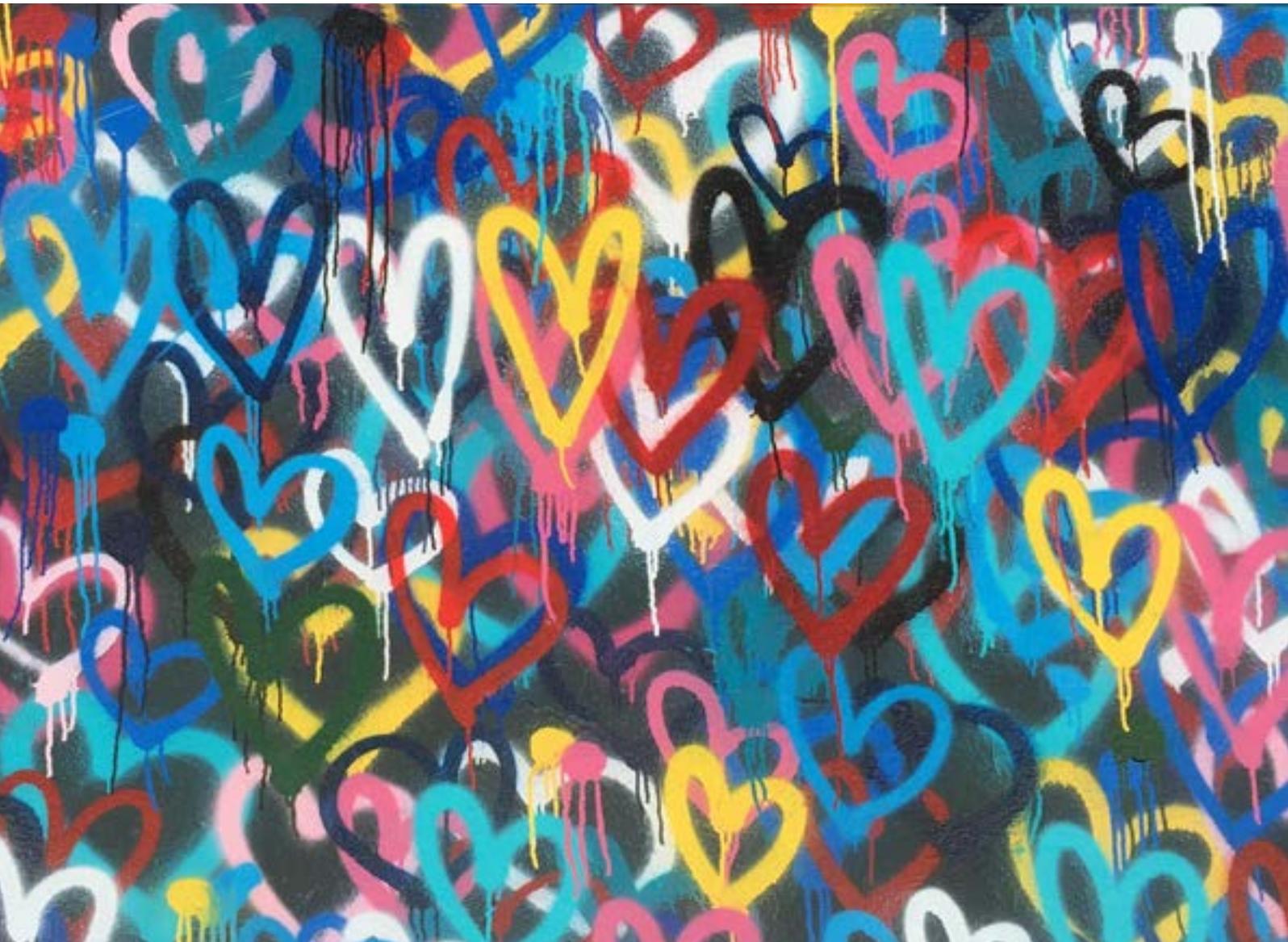
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Heartland Alliance, one of the world's leading anti-poverty organizations, works in communities in the U.S. and abroad to serve those who are homeless, living in poverty, or seeking safety. Heartland Alliance provides a comprehensive array of services in the areas of health and healing, economic opportunity, and safety and justice. The Alliance also leads state and national policy efforts, which target lasting change for individuals and society.

