



Barriers to Employment in DuPage County: Who Faces the Greatest Obstacles?

September, 2025



Acknowledgements

This report was funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Employment & Training Special Project - Community Resource Development Program # 26-444-80-1268-01. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Illinois Department of Human Services that made this community-based research and reporting possible. We also would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the many employment training and support service providers and DuPage residents seeking employment who contributed to this report. Their support has been instrumental to this reporting.

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Introduction

Background: Unemployment in DuPage County

Nearly 25,000 working age people (16 years old and older) are unemployed in DuPage County, representing approximately 3.3% of the County population.ⁱ While this unemployment rate may feel low, the negative impacts are major for those who experience multiple and significant barriers to employment; the path to a living wage job and meeting basic needs can be extremely challenging. Inability to access and sustain living wage employment hinders people's capacity to meet basic needs including housing, food and healthcare. People earning less than living wages experience greater stress and poorer physical and mental health.ⁱⁱ They encounter a greater likelihood of debt and financial instability, making it even harder to achieve financial security and well-being.ⁱⁱⁱ Mirroring national trends, several populations within DuPage County face significant challenges to accessing and retaining living wage employment, including: people with limited education and prior work experience, those living with disabilities, mental illness and/or substance use concerns, justice involved individuals, single heads of household, immigrants, refugees, and asylees, housing insecure and homeless individuals, disconnected young adults and older adults.^{iv v}

While US Public Law 119-21 will require a greater portion of Medicaid and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) recipients to meet work requirements in order to keep benefits, the full impact of these policy changes on people who face significant barriers to employment has yet to be seen.^{vi} However prior research on such projects implemented at the state level indicates such requirements raise administrative costs significantly, reduce healthcare coverage for many and do not increase employment rates.^{vii viii} In fact, the strong majority of Medicaid recipients (92%) already are working or face significant barriers to employment such as illness, disability, or caregiving responsibilities, suggesting that work requirements might not have a strong impact on employment rates among benefit recipients.

Purpose

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program provides time limited cash assistance, transitional services to support family independence, and screening and referrals for mental health, substance use and domestic violence concerns. The aim of the TANF program is to help families in need transition to greater self-sufficiency and well-being. To promote family self-sufficiency, the TANF program requires eligible participants to take part in work activities such as job seeking, training, employment and community service. At the same time TANF also provides supports and services to help participants become employment ready, such as vocational training, postsecondary education, vocational rehabilitation and job retention services.

The purpose of this report is to review and understand the unique obstacles and needs of DuPage County residents with the greatest barriers to employment, as well as assets that support employment attainment. This report will also explore where gaps in the employment training and support services system remain and make recommendations for ways employment training and support services can best help people with the greatest barriers to employment.

Research Questions:

- 1. What employment training and support models have demonstrated effectiveness? How can we enhance our employment training and support service models to best support DuPage County residents with the greatest barriers to employment?*
- 2. What challenges do people with the greatest employment barriers face in finding, retaining and advancing their employment? Where are there gaps in the service system as a whole?*
- 3. What supports are in place to address these barriers and fill gaps? How effective or efficient are they?*
- 4. How could the DuPage County employment services and support system better support people with the greatest barriers to employment? What has worked well that we should do more of?*

Methods

Participants

A purposeful sample of key stakeholders was selected for community engagement interviews based on their knowledge and experience as employment training and support service providers or as recipients who have personally experienced significant barriers to accessing work. An emphasis was placed on including as many subpopulations with employment barriers as possible to ensure that findings reflected employment equity concerns, reached a diverse audience and elevated the concerns of often marginalized voices. Types of service providers and service users are summarized below.

Employment Training and Support Service Providers (n = 6)	Employment Training and Support Service Users (n = 9)
- Intellectual/developmental disabilities (n = 1) - Homeless/housing insecure (n = 1) - DuPage community (general) (n = 1) - Municipal area community (n = 1) - People living with mental illness (n = 1) - Immigrants/refugees (n = 1)	- People in recovery from substance use disorders (n = 8) - Single mothers (n = 1)

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to gather insights on key constructs of interest, including barriers and facilitators to employment, system level gaps in employment services, and recommendations to strengthen the employment training and support services system. All interviewees were informed of the purpose of this research, and the voluntary, confidential nature of data collection. Interviews were conducted either in-person or via Zoom at interviewees' preference. All interviews were recorded with the permission of interviewees to facilitate later analyses. Interviewee responses were documented by written notes or transcripts based on the recording.

Analyses

Interview analyses took place in a two-step process: 1) descriptive analyses and 2) thematic analyses. Descriptive coding was utilized to summarize passages of qualitative data for domains of interest into short phrases. This yielded a categorized inventory of the interview data's content and set the groundwork for thematic analysis. Thematic coding was used to organize patterns and overarching themes found in the qualitative data that relate to specific research questions, for example, "What barriers do DuPage residents experience in securing employment? Maintaining employment?" or "What system level barriers prevent people from securing jobs?"

Findings

The following section presents findings from original data collected through interviews and focus groups coupled with a review of research and practice literature on effective models for training and supporting people with significant barriers to employment.

What employment training and support models have demonstrated effectiveness? How can we enhance our employment training and support service models to best support DuPage County residents with the greatest barriers to employment?

A review of research and practice literature reveals that employment training and support service models typically have the following major components:

- **Assessment:** An initial assessment of client's skills, education/training, interests, preferences and needs. This assessment process also considers barriers to employment, such as gaps in skills and training, and necessary supports to successfully find and retain employment.
- **Education, Training and Supports:** Process of matching clients to training, services, and supports needed to be employment ready. This could include job acquisition supports such as resume writing and interviewing support, job search skills, training supports such as classroom and/or on the job training to build employable skills and knowledge. It could also include client-specific supportive

services such as food assistance, transportation, childcare, legal aid, mental health and recovery supports.

- **Job Placement:** Connecting clients to employment opportunities that align with their background, experience and interests. Many programs for people with significant barriers to employment emphasize jobs that require more limited time and training investment to deliver high earning and growth opportunities so that clients can grow income and stability quickly.
- **Employer/Workplace Engagement:** Providing ongoing support and workplace responsiveness for those with the greatest barriers to employment, to combat stigma, and overcome the perceived risk among employers for hiring people with barriers. This could include employer and peer-employee engagement and training, as well as onsite employee coaching.

Some employment training and support models for people with significant barriers to employment place greater emphasis on meeting clients' needs and addressing their specific barriers, while others prioritize employer gaps and needs, such as understaffed industries and roles, and training employees to those needs. Examples focusing on employee needs and supports include:

- **The individual placement and support (IPS) model** prioritizes job seekers' choice and does not exclude them from employment options based on factors such as diagnosis or symptoms or work readiness. The IPS model emphasizes competitive employment and building supports around the employee so that they can be successful in a competitive role. Employment support is integrated with other supportive services and tailored to individual needs. Originally designed for people with severe mental illness, this model has been adapted to other populations including those with substance use disorders and people with disabilities. Such programs have allowed employees to attain employment in competitive roles and achieve improved income, psychosocial outcomes and decreased use of mental and behavioral health services.^{ix x}
- **Transitional subsidized employment models** are programs in which wages are subsidized while employees build up work experience and skills before transitioning to unsubsidized roles. These models by design are time limited and have demonstrated short-term income gains, however, have not consistently impacted long-term employment.^{xi}
- **Apprenticeships** pair employment with paid on the job training, mentorship and/or classroom training. Traditionally apprenticeships have been a part of skilled trades but have expanded to a wider range of careers, including human resources, healthcare, banking and insurance^{xii} Apprenticeships have been shown to increase participants' long-term earnings.

- **Case management and employment coaching** addresses employee stability and well-being while also providing support in finding and retaining work, such as job search support, goal setting and self-regulation skills. These models have demonstrated mixed results in achieving employment goals for participants.^{xiii xiv xv}
- **Re-entry programs** for justice-involved employees integrate tailored services such as legal aid with job training and subsidized employment. These programs have demonstrated success at bridging employees from a period of incarceration to unsubsidized employment, however benefits can be time limited and minimal.^{xvi}

Models that focus on employer needs and gaps include:

- **Sector-based training programs** that identify industries in need of employees, such as healthcare or manufacturing, and train employees to these needed roles; they have been shown effective at increasing employees' income and have sustained long term benefits.^{xvii}
- **Employer incentive programs** encourage employers through tax credits to hire people with barriers to employment, such as those in recovery and experiencing mental illness.^{xviii} They have demonstrated effectiveness at increasing hiring rates for participants.^{xix}

What challenges do people with the greatest barriers to employment face in finding, retaining and advancing their employment? Where are there gaps in the service system as a whole to support people with employment barriers? Where do supports fill these gaps?

