



JOB READINESS TRAINING *for* Homeless Families: PREPARING FOR WORK TO ACHIEVE HOUSING STABILITY

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Job Readiness Training is a package of services intended to move job seekers quickly into employment by helping them to market their existing skills and abilities toward openings in local labor markets.^[10; 16] It includes instruction in résumé-writing, interview skills, and job search methods, as well as appropriate behaviors and attitudes to display in the workplace. Job Readiness Training is a central component of the Secure Jobs model, which links employment and housing services for homeless families in Massachusetts.ⁱ

Families in Secure Jobs are homeless and either have recently been diverted from shelter, are living in emergency shelter (e.g., congregate housing, motel, scattered site unit), or are receiving temporary housing assistance. Housing case management services accompany most of these housing assistance programs and identify families who are most ready, willing, and able to work. The families are then referred to Secure Jobs for intensive employment services, including Job Readiness Training, with the goal of helping them move into jobs so that they can afford stable housing for their families.

Secure Jobs provides employment services to homeless families in seven regions across Massachusetts, and all Secure Jobs participants receive Job Readiness Training. This brief will outline Job Readiness Training program elements, describe variations in service delivery models, and then offer recommendations for best practices in implementing Job Readiness Training for homeless families.

Background

While job training has been a key strategy for addressing unemployment since the New Deal,^[26] and it has been a key anti-poverty strategy since the War on Poverty,^[11] traditionally it has focused on “hard” or technical skills, e.g., how to operate a machine or build a bridge. In recent decades, in response to changes in the economy and political ideologies,^[9; 16] the focus of job training has shifted to soft skills, which are behaviors and attitudes that demonstrate reliability, motivation, and ability to be a team player.^[7; 20] Demonstrating a mastery of soft skills indicates employability,^[13] and research has shown that employers place more value on soft skills than on hard skills, particularly when evaluating job applicants with low incomes and low levels of education.^[12; 21] Job Readiness Training programs teach participants these symbols of employability to help job seekers to market themselves to employers.

Many Job Readiness curricula center on the idea of empowerment, i.e., that participants can and should take control of their lives, both because a sense of personal empowerment will help them to make sensible

JOB READINESS TRAINING COMPONENTS

The following tasks are commonly addressed in Job Readiness Training:^[14]

- Identify participant’s career interests
- Refine job search skills
- Assist in completing job application
- Build résumé
- Develop interview skills
- Practice workplace behavior/etiquette (soft skills training)

ⁱ For more information on the Secure Jobs model, see the first report in this series, “Secure Jobs, Secure Homes, Secure Families: Process Evaluation of the Massachusetts Secure Jobs Pilot” at <http://iasp.brandeis.edu/pdfs/2013/SJP1a.pdf>.

career decisions and because displays of confidence and effectiveness are among the key soft skills that employers demand. This curricular orientation stems from two concepts developed in the field of psychology, the “locus of control” and “self-efficacy.”^[23] According to the locus of control framework, when an individual feels that a task’s outcome is *internally controlled*, or determined by her own behaviors and actions, then she will approach the task with more motivation and work harder to achieve the outcome.^[22] Relatedly, when an individual has a higher sense of her own effectiveness in completing a task, then she will approach the task with more enthusiasm and motivation, and this effect may spill over into other related tasks as well.^[2] These frameworks suggest that developing a participant’s internal sense of capability and confidence in Job Readiness Training will help her to engage in the course materials and develop the soft skills necessary to impress employers.ⁱⁱ

Many of the skills taught in Job Readiness Training were first identified as important to job readiness in the early 1990s, by the US Department of Labor Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). This commission was tasked with developing a list of key workplace skills. It produced the resulting SCANS Competencies, which are divided into two groups: Workplace Competencies and Foundation Skills.^[25] Workplace Competencies include interpersonal skills; the abilities to analyze data, allocate resources, and apply solutions to problems; and some technological skills. Foundation skills include reading, writing, basic math, analytic thinking, and personal qualities such as self-esteem and responsibility. These sets of skills are often represented in a wheel (see Figure 1). The SCANS Competencies inform most Job Readiness Training curricula, including those used in Secure Jobs. SCANS Competency assessment tools are used identify areas where participants may need more work to become job-ready.