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

As more communities across the country recognize that employment and earned income play an essential role in preventing and ending homelessness, many communities still struggle to ensure that people experiencing or at risk of homelessness have access to appropriate, effective employment services.

This work cannot be done by programs alone. A systems-level response that includes collaboration between homeless services and public workforce systems is critical to ensure that leadership in both systems take responsibility for achieving equitable employment outcomes. Through collaboration, systems leaders can make sure the right resources and incentives for this work are in place, design programming according to best practices, support efforts with data, and monitor outcomes. While systems leaders can drive change, it is also imperative that homeless services and workforce development managers and frontline staff who are responsible for implementing new approaches believe in the goals and efficacy of connecting people experiencing homelessness to employment. Moreover, these professionals need to work together across systems to deliver the best services for homeless jobseekers.

Research evidence strongly supports the idea that people experiencing homelessness want to work, that they can be successful in work with the right supports, and that in addition to being essential for housing stability, work has positive social, health, and wellbeing impacts when offered to individuals who demonstrate interest in working. However, in many communities the professionals responsible for providing housing and employment services could benefit from further education around the benefits of employment for people experiencing homelessness, the employability of people experiencing homelessness, and the best practices for connecting homeless jobseekers to quality jobs.

Stakeholders in Houston identified cross-system training as a promising means to build buy-in and commitment from staff and leaders from both the workforce development and homeless services systems around prioritizing employment outcomes for people experiencing homelessness, and to lay the groundwork for further efforts toward coordinating and changing public systems to better accommodate homeless jobseekers. Heartland Alliance's National Center on Employment and Homelessness partnered with Houston's Income Now team (see pull out box) to develop and deliver a training curriculum for personnel from multiple systems focused on research evidence, culture and values, and best practices for connecting people experiencing homelessness with earned income. Heartland Alliance's Social IMPACT Research Center evaluated the trainings' impacts through pre- and post-training survey research. The evaluation found

large, immediate changes in respondents' attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge related to the value of employment for people experiencing homelessness. While some of these changes were persistent, others faded with time. We recommend cross-system training for communities seeking to build buy-in for similar systems coordination efforts, more frequent reinforcement and follow-up, and codifying training content within agency policies in order to ensure the trainings' impacts are lasting and robust.

HOUSTON'S INCOME NOW PROJECT

Since 2015, Houston's Income Now Project Team has worked to integrate their homeless service system with an income assessment and triage tool to ensure that all people receiving homeless services can access both housing and employment. Through their year-long "Income Now" workshop series, facilitated in partnership with Heartland Alliance's National Center on Employment and Homelessness, Houston has led the charge to ensure that homeless services and workforce development stakeholders understand how employment can help prevent and end homelessness and have access to the resources necessary to consistently connect homeless jobseekers with work. The workshop series built both buy-in and capacity among participants, ultimately translating into over 1,000 people, who were entering Houston's homeless services system, being connected to employment assistance.

The Need for Education

In interviews and conversations with stakeholders in communities across the country, one common concern is that managers and frontline staff in the homeless services field are not fully persuaded that a) employment is a critical component of helping clients exit homelessness, b) their clients are employable in the near term, c) employment does not pose a threat to the stability and recovery of their clients, and d) that their jobs include the role of facilitating the process of accessing and succeeding in employment. Moreover, among managers and frontline staff in the public workforce system, there is frequently inadequate funding, specialized knowledge, and staff resources to deliver appropriate and effective employment services to jobseekers experiencing homelessness, as well as misperceptions about the employability and likelihood of workplace success among people experiencing homelessness. While this is by no means true of all housing and workforce professionals in all communities, the phenomenon is pervasive enough to pose a significant barrier to ensuring that more homeless individuals gain access to appropriate employment services and achieve their employment goals.

At the community level, practitioners in the workforce development and homeless services fields need to understand their shared responsibilities and work together to ensure common goals are achieved. We have heard from frontline staff and managers across the country working in these fields that further education is needed to better understand that:

- These systems are serving the same populations and often the same individuals;
- Employment success and housing stability are interdependent;
- These systems have a shared responsibility to support employment and housing outcomes;
- Employment is in the best interest of people experiencing homelessness when they choose to participate in employment services and supports; and
- People experiencing homelessness can and do succeed in employment if offered the proper supports.