The following section will highlight population-specific experiences, barriers and supports to finding and retaining employment.

Older Adults

Older adult job seekers, defined as young as 40 years old and older, have unique employment training and support needs. Fifty percent of DuPage residents (n= 463,655) meet this age criterion and 40% (n = 362,117) meet the more traditionally accepted working age range that caps working age at 69 years old.^{xx} Older adult job seekers who struggle to find employment include recently employed individuals, people exiting low demand jobs in need of retraining, and people exiting retirement status when their financial security eroded.

Older adult job seekers frequently present with a variable skill set, possessing a high degree of knowledge and expertise in areas related to their past employment coupled with gaps in newer technologies. According to employment training and support service provides, some may require basic computing skills such as conducting internet searches and using Microsoft Office suite. Others who have not job searched for a long time are more likely to be unfamiliar with current employment application conventions and require

training in these areas, such as online application processes and applicant tracking systems. Others who have not job searched for a long time are more likely to be unfamiliar with current employment application conventions and require training in these areas, such as online application processes and applicant tracking systems. Specifically, they may need support building their resumes to



include key words that AI (artificial intelligence) screening tools rely on to pass the first tier of applicant screening. Additional supports that benefit older adult job seekers include practice with interviewing skills, particularly if they have not job-interviewed recently, and potentially building up technology skills in areas where they may be less proficient in order to offer a more well-rounded skill set to future employers. Older adults seeking employment also may need to manage expectations as to how long the job search process takes currently vs. historically, as well as due to implicit age bias. As employment training and support service providers noted:

Especially for mature workers who might have been at their last job for 20 or 30 years, they're not used to this job market. It's very different, so it's adjusting their expectations right away. Pre-Covid, it used to be 6-9 months of searching for a job. Now it's 9-12 months and that's of active employment searching.

We have a lot of people who are mid-40s to mid-60s, it is a challenge to find work because of their age.

Older adults who utilized supports and resources to the fullest were the most successful at securing living wage jobs. They were able to leverage these resources to fill gaps in their skill sets, improve job search and interview skills and grow their professional networks. One employment training and support services provider related:

I tell people: you're building your own job search team. They can work with WorkNet, PRC, Goodwill and we are all non-compete with each other. So they can pick however many or however few they want to work with. And it's usually those people who actually take that to heart and build their team and let us know what they need help with (that find success).

Limited Income and Educational Attainment

Limited income and educational attainment restrict opportunities to achieve living wage jobs.^{xxi} Within DuPage County an estimated 1 in 8 families (n = 29,365 families) earn incomes at 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) or lower.^{xxii} Additionally, an estimated 5% of DuPage County residents 25 and older have attained less than a high school degree or its equivalency and 49% have less than a bachelor's degree.^{xxiii} Limited income constrains capacity to afford education, particularly career-advancing secondary education and the opportunities to develop employable skills and valued job experience.

A person who's worked a series of jobs through a temp firm, who doesn't have a lot of marketable skills, credentials, or education experience, or maybe it was someone laid off from a job that is no longer an in demand occupation, a slow growth industry, those individuals are likely going to need something additional in their skill set to be attractive to an employer to get a job that pays enough money to be self-sufficient. Our career counseling staff works with that person to put a plan together, maybe they want to get their CDL or become a nurse or they're an IT professional and need an additional certification, we can fund individuals up to ten thousand dollars through a statewide collection of approved training providers.

Similarly, low income limits where people can live, their proximity to work, as well as transportation and childcare affordability. One employment training and support services provider related how challenging securing employment can be for someone with limited education and work experience:

Like older adult job applicants, many participants with limited income and education spoke to how the job seeking process has become increasingly difficult in recent years, requiring a longer and more rigorous application process to advance through AI-driven resume screening, multiple interviews and ultimately securing a job. Many expressed frustration at how much effort the job seeking process requires yet often doesn't yield results. As one participant seeking work noted:

I think I applied, like, daily at least to 10 to 15 positions and it's been more than four months. That's why I said it's been a lot. I was writing it down, like for a month, how many I applied to, but as I said, the majority of them, they didn't even reply that they got my application.

Additionally, some participants felt that once they found work, it still did not feel secure. They expressed fear that they would lose their employment and need to start a protracted job search process yet again. As one participant related:

I'm very scared to lose this job. Because I don't want to go through the same process applying and reapplying. It was a nightmare. This was the first time that I had that experience. Usually, I was switching from job to job because they recommended me. Like my manager recommended me to another company that they have some other better position that they can offer and that's how I was moving.

There was also a common sentiment that wages have not kept pace with the cost of essential costs such as rent, childcare and groceries. Participants expressed frustration that once they secured a job it was still incredibly difficult to pay for these necessary items. This finding is supported by economic data showing increasing prices over the past year for essential costs such as food, housing, medical care and transportation services.^{xxiv} As one employment training and support service provider noted:

We were looking at same data and we haven't seen an increase in wages in about 4 or 5 years, it's really stagnated. And we know that prices have not. We saw some wages increase during COVID and they haven't changed since. Some are actually paying less, some have really just stayed the same.



Because people with limited income and education face multiple barriers to education and career advancement, providers noted the importance of embedding training and advancement opportunities into people's existing workday, such as paid on-the-job-training, career pathway and apprenticeship programs. It was

important to “make it easy” and not add another time or cost burden to participants’ opportunities to advance. This structure aligns with evidence-based practices for meeting the needs of people with limited income and low educational attainment.^{xxv} It also allows people to grow the skills and training necessary to transition into higher paying jobs while simultaneously working and earning income. Further, providers noted the importance of identifying roles and industries that are in-demand and provide pathways to advancement and living wage jobs.^{xxvi}

Housing Insecurity

A significant portion of DuPage County residents are experiencing housing cost burdens and housing insecurity. Twenty-five percent of DuPage households with a mortgage and 46% of renters report being cost burdened, meaning that they spend 30% or more of their income on housing costs in the past year.^{xxvii} As a more distressing measure of housing insecurity,



887 people in DuPage County went through the shelter system during 2024.^{xxviii} It is anticipated that housing insecurity could grow over time in DuPage County as incomes in faster-growing industries do not keep pace with the cost of housing. As one employment training and support service provider noted:

The composition of the economy in DuPage County has changed significantly over time. Manufacturing, transportation, distribution, and logistics are going up. Professional business services have been declining. Those professional business services pay enough for you to live in the more expensive sections of the county or in expensive housing, but the most in-demand jobs might not pay enough for a family to live in DuPage County. It doesn't mean they're not paying enough, but it's expensive to live here, new housing developments are more expensive, the luxury apartments being built are not affordable for everybody.

People experiencing housing insecurity face multiple barriers to accessing employment, including basic health, nutrition, and safety challenges, as well as lack of or limited access to transportation and online communication necessary for job seeking. When these basic needs are not adequately met, participating in employment training and placement activities becomes all the more insurmountable. As one provider who worked with housing insecure clients shared:

It's not that people don't realize that this (job opportunity is an opportunity to take advantage of but when you have multiple fires to put out you don't always have the luxury of doing things like investing in yourself.

It's difficult to talk about some of these education programs, the job readiness, the financial literacy programs because a lot of people are still in survival mode (post-COVID) and I think the broader public does not understand that...not only are people still financially recovering from COVID, it created a new group of people who have fallen into poverty, particularly families and then seniors.

Immigrants, Refugees and Asylees

It is estimated that 20% of DuPage residents (n = 187,132) are immigrants with the majority arriving from Asia (44%), Latin America (27%) and Europe (24%).^{xxix} Immigrants, refugees and asylees face unique challenges in finding, keeping and advancing their employment. Often education and qualifications from countries of origin do not transfer equivalently to the US. One provider noted that many of their immigrant, refugee and asylee clients have education and training that would afford well-paying jobs in their home countries however between language access barriers and loss of degrees and experience equivalency, only lower paying jobs are available in the US.