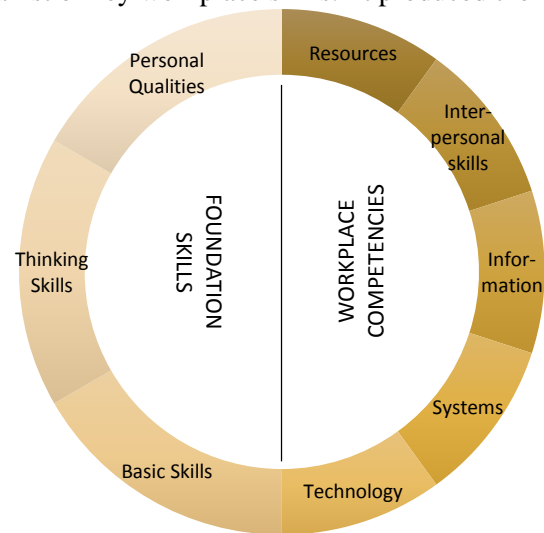


Figure 1 SCANS Competencies Wheel
Adapted from Cengage Learning’s *The SCANS Wheel*^[3] and the US Department of Labor Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills report *Learning a living*,^[25] p. xiv.

Why Job Readiness Training

A key assumption behind Job Readiness Training is that participants will benefit from a focus on soft skills, acclimatization to the routines of work, and presenting themselves in ways that demonstrate employability. As the US economy has shifted from manufacturing to service- and knowledge-based work, employers’ requirements for workers have changed.^[18] Employers cite interpersonal skills as more important than technical skills in potential employees, and they are looking for job seekers who display particular styles of interaction.^[12; 21] Specifically, they seek workers who are prompt and courteous, show enthusiasm and motivation for the

We have to teach them and give them tools that they haven’t had their whole lives. Like, being responsible, going to work every day, showing up, being mature, still continuing to be a parent and take care of your children and household and your professional life. They haven’t had that in years, maybe their whole life.

-Job Readiness Training Instructor

work, can think independently and analytically but also follow directions. Secure Jobs staff state that due to long periods of unemployment or little work history, participants are not always accustomed to exhibiting these qualities. Job Readiness Training attempts to address this service need.

ⁱⁱ Some research has shown that Job Readiness Training instructors may assess participants’ self-efficacy at levels lower than where the participants assess themselves, and this disparity may have a negative impact on participants’ willingness to engage fully with the course materials.^[14]

Job Readiness Training Approaches

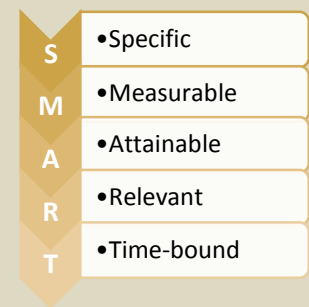
Job Readiness is offered both one-on-one and in groups and can be structured in a full-time curriculum, often lasting three to five weeks, or a series of topic-based workshops, each lasting a few hours. Many full-time courses use a combination of classroom lecture and activities, online tools, and independent job search. In a workshop-based model, students arrive for a workshop on one topic, which covers general information related to the topic. One-Stop Career Centers most often use a workshop-based model.



One-Stop Career Centers most often use a workshop-based model.

A one-on-one model offers the opportunity for Job Readiness Training that is tailored specifically to each individual job seeker's needs. A job seeker meets regularly with an employment specialist, who assesses the areas where the job seeker needs the most work, and supports her in those areas. This model is more labor-intensive for the employment specialist, but provides services that are more targeted than what a course- or workshop-based model provides.

A commonly-used concept throughout most Job Readiness Training curricula is setting SMART goals. SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-Bound) is an acronym that was developed in management literature from the early 1980s.^[8] Since then it has been applied to many other fields. The main idea behind SMART goals is to be thoughtful about setting goals, making sure to make them realistic, and to consider ahead of time what measure will indicate whether they have been achieved. The MassCAP curriculum uses SMART goals repeatedly throughout the course.



