



SYSTEMS CHANGE *in Service Delivery for Homeless Families:* BUILDING *and* LEVERAGING NETWORKS TO IMPROVE SERVICE PROVISION

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In response to frustration at the inability of traditional service models to effect lasting change, service provider organizations and grantmakers have turned to systems thinking^[19] to gain new insight into social problems and develop innovative solutions that work. Systems thinking suggests that a social problem needs to be viewed holistically in order to understand and address its multiple sources in a coordinated effort with sustained impact. So, when providing support to a homeless family, if homelessness and unemployment are each considered separate issues and addressed with separate sets of services, then service provision is inefficient and ineffective. When these issues are considered *together* as part of a system, then each service provider gets a full picture of the barriers that the families face and can help the families to find permanent solutions.^[17]

The Secure Jobs Initiative was developed with a systems thinking approach to demonstrate a new integrated stabilization service model. Beginning by forging a strong link between traditionally separated housing and employment services, it creates the infrastructure to make the necessary changes to organizational systems that allow for service provision through a collaborative network, in which providers of different types of services partner with each other to examine and address clients' multiple challenges in an integrated package.^[2] This brief will provide background on systems change in service delivery models and outline the types of collaborative networks that Secure Jobs sites have built. Based on data from all Secure Jobs partners and stakeholders, the roles various collaborations will be examined, including the development and evolution of service provider relationships, successes and challenges.

[In Phase Two] overall there is great communication among all the partners with increasingly improved results.

-Secure Jobs Employment Service Provider

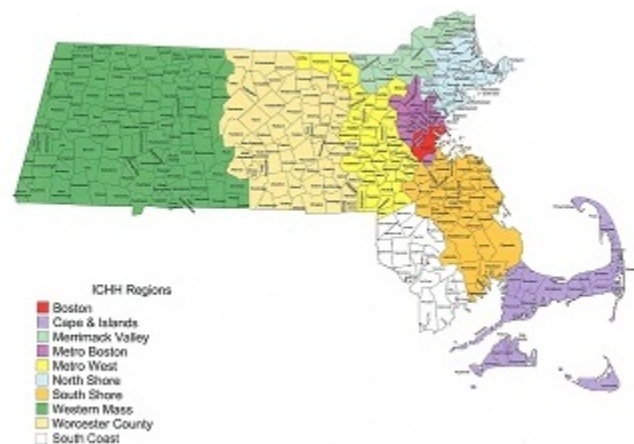
Background

The Paul and Phyllis Fireman Foundation, whose mission is to end family homelessness in Massachusetts and beyond, developed the Secure Jobs Initiative in 2012 using a systems thinking process to generate a public-private network to support homeless families. Prior to Secure Jobs, in 2009, then-governor Deval Patrick established the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness (ICHH) to promote interagency collaboration and partnership among community resources to combat homelessness^[9] (this development was sparked by a 2007 Massachusetts state government resolve to end homelessness.^[6; 10]) The ICHH charged stakeholders statewide with forming Regional Networks to develop innovative local and holistic solutions to end homelessness in their regions, by leveraging existing resources rather than generating new ones. Ten Networks formed (see Figure 1) and eight were still active in 2014.^[9; 11]

In 2012, as the long-term effects of the Great Recession continued to leave families struggling, the Fireman Foundation saw in the Networks an opportunity to pilot a systems change approach to family homelessness. This new model was intended to support those families most ready, willing and able to work, in the HomeBASE program, a new statewide rapid re-housing program for homeless families that offered short-term rental vouchers (Rental Assistance) or a lump sum (Household Assistance). Families enrolled in HomeBASE received housing stabilization services, but they were not receiving employment support or related wraparound services. Without this support, service providers, the Fireman Foundation,

the state and the families themselves were concerned that they would not be able to increase their incomes to the point where they could pay full market rent before they exhausted their HomeBASE assistance. In response, and given the steep decline in available permanent housing subsidies for families,¹ the Fireman Foundation solicited recommendations from the Networks about how best to support those HomeBASE families most ready, willing and able to work. The Networks advocated for integrating employment support into stabilization services. The Fireman Foundation used their suggestions to develop the Secure Jobs model² which would be implemented in partnership with Massachusetts' Department of Housing and Community Development (DCHD).