Job seekers who hold degrees, certifications and experience in their home countries find that these credentials often aren't directly transferrable in the US. While immigrants and refugees may be able to attain a job in their field, it often is at a lower status and income level, unless they are able to acquire US based certifications. Those without prior education or employment, exposure to Western work culture and norms, or experience in specific practical skills such as driving a car or navigating public transportation face additional challenges in securing employment.

Many immigrants, refugees and asylees experience acculturation stress, histories of trauma and fear of deportation, all of which challenge employment seeking and retention. Several immigrant, refugee and asylee groups in the US contend with unstable legal status in which once existing protections have been revoked, causing further stress and instability. The uncertainty of shifting legal status for many immigrant groups in the US can retrigger trauma. Immigrants, refugees and asylees with limited English proficiency are restricted to job options that do not rely on English language skills; unfortunately, these jobs tend to be lower wage positions that slow progress toward earning a living wage.^{xxx}

Collectively, these barriers limit and delay immigrants, refugees and asylees from achieving a living wage job.

Some immigrants, especially from less Westernized cultures, may not have a frame of reference or experience with Western work culture; this requires education and support to acclimate clients to these norms. As one provider noted:



Some of our clients have never worked and there are misunderstandings about how this whole culture works. Our Afghan women's group is a good example. There are women who have never worked in their lives and some of them are illiterate or very low literacy levels. We're helping them to build those basic skills like, you go to work, you don't just stay home when you don't feel like going to work, or you dress a certain way or how you communicate with your manager. There's a lot that we just take for granted. These are learned skills that a lot of our clients don't have.

Providers noted that stigma associated with immigrant, refugee and asylee status perpetuate misperceptions that job seekers are less capable than they truly are.

As one provider noted: *"There is a need for being able to see beyond where someone is from or what language they speak and look at their skills, what they can do."*

Immigrant, refugee and asylee job seekers found success in retaining employment with the support of onsite job coaches who helped them acclimate to Western work culture and norms. Building a path toward English language proficiency, especially with an emphasis on technical language that helps people advance in their career paths, was a strong benefit to immigrant, refugee, and asylee employees. While job coaching and English language classes may be scalable endeavors, finding time for additional development like language classes is challenging for many immigrants, refugees and asylees stretched thin by multiple demands. In some instances, employers were flexible and forward thinking enough to establish English classes or technical education in employees' language in the workplace, but this wasn't considered common practice at the majority of employers. One such success story is noted below:

We had a class that was just Burmese so they didn't have to have as high of English proficiency because they had a lead in there who spoke Burmese and who did have higher English proficiency and could help. Because they can do the math and the reading and writing but they just couldn't communicate as well, and it didn't hurt them. In a class of just English speakers, it would have been harder.

Unfortunately, human service staff who work with immigrants, refugees and asylees noted that some solutions that were once effective at supporting workforce development are no longer tenable. This included housing immigrant, refugee, and asylee clients near each other so they could develop a mutual support network and sense of community, for example helping each other with childcare and transportation. As rental housing has become and remains more expensive in DuPage County, providers have found it more challenging to access enough affordable housing units near each other to use this solution. One provider elaborated how the shortage of affordable housing has impacted their capacity to encourage childcare support among immigrant and refugee families within their program:

Childcare is connected to the housing shortage. We used to strategically place clients near each other to help each other and build community. In the current housing market, we can't do that; childcare and transportation are affected a lot by that.

One next best solution has been for parents to work opposite shifts so one can be home with children at all times, but this comes at a cost for parents of rarely being together or having gaps in childcare coverage despite this arrangement.

People Living with Disabilities

It is estimated that nearly 80,000 DuPage residents live with a disability that impacts their hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory or self-care capabilities. Forty-three percent of those living with a disability are in the peak working age range of 18-64.^{xxxix} The type and severity of disabilities people experience and their impact on employment varies greatly. This creates a wide range of needs for employment training and support. For example, some may need minimal support with interviewing skills, while others need transportation support, adaptive technologies or intensive job coaching. However, some providers felt that employment training programs are insufficiently tailored to accommodate the range and severity of disabilities. As one employment training provider noted, “Governmentally we tend to look at people with disabilities all in one bucket and it is a huge, huge mistake.”

A concern among employment training and support service providers was employer and workplace bias against hiring employees with disabilities out of fear that they would not meet productivity standards of the general employee population. Stakeholders noted concerted employer engagement is necessary to challenge stigma and build support for hiring employees with disabilities. To support employees with disabilities, employers may require engagement to build awareness and support for accommodations that would allow employees to thrive in their



job roles and functions including assistive technology, such as screen readers or voice recognition software, physical accessibility concerns such as use of ramps and access to bathrooms and work stations, and flexibility in working conditions, such as remote work options or flexible hours.

One provider noted that people with significant intellectual or developmental

disabilities faced the greatest challenges securing employment given the more intensive level of support they need. They also pointed out that small portion of people with significant disabilities may never achieve a living wage or full-time employment yet need meaningful activities to engage in during their day.

At the structural and financial level, employment training and support service providers for people with disabilities reported significant pending financial concerns. They expressed mixed reactions to how the recently passed Dignity in Pay Act could impact employment opportunities, especially for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Dignity in Pay Act will phase out sub-minimum wage employment for workers with disabilities and phase in minimum wage with transitional supports/Medicaid waivers to support disability employment programs.^{xxxii xxxiii} While some stakeholders applaud this change as ending a longstanding discriminatory pay practice, others fear negative, unintended consequences, specifically that as subminimum wages are phased out.

Employment training and support service providers also expressed fear that anticipated deep cuts to Medicaid funding for services will result in significant loss of services and innovation. As one provider indicated:

If Medicaid benefits all of the sudden get cut and we can't pay for the staff in residential then if you have to pare back, what you pare back on is painful. You take away things, you have to allocate fundraising to sheer survival things. Programs like what we're doing that are pretty innovative, nobody's really doing what we're doing, tend to go away.

In terms of what works in supporting people with disabilities to secure and retain employment, providing assistive technology, physical access and flexibility in work hours were important accommodations that allow people to thrive in their roles. Providers reported that experiential learning or practice in one's job functions are critical to promoting self-confidence and comfort in a job role. Employment training and support service providers further noted that on-site job coaching and regular reinforcement of social skills were important among employees with intellectual and developmental disabilities to build and maintain job-specific skills and soft skills necessary to succeed at one's role:

What's needed for individuals who want to work in a community integrated setting: provide training, transportation and soft skills, experiential learning translates into better level of self-confidence when person encounter something in job.

Finally, participants indicated that not enough people living with disabilities and their families or support networks were aware of employment training programs that they were eligible for, indicating more concerted or different strategies for building awareness may be necessary.

People Living with Mental Illness

National estimates indicate that approximately 1 in 5 adults live with a mental illness.^{xxxiv} In Illinois, 29% of adults have reported recent symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorders.^{xxxv} Just over 16% of DuPage adults have been diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives.^{xxxvi} Additionally, nearly 13% of adults in DuPage County endorsed that their mental health was not good for 14 days or more in the past month.^{xxxvii} Mental illness has been associated with lost productivity at work and days of work.^{xxxviii} While many people living with mental illness maintain successful and fulfilling employment, managing their condition independently or with limited support, others experience more significant challenges to finding and retaining work, based on the type and severity of their illness.

Mental health advocates recommended support with specific skills when people living with mental illness are applying for, interviewing and launching new jobs. This included practicing soft skills such as interviewing skills and interpersonal, electronic and telephone communication. One provider shared:

Many people with mental illness that we serve totally lacked soft skills to successfully do internship or employment, not responding to messages, not showing up for appointments, lacking problem-solving skills.

People have limited skills in interviews and resume writing. We do mock interviews, we help with resumes, some people have terrible anxiety for interviewing.

Job coaches with sensitivity to mental health concerns, yet who also focused on skill development were noted as especially helpful to securing employment, for example managing anxiety while effectively answering job interview questions.



One specific challenge to retaining employment for people living with mental illness is that as their wellbeing fluctuates so too does their capacity to work. This hinders their ability to maintain consistent employment and sustainable income. Building workplace structures that support employees while also addressing employer productivity needs may lessen the negative impact of fluctuations in mental health (e.g. time off for mental healthcare, job share and team approaches that minimize losses in productivity).

It's no one's fault the employer has hired peer workers and they worked for a month and were great, really helped a lot of people, and then were off for a month or two because of their illness. And that's not really predictable when that will be.