Job Readiness at Secure Jobs

The seven Secure Jobs sites employed various models of Job Readiness Training and drew from both existing curricula and lessons that they developed specifically for Secure Jobs. Some sites switched between models over the course of the more than two years of the initiative. And one site offered a cohort for unemployed Secure Jobs participants, but provided one-on-one services to participants who had part-time jobs that conflicted with the Job Readiness class time but were looking for better employment opportunities.

Job Readiness Training Instructors expressed a preference for a cohort model, citing four main advantages over one-on-one work.

- First, the cohort setting allowed instructors more time with participants, so they could provide support as challenges arose for participants.
- Second, they felt that the structure would encourage greater accountability among participants, and, as a result, regular attendance would be more likely.
- Third, the support of classmates was an essential part of the Job Readiness Training experience. Classmates were able to engage in exercises together in class and to develop personal bonds that extended beyond the classroom.
- Fourth, the full-time cohort model satisfied the work requirement for public benefits. According to the rules of Massachusetts' Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, recipients who are engaged in thirty or more hours of employment training per week can receive cash benefits as well as a voucher for child care. Most participants have young children^[19] and cannot engage in job search

If clients only come in once a week [for a one-on-one meeting], there's only so much you can do with them. An hour a week is not enough time.
-Job Readiness Training Instructor

activities without reliable child care. Structuring the Job Readiness Training class to fulfill the TANF requirement for a child care voucher enabled participants to access child care and have time to dedicate to their job search.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this way, the Secure Jobs model responded to participants' specific needs to support entry into work.

Job Readiness Curricula

There is no standardized Job Readiness curriculum, and many curricula have been written, varying in content, intended audience, theoretical framework, and pedagogic orientation. Most include a combination of a) practical skills for job seekers, such as instruction in writing cover letters and résumés,

I focus on personal development. They need that foundation. I'm giving them all these tools but what if they don't know how to use them? It's like building a building but starting in the middle floors. [In order to sell yourself to an employer,] you have to know your product, which is you.

-Job Readiness Training Instructor

We started out doing one-on-one appointments, and clients were sort of coming in at their leisure. And I think that the structure [of a full-time cohort model] had to be created in order for them to see that this is going to work, and this is also what an employer expects.

-Job Readiness Training Instructor

interview skills, and mock interviewing; b) instruction in attitudes and behaviors to display on the job (i.e., soft skills); and c) development of self-esteem and a sense of self-efficacy. The Secure Jobs Job Readiness Training courses resemble those offered for populations with similar incomes and levels of education; no additional elements were added specific to homeless families.

The Secure Jobs sites focus, for the most part, on developing participants' confidence. Job Readiness Training instructors feel that a lack of self-confidence holds participants back from identifying their career interests and attempting to pursue them. They suggest that participants have missed both opportunities to consider their options for the future and accountability for the decisions that they have made; and these two elements in combination are critical for entering and maintaining career-oriented work. Job Readiness Training aims to provide this structure. Alongside this training, Secure Jobs sites provide support in overcoming the many logistical barriers that participants face to entering employment, including securing childcare, obtaining appropriate work clothes, and understanding the tax- and benefits-related documents that must be filled out when starting a new job. These supports are an essential complement to the course material.

While much material covered in Secure Jobs Job Readiness courses is common to all seven sites, there is wide variation in the materials used, subjects emphasized, and pedagogic methods. This variation is attributed in part to instructors' assessment of what each participant needs and what has caused her unemployment. The materials used in Secure Jobs include published curricula (three commonly-used curricula are detailed below), online resources, materials the sites had developed in-house prior to Secure Jobs, and materials that instructors developed on their own, specifically for use in Secure Jobs.

Financial Literacy and Job Readiness Training

Several Secure Jobs sites either incorporate financial literacy into their Job Readiness Training or offer financial literacy services to Job Readiness participants. Financial literacy is an essential complement to Job Readiness Training, providing parents with the information they need to develop short- and long-term plans for their own careers and their families' economic self-sufficiency.^[5] Participants use the tools learned in financial literacy courses to assess their current financial situations and set financial goals

ⁱⁱⁱ Child care vouchers are available to TAFDC recipients engaged in full-time job search, training, or education through a Massachusetts regulation^[24] that implements the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant Act, originally passed in 1990 and reauthorized in 2014.^[4]

including improving credit scores, paying off debts, and starting to increase savings. As participants enter jobs, these tools are critical to managing the increase in family income.