Figure 1: ICHH Regional Networks (ICHH 2007)



Secure Jobs creates networks of providers and stakeholders, beginning with core partnerships between regional housing and employment service providers,³ supported by secondary partnerships with local employers, training providers and other community resources, and local administrators of state benefits. These relationships are maintained through regular communication between all partners, so that all providers have the most up-to-date information. By leveraging existing resources rather than generating new ones, this model is able to deliver individualized services to meet families' specific needs at a relatively low cost. The Secure Jobs Initiative serves families in seven regions across the state and has expanded to families in emergency shelters, motels and the Rental Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program.⁴

Systems Thinking for System Change

Systems thinking is a concept that suggests that most social problems are the result of multiple issues within a social system, so addressing any problem will require examining the system as a whole to identify the root causes, and then making changes to the system as a whole. Originally credited to Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1940s,^[20] the idea was widely popularized among organizational theorists with the publication of management scholar Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990.^[18] Senge writes that to be effective, any organization or network of organizations needs to institutionalize mechanisms for systems thinking (in addition to the other four disciplines of personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision and team learning). Systems thinking will promote self-reflexivity within the organization, allowing for more accountability and continued growth and learning. Applying this concept to family homelessness, a systems thinking solution requires inter-organizational collaboration at multiple levels, to allow for a richer understanding of the problem as well as more flexibility and adaptability in production and delivery of services.^[1] Such a collaborative strategy has

¹ Permanent housing for chronically homeless individuals has been increasing steadily over the past two decades, in response to a large-scale advocacy effort. Alongside this increase has come a decrease in housing subsidies for families.^[4]

² For more on this background to Secure Jobs, see the first report in this series, *Secure Jobs, Secure Homes, Secure Families: Process Evaluation of the Massachusetts Secure Jobs Pilot*.^[12]

³ Each Secure Jobs site consists of a lead agency, who is either the housing or employment service provider. Some sites had both housing and employment providers under one roof prior to starting Secure Jobs, but built stronger links between the different sections in their organization through the Secure Jobs Initiative.

⁴ For more on the development and expansion of Secure Jobs, see the third report in this series, *Secure Jobs for Homeless Families: Expanding an Integrated Service Model*.^[13]

benefits for both program participants and providers.^[15] Models utilizing inter-organizational collaboration have been shown to increase effectiveness and efficiency in service to homeless individuals in the past,^[14] most notably in the federal government’s Collaborative Initiative to End Chronic Homelessness (CICH) which took place from 2003 to 2008.^[8; 16]

Among service providers, the most common model for working collaboratively is one of **complementary coordination**.^[1] According to this model, organizations that provide disparate but complementary services to the same population, such as housing support, employment and education, communicate with each other to provide an integrated service package instead of offering their services in a vacuum, with no knowledge of their clients’ other needs.^[1]

I think a lot [of partnerships] are mutually beneficial too—like a symbiotic relationship between the two agencies
- Secure Jobs Staff

This model has also been described as symbiotic, using an ecological metaphor.^[7] When in symbiotic relationship with each other, organizations receive resources that help them to thrive, and the entire network becomes stronger and more adaptable.^[7] Subcontracting is a key mechanism for building a network of symbiotic organizations: a lead agency will subcontract with agencies that provide services that are complementary to their own, and under this subcontract

agreement, they will work together to provide integrated services. The lead agency then receives support in service provision, and the subcontracted agencies receive additional funds to provide services to the lead agency’s target population. Secure Jobs sites frequently described their partnerships in these terms, noting that their partnerships are “symbiotic” and mutually beneficial.