Mental health advocates shared recommendations for supporting people with mental illness to find and keep employment. This included training and awareness in the workplace about the signs and symptoms of mental illness, how to appropriately respond to professional peers in distress, building awareness and normalization among staff for use

of employee assistance programs, providing insurance plans that adequately cover mental healthcare, and instituting and normalizing use of mental health days. As one provider stated:

You would hope to create in your workplace a sensitivity about mental illness and the ability to reduce any stigma so people can, you know offer mental health days as part of your sick days, without a doctor's note. There are ways to create sensitivity around it.

If there's people who knew what the signs and symptoms (of mental illness) were and weren't afraid to ask, because that's the other piece, or oh yeah, I noticed they weren't doing very well, they've been calling off or I saw them in the bathroom crying but it's not my place to ask anything. To understand what to say and be empowered in what questions to ask that could go along way for saving lives.

Despite the prevalence of mental health conditions, many employers and workplaces may inadvertently stigmatize mental illness through their culture and practices and lack awareness of ways they can support employees' mental health, well-being and productivity in the workplace. Increasing awareness among employers about the benefits of enacting these supports, such as fewer lost workdays and employee retention, will also be critical to their adoption and impact on employee mental health and wellbeing.

Trained certified recovery support specialists (CRSSs), have been found to be especially effective in supporting people living with mental illness to remain engaged in treatment and recovery and maintain their wellbeing.^{xxxix} CRSSs are formally trained and certified individuals who have been successful in their own recovery and who provide understanding, empathy and coping skills for people living with mental illness. Utilizing peer support for people living with mental illness was noted as a best practice that helped stabilize people living with mental illness and maintain their capacity to work. With this support people are more likely to stay well and to stay consistently employed. CRSS programs have been supported with state funding as an effective strategy to improve mental health, well-being and workplace productivity while also reducing reliance on the emergency health system for subacute care.

While the CRISS program holds promise for people experiencing mental illness, implementation challenges were noted in the CRSS program, that if addressed could more efficiently grow this pool of supportive professionals for people living with mental illness, implementation challenges were noted in the CRSS program, that if addressed could more efficiently grow this pool of supportive professionals for people living with mental illness. Many CRSS students may not have a prior work history, may need additional supports

developing effective student-professor communication skills and study skills and additional support materials to prepare for certification exams. As one provider noted:

The schools didn't realize students with mental illness weren't going to be like other students. CRSS is attracting a lot of people who haven't worked before, that's part of the issue. We had no idea we would have to spend so much time with these students. They weren't staffed for it, There is more follow up you need to do, much clearer in your communication, it's much more unlikely for students to reach out to you if there's a problem, they're more likely to drop off the face of the earth if there's a problem, They may need to take time off for their mental health and they just won't tell you. Schools were not prepared at all for that.

CRSS program planners should consider modifications and supports for their programs to accommodate these needs.

Youth and Young Adults

An estimated 41.3% of young people ages 16-19 years old participate in the workforce and 77.6% of young adults ages 20-24. Yet, the unemployment rates for these age groups are approximately double what it is for older employees: an estimated 12.3% of 16–19-year-old employees and 10% of 20–24-year-old employees. By comparison the estimated unemployment rate for those 25 and older never reaches above 5.1%.^{xi} Young adults and youth who are disconnected from education, employment and training struggle to find living wage employment. Young people aging out of foster care, LGBTQ+ youth who have exited unaffirming homes and low-income youth are all at greater risk of being disconnected from supportive education and employment institutions, as well as from natural role models such as parents and extended family, making it harder to navigate education and career planning.

Opportunities for career awareness and exploration, like job shadowing and internships, are especially helpful to young people seeking work; they also assist employers looking to develop an employee pipeline. As one participant noted, “*Career awareness and exploration: that works really well for young adults. The lightbulb goes off; I would never want to do this (job), but I could do that (job) all day, we need to do more career exploration at younger ages.*” Apprenticeships and subsidized employment models also have been found effective for young people seeking work. By providing additional supports and building work experience and skills through paid on the job training, these programs remove important barriers to employment for young people.

People in Treatment and Recovery for Substance Use Disorders

Substance use concerns have a far-reaching impact in DuPage County. According to recent estimates, 19% of adults in DuPage County have reported binge drinking alcohol in the past month while 22% of 12th graders endorsed drinking alcohol in the past month. An estimated 16.8 people per 100,000 have died in DuPage County from opioid and other drug overdoses during the most recent reporting period.^{xli} Substance use is also tightly linked to our justice system demonstrating not only a health risk for substance users but legal involvement that further jeopardizes employment opportunities. In the past year (June 2024- 25), 381 people in DuPage County have been charged with a substance use related crime as the most serious charge of their case. These charges make up 11% of overall crimes. The true number of substance use involved people is even greater when factoring in substance use related charges not considered the most serious charge in a case.

Given the frequent co-occurrence of substance use disorders with justice involvement, people in treatment and recovery for substance use concerns frequently face dual barriers to employment: balancing substance use treatment and recovery while also addressing legal concerns. Participants in a focus group of people in recovery who are job seeking or currently working shared



their experiences and barriers finding and retaining work. They reported that stigma for substance use and justice involvement had a significant chilling effect on their capacity to maintain existing employment or to get hired into new roles. Participants in recovery noted that if they were working when they entered inpatient treatment, that their prior job may no longer be available to them after treatment was completed.

While participants knew that employment discrimination based on participating in substance use treatment was illegal, they felt that employers weren't genuinely held accountable to this law. As a result, the loss of employment for engaging in treatment disincentivized employees with addiction concerns from seeking treatment and being honest with employers about their substance use challenges. They also expressed disappointment at the lack of confidentiality related to their substance use or respect for their recovery and sobriety. As one participant related:

The times that I've been fired, I wouldn't tell them (my manager and team) I was going into treatment. I would take the personal time. But HR, just because they say they keep things private, you get back to work and everyone knows your business, it's like high school. There's a lot of stuff you can't prove is going on but how does everyone know I went to treatment. Getting treatment, it ends up backfiring. And it kinda sucks...when someone gets help and takes initiative to get help, there should be a law like you can't get terminated. I know there's a law you can't get terminated for going to a recovery center, but they'll say anything they want. They'll find a reason. They'll say oh, we don't need that position any longer and then they'll hire someone the next day for the same position.

People in recovery also reported frustration at the negative influence of criminal background on the job interviewing process. One participant related having job interviews with multiple employers, proceeding through successive interviews and ultimately not being selected for the job, particularly at the interviewing stage when background checks took place. Participants indicated that background checks were their most significant barrier to employment. They felt that employers perceived an employee with substance use related charges as less capable and a potential liability to the business. As one participant noted:

All these jobs, you come to your interview, I nailed the interview, I know I did and then it's a waiting process and you get let down, and I got another one and it's a waiting process and I got let down. Today I had two interviews and now I'm in the waiting process. If I get let down again, I don't know, it's really messing with my head. I keep getting these good interviews and then I get shot down right after. I don't know if it's the address (of the recovery residence I'm staying at), or because I'm waiting that 15 minutes outside for a car to pick me up? I don't know what it is.

Another participant highlighted the frustration and shame people in recovery can experience when job seeking and being denied employment based on substance use related charges:

The big dilemma is background checks for a lot of people. I know they say oh the check doesn't go past seven years but how about two years? Or if it's not violent. Seven years is a lot. If someone did something five years ago, they can't get a job and they've done good for five years. It's just not fair to them.... if someone's an addict and they got picked up because they had drugs on them because they're an addict and they got charged. But they're now trying to get better, they're being punished by not being allowed to work. That's the biggest thing. Guys are struggling with this and it sucks. You get yourself better but you can't work, you've just gotta sit there and be depressed because you can't take care of yourself.

Participants reported that temporal gaps in their work history, due to treatment stays, or a career history that crossed multiple industries appear inconsistent or unreliable to many potential employers. People in recovery struggled with revealing that their several months gap in employment was due to participating in treatment.

There's a big stigma with just mentioning anything about any kind of recovery. Either you have to keep it very secretive which is totally against the program you're trying to work an honest program and you can't explain a gap in your work history when you're at treatment whether it's 30 days or 90 days, or if you're living in a treatment facility full time there's like this big stigma with it. Any place around here will tell you they won't hire you if you come from this house. So you've gotta kind of lie your way in that you're a good person and you work hard and pay your bills.

