

# Finding the Next Job

## REEMPLOYMENT STRATEGIES IN RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT PROGRAMS FOR CURRENT AND FORMER WELFARE RECIPIENTS

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PRACTITIONER BRIEF

Current and former welfare recipients often have very unstable employment experiences. They find low-wage work but then quickly lose these jobs (either voluntarily or not), have trouble finding another job, and are unable to achieve earnings gains, even over time. This practitioner brief offers program administrators — particularly those managing employment retention and advancement programs<sup>1</sup> — practical advice on how to design and implement policies that turn a recent job loss into an opportunity to find a better job. It is based on the experiences of 12 programs in the national Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) evaluation conducted

by MDRC for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, with support from the U.S. Department of Labor (Box 1).<sup>2</sup> A central lesson from this evaluation is that retention and advancement programs for this population confront very rapid and high rates of job loss despite the services provided and must therefore focus as much, if not more, on *reemploying* program participants as on helping them advance in existing jobs.

The programs in the ERA evaluation offer a variety of intervention models and local contexts from which to draw lessons. Most programs were designed to improve the employment outcomes of current or former recipients, primarily single mothers, of

### BOX 1.

#### THE NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT (ERA) PROJECT

The national Employment Retention and Advancement project was conceived and funded by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The project was also supported by the U.S. Department of Labor. It was designed to fill a gap in knowledge about which employment retention and advancement strategies might be effective. A total of 16 ERA models were implemented in eight states; overall, more than 45,000 individuals were randomly assigned to research groups.

## BOX 2.

### ERA PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

**Chicago**<sup>o</sup> — A private, for-profit provider delivered a combination of services to promote career advancement to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients who had worked at least 30 hours per week for at least six consecutive months.

**Cleveland** — A nonprofit provider delivered retention services – such as supervisory trainings, on-site case management services during weekly office hours, and biweekly lunch meetings — at the work site to low-wage workers who earned less than \$13 per hour and who had been in their current jobs for less than six months.

**Eugene, Oregon** — Welfare, community college, and workforce agency staff implemented a team-based case management model that targeted newly employed former TANF recipients and delivered retention and advancement services tailored to participants' career interests.

**Los Angeles Enhanced Job Club** — Welfare staff provided workshops promoting a targeted job search method that was designed to help TANF recipients who were required to search for employment find a job in line with their careers of interest.

**Los Angeles Reach for Success** — County welfare staff implemented flexible and individualized stabilization and retention services, followed by a combination of services to promote advancement,

to newly employed TANF recipients working at least 32 hours per week.

**Medford, Oregon** — Welfare, community college, and workforce agency staff implemented a team-based case management model that targeted newly employed former TANF recipients and employed participants of the Oregon Food Stamp Employment and Training program and the Employment-Related Day Care program; they also delivered retention and advancement services tailored to participants' career interests and personal circumstances.

**Riverside PASS**<sup>o</sup> — In Riverside County, California, community-based organizations, a community college, and a county welfare agency delivered family-based support services and, if needed, reemployment services to individuals who left TANF due to increased earnings.

**Riverside Training Focused** — County workforce staff implemented an education and training model that connected newly employed TANF recipients working at least 20 hours per week to education and training activities with the option of reducing or eliminating their required work hours.

**Riverside Work Plus** — County welfare staff implemented an education and training model that connected newly employed TANF recipients working at least 20 hours per week to education and

training activities with *no* option of reducing or eliminating their required work hours.

**Salem, Oregon** — Welfare and community college staff implemented a team-based case management model that targeted TANF applicants and delivered job search assistance combined with career planning and, once employed, individual and group meetings to promote retention and advancement.

**South Carolina** — County welfare staff provided case management services that focused on reemployment, support services, job search, career counseling, and individualized incentives to individuals who left TANF, for any reason, between October 1997 and December 2000.

**Texas**<sup>o</sup> — Three sites in Texas (Corpus Christi, Forth Worth, and Houston) implemented a team-based case management model that targeted TANF applicants and recipients and delivered monthly stipends of \$200 to those who maintained full-time employment and completed activities related to an employment plan.