The Trainings

The [Way Home Houston](#), a collaborative effort among more than 100 partners to prevent and end homelessness in the City of Houston and its surrounding counties, recognized these needs in their own community. They decided to respond with an educational campaign including a series of trainings designed to meet the needs of staff and leadership from both systems. With assistance from the National Center on Employment and Homelessness, Houston's Income Now team developed and delivered a nine-part training series for frontline staff and managers from the local homeless services and public workforce systems with the intention of achieving the following goals:

> **Stakeholders in Houston identified cross-system training as a promising means to build buy-in and commitment from staff and leaders from both the workforce development and homeless services systems around prioritizing employment outcomes for people experiencing homelessness, and to lay the groundwork for further efforts toward coordinating and changing public systems to better accommodate homeless jobseekers.**

- Attendees would be more likely than before attending to see mainstream competitive employment as a *viable* goal for people experiencing homelessness;
- Attendees would be more likely than before attending to see mainstream competitive employment as a *valuable* goal for people experiencing homelessness.
- Attendees would be more willing to dedicate their time, attention, and energy to working with people experiencing homelessness to secure mainstream competitive employment; and
- Attendees would feel more equipped to help homeless jobseekers with their employment goals.

In order to affect these changes in attendees' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding homelessness and employment, the training curriculum was developed around three themes:

- Presenting research evidence supporting the value of employment and earned income for people experiencing homelessness who want to work and the efficacy of employment strategies as a component of anti-homelessness programming;

- Demonstrating how prioritizing employment and income for people experiencing homelessness aligns with the values, principles, objectives, and outcomes measures of both the homeless services system and the workforce system, and how every worker in either system has a role to play in supporting the employment goals of their participants; and
- Equipping attendees with the practical tools and techniques to effectively support the employment needs and goals of homeless jobseekers, including evidence-based program models, best practices, and next steps.

The Income Now curriculum was designed to equip managers and frontline staff with strategies and tools to begin supporting employment in their daily work, as well as the knowledge to develop and deliver comprehensive, evidence-based program models that reinforce the position of employment within the values that drive anti-homelessness work and align with the principles of "housing first."

The training curriculum provided a common language and highlighted the common goals among housing and employment professionals, and suggested methods for building coordination between fields. Each training session supported the messages that employment is a critical part of preventing and ending homelessness; that employment is a desire and goal of people experiencing homelessness; that employment is good for the recovery and wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness; and that people experiencing homelessness are employable and capable of workplace success.

Evidence supporting the value of employment

In order to build buy-in and support from leadership and staff across systems, it is essential to communicate that extensive research evidence supports the position that employment is a critical factor in preventing and ending homelessness, and that people experiencing homelessness can be successful in employment. The Income Now trainings cited research to support these key points: most people experiencing homelessness want to work and, in fact, often attribute their homelessness to a lack of employment and insufficient income.[1] Alongside healthcare and housing, steady employment is consistently ranked as a primary need by those experiencing homelessness.[2] Research regularly demonstrates that increased income is a leading predictor of a person exiting homelessness,[3] and earned income from formal employment has repeatedly been shown to shorten periods of homelessness.[4] Not only does the earned income from employment improve access to food, clothing, and healthcare, but it instills purpose and builds confidence and self-worth.[5] As a result, employment has the potential to improve family functioning and community wellbeing.[6] And although many service providers are concerned that working creates stressors that could imperil recovery from mental illness or substance use disorder, evidence shows that employment actually supports recovery.[7] Employment has also been shown to successfully reduce justice involvement and recidivism.[8]

Aligning employment with the values and mandates of each field

The objectives of the workforce and homeless systems are highly interdependent: for most people, access to living-wage work is critical to remaining stably housed, and being stably housed is critical to gaining and retaining employment. In addition, the professional values of service providers align with the goal of prioritizing employment outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. For example, the homeless services field highly values "consumer choice," or the belief that impacted individuals have agency to choose the time, circumstances, and conditions in which they receive services and the types of services they receive. The homeless services field is also committed to the principle of "Housing First," according to which people experiencing homelessness are not required to meet conditions prior to being housed. Applying the values of consumer choice and housing first to employment is consistent with best practices in workforce development for people experiencing homelessness, in which an individual's stated desire to seek employment should be the principal determinant of access to employment services, as opposed to a service providers' assessment of "motivation," "readiness," or "employability," or requirements to participate in extensive training or preparation prior to job placement.