Similarly, participants pointed out that people in recovery may switch roles or industries to find work that is less threatening to their recovery, for example avoiding work in the hospitality industry or manufacturing/factory night shifts where drugs and alcohol are more prevalent than day shifts. They feared that potential employers would view these choices critically and be less likely to hire them.

Finally, many participants lacked four-year degrees that they felt would make them a more attractive job candidate and combat some of the potential stigma associated with their substance use and/or justice involvement. Many viewed their time in treatment and early recovery as an opportunity to build their education and become more attractive job candidates, especially in light of criminal records that create stigma and limit their opportunities. They wanted to use their time in treatment and recovery productively to

participate in education and work-related training to combat this stigma and boost their chances of employment.

Several participants reported that among the different paths to seeking employment, they ultimately found success when accessing a job through recovery supportive networks, either through someone in recovery who was employed at a recovery-friendly employer or through mission-driven employers, such as social enterprises, that intentionally support people in recovery. Two participants described how they leveraged their recovery networks to gain employment:

The only thing I've seen work is when one of the other guys in the house gets a job and it's a referral. That's really it. Maybe they don't do background checks. We know one of us has got a foot in the door, so it works for the others.

I got a job through my roommate. I got a job in about a week. I had filled out applications at about 12 agencies, I did all that, where I went on Indeed, went to a temp agency, but I ended up finding a job through my roommate. He gave me a good tip on a job opening up.

Participants noted several ways that the employment system could be strengthened to improve their chances of securing living wage employment including revising background check policies, opportunities to expunge and seal records, support for job-related skill building and training during treatment and early recovery, workplaces and building stronger relationships with and a greater number of workplaces friendly to hiring people in recovery.

Single Heads of Household

There are nearly 10,000 single parent households in DuPage County with parents raising children under 18 years old; 72% of them are female-headed households.^{xlii} Single mothers face multiple barriers to employment including gender-based pay inequities, more limited advancement opportunities, and inadequate flexible work arrangements that account for caretaking needs. Research also notes that women, and especially women of color, tend to get segregated to lower paying roles and industries, further exacerbating the gender wage gap^{xliii xliv} Women in DuPage County on average earn 81% of what men earn, with Black and Hispanic/Latina women earning the lowest median wages among women.^{xlv}

One woman interviewed reported differential treatment in the workplace between male and female colleagues, with male colleagues advancing more quickly despite comparable or even lower credentials. A Pew Research study corroborates this sentiment with 61% of women in the workplace endorsing that employers' inequitable treatment of men and women was a contributing factor to the gender wage gap.



Single mothers also spoke to the need to balance work with caretaking demands on how this impacted advancement opportunities. Single mothers related limitations to employment that they can accept based on how the hours and demands of a job align with when childcare is available or when they need to be available for necessary caretaking duties (e.g.

bedtime, homework, meals). This restricted many single mothers' capacity to work evenings, after school, or on weekends, and capacity to relocate for work, considering the impact removing children from their current school setting and stability. Transportation must also be considered when determining what jobs are feasible for single mothers, given the significant time commuting can add to parents' workday.

Insufficient affordable childcare also remains a persistent and significant barrier for families seeking employment or advancing existing employment to a living wage role. While this burden is felt among many households, it is most acutely felt among single female heads of household, and even more so females of color, due to gender and race-based pay inequities and job segregation in lower paying roles.^{xlvi xlvii} Local data estimates a significant childcare gap with licensed, license-exempt and family childcare centers together in DuPage County having capacity to serve 22,789 children, yet there are a total of 43,880 DuPage County children under the age of 6 for whom all parents are working (i.e., both one and two parent homes).^{xlvi, xlviii} As one provider noted: *"Childcare. It's super expensive and there's not enough of it. That's what it boils down to."*

The dearth of childcare seats available is fueled in part by the low income that early childhood educators and childcare providers earn coupled with a loss of childcare providers during COVID that has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. The Illinois Salary and Staffing of Licensed Childcare Facilities estimates that early childhood educators, on average, earn approximately \$34,320 per year and that dissatisfaction with wages or benefits was the primary reason for early childhood teachers leaving their roles.^l One provider described this childcare workforce barrier as follows:

You can't sprout up a bunch of additional providers because you can't staff them. Most of the jobs that are within a daycare center don't pay particularly well. People aren't clamoring to get into it because it doesn't pay well. Some people have suggested, like policy makers, that early childhood education, childcare centers, should be included as part of the education system, like EC through 12 instead of K-12 and it fell under that same umbrella, then people would be getting paid more, there'd be more controls like how many seats are available, what the capacity is. But it's its own little system and that's challenging. A lot of childcare centers shut down during COVID and we lost that infrastructure.

The inability to access adequate, affordable childcare and coordinate it with work and training schedules drags on parents' capacity to advance in their careers to living wage jobs. As one provider reported:

Childcare is huge. We have a lot of people that we serve who are women heads of households. Even if we are connecting with some of the certification programs in the area, childcare is not always a part of that. It's incredibly expensive so sometimes it can limit a household's options, a worker's options, in what they can do, in hours and taking part in education programs out there.

As one potential solution, many working parents rely on the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to afford childcare while working.^{li} However, for parents seeking employment, coordination barriers persist in enrolling in CCAP that have not been sufficiently resolved. CCAP eligibility requirements stipulate that parents cannot get approved for the program until they are already employed, but accepting a job without childcare in place is a barrier for many parents. Providers and parents noted that a future employment date isn't sufficient documentation to qualify for CCAP and initiate childcare support. For many this was a source of great frustration.

In practice, if a if a person is unemployed, they don't qualify for childcare assuming employment will begin at future date. However, it's hard to commit to a job without childcare in place. They're caught in a catch 22. There's a gap in the social safety net in that it takes a while to get a placement, but you can't get a job without the placement. That's going to keep people right where they're at.

For parents with school-aged children, before and after school care was inconsistently available, meaning it was available in some school districts but not others, or the number of seats available was too limited relative to demand.

Parents were asked how they resolved childcare needs in this context of scarcity. People admitted that while they found solutions, they weren't perfect and, in many ways, still insufficient. Some families were able to access childcare support from neighbors within their communities. However, this solution relies on having a significant level of trust and comfort in your neighbors that many struggling families may not have the time and resources to cultivate. Parents with limited English proficiency struggled even more to find childcare options that met their communication needs.

Transportation

Universally, employment training and support service providers and clients identified transportation as a major barrier to accessing and advancing in employment. Among those who rely on public transportation, limited infrastructure and long commute times across the county placed significant constraints on where people could feasibly work, impeding opportunities for career and income growth. These



barriers are even more pronounced among people who work in DuPage County but are unable to secure affordable housing within the County. Recent data estimates that 55% of DuPage County employees reside in neighboring counties, extending the length of their commute to work.^{lii} For those taking public transportation, crossing county borders meant coordinating between different county transportation systems which could add additional commute time.

Public transportation here isn't robust enough to support people, Pace doesn't have enough routes or capacity, relying on rideshare service is expensive.

Given the limitations of public transportation, several providers described DuPage County as a place where a car is necessary to get to work and day-to-day tasks. However, many people face financial barriers to owning and maintaining a car. The cost of a car loan or purchase, insurance, registration, maintenance, and gas are prohibitively expensive for many. Some providers also indicated that less financially literate clients would benefit

from car buying classes to prevent being manipulated into high interest, unsustainable car loans.

Further, while transportation benefits are available to low-income seniors and people living with disabilities for specified purposes, like going to doctors' appointments, no such support service is available for people simply who have low incomes. This presents a barrier to many employment-ready people from accessing work and building income. As providers noted:

Transportation is a huge problem. The number one problem is getting an individual to and from work.

There is a direct connection between transportation and what we could call upward mobility and stability. If you don't have it, you're pretty much stuck and treading water.

Participants also identified population specific needs related to transportation. Immigrants, refugees and asylees arriving from countries with different laws and practices related to preparing and licensing drivers, may not be familiar with how to prepare for and obtain a driver's license in the US. People living with disabilities drive at lesser rates than the general population and rely on public transportation, transportation benefits, taxi and rideshare services at greater rates. For many these services are not cost effective; others may not have the capacity to navigate them independently. As one provider noted: *"For people (with intellectual and developmental disabilities) whose needs are a little more significant. It's not reasonable to think that someone can hop on a bus and use public transit and be on a bus for an hour and half be OK."*

People in treatment and recovery are more likely to have lost their drivers' licenses due to substance use driving related charges. The cost associated with legally restoring driving privileges, maintaining a car and auto insurance can be out of reach for many people returning to work after treatment. Similarly, regularly relying on rideshare services (e.g. Uber, Lyft) can be equally inaccessible. As a result, many people in recovery are limited to employment in areas that are accessible by public transportation or funded ride services.