<sup>o</sup>This ERA program had positive impacts on employment and earnings.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Some targeted individuals who were already working when they enrolled in the program, while others first connected with individuals when they were unemployed. From site to site, a broad range of institutions delivered services, including workforce development and welfare agencies; community colleges; and for-profit, nonprofit, and community-based organizations. The programs operated from 2000 through 2004, and the study follow-up period extended until 2007. While the labor market was fairly challenging during this period,<sup>3</sup> economic conditions were not as dire as today, and unemployment levels were not as high.

To examine the economic impacts of each ERA program, the evaluation used a random assignment design, whereby individuals were randomly assigned to either a program group or a control group.<sup>4</sup> The specific services that were provided varied from program to program (Box 2), but, in each site, the evaluation tested whether a package of services — which typically included assessments, one-on-one staff assistance, job search assistance, and job-related counseling — could improve individuals' employment retention and advancement outcomes, compared with the services and supports that were generally available in the communities.<sup>5</sup> Overall, 3 of the 12 programs increased employment and earnings levels for participants, compared with control group levels.

This brief focuses on one aspect of the ERA programs, that is, their strategies to reemploy the many program participants who quickly lost jobs. Limited rigorous evidence is available on reemployment strategies. Moreover, the ERA evaluation was not designed to test the effectiveness of the specific strategies discussed in this document. However, the experiences —

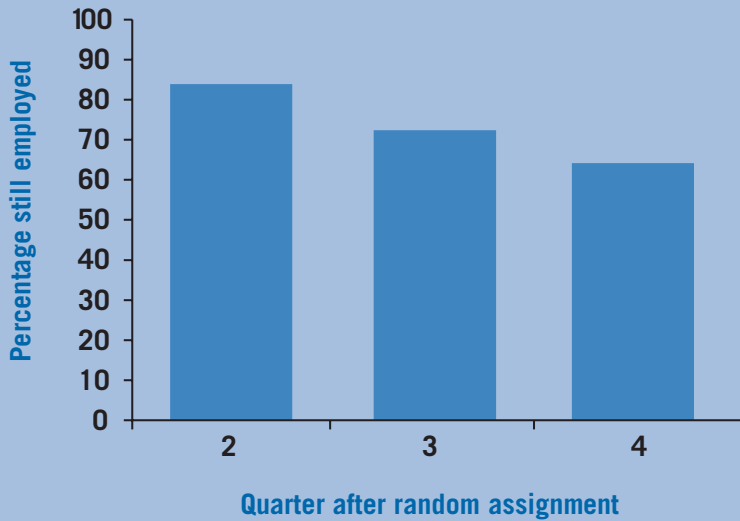
successful or not — across the ERA programs can provide important lessons for developing or operating employment programs for current and former welfare recipients. The reemployment services that were offered to newly unemployed individuals are similar to job placement services in programs that target unemployed populations generally, but there are differences, particularly in using recent job loss as a learning tool in finding the next job. This brief does not attempt to provide an exhaustive list of all the strategies that a program could use to help recently unemployed individuals get back into the labor market but, rather, reflects the experiences of a wide range of programs in the ERA evaluation.

The brief begins by explaining the need for reemployment strategies for current and former welfare recipients. It then highlights several strategies for how to structure job search and job placement services. These strategies may potentially reduce time spent in unemployment, improve the quality of subsequent job placements and their alignment with individuals' skills and interests compared with the previous job, and achieve greater employment stability in the long term.

### WHY ARE REEMPLOYMENT STRATEGIES SO IMPORTANT?

Going into the ERA evaluation, the expectation was that the programs would focus on increasing the length of time that the participants stayed in a particular job (that is, job retention) and then on helping them either advance in their current workplace or find better opportunities elsewhere. Instead, most programs experienced high rates of immediate job loss among participants; participants had extended periods of unemployment; and programs thus had to refocus their services on reemployment.

**FIGURE 1.**  
**EMPLOYMENT RETENTION AMONG THOSE**  
**WORKING IN QUARTER 1**



- Job loss is common, especially during the initial months after starting a job.** There was a relatively high rate of job loss across the ERA sites; about 14 percent of those working in any given quarter were not working by the next quarter. The likelihood of leaving work was highest in the first several months on the job. Among those who started a job in a given quarter, for example, one in four were not working by the next quarter. In contrast, among those who had been employed for at least six quarters, only one in ten left work by the next quarter. The high rate of job loss can be seen by tracking those who were employed in the quarter of study entry, regardless of how long they had held this job (Figure 1). Among individuals employed at study entry, only 64 percent were still employed in Quarter 4, meaning that more than a third had lost their jobs by that point and stayed out of work for at least one quarter. Job loss was greater for individuals without a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate.<sup>6</sup>

- Many program participants experience long periods of unemployment between jobs.** Individuals who lost their jobs after entering the ERA study generally spent long periods out of work. Consider, for example, those who worked in the first quarter but left work within the next three quarters. Just over half of this group stayed unemployed for at least three quarters. Older individuals, those with lower education levels, and those with young children took longer to return to work than other workers. The longer an individual had been unemployed, the less likely he or she was to return to work.