I can’t underestimate the value of cash [for subcontracting] in making this partnership work. We’ve spent a significant amount of resources to make our partnership with the career center work... So the ability to have partnerships that don’t just rely on the kindness of strangers, but really show a significant investment on our part as an agency... I think that’s been a really strong motivator. It strengthens it, it absolutely has.

– Secure Jobs Staff

Effective functioning of this partnership model requires two key elements: institutionalized mechanisms for regular **communication** between partners at every level, and a **facilitator** who convenes the network and brokers communication.^[5; 7] Communication and facilitation are often accomplished by a **linking-pin organization**.^[7] The linking-pin organization is composed of representatives from partner agencies who meet regularly. Advisory councils are common linking-pin organizations among collaborative networks of service providers: representatives from each provider agency, along with other relevant stakeholders, meet to discuss the network’s functioning, each member’s contribution, and ways to improve overall network performance to meet the participants’ changing needs.^[7]

The Secure Jobs model includes the creation of advisory committees at each site, composed of representatives from all partner organizations. Advisory committees meet regularly to exchange information and work together to address challenges for participants or within the organizational network. In one Secure Jobs region, the Regional Network acts as the linking pin, convening the Secure Jobs advisory committee monthly and ensuring constant communication between meetings via email and the Network’s website. The ongoing active engagement of the advisory committee has helped this site to weather changes in funding, staffing, and individual organizational commitment.

At the state level, the Fireman Foundation and DHCD serve as the linking-pin between Secure Jobs sites, convening the site coordinators regularly with government and private stakeholders to problem-solve and learn from each other. Mechanisms for communication are also important at frontline staff level, so that the actual service providers have a more holistic sense of what is going on in clients’ lives. This can be accomplished with regular case conferencing, or through more informal means such as email and phone.

Collaborative Networks in Secure Jobs

Collaborations among Secure Jobs networks fall into three categories: core service partners (housing and employment), peripheral service provider and employer partners, and policymaker partners (see Figure 2). The **core partners** are those that provide the services that make up the crux of the program: housing and employment. Core partners maintain constant contact with each other to ensure that all service providers have the most current information about participants. This regular communication between the two core partners – housing and employment providers – is the backbone of the Secure Jobs model.

Housing partners are agencies that provide emergency housing assistance, including shelter, motel and scattered site placement, and HomeBASE and RAFT administration, as well as stabilization services. Secure Jobs housing providers identify the candidates most ready, willing and able to work, and refer them to employment service providers. They also maintain relationships with families as long as families are receiving housing services and, in that capacity, can assist families with moving towards housing stability, housing-related crises and other case management, and can track housing outcomes.

Employment service providers offer individualized employment support services including job search assistance and job readiness training,⁵ referrals to skills training programs, connections with employers, and help with addressing barriers to employment as they arise. Employment service providers have staff dedicated to working with Secure Jobs participants specifically. Employment service provider agencies include community action agencies, vocational service agencies, and existing employment staff within

Housing staff and [our] staff... have a weekly phone call to discuss cases, issues and solutions, and [we] have monthly in-person meetings as well.
-Secure Jobs Employment Provider

housing agencies. Secure Jobs employment staff are sensitive to the specific issues that unstably housed families face when looking for work, and can leverage community resources to help these families to access safe and affordable child care and transportation, clothes for job interviews or employee uniforms if they get hired. Also, they develop relationships with local employers who might hire Secure Jobs participants.

In addition to the core housing and employment services, Secure Jobs sites also maintain **peripheral partners** specifically to support families in gaining employment. These include additional employment service providers, hard skills training providers, agencies that can cover needs such as childcare and clothing, and employer partners. Core partners reach out to existing community service providers and employers to develop and leverage these partnerships. Peripheral partnerships are formalized most often through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or via a subcontract, i.e., the core partner sub-contracts a specific set of services from a community provider.