Equipping providers with effective models and practices

Once service providers understand that prioritizing employment for people experiencing homelessness is supported by research and consistent with their professional values, they need to know about the models and practices that are most effective for connecting those individuals to jobs. There are a handful of rigorously tested program models that are effective for jobseekers experiencing homelessness, as well as a range of promising practices that can be implemented across models. Evidence-based models that have demonstrated efficacy for jobseekers experiencing homelessness include Transitional Jobs and Individualized Placement and Support (IPS). Transitional Jobs combine time-limited subsidized employment with support services, skill development, and unsubsidized job development.[9] IPS focuses on rapid placement into competitive employment coupled with concurrent, multidisciplinary wrap-around support services.[10] Best and promising practices that can be implemented across program models include prioritizing rapid attachment to paid employment, fostering peer support among jobseekers, providing highly individualized job development and placement services that align with jobseekers' interests, and offering robust retention services once individuals access work. The Income Now trainings provided attendees with practical guidance on how to implement these models and strategies within their operations in a format that progresses from simple, low-cost actions that can be taken immediately through the long-term planning and funding of fully-developed evidence-based models.

> **There are a handful of rigorously tested program models that are effective for jobseekers experiencing homelessness, as well as a range of promising practices that can be implemented across models.**

Evaluation Methodology

The goal of evaluating Team Houston's trainings was to assess the efficacy of cross-system trainings in changing staff attitudes and beliefs regarding the value of employment in preventing and ending homelessness. The core research questions were:

1. After attending the trainings, are attendees more likely to see employment as a valuable goal and a viable goal for their homeless clients?
2. After attending the trainings, are attendees more willing to dedicate their time, attention, and energy to working with homeless jobseekers to find employment or support the effort of other service providers assisting with employment services?
3. Do the trainings shift perception in how equipped organizations and their staff are to link homeless jobseekers to employment?
4. How intensive of a training schedule is necessary to affect attitude and culture change on these items?

In order to measure changes in training attendees' attitudes and beliefs over time, Heartland Alliance's [Social IMPACT Research Center](#) (IMPACT) developed a baseline survey to be administered prior to receiving any training as well as a series of follow-up surveys to be delivered after each of the trainings. Because it was likely that each training would be attended by a slightly different group of participants, Houston's Income Now team worked with IMPACT to identify a Core Group of individuals who were influential in their respective fields and likely to attend all or most training events. IMPACT then measured changes in survey responses among this Core Group throughout the training series. Heartland Alliance's [National Center on Employment and Homelessness](#) also conducted follow-up interviews with some of the Core Group attendees in 2019 to find out whether they saw any long-term effects from the trainings and to get their input on how to make the impacts of the trainings last longer.

Findings

The cross-system trainings positively impacted the attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of attendees regarding the value of employment for people experiencing homelessness, but some of those effects faded over time.

The responses to the survey indicate that cross-system trainings can positively impact the attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of attendees from both homeless services and workforce development systems regarding the value of employment for people experiencing homelessness. However, some of the effects of the trainings as measured by survey responses faded over time, suggesting that it may be difficult to sustain these changes in the absence of frequent and recurring in-person reinforcement. For example, following the initial training there was a significant increase in the number of Core Group respondents who agreed with the statement: *"Most homeless individuals can be successfully employed."* However, this initial improvement slowly, but steadily, returned to baseline. This pattern of sudden increase in agreement followed by a slow reversion

to the initial baseline level was observed across a number of statements in the survey. There were some statements for which the changes were more persistent, but there were differences between statements that resonated long-term with workforce development professionals and homeless services professionals, as described below.