- Programs that quickly reemploy participants in better jobs can increase employment and earnings.** For two ERA programs (Chicago and Riverside PASS), positive effects were due, in part, to moving recently unemployed individuals into new jobs more quickly and to moving employed individuals into better jobs than the ones they held. In both cases, the programs started with already-employed participants, and while it might be expected that these programs would achieve their impacts by lengthening the amount of time that people stayed in the job they held when they entered the program, many individuals lost their jobs soon after enrolling in the program and needed immediate assistance finding subsequent jobs. Participants in the Chicago program often advanced by changing jobs, with staff matching individuals with jobs in particular firms that paid higher wages.<sup>7</sup> Longitudinal, nonexperimental studies have also found positive earnings gains from job changes.<sup>8</sup>

#### LESSONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

While preventing job loss can be an appropriate goal for retention and advancement programs, the ERA study

illustrates how challenging it is to keep individuals in a particular job. Programs might consider redefining “retention” as sustained employment *across* jobs rather than as sustained employment in any one job. The focus in this brief is on how to address job loss once it has happened: structuring job search and job placement services for those who have recently lost their jobs, with the goal of reducing the length of unemployment, improving the quality of the new job over the previous one, and achieving greater employment stability over time. The lessons address three overarching questions:

- **How can programs learn about participants’ job losses quickly?**
- **Which strategies might contribute to faster reemployment?**
- **How can managers organize staff and resources to address job loss?**

Again, while the ERA evaluation was not designed to test the effectiveness of these specific strategies, the experiences of ERA program operators can provide important, relevant lessons for policy and practice.

### **1. Develop Mechanisms to Learn About Job Loss**

Job loss is most likely to occur during the first few months after starting a new job, so strategies that result in early and ongoing contact and communication between program staff and individuals is crucial.

- **Contact newly employed workers as soon as possible after they start a job, and make frequent interaction easier through flexible meeting locations and office hours and by using incentives.**

Frequent contact with workers can help staff hear about lost jobs and can lead to more

rapid assistance. To help make ongoing interaction easier for employed participants, many sites in the ERA study expanded both their hours of operation — including lunch times, evenings, and weekends — and the locations where services were provided. For example, in Corpus Christi, Texas, staff met with workers at their job sites two weeks after they started work, and staff conducted monthly visits to employers whenever possible. Most participants seemed amenable to the site visits because it saved them a trip to the ERA office or trying to connect by phone. If an employer or participant found the visits problematic, ERA staff arranged to meet with the worker during the lunch hour or a break or at another location. In other ERA programs, participants were encouraged to have brief monthly check-ins with staff when they were recertified to receive work supports, such as extended child care and Medicaid benefits. In several sites, staff maintained formal logs of contacts to keep track of whom they had seen and how frequently.

*Frequent contact with workers can help staff hear about lost jobs and can lead to more rapid assistance.*

ERA staff in some sites traveled to meet workers at their homes or in public locations, such as a library. ERA staff in the Eugene program held weekly office hours at a community college, giving workers another place where they could meet and talk. To increase their mobility and availability to participants, staff in a few programs were equipped with cell phones and laptops.

A few ERA programs used a range of financial incentives to encourage workers to stay in touch. The Chicago ERA program offered \$75 transit passes to participants if they returned for monthly visits. One Riverside PASS ERA

provider used movie passes, car repair, and diapers to reward participants for maintaining contact with program staff.