One of the most commonly utilized partnerships among all sites is the local career center. Career centers provide a variety of services to Secure Jobs participants, including job readiness training, skills training and connections to employers.⁶ In addition, hard skills training and educational partners, such as

Figure 2: Model of Secure Jobs Partnerships



⁵ For more on job readiness training in Secure Jobs, see the second brief in this series, *Job Readiness Training for Homeless Families: Preparing for Work to Achieve Housing Stability*.^[3]

⁶ At one site in Phase Two, the local career center is the core Employment Service Provider.

community colleges, vocational high schools, and job training agencies, are key members of the networks. Core partners use flexible funds to pay the fees for their programs, or in some cases have negotiated reduced fees for a full class cohort from Secure Jobs. Also, Secure Jobs sites partner with High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs.

Peripheral partners can also cover needs such as childcare, clothing and legal support for landlord mediation or help to clear up criminal records. Accessing childcare is one of the most common supportive services, although it is also frequently mentioned as a challenge. Sites use the network in different ways to help families find childcare, including partnering with day care centers and referral agencies and working with state agencies to obtain childcare subsidies. Childcare is a necessary precursor to any job-related activities, although cost and availability can act as barriers.

Several sites also partner with Dress for Success to access necessary work clothes for participants.

Lastly, employers are critical members of Secure Jobs networks. Many sites dedicate staff time to developing relationships with employers and some have referral or résumé reviewing processes set up with specific employers. Employer partners range from large corporations to local small businesses.

We have a job developer on staff and her sole role is to go out and establish employer relationships within the community. She does that based on meetings that she has with the employment specialist and who they have identified as being kind of their targeted group [that is ready for employment.]

-Secure Jobs Employment Provider

Several sites have partnered with local hospitals and other health care provider organizations, where participants who have gone through nursing assistant training can use their skills. Sites also partner with staffing agencies that can offer quick short-term employment options while participants continue to work on their longer-term goals, and that have additional resources including résumé building and coaching on interviewing.

The outer circle in this partnership model consists of **policymakers**: legislators, state agencies, and funders. These partners convene the Secure Jobs network to improve communication and interaction between Secure Jobs sites and relevant state programs (including the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC)), secure funding for Secure Jobs, and provide oversight of the initiative. The Fireman Foundation and DHCD serve as the core partners at this level, hosting monthly conference calls and quarterly Learning Labs to share best practices and persistent challenges. The Learning Labs in particular provide a space for the full Secure Jobs network to come together and analyze the problem of family homelessness from multiple perspectives, in order to adapt and refine a programmatic response that addresses the root causes of the problem. These partners also collect performance-related data from all Secure Jobs sites.

Policymaker partners have been critical in the state's financial support for Secure Jobs so that it could grow and develop so rapidly. The initial commitment to fund Secure Jobs was only for one year, with no promise of renewal. Several sites engaged their state and local legislators from the beginning of the Initiative and communicated program successes to them regularly. One site had legislators present at every advisory committee meeting, and has hosted annual events where legislators would meet Secure Jobs participants, hear their stories, and be thanked in person. As a result of this constant engagement, legislative partners introduced a line item into the FY15 state budget to fund Secure Jobs and garnered enough support for it to pass. In FY16, legislative advocacy resulted in a 50% increase in the line item. (Although neither of these line item amounts was enough to fund the full initiative, DHCD and the Fireman Foundation made significant additional contributions in response to this signal of state support.)

Communication, Adaptation and Education

Over the course of the more than two years of Secure Jobs, these collaborative relationships have evolved, and changes have manifested in different ways. Most notably, some sites report a strengthening of partnerships due to an increase in communication. Among Secure Jobs sites, communication has increased each provider's responsiveness to both the needs of families and the service capacity of partners. It is worth noting that some sites reported minimal change or utilization of different types of partnerships based on a different service population.