When asked why the improvements generated by the initial training had gradually tapered off, interviewees commonly cited staff turnover, which one respondent estimated to be as high as forty percent within the last two years. New staff members rarely have experience working across systems, nor have they been exposed to cross-system trainings in quite the same way as the existing staff that they replace. The issues emerging from high staff turnover, however, can be overcome by frequently convening cross-system trainings at regular intervals, as described below.

The initial and longer-term effects of the trainings differed among workforce development system and homeless services system attendees.

The trainings had different effects depending on whether attendees worked in the homeless services system or workforce development system. Among Core Group respondents from the homeless services system, the trainings had lasting effects on agreement with the following statements: *"My organization dedicates appropriate resources to support me in working with homeless individuals on employment goals;"* *"Promoting employment to homeless individuals is consistent with the values of the field;"* and *"Employment is in the best therapeutic interest of most homeless individuals."* The workforce group also saw an increase in agreement with the statement *"Promoting employment to homeless individuals is consistent with the values of the field,"* but this effect returned to baseline over time.

Among Core Group respondents from the workforce development system, the trainings had lasting effects on agreement with the statements *"I am equipped with strategies to help homeless individuals work on employment goals"* and *"Employment is in the best financial interest of most homeless individuals."* The homeless services group also saw an increase in agreement with the statement *"I'd say that employment is in the best financial interest of most homeless individuals,"* but this effect returned to baseline over time.

It is encouraging that Core Group respondents from both homeless services and workforce development fields experienced lasting changes in their agreement with some statements, but the fact that the two groups differed in which statements they agree with indicates a possible retrenchment toward the respective systems' conventional competencies. The focus of workforce employees on financial interests, like homeless services employees' interest in meeting individuals' therapeutic needs, underscores what each system sees as their primary area of responsibility and set of priorities.

Survey Findings
Workforce Development System Stakeholders

81% 95% 94% 100%

Baseline   Q2   Q3   Q4

"I am equipped with strategies to help homeless individuals work on employment goals."

74% 95% 100% 75%

Baseline   Q2   Q3   Q4

"Most homeless individuals can be successfully employed."

81% 89% 100% 100%

Baseline   Q2   Q3   Q4

"Employment is in the best financial interest of most homeless individuals."

89% 89% 100% 92%

Baseline   Q2   Q3   Q4
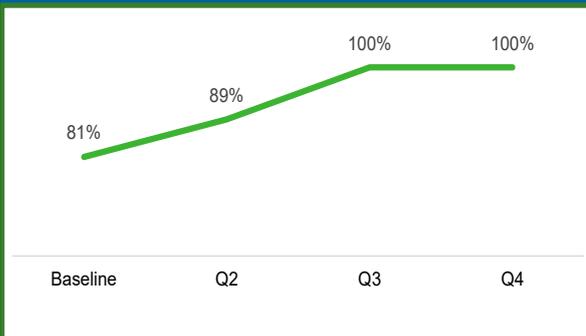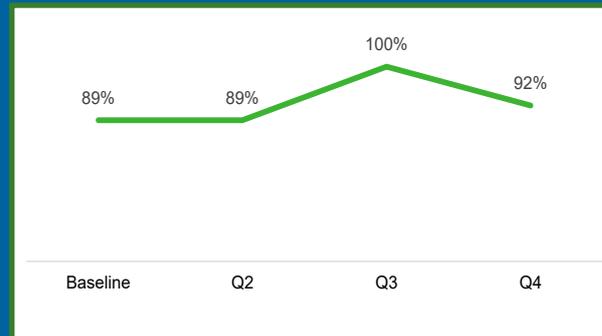
"Promoting employment to homeless individuals is consistent with the values of the field."

"Changes in survey responses over time varied by which field respondents worked in. Some of those changes persisted throughout the study period but most returned to baseline before the training series was over. This suggests the need for ongoing training and messaging in order to affect lasting change in beliefs and attitudes about employment for people experiencing homelessness."