Service providers and service users reported that current solutions to address transportation gaps were insufficient to meet the scale of true need. They included a range of options: bicycle purchases and donations, a limited number of car donations, gas cards for people with cars, scholarships for drivers' education, navigation of DMV appointments, public transportation passes, payment for rideshare services for short-distance trips, discounted car repairs and a small number of providers who offer limited van service.

Some providers have addressed transportation barriers by housing clients near their employment but were able to do this with limited success.

We try to arrange carpools, bike donations, and jobs that are in bikeable distance, or jobs that are more affordable to get to if Uber or Lyft are required.

Especially for young adults, we limit job searches to places that people can get to without a car, that they can walk or bike to, or use public transportation. This is limiting in terms of job opportunities available.

How could the DuPage County employment services and support system better support people with the greatest barriers to employment? What has worked well that we should do more of?

Employment training and support service providers and employment seekers have identified multiple recommendations for supporting people with significant barriers to employment to secure living wage jobs. The following recommendations are presented based on interviewees' professional and lived experiences and a review of the practice literature. They are organized into four primary areas: 1. Actions that employment training and supportive service providers can take, 2. Supports for specific Job-seeking populations, 3. Actions employers can take and 4. System-level barriers and concerns that limit access to employment.

What Can Employment Training and Supportive Service Providers Do?

1. Provide Comprehensive Supports to Those Facing Significant Barriers to Employment. Leverage High Impact, Short-Term Employment Training Opportunities to Chart an Efficient, Supportive Path from Survival Jobs to Living Wage Employment.

Many clients are faced with short timelines to secure employment before time limited public benefits supporting job seekers and their families are exhausted. This was especially challenging because clients who face significant barriers to employment need much more comprehensive support and training than the typical job seeker. Commonly requested supports included job-seeking support, job-integrated training and education, transportation, onsite job coaching, and affordable childcare. These enhanced supports must be tailored to clients' unique need and be directed toward living wage job opportunities.

Employment training and support service providers noted that many clients need to rely on “survival jobs” while they are simultaneously building skills and experience to advance to better jobs. Yet it was essential to identify career paths that allowed for this advancement.

We’re looking for short-term, high impact skills and credentials that will significantly increase earning potential or household income potential.

They reported success placing clients in short term training programs such as 6-month to 1-year certificate programs that prepared job seekers for living wage jobs. Matching these certifications to in-demand job sectors, such as logistics, commercial driving and manufacturing, was another critical component to clients’ success with job placement and earning a living wage. As one provider noted:

The challenge is there's not a lot of energy behind long term career growth but just getting people settled right away at entry level; but you're going to be here awhile and now we have more time to work with people on the long-term plan.

Instead of someone who works in a nursing home, there's not a lot of upward momentum in that, you're a patient care technician and it levels off at that. If you're in a healthcare system you can start out even working in laundry or janitorial, but a lot of these places will help if you want to get certified in something and will even pay for the tuition. It's more of an all-encompassing thing with places that will provide even better healthcare, better benefits for family, childcare, things like that.

Employment training and support service providers indicated there is a culture within employment services that values employing people quickly over planning for living wage jobs that will sustain clients and their families over time. Many saw this as counterproductive in the long term and advocated for a path that included a rapid transition to employment but more importantly a path toward a living wage job. Employment training providers intentionally cultivated relationships with employers that offered a path for their employees to advance in skills, expertise and compensation.

Finally, many providers were cognizant of the importance of employment to achieve stability and relieve clients’ very real stress associated with insufficient or no income.

2. Build Awareness for Less Familiar Living Wage Jobs among Job Seekers.

A common challenge that many employment training and support service providers shared was the misalignment between high demand roles and clients’ awareness and preparation for these roles. Lack of awareness for the range of careers within the various employment

sectors was a major driver of these roles remaining unfilled. This was noted especially in skilled trades, advanced manufacturing, logistics, commercial driving/transportation, and healthcare. As one provider stated:

People don't understand where these jobs are, and the skills required. A high level of technology is required for manufacturing; when people think about technology, they think coding. Healthcare is a huge demand area. It's the biggest part of DuPage County's economy and employment. But people may not think beyond doctor or nurse to respiratory therapist, for example.

One consequence of this lack of awareness is that people select jobs from the limited range they are aware of and miss opportunities for other living wage jobs within a sector. Further, when job training lacks an experiential component, prospective employees are less likely to have a clear understanding of their “day to day” work experience and their affinity for such a role. Consequently, many people invest in training for jobs that ultimately are not a good fit for them, resulting in a lost investment of time, money and effort. As one provider commented:

We don't know enough about the full range of jobs that exist or are possible. People are aware of fields, but not jobs within them, so a lot of jobs go unfilled. People have a lot of misstarts early in their career paths, which is expensive if you take out a lot of loans to do something you don't want to do.

Career education and training that promote greater awareness of the range of job possibilities within each employment sector are recommended to broaden job seekers' understanding of their options. Experiential job-related learning is recommended, such as internships and job shadowing, which provide exposure to a career prior to full investment in it.

3. Build Prospective Employees Awareness for Apprenticeships and Other On-the Job Training.

People with the greatest barriers to initially securing employment face these same barriers in advancing their careers. Competing caregiving demands, limited prior work experience, transportation, limited time and funds all challenge employees' capacity to progress in their professional roles toward living wage jobs. When employers, employees and training and support service providers were able to develop on-the-job training opportunities, everybody won. Employees grew their skills and wages and employers developed and retained more highly skilled workers, loyal to their companies.

Successful career-embedded training takes many forms depending on the unique situation of employers and employees. For some employees, on-site job coaching is sufficient to develop the necessary skills, confidence and comfort to thrive in their roles.

Apprenticeships represent another successful job training model for many employees. Apprenticeships utilize a work-based learning model where supervised, on the job learning is combined with classroom instruction and ultimately results in industry approved credentials in one's field.^{liii} One major benefit of apprenticeships is that they allow employees to grow in their field while earning an income and without incurring significant educational debt. Employers are able to develop a highly talented employee pool through apprenticeships and reduce costly staff turnover. As one provider related:

Apprenticeships are currently a popular model to get to living wage jobs; the individual is working and going to school at same time, so they don't have to pause on income while getting an education, learning on job through paid employment plus in school at the same time, offsets the costs of schooling.

Limited awareness among job seekers for the full range of careers that utilize apprenticeships presents participation barriers. Employment training and support service providers should consider intentional outreach strategies to build awareness among job seekers with the greatest barriers to employment. While many people associate apprenticeship with the trades, this model has been applied to a much wider range of careers including information technology, human resources, healthcare, banking and insurance. Lacking awareness for the breadth of apprenticeships, many job seekers are missing out on cost effective opportunities to advance their careers and grow their incomes.

4. Foster the Development of Soft Skills in Employment Settings.

Many people with significant barriers to employment have limited experience in work settings. Employment training and support service providers regardless of the population they serve noted the importance of “soft skills” to securing and retaining employment. Identified skills included effective communication with professional peers and supervisors, capacity to work in team settings, and adherence to workplace norms such as timeliness, and keeping schedules and appointments.

Support with soft skills that prospective employees need varies by population subgroups. For example, organizations working with immigrants, refugees and asylees develop soft skills through education on Western workplace norms while organizations serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities utilize on-site job coaches to build

employees self-confidence and skills in their role. One provider spoke to communication challenges as follows:

People we serve have challenges with soft skills: how to work in a team, conflict resolution skills, capacity to work within an organizational system at a job, learning how to communicate, making complaints without losing your job.

One provider further noted contextual developments in the workplace that necessitate better intergenerational communication skills in the workplace. First, because people are staying in the workforce longer there are growing differences in communication methods and preferences among different generations of workers. There are also different age-associated emphases or values on which communication skills are important to have. One provider noted:

Everyone that does this work is trying to weave this communication component in, no one entity can solve it alone, how culture and generations are changing, the multi-generational component: the younger generation wants small snippets of information, they are reading less, is at odds with Gen X and Boomers. But people are all working in the same place, people are working longer, generations don't get each other, and the definition of soft skills varies generationally.

