

Workforce Development Programs are Key for Those Struggling to Pay Rent

Hilary Gawrilow, Corporation for Supportive Housing and Caitlin C. Schnur, National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity at Heartland Alliance

Affordable rental housing is in short supply and the availability of subsidies to assist extremely low-income renters has not changed in over a decade. Only [one out of four](#) eligible households actually receives federal rental assistance. Various policy proposals have been put forth to increase the turnover in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s assisted housing stock, including imposing work requirements and time limits.

Time limits and work requirements for families receiving housing assistance through HUD will undo years of progress and push people back into poverty. Rather than cutting off assistance, efforts would be better spent ensuring that those struggling to find a job and pay rent have access to robust workforce development services through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) that meet their employment needs and interests. Thankfully, ideas such as time limits and work requirements did not find a home in H.R. 3700, the Housing Opportunity through Modernization Act of 2015, when it was passed by the House Financial Services Committee. The bill contains long-awaited improvements to a variety of housing assistance programs that both sides can agree on.

One misconception that is driving the call for time limits and work requirements is that people receiving housing assistance don't want to work. In reality, [two thirds](#) of non-elderly, non-disabled households – which are typically the focus of work requirements – have at least one member who is working or has worked recently.

Data show that families that use voucher assistance for five years or more typically live in high-cost rental markets. The median income of these households was \$15,600, which is a full time job at minimum wage. There is simply nowhere in this country where someone working one minimum wage job can afford to rent a family apartment.

At the same time, people experiencing or at-risk for homelessness face a number of barriers to employment in quality jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage. These roadblocks can include lack of access to affordable child care, transportation, appropriate clothing and equipment, and email and phone service to conduct their job search. Many of these would-be workers may have low educational attainment or lack the soft skills needed to succeed on the job. What these jobseekers need is access to workforce development programs that meet their needs and interests and can help them access quality jobs that pay a living wage.

Congress made important changes to the public workforce system under WIOA that are intended to increase effectiveness and access to employment services for jobseekers facing barriers to employment, including those experiencing homelessness, living in public housing, or receiving housing aid. But communities need time to [implement these changes](#), learn from the results, and refine strategies.

Before WIOA legislation, public workforce development programs were largely not designed to recognize the needs of homeless jobseekers and operated under a set of incentives that made it difficult for this community to access and succeed in available services.

WIOA improves the system in several ways. First, the public workforce system under WIOA must prioritize and direct resources to low-income adults, and state workforce development plans must describe how they will prioritize employment and training services for individuals facing barriers to employment, which includes people who are experiencing homelessness, living in doubled up situations, or couch surfing. Second, states can opt to develop new, [combined state workforce plans](#) in coordination with other systems, including HUD-funded employment services. If done thoughtfully, that could mean the inclusion of employment supports in coordinated access and assessment processes, co-location of

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homeless and workforce services, and the use of employment navigators, all of which increase the likelihood that households experiencing homelessness will receive appropriate housing and workforce services. There is a new emphasis on supportive services and, finally, new performance measures should reduce historical disincentives to serving people who face barriers to employment.

HUD's existing self-sufficiency and employment service programs are small and underfunded, but could be much more effective than time limits and work requirements at helping residents of assisted housing move toward economic independence. The Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) program, available to residents in public housing, households utilizing vouchers, and now Project-Based Section 8 tenants, promotes work by putting any increases in rent due to increases in income into an escrow account for the participant. A participant can set their own goals and the program removes the barrier of a household reaching a "benefits cliff." Upon completion in the five year program, the participant is likely to have increased their income, is paying more in rent, and gained some type of employment. HUD recently announced a pilot program that would test pairing FSS with vouchers aimed at serving youth aging out of foster care.

The Jobs Plus pilot program is a place-based strategy that attempts to saturate housing developments with peer-to-peer information sharing about work opportunities, employment services, and elimination of financial disincentives. As states are retooling their workforce development strategies to better serve higher-need households, Congress should be encouraging the connections between HUD programs and WIOA programs.

States are currently developing new workforce development plans, due in March, 2016. There is a real opportunity for partnership and cross-system collaboration between housing providers and public workforce system. The objectives should be to build on the success of WIOA and continue to address the obstacles families face in maintaining employment and stable housing.

Hilary Gawrilow is the federal policy director for the [Corporation for Supportive Housing](#) (CSH).

Caitlin C. Schnur is the coordinator of [Heartland Alliance's](#) National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity.

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