Survey Findings
Homeless Services System Stakeholders
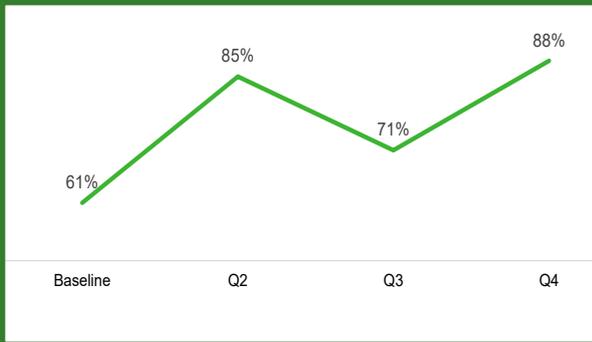
85%
88%
71%
61%

| Baseline | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 |

"My organization dedicates appropriate resources to support me in working with homeless individuals on employment goals."

85%
82%
76%
61%

| Baseline | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 |

"Most homeless individuals can be successfully employed."

100%
100%
89%
81%

| Baseline | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 |

"Employment is in the best financial interest of most homeless individuals."

95%
94%
94%
83%

| Baseline | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 |

"Promoting employment to homeless individuals is consistent with the values of the field."

76%
71%
56%
55%

| Baseline | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 |
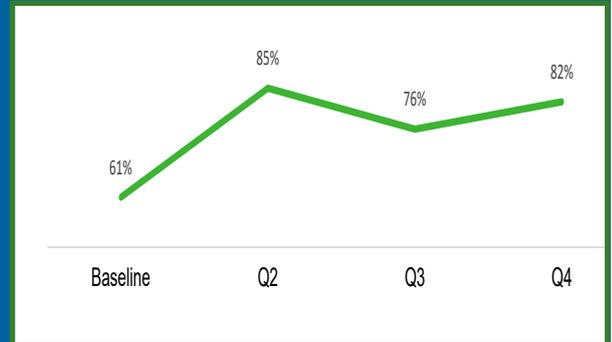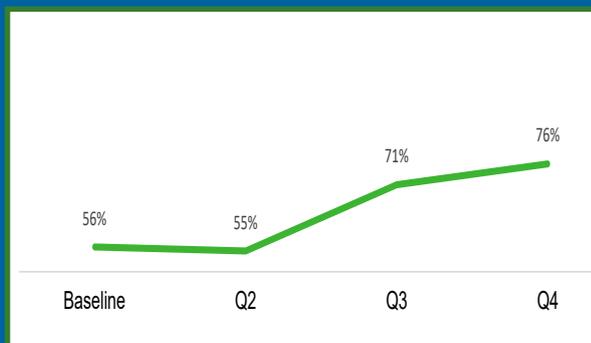
"Employment is in the best therapeutic interest of most homeless individuals."

It is likely that the effects of these trainings could be strengthened and extended with follow-up trainings and ongoing cross-system engagement.

Initiating and preserving improved collaboration between the homeless services and workforce development systems seems to demand regular engagement between the two systems in formal training and professional development activities. That is, prolonged follow-up at regular intervals is required to normalize the implementation of new collaborative practices in the face of staff turnover, shifting regulatory orientations, and the tendency toward existing routine.

A number of interviewees suggested that more frequent follow-up trainings and train-the-trainer opportunities would help to maintain momentum and commitment among homeless services and workforce development staff around prioritizing employment for their clients experiencing homelessness. At least one interviewee who supervises workforce system staff reported periodically using materials from the cross trainings to refresh those concepts with his direct reports.

Recommendations

Communities seeking to strengthen systems coordination among homeless services and workforce development systems should consider cross-trainings as an important component of those efforts.

Our experience tells us that effective systems change cannot be exclusively top-down or bottom-up. System leadership can set the course for collaboration and improvement, but change will not happen unless the professionals responsible for implementing those changes are bought in. Likewise, those professionals working directly with participants need decision makers to set policies and priorities in order to support the implementation of new practices. In addition, workers and leaders in different systems need to understand the operations, mandates, and outcomes measures of other systems in order to build collaboration that is effective for participants and mutually beneficial for systems. Building knowledge, understanding, and buy-in across systems and positions is an essential step toward changing the way systems work and collaborate.

Cross-trainings are valuable to attendees and can affect positive changes in knowledge, attitudes, and understanding related to employment and homelessness, but "one and done" training events are insufficient to support lasting change.

In order to maintain the effects of cross-training, plan for follow-up and reinforcement.