While most providers identified communication skills as a challenge to address in the workplace, a significant gap is the lack of a curriculum or training modules to build communication skills among employees. Developing and disseminating such training would fill a gap for many employers and employees.

5. Support Clients in Adapting to Employment Search Processes that Rely Increasingly on Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Employers' use of online application processes and reliance on AI to screen resumes is becoming increasingly common in the workplace. Multiple job seekers interviewed related the challenges they experienced building their resumes to include key words that AI (artificial intelligence) screening tools rely on to pass the first tier of applicant screening. Employment support service providers should anticipate needing to assist clients with this process including building knowledge related to elements of the online application process, applicant tracking systems, and developing resumes that utilize common key words for specific roles. Artificial intelligence can also be leveraged by providers and clients in the employment search process, for example screening job postings for key words and using it to develop and respond to practice interview questions.

6. Continue Developing and Deepening Relationships with Supportive Employers.

Multiple employment training and support service providers recognized the value of building relationships with employers supportive of hiring people with significant barriers to employment. Yet, they also recognized that cultivating these relationships could be challenging. Concerns about worker turnover, liability, productivity and loss of company profits were identified as employer concerns. Providers also reported that they place a considerable amount of time and effort in building relationships to create a pipeline of employers receptive to their clients. There didn't seem to be a clear path to forging these relationships beyond trial and error coupled with consistent effort. As one provider shared:

It starts with cold-calling employers, looking at employment models in other states that have worked well. We are finding and creating relationships with employers and community colleges that are receptive to hiring refugees and immigrants, people who are developing job readiness and skills, and employers who are community minded. The challenge is to find receptive employer partners in the private sector where the bottom line financially is the driving force.

More systemic, comprehensive support in cultivating employers would help expand employment opportunities for people who face significant barriers.

7. Engage Employers and Workplaces to Reduce Stigma for Populations with Significant Barriers to Employment.

Combatting stigma was a barrier noted commonly across populations within DuPage County that experience significant barriers to employment. Whether older adults, young people, refugees, single mothers, people with disabilities or in recovery, providers and service users noted that these job seekers were seen as less capable and more risky to hire. A concerted effort is needed to combat stigma for these potential employees to thrive in the workplace. At a minimum, this effort would require population specific education and awareness building for employers and peer-employees, and provision of supports that help people succeed in their roles.

Population Specific Supports

- 1. Continue to Invest in Collaborations that Have Been Developed on Behalf of Young People** among the Regional Office of Education, WorkNet DuPage, College of DuPage, the Technology Center or DuPage and Choose DuPage to support work-seeking young people with opportunities to grow their skills as well as meet the needs of the future work world.

Engage in specific outreach efforts to vulnerable youth populations including LGBTQ+ youth serving organizations, child welfare organizations and alternative schools.

To maximize the benefit of these collaborations, continue to identify ways to make participation in these collaborations as low barrier as possible both for students as well as for employers, such as through career pathway courses that offer college credit in high school, and participation of students in job shadowing opportunities and internships. Build awareness of the multiple employment options and pathways to living wage jobs that do not rely on 4-year degrees, including certificate, associate degree and apprenticeship models.

2. Build Positive Communities of Support and Safe Spaces for Disconnected Youth and Young Adults among Service Providing Organizations and in Youth-Accessible Places.

Youth and young adults, ages 16-24, disconnected from schools, employment and families may lack social support and positive role models that provide necessary support in employment seeking. Consider tailoring these communities of support based on young people's identity and experiences to maximize bonding opportunities, for example LGBTQ+ young people, youth exiting foster care and pregnant or parenting young adults.

3. Support Online Strategies for Advancing Education and Job Seeking Opportunities During the Appropriate Stages of Treatment and Early Recovery.

Participants in recovery with limited educational background were aware that completing a higher degree such as 2- or 4-year degrees or specific certificate programs would make them more competitive candidates for higher paying jobs. Many were motivated to advance their education, for example through online classes, earlier in their treatment and recovery process than what they are currently able to do, in part due to exclusive emphasis on treatment and recovery early in the recovery journey but also due to limited computer access in treatment and recovery residences. Participants stressed the importance of proactively advancing their education to combat negative emotions like depression and shame and promote self-esteem. In fact, they named education as a strategy for preventing relapse. Work with substance use treatment providers to identify the appropriate timing to initiate job training and provide the technical and wrap around supports necessary.

4. Focus Employment Training and Support Outreach to Highest Need Populations.

Several employment training and support service providers noted people in the greatest need of employment related support also have the greatest challenges accessing supports. Concerted outreach to these populations will be needed. Lack of access to transportation, health and disability status, and competing caregiving needs all present

barriers to participating in education, training and employment opportunities. One strategy that has been found effective is co-locating training and employment opportunities with necessary support services. For example, multiple support services have been co-located at College of DuPage to join support services with education. To remove participation barriers, respondents also suggested locating or scaling up outreach, training and support services in highly frequented accessible locations among communities in greatest need, such as within public libraries, jails, recovery residences, and schools.

5. Continue or Adopt Tailored Onsite Job Coaching for Communities that Would Most Benefit from this Support.

Onsite job coaching was seen as a strategy to build comfort with workplace norms, self-confidence and skills among employees in their roles and functions. Providers noted several populations that benefit from onsite job coaching. This included:

- Immigrant, refugee and asylee employees with limited or no prior work experience and lacking familiarity with Western work culture.
- People with intellectual and developmental disabilities in need of additional skills support or assistance building self-confidence in their role.
- People living with mental illness requiring additional support with communication skills and addressing mental health symptoms on the job.

6. Cultivate Relationships with Recovery-Supportive Employers; Expand the Number of Recovery-Supportive Employers

Several participants indicated that after multiple attempts they were able to secure employment but were only successful when they found employment through fellow people in recovery who had already started jobs with supportive employers. Some noted that a small number of employers have as part of their mission to hire people in recovery and/or people with criminal histories. While such employers were difficult to find, they played an essential role in gaining access to employment. A multi-strand approach is recommended to build a growing pool of supportive employers:

- **Identify, catalogue, and collaborate with social enterprises and mission driven employers who are intentionally training and/or hiring people in recovery.**
- **Make employers aware of incentive programs to hire people with mental illness and substance use concerns.** The Illinois Department of Human Services offers the Recovery and Mental Health Tax Credit to employers who hire eligible employees. Providing support to employers to complete the application process may improve uptake.

- **Build awareness of and compassion for mental health and substance use concerns**, including the breadth of individuals and families impacted as well as capacity for people to live and work successfully in recovery.
- **Increase the number of recovery-supportive workplaces.** This includes practices such as active promotion of employee mental health and well-being, de-stigmatization of mental illness and substance use, allowance of time off for treatment and attendance at legal appointments, without negative consequences. Multiple [resources](#) are available to help workplaces foster their employees' recovery.^{liv}

What Can Employers Do?

1. Promote Recovery Ready and “Other Ready” Workplaces through Onsite Service Provision and Participation in Tax Incentive Programs.

The recovery ready workplace model, originally developed to proactively support employees with mental illness and substance use disorders (SUDs) through their policies, practices and workplace culture, can be adapted for other populations with significant barriers to employment. Examples of recovery friendly policies and practices include provision of employer health insurance plans with high quality mental and behavioral healthcare coverage, schedule flexibility to allow for participation in ongoing treatment, recovery and supportive services, and legal appointments, matching the intensity of work experiences to a person's stage of recovery, and promoting peer support opportunities onsite. Recovery ready workplaces also foster a workplace culture that promotes help seeking without fear of discrimination or negative consequences and does not stigmatize people with mental illness or SUDs.^{lv} These principles align strongly with recommendations gleaned from interviews and focus groups conducted for this research. Further the concepts of providing time to attend to health and wellness needs and resources coupled with a supportive workplace culture can be adapted to multiple populations with significant needs such as people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, immigrants, refugees and asylees.