Learning to engage, maintain, and effectively utilize the Secure Jobs network has been a work in progress for many sites. Housing partners found that they had to educate partners who had little experience serving homeless people about the specific issues that this population faces. Some sites reported challenges with introducing a new client base with a higher level of service needs to programs not equipped to deal with those needs. For example, many career centers had not routinely worked with homeless and formerly-homeless families previously. As a result, in some cases their service models did not quite fit with needs of families living in crisis. Secure Jobs providers have met this challenge in different ways, sometimes working with the career center to alter their programs slightly, other times referring clients to other programs that better matched their needs. In both cases, it took time to reach a partnership model that worked smoothly and provided processes that effectively serve homeless families.

Our partnerships are growing stronger because now they understand what we want to do for clients; they're more likely to refer more people to us. ... The communication between the organizations has strengthened... there's more open communication where we can talk really about the clients and how best to serve them.

-Secure Jobs Staff

This will be a lasting relationship [with the Secure Jobs site]. It's sort of been a win-win... I know that when I call [the Secure Jobs Job Developer], if she's not right there picking the phone up, I'm going to get a call back. When I email her, I have to tell you, I almost get an instant email back. It'll be, "Okay, I'm in a meeting, but I'm getting back to you shortly." And that's just sort of, we've really clicked, and I really value my relationship with the folks I've met through [Secure Jobs Site].

-Secure Jobs Employer Partner

Successes and Challenges

Successful partnerships work to support families in achieving and maintaining employment as well as stable housing. Secure Jobs sites list a wide variety of such partnerships, with career centers, training providers, employers and others (see Table 1.) In addition to specific successes, sites also pointed to successful practices in maintaining partnerships, including communication and outreach. These often take the form of daily informal check-ins with providers that work with participants regularly, such as the career centers and case management staff at the housing agencies.

Nevertheless, challenges still exist to maintaining effective partnerships and to making sure that partners address all necessary services for participants. For example, core sites report that some sub-contracted partners, including career centers, community colleges and vocational schools, did not initially provide the level of services needed. Some career centers were not equipped to address participants' need for child care and transportation, and traditional educational institutions did not have the capacity to enroll new students throughout the year and not just at the start of the semester. Furthermore, some sites expressed differences of opinion in the optimum service delivery model between partners. In all these situations, partners were able to resolve these issues through communication and changes in services to address the specific needs of homeless families.

Secure Jobs sites also identify gaps in service provision that may require further partnerships. One such gap is a lack of affordable childcare and childcare for non-traditional hours. The most common way sites resolve childcare issues is to help a participant obtain a state-funded childcare subsidy. However, this

process can take a long time as some waiting lists are a year long or more. Additionally, a lack of good public transportation outside of Boston and the cost of public transportation in Boston are both cited as additional barriers to program success. Finally, a lack of English language classes for non-native speakers is also mentioned as a gap for some participants.

Table 1: Examples of Successful Collaborations

Type of Partner	Description	How Success is Defined
Career Centers	Intensive job readiness training and job search	Job attainment; job retention; access to job leads
Housing Support Agencies	Landlord mediation and eviction prevention	Keeping families housed and preventing homelessness
Community Colleges and Training Providers	Skills training	Higher wages; room for growth
Case Management	Building relationships with families; getting them set up with supportive services, such as childcare and transportation	High referrals; helping families remain engaged
Employers	Linking participants with jobs; getting them initial interviews	Job attainment
Homeless Services Networks	Building relationships with broader community	Greater access to available jobs

Conclusion

The Secure Jobs Initiative was designed to create change in the homeless service delivery model by using a systems thinking approach to develop a network of service providers collaborating to address the root causes of family homelessness. At the service provider level, Secure Jobs has led to the widespread adoption of institutionalized inter-organizational collaboration, which in turn has improved service delivery. At the policymaker level, collaboration has allowed for sharing information and best practices and leveraging additional funding, but the leadership required to institutionalize true cross-agency systems change is still lacking. Systems change in service delivery models is a continual growth process, and all members of the Secure Jobs network have encountered challenges along the way. However, the core Secure Jobs relationships provide the network with a structure that allows Secure Jobs sites and stakeholders to address challenges deftly and to learn from the model’s evolution.

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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 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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