THE MASSCAP JOB READINESS TRAINING CURRICULUM

The Massachusetts Association for Community Action (MassCAP) developed a curriculum for a 120-hour Job Readiness Training course in 2010, for use in Massachusetts' 25 Community Action Agencies and other organizations offering workforce development services. The MassCAP curriculum is intended to be offered in a full-time classroom setting over three or four weeks.

The course begins by asking students to develop a *personal vision* of their hopes for the future, and then using this vision to explore personal values, important life influences, and individual strengths and weaknesses. This vision, and the self-awareness that is generated from study, guides the rest of the course. The next modules focus on the practicalities of getting a job, workplace etiquette, communication skills, and résumé, cover letter, and job search skills. The course also includes an in-depth section on financial literacy. Each lesson identifies the SCANS Competencies^[25] (see below) that it works to develop. The MassCAP curriculum, either in part or in its entirety, is used widely throughout Massachusetts, not only in CAP agencies but in a variety of service provider settings.

THE COMMONWEALTH CORPORATION'S EMPOWER YOUR FUTURE CURRICULUM

The Commonwealth Corporation (CommCorp) is a quasi-public workforce development agency under Massachusetts' Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. CommCorp released a series of curriculum guides, teacher manuals, and student workbooks entitled *Empower Your Future*^[6] in 2010. This series was originally designed for youth and includes materials specifically for youth in Department of Youth Services (DYS) assessment and treatment programs. However, the lessons are widely applicable and are used for all populations across the state. Empower Your Future is constructed in a series of five modules and can be offered as a full-time course, as individual workshops, or as lessons integrated into the school day.

The first unit of the course covers professionalism, focusing mainly on soft skills such as displaying enthusiasm, communicating effectively, and examining how personal values mesh with a professional attitude. The next two units provide various career assessment exercises, identifying students' interests and strengths and how they may apply in the workplace. The fourth unit addresses résumé, cover letter, and interview skills, as well as practical information once in a job such as how payroll works and strategies for retention and advancement. The final unit helps students with managing the stresses of a new job effectively and includes a brief financial literacy section. The entire Empower your Future series is available online as a free download.

THE PBS LITERACYLINK WORKPLACE ESSENTIAL SKILLS CURRICULUM

The Workplace Essential Skills Curriculum is a multimedia job readiness program developed in 1999 by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and Kentucky Educational Television (KET). It consists of twenty-four lessons on seven DVDs and four workbooks,^[15] or the materials are available free online through KET.^[17] A teacher's manual is also available.

This curriculum begins with exercises helping participants to generate a career plan and moves onto résumé and interviewing skills. The second unit of the course focuses on soft skills, including both verbal and written communication. Finally, the course has units teaching basic reading, writing, and math skills, demonstrating applications of high school-level material to workplaces. A key feature of this curriculum is the videos, which include not just instruction but also vignettes of job seekers and workers. These vignettes follow characters through the process of thinking about and applying for jobs. This series is available for purchase or to stream on the KET website at no cost.

Secure Jobs Participants' Assessment of Job Readiness Training

Secure Jobs participants described a solidly positive experience in Job Readiness Training, citing as especially helpful the soft skills training, interviewing skills, and the consistent support and motivation from staff. Participants found the instruction in behaviors to display in the interview and on the job to be very helpful. Many described entering the course thinking they knew how to behave professionally, then realizing in the process of the course that they could learn more. Learning new modes of communication helped them not only in being better prepared for job interviews but also in other parts of their lives, such as talking with service providers or their children's teachers.

Interviewing skills and mock interviewing were especially helpful. Participants described not realizing some of the body language they were displaying until it was pointed out to them, and having their anxiety about interviewing eased by practicing interviews in the program.

When we came in, and the first thing that they're talking about is professionalism. Everybody has an idea of what professionalism is, but once you start trying to speak about it, it's like, "Well, what does it really entail? How important is it?" And... the next, and the next thing you know, you're really thinking about yourself, like, "How am I in the business place? Am I professional? Am I courteous?"