Recovery ready workplaces that have demonstrated effectiveness to support sustained health and successful employment among people with SUDs and mental illness, are also being successfully adapted to work with other populations that face significant barriers to employment, including immigrants, refugees, and asylees and caregivers.^{lvi} For example, providers discussed the benefit of partnering with employers that allow for “mom shifts” that don't overlap with peak caretaking hours or provide training for employees with limited English proficiency. Some employers embedded English language classes within their work week to support this proficiency that will be critical to ongoing career advancement. Another employer utilized a bilingual technically trained staff person to provide job-related technical training in employees' first language to upskill employees. Providers noted these

classes could be especially effective at building skills essential to advancement in US based employment.

They had a lot of people they wanted to promote but couldn't because of language and so they actually brought in English language classes and our education program helped with that...They got paid for an hour of their time and gave an hour of their time for class 2 days a week and they did promote a few people, some of our refugee clients and some of their own internal people that we didn't know. That ongoing relationship, they went from 70 employees to 600 and something. We want to partner like that, to see people make that transition, where we can put people into training programs and partner with companies that have those positions.

While such an example provides a wonderful opportunity to develop the workforce of local businesses, the infrastructure to provide technical education in multiple languages appears limited. Identifying a “hub” organization that could cultivate and coordinate resources for recovery ready and “other ready” workplaces would be an important asset to the DuPage Community.

One employer focused strategy has been to provide tax credits to employers for hiring and retaining employees with significant barriers and to provide relevant support services. The Recovery and Mental Health Tax Credit Program and Apprenticeship Education Tax Credit Program are two such models, however providers have noted that the application process itself can be a barrier to broader employer participation.^{lvii lviii} In addition to the application process, employers may want assistance building connections with area service providers to seamlessly connect employees to necessary supports, such as mental healthcare providers and substance use treatment providers included within the employers’ health insurance plan. Supporting employers with completing applications, monitoring their approval status and reapplying as necessary for certification would assist in growing the number of participating employers. So too would connecting employers to local, high quality support services relevant to employees’ needs.

What Can We Do to Improve the Employment Training and Supportive Service Infrastructure?

1. Improve the Coordination of Services to Reduce Job-Seeker Burden to Coordinate Own Services Across Providers

Employment training and support service providers reported both strengths and challenges in coordinating services to support people with significant barriers seeking, retaining and advancing their employment. Multiple providers indicated that DuPage County is fortunate

to have many resource options that they can refer people to. They also noted that co-locating supportive services at community colleges made coordination more seamless and provided a “one stop shopping” model for clients that reduced time and transportation barriers. Employment training and support service providers working with people experiencing behavioral health concerns noted that strong coordination between discharging hospitals and community-based services promoted better continuity of support as clients transitioned to less intensive care.

While advances have been made in coordinating and co-locating services, clients themselves still carry a significant amount of responsibility for service coordination while navigating multiple barriers to accessing supports. As one provider related:

The client may need X amount of dollars to stay in an apartment or get to first month's rent and deposit. And the onus is on them to go from place to place to make these conversations and not only that but to convince this organization that you have a commitment from another organization. They already have a lot of issues that they're dealing with, so if we're asking them to do a lot of the legwork, which I get, but it's so difficult to connect with all of these different organizations and there's no formal process to say this person has committed this amount of money or could you please call this organization and let them know you're going to give \$500. It's just messy. I wish there was a better way for organizations to connect with each other.

Providers described a lack of clear roles, responsibilities and accountability across clients and provider organizations. One provider noted that while networking with other provider organizations is helpful, it is critical that networking moves beyond a casual level to more formalized collaborative agreements to strengthen the support network for clients and improve service efficiency. Another provider spoke about the lack of role clarity and accountability among providers as follows:

We all lack a general understanding across agencies as to what MOU is in place; who's supposed to do what, and who's accountable for what. Because there's no one entity held directly accountable for anything, you end up having finger pointing and confusion and quite frankly things don't work as good or as smoothly as they should.

Finally, one provider mentioned feeling isolated in their work and wished for better peer support and system level planning across agencies. At times, it could be difficult to understand whether one organization's experiences are anecdotal or representative of a larger trend, and they wanted consultation with professional peers to better plan around such phenomena.

I feel like while we have connections with other nonprofits through networking, sometimes it feels like you're operating in a silo. Like, are you seeing what I'm seeing?

2. Reconsider How Employment Background Checks and Hiring Policies are Implemented: The Illinois Human Rights Act (section 103) prohibits employers from using arrest and conviction records as the basis for hiring decisions.^{lix}

Further, this act states that when denying employment based on a candidate's criminal history, an employer must demonstrate a relationship between a potential hire's conviction record and the job they would hold and/or that employing the job candidate would create unreasonable risk of harm to individuals or the general public. Hiring decisions are to consider the number type and severity of convictions, length of time since conviction, facts and circumstances surrounding the conviction, age of employee at time of conviction and evidence of rehabilitation.

Despite this existing protective state law, many participants felt that it was too difficult to hold employers accountable to anti-discrimination laws. According to participants, convictions not relevant to their potential work opportunities were being used to deny employment and factors such as length of time since conviction or evidence of rehabilitation were not being given enough weight in employment decision making. They suggested limiting the background review period from seven years to three to five years, and excluding misdemeanor and non-violent convictions directly related to substance use, such as drug possession convictions. Another recommendation was to include probationary employment periods during which employers could assess employees' work and build confidence in the capabilities of new hires with prior conviction records.

Participants also wanted the process for expunging or sealing criminal records to be more accessible to people with conviction records seeking employment. Understanding legal documents and processes like expungement and sealing of records can feel complex and daunting to most people who are not trained in the legal field. Further, different types of convictions (e.g. civil vs. criminal, adult vs. juvenile) get expunged through different mechanisms, adding to the complexity. Providing support for navigating the application for expungement/sealing process and acquiring all supporting documentation could be good starting places. Streamlining the multiple types of expungement and sealing to a more

unified process would also reduce burden among people applying. Finally, ensuring that applicants are aware of how to waive fees for expungement/sealing records would remove cost barriers to this support.

3. Consider Strategies to Improve Long Intractable Barriers that Have High Impact on Access to Living Wage Employment

Childcare Infrastructure:

The cost and limited availability of childcare continues to be a barrier to many parents seeking employment. Participants articulated ongoing system level challenges including the high cost of childcare for parents and the persistently low compensation for early childhood educators that prevent expansion of these services. These concerns are validated by state and national childcare workforce studies.^{lx lxi} Participants further noted that improvements would require significant investment and will at the state and federal policy level to substantively address these concerns, such as subsidizing childcare or integrating early childhood education into public K-12 education system to standardize and elevate wages for early childhood educators. Providers made the following recommendations:

- **Consider collaborating with local, state and national professional organizations and advocacy organizations** that represent early childhood educators, parents and related stakeholders **to advance capacity and affordability solutions.**
- **Similar advocacy strategies are recommended to promote expanded before and after school care.**
- **Continue to foster collaboration within the Illinois Department of Human Services between the Early Childhood Services Division administering CCAP and the Family and Community Services Division administering the TANF program to address childcare concerns for working parents.** Consider ways to coordinate the Childcare Assistance Program (CCAP) benefits in ways that better support parents entering the workforce. Many parents need this support in place to accept and initiate work. Consider allowing for a temporary period where parents can access CCAP benefits shortly prior to initiating work with ongoing CCAP access contingent on sustained employment.
- **Consider strategies to support parents with limited English proficiency who need childcare in non-English languages through interpretation or non-English childcare provision.** Parents with limited English proficiency struggle to communicate and coordinate childcare services with English speaking childcare providers. Further, they may wish to preserve their children's language capacity in their first language. Support also the training and licensing directed toward non-English language or bilingual childcare workers.

4. Transportation Infrastructure

The high costs of car ownership and limited public transportation infrastructure make getting to and from employment incredibly difficult for people in lower wage jobs seeking employment. Many people are restricted to employment options accessible through walking, biking or a limited radius via public transportation. State level public transportation legislation (HB3438) has not yet been finalized, providing an opportunity to advocate for public transit solutions that would benefit working people in DuPage County who rely on public transportation.^{lxii}

- **Consider collaborating with local, state and national advocacy organizations to develop public transit capacity solutions that support people with significant employment barriers.**
- **Advocate for increased transit support for lower income individuals who rely on it for connecting to work, school and daily tasks** such as grocery shopping and healthcare appointments. Transportation options are available for lower income older adults and people living with disabilities; however, it is not available for people simply based on low-income status, which is a considerable impediment in commuting to and from work.

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