- **Ask probing and open-ended questions designed to learn about participants' experiences on the job.**

Maintaining regular contact with employed program participants often meant challenging their expectations about the goal of the ERA programs, because individuals were typically accustomed to other, standard employment

*Properly framed, specific and probing questions can deepen relationships with participants, perhaps encouraging them to stay in contact with the program and helping staff find out sooner about job loss.*

programs that ended once they had found a job. In some ERA programs, staff emphasized that each job represented only one step along a career path and that job loss should not be perceived as a failure, but as an opportunity to learn about how to perform better in the next job. In training offered as part of the ERA study, staff were encouraged to go beyond a general “check-in” that broadly addressed “how things are going” to ask specific questions aimed at detecting on-the-job problems and other threats to job stability. (Box 3 gives an example of such a script.) Properly framed, such questions can deepen relationships with participants, perhaps encouraging them to stay in contact with the program and helping staff find out sooner about job loss. Probing questions can also build a bank of important information about each participant’s experiences at work, which can be invaluable should that individual need to search for a new job.

- **Learn about job loss through employer connections.**

Maintaining solid relationships with the employers of program participants can

serve multiple purposes, including discovering job loss more quickly, helping to avert job loss, and exploring opportunities for promotion. Having the employer’s perspective on the circumstances around a job loss — whether the loss was voluntary or not — can be very useful when coaching a participant as he or she looks for a new job. Getting the employer’s feedback, however, requires the participant’s consent and is often easier if the program has a preexisting relationship with the employer (for example, through having placed individuals at that company). Organizations can develop employer relationships directly or through partnerships with other organizations that already maintain a network of employer relationships, such as intermediaries who work with employers or industry associations.

Interacting with employers proved harder to do than expected in the ERA programs. Across 12 programs, ERA staff spent less than 10 percent of their time interacting with the employers of program participants. Some participants preferred not to have staff interact with their employers — in some cases, because they felt stigmatized by being part of the program. In other cases, staff lacked the experience and skills necessary for building and maintaining relationships with employers.

The ERA program in Corpus Christi was a notable exception, as staff made routine visits to participants at their places of work. To gain employers’ support, staff explained the goals of the ERA program and emphasized the benefits for business leaders, such as reducing job turnover and providing referrals for future vacancies. Staff also found that it was helpful to keep the meetings with employers casual and short, lasting less than five minutes.

**BOX 3.**

**QUESTIONS FOR A PROGRAM PARTICIPANT WHO HAS A NEW JOB**

<b>DAY 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did you do on your first day?</li> <li>• Did you get an orientation talk and information as a new employee?</li> <li>• How many people did you meet?</li> </ul>
<b>WEEK 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you feel comfortable talking with your supervisor?</li> <li>• Were any instructions that you received from your supervisor not clear to you? What did you do?</li> <li>• Have you asked to go to lunch with any of your coworkers?</li> </ul>
<b>WEEK 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is this job what you thought it would be?</li> <li>• What is better than you expected? What isn't as good as you hoped?</li> <li>• Have you made any friends on the job? Do you admire any of your coworkers?</li> <li>• When you finish a job, do you wait for the supervisor to give you something else to do, or do you go to the supervisor and ask for additional work?</li> </ul>

**2. Develop Strategies Focused on Quick Reentry into the Labor Market**

Experiences in the ERA programs suggested two complementary avenues to help newly unemployed program participants: moving them into jobs more quickly and helping them to obtain better jobs. Since ERA participants were predominantly entry-level, low-skilled workers, qualifying for a better-quality job might have required additional education and training — which was not a priority for most ERA programs. Instead, ERA programs worked to find jobs that were better matches for the participants in terms of job tasks and responsibilities, work conditions, location, and hours.

- **Establish a timeline for defined activities that staff should follow when working with individuals who are in need of reemployment assistance.**

In the ERA sites, staff faced competing demands on their time — at any one point,

they might be expected to foster job placements, provide retention support, and offer career counseling to explore advancement opportunities. To help guide staff as they juggled multiple responsibilities, some ERA programs outlined a distinct timeline for a clear set of activities to address the reemployment needs of participants.

Given that quick reemployment in a better job was the goal, the timelines for working with newly unemployed participants ranged from 15 to 45 days, depending on the site, which gave staff a defined window and an implicit deadline to provide services like counseling and coaching to help participants find a subsequent job. In the Los Angeles Reach for Success program, staff would use this time period to focus participants on seeking jobs that were of strong interest to them and that matched their skills. If participants were unable to find a job during the 45-day reemployment period, the ERA staff would send them back to the standard

**BOX 4.****QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING JOB LOSS**

- Was the participant fired, or did she or he quit?
- Why? What were the main reasons for this?
- Categorize the reasons for job loss:
  - Interpersonal conflicts
    - With coworker(s)
    - With supervisor(s)
  - Performance problems
    - Unable to follow instructions
    - Unable to complete work on time
    - Unable physically to do the work
  - Child care logistics
    - Concerns about a sick child
    - Concerns about the child care provider
    - Concerns about costs
  - Commuting logistics
    - Car problems
    - Inadequate public transportation
  - Job mismatch
    - Tasks and responsibilities
    - Work conditions
- How would a new job be better or different?

welfare-to-work program, which emphasized immediate employment in any available job.