It is clear that cross-trainings are valuable to attendees and can affect positive changes in knowledge, attitudes, and understanding related to employment and homelessness, but "one and done" training events are insufficient to support lasting change. Regular follow-ups and train-the-trainer supports could help equip local champions to deliver refresher trainings to reinforce cross-training messages as well as train up new staff members as agencies

experience turnover. Managers also have a role to play in reinforcing training messages and embedding the objectives and values of prioritizing employment within the operations and culture of their teams, and by helping to codify those objectives within agency policy, as described below.

Build on the effects of cross-training by pursuing further system collaboration and policy change.

Cross-systems training can be a great beginning to better systems collaboration but it is certainly not the end. Communities can leverage the momentum and relationships fostered through cross-trainings to take additional steps toward systems change and collaboration such as shared systems leadership, colocation of personnel and services, formalized referral pathways, data sharing, and the implementation of evidence-based employment service models. Moreover, these changes can and should be codified in agency policy and materials such as employee training manuals and program implementation guides in order to maintain lasting impact as leaders and personnel change. Finally, the findings and practices described here can and should be used inform public policy to support long-term structural solutions to the structural problems of homelessness, chronic unemployment, and poor job quality.

Conclusion

Overall, the experience of cross-system trainings in Houston illustrates that convening staff and leadership from multiple systems can be an effective way to cultivate a sense of shared values and objectives among participants, share knowledge of the functions and policies of other systems, and foster a sense of responsibility and efficacy among participants regarding the roles they play in supporting employment outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. However, it is clear that those effects do not persist without ongoing reinforcement and follow-up by local leaders. Communities seeking to foster better coordination between local public homeless services and workforce systems should consider cross-system trainings as a key part of those coordination efforts, and be sure to reinforce and maintain those messages over time to support long-term changes in organizational culture.

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Appendix A: Houston's Income Now Training Schedule

HOUSTON'S 2016 INCOME NOW TRAINING SCHEDULE

Training	Date	Presenter/s
The Relationship Between Housing and Income	3/22/16 and 3/23/16	Carl Wiley Chris Warland
Employment Models	4/28/2016 2:00pm to 3:30pm	Heartland Webinar
Understanding our Local Job Market	TBD	WFS
Who Can Work? Anyone that Wants to!!!	TBD	TBD
Best Practices in Youth Employment	TBD	Carl Wiley Chris Warland
Supported Employment for the Homeless Response System	TBD	John Coburn
Ticket to Work SSDI/SSI Work Incentives	TBD	John Coburn
Supporting Job Retention	TBD	TBD
Job Seekers and Criminal Backgrounds	TBD	WFS
Helping Families Make Every Cent Count	TBD	Carl Wiley Chris Warland

Appendix B: Heartland Alliance's Social Impact Research Center Survey Text

Income Now Training Survey

(untitled)

1. Which field do you primarily work in? *

○ Homeless Services

○ Workforce/Employment Services

2. Does your organization offer employment services to homeless individuals? *

○ Yes

○ No

○ I'm not sure

(untitled)

3. How many of the Income Now Initiative trainings that The Way Home has hosted have you attended?

*

4. Based on my experience, I'd say most homeless individuals can be successfully employed. *

Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

5. Based on my experience, I'd say that employment is in the best therapeutic interest of most homeless individuals. *

Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

6. Based on my experience, I'd say that employment is in the best financial interest of most homeless individuals. *

Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

7. Promoting employment to homeless individuals is consistent with the values of the [question("value"), id="7"] field. *

Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

8. Homeless service providers should play an active role in helping homeless individuals attain employment. *

Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

9. Workforce/employment providers have the primary responsibility of helping homeless jobseekers become employed. *

Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

10. I am equipped with strategies to help homeless individuals work on employment goals. *

Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

11. My organization dedicates appropriate resources to support me in working with homeless individuals on employment goals. *

Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

(untitled)

12. I've shared what I've learned at this training series with others in my organization. *

Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

13. What percentage of your time do you estimate you spend helping homeless individuals on employment goals? *

[   ]

14. As a result of this training, how do you expect the time you spend helping homeless individuals on employment goals will change?

Increase	Stay the Same	Decrease
○	○	○

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