-Secure Jobs Participant

So, having these resources and this positive energy, not just from [the instructor] but from the students, and everybody here [at the agency], from the receptionist to my classmates, the overwhelming support, it helped me get my foot on the first rung to having self-confidence and self-respect, self-worth for myself, which is really, really important right now.

-Secure Jobs Participant

more instrumental benefit derived from the actual course material. Several emphasized the fact that they had never received that level or consistency of support from a service provider agency before.

Participants had few critiques of Secure Jobs job readiness training. Some expressed frustration with the career assessment tests, finding them confusing. And some wished that the course would be more structured, with a set syllabus to which the instructor adhered and a workbook that followed the lessons. Overall, however, participants found the staff's dedication and support to be very useful.

Participants also found the emotional support they received at Job Readiness Training to be highly motivating. Participants in cohort model courses especially described experiencing a boost in their self-esteem and a new excitement to start working and making other changes in their lives. This psychological benefit was as important as the

I used to love the mock interviews. And actually, the mock interview... helped me get a job. Because we did the mock interview and [the employment specialist] asked me a question and [then] when I went for my [actual job] interview..., my manager asked me the same exact question. So I was like, oh, snap! Well, I'm just going to give him the same answer I gave in the mock interview. Because if [the employment specialist] says it's good, then it must be good.

-Secure Jobs Participant

ACT KeyTrain: The Future of Job Readiness Training?

ACT, makers of a standardized assessment test for college entry, have recently created an online job readiness course called KeyTrain that includes modules in reading, writing, math, and soft skills for the workplace. ACT's curriculum is evidence-based: using the Department of Labor's categorizations of occupations and the skills they require, they determined what skills are most in demand and tailored the curriculum to teach those skills.^[1] ACT also has a job readiness assessment test, called WorkKeys. The KeyTrain modules prepare students for sections of the WorkKeys test. And ACT recently introduced a credentialing system, the National Career Readiness Certificate, in which a spectrum of job readiness

credentials relates to the WorkKeys score earned. ACT hopes that employers nationally will become familiar with these credentials and use them as signals of a candidate's level of job readiness. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts purchased a license for the KeyTrain program in 2014 for use in all One-Stop Career Centers and community colleges. Any Massachusetts job seeker can use this resource at no cost. The WorkKeys test is also available, but there is a fee to take the test. The ACT program is not yet in wide use, but may grow in popularity over time.

Recommendations

Based on the information presented here, the following recommendations are advanced:

- When possible, use a cohort model to administer Job Readiness Training. This model offers participants the added advantage of peer support, as well as eligibility for child care.
- Use an evidence-based curriculum (such as ACT KeyTrain) as a basis for the course curriculum. There is wide variation in the content of Job Readiness courses across the Secure Jobs sites, and narrowing this range will ensure that all participants are receiving the same level of instruction. An evidence-based curriculum is least likely to include individual or social biases or assumptions about the participants.
- Include mock interviews as part of Job Readiness Training, with interviewers who are not program staff and, therefore, not known to participants. Employers, community volunteers, and management training programs can all be sources of interviewers.
- Incorporate financial literacy into Job Readiness Training, to give families the tools they need to plan for their families' financial futures.
- Provide support with child care and transportation so that participants can attend Job Readiness Training. These supports are particularly important for homeless participants, who may be living far from their home communities where they would have access to friends and families who might help with these logistics.
- Follow the course with regular reunion meetings. The connections to fellow classmates and to the instructor are essential to participants' investment in the course, so maintaining these connections is critical. Monthly follow-up meetings, with child care (and transportation, if possible) provided, can facilitate this process.


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About IASP

The Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP), a research institute at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, is dedicated to the economic well-being and social mobility of individuals and families, particularly to those traditionally left out of the economic mainstream. Working in close partnership with constituencies, state and federal policy makers, grassroots advocates, private philanthropies, and the media, IASP bridges the worlds of academic research, organizational practice, and government policy-making. IASP works to strengthen the leadership of lawmakers, practitioners, researchers and others by linking the intellectual and program components of asset-building policies.

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