In many ways, the ERA reemployment services were similar to traditional job search activities, including one-on-one assistance to help create or update a résumé, fill out job applications, and provide job leads. A key distinction, however, was how staff helped participants examine the problems that had led to the loss of their previous job and to avoid similar situations in the future. Discussing with a participant the specific reasons for losing a job can highlight barriers to getting and keeping a subsequent job. (Box 4 presents sample questions to help understand job loss.) For example, the ERA

program in Eugene sponsored a series of classes centered on job searches, which included analyses of why participants had lost jobs. The classes were conducted every couple of months at a central location.

In addition to one-on-one assistance, reemployment services might also include job clubs, which typically consist of one to two weeks of classroom instruction on how to look for jobs, followed by several weeks, in a supervised setting, of calling employers and lining up interviews. Job clubs are a proven strategy for assisting individuals who have been employed in the past to find a new job quickly.<sup>9</sup>

- **Improve services to participants and employers by developing close working connections with businesses.**

The Chicago ERA program maintained a network of relationships with businesses in the security industry and tracked information on security jobs with a variety of wage levels, locations, and work shifts. With this information, the program helped participants move from jobs with low wages or in the informal labor market (for example, in-home child care) into better jobs that paid somewhat higher wages and were covered by the unemployment insurance system. As one example, a participant who was not working when she entered the Chicago program — having recently lost a job at a fast-food restaurant — obtained a full-time job with a security firm at \$8.59 per hour, and eventually her hourly wage increased to \$9.09.

Some ERA program staff developed relationships with local businesses to obtain detailed information for participants about application processes, job requirements, and work environments. For example, a staff member of the Los Angeles Reach for



Success program visited a new business in the area, a company that was hiring Spanish-speaking employees to transport, defeather, and process ducks. After getting a clear understanding of what the employer wanted, she was then able to better portray the day-to-day responsibilities of the jobs when participants expressed interest. In Chicago, ERA staff learned enough about the security business that they knew what kinds of questions would be asked in interviews, could work out logistical issues in scheduling interviews, and could get feedback from employers after interviews took place.

Employers also benefit from partnerships with employment programs. In addition to providing job candidates, some ERA programs provided a screening process to facilitate a better match between participants and jobs. The Chicago ERA staff sometimes administered drug tests in their own office, identifying in advance those participants who would not qualify for a job. This was helpful in several respects: the participant could be referred for appropriate treatment; the employer would avoid interviewing unqualified applicants; and ERA staff would not jeopardize the program's reputation by referring an inappropriate job applicant to an employer.

### **3. Allocate Organizational Resources to Deliver Effective Reemployment Services**

Levels of job loss were so high — and, importantly, job loss occurred so quickly — in the ERA programs that staff found themselves usually starting from square one to help participants find jobs, rather than coaching them to stay in the labor market and guiding them to pursue better jobs. This unexpected focus on reemployment made it harder to work on retention and advancement issues with those participants

who were employed — a situation that was exacerbated by the way that staff were organized, to be responsible for providing a range of services rather than specializing in one or two. The experiences across the ERA sites suggest a number of lessons for allocating resources to deal with high demand for reemployment services.

- **Designate staff to work specifically with newly unemployed participants.**

In the ERA program in Fort Worth, Texas, a staff person was designated to serve newly unemployed participants, while the ERA program in Chicago and the Los Angeles Reach for Success program called on staff who specialized in job development to also support reemployment activities. Deploying appropriate and adequate personnel can protect against staff frustration and burnout. When tight budgets make it hard for programs to hire and train enough staff, it is even more important that staff roles, responsibilities, and workloads be clearly defined and closely monitored.

*Some ERA sites hired staff outside the standard welfare-to-work agency or created partnerships with organizations that had the expertise needed to provide reemployment services.*

- **Hire staff or partner with organizations that have strong employer relationships and knowledge of job dynamics in the low-skills labor market.**

Some ERA sites hired staff outside the standard welfare-to-work agency or created partnerships with organizations — like community colleges, Workforce Investment Act One-Stop contractors, nonprofit employment service providers, and community-based organizations — that had the expertise needed to provide reemployment

services. Also crucial is knowledge about the local low-skills labor market, including which sectors have appropriate openings for participants and what requirements, work conditions, and prospects for wage increases or promotions they offer. In the Riverside PASS program, three of the five service providers were community-based organizations — each with expertise in the local job market — that delivered reemployment services. The Salem ERA program was staffed by a two-person team consisting of a case manager employed by

*Employment programs seeking to improve retention and to support advancement among workers should consider the need to be prepared to address job loss quickly.*

the Oregon Department of Human Services and a training and employment specialist employed by Chemeketa Community College. Similarly, the Eugene ERA program represented the first time that the Oregon Department of Human Services and Lane Community College collaborated in

operating a service program. An added benefit was that some participants seemed more willing to engage with staff from nonwelfare organizations.

- **Provide frequent and repeated training to help staff understand their roles and responsibilities.**

For the ERA project, workshops run by professional training providers educated staff about how to maintain participants' engagement over time and how to deliver advancement services. Most training was delivered before the programs launched services, however, and it ended after the first year of operations. For training efforts to be most effective, they should take into account all the factors that might diminish staff capacity over time — including staff turnover, understaffing,

and management challenges — which can leave staff without the proper supervisory support and guidance needed when delivering new services.

## CONCLUSION

Job loss and employment instability are prevalent among current and former welfare recipients, making it difficult to provide services that help them advance in the labor market and increase their earnings. However, changing jobs can also be a pathway to better economic outcomes, suggesting that a job loss can be an opportunity to be used to the unemployed worker's advantage.

Employment programs seeking to improve retention and to support advancement among workers should consider the need to be prepared to address job loss quickly, to help newly unemployed workers learn from their experience, and to focus on placing individuals into better jobs that — besides providing higher wages — match their skills, interests, and education, to the extent possible. While the ERA evaluation was not designed to test the effectiveness of the specific strategies discussed in this brief, the experiences of the ERA programs suggest important lessons for developing or operating employment programs for current and former welfare recipients.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Retention services seek to increase the length of time that an individual is employed, and advancement services seek to increase earnings over time as well as improve fringe benefits, work conditions, or opportunities for promotions.

<sup>2</sup> Four additional ERA programs that targeted hard-to-employ individuals are not covered in this brief.

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. economy was in a recession for most of 2001. The unemployment rate reached a high of 6 percent in 2003, and employment did not return to prerecession levels until 2005 (Economic Policy Institute, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Often considered the gold standard of policy analysis, random assignment ensures that when individuals enter a study, there are no systematic differences, measured or unmeasured, in the characteristics of the research groups. Thus, any differences between the groups that emerge after random assignment (for example, in employment rates or average earnings) can be attributed to the program or policy implemented for the program group, in contrast to the services available to the control group.

<sup>5</sup> This could also include the site's standard welfare-to-work program or, in some cases, minimal efforts that the sites already had in place to provide assistance to individuals who found jobs.

<sup>6</sup> For the analysis and statistics cited in this paragraph and the next, see Miller, Deitch, and Hill (Forthcoming, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the ERA programs' economic impacts, see Hendra et al. (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Andersson, Holzer, and Lane (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Hamilton (2002).

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

## Finding the Next Job

### Reemployment Strategies in Retention and Advancement Programs for Current and Former Welfare Recipients



When current and former welfare recipients who are looking for work find jobs, they often lose them quickly and have trouble finding another job. This brief, based on the experiences of 12 programs in the national Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) evaluation, offers practical advice on how to design and implement practices that turn a recent job loss into an opportunity to find a better job. The ERA evaluation revealed that, given the rapid and high rates of job loss in this population, job retention and advancement programs for them must focus as much, if not more, on strategies for reemployment as on advancement in existing jobs. Several reemployment strategies are highlighted, including developing mechanisms to quickly learn about job loss, creating strategies to foster rapid reentry into the labor market, and allocating organizational resources to effectively deliver reemployment services. Overall, the evaluation found that quickly reemploying participants in better jobs can increase longer-term employment and earnings.