

**Wellesley Central Health Corporation  
Wellesley Urban Health Grant – Enabling Grant**

**Downtown East Community Development Collective Project:  
Community Sector Transitional Jobs  
for Individuals with Barriers to Employment**

**Final Report  
Written by Tm Zizys**

**1.0 Introduction**

This final report provides an overview of the accomplishments arising from this project. It builds on the interim report (submitted in October 2004) and provides a narrative of how this project evolved and an analysis of its impact and learnings.

To summarize the project overall, the following brief description is restated from the original project materials:

The purpose of the project is to research and design the outline for a program which would offer transitional job placements to individuals with multiple barriers to employment living in downtown east Toronto, placing them in non-profit sector jobs which are structured to provide them with the expected job skills for downstream private and public sector job opportunities. In addition, the program would seek to ensure that appropriate assessment, services and supports are in place, before, during and after the program, to ensure its sustainable impact.

For a number of reasons, the outcomes of this project are something quite different from what was anticipated when this project was first undertaken. In short, rather than deliver a specific project design for a transitional job-placement program, this project ended up supporting, in a variety of ways, a rethink of employment programs generally, as well as positioning the Downtown East Community Development Collective (DECDC) as a credible player in policy and program discussions relating to employment programs for individuals with barriers to employment.

This report is organized in the following way:

- A review of the transitional employment model
- Results of discussions with the Province and the City
- The evolving critique of the employment services system as a whole
- Actual accomplishments under this project
- Future prospects
- Overall conclusions

## 2.0 Review of the transitional employment model

As was noted in the original proposal for this project, the idea for this initiative is based on an existing project in Philadelphia, called Philadelphia@Work, operated by the Transitional Work Corporation. Since the original research was undertaken for this project, a further report has surfaced, which provides a substantial review and evaluation of six such transitional programs in the United States, including the Philadelphia experience (which continues to be the flagship example of this approach). The report, *Transitional Jobs: Stepping Stones to Unsubsidized Employment*,<sup>1</sup> warrants further elaboration.

The report provides significant validation of the transitional job approach:

The philosophy behind transitional job programs is that the best way to learn how to work is through a paying job, an idea attractive to policymakers and program administrators in the current work-focused welfare environment. Although these programs focus on work, they also provide a supportive environment and direct services for participants who need individualized attention in making the transition into work. This approach is particularly useful to policymakers and program administrators because it has the potential to move a relatively inactive portion of the welfare population into work.<sup>2</sup>

The transitional programs reviewed all incorporated the following components:

- Transitional work as paid work;
- Transitional work designed for the hard-to-employ;
- Not “make-work;”
- Transitional work as temporary jobs;
- Transitional work experiences concentrated in non-profit organizations.

The support elements of these programs also reflected several common features:

- Assessments, including basic and job skill tests, psychological evaluations, screens for barriers to employment, interest inventories, as well as (two common American features) drug tests and criminal background checks;
- Training, in particular on workplace norms and job search skills;
- Support and services, through work site supports and mentoring, case management, job coaching, and supportive services such as transportation passes, money for car repairs, children’s clothes, household supplies;
- Job search assistance, and
- Job retention and post-placement support and follow-up.

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<sup>1</sup> Gretchen Kirby, Heather Hill, LaDonna Pavetti, Jon Jacobson, Michelle Derr and Pamela Winston, *Transitional Jobs: Stepping Stones to Unsubsidized Employment*, 2002, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.

These programs are not a cure-all for the barriers which many people face. Like many programs targeting this population, approximately 50% of enrollees do not complete the program, but of those who do, across these six programs, 81-94% get permanent, unsubsidized employment.

The report provides extensive review of all program components and provides detailed summaries of program staffing and costs. In short, this particular report provides sufficient information to inform a preliminary outline of what a comparable program in Toronto could look like.

### **3.0 Results of discussions with the Province and the City**

The transitional job program in Philadelphia is focused on the welfare to work transition, and there are parallels to be drawn between the welfare framework in Pennsylvania and that in Ontario. Indeed, OW's Community Participation program, where welfare recipients volunteer for work in community agencies, reflect some of the thinking, that a work experience may lead to future employment. The experience of the transitional job programs in the United States, however, shows that this experience needs to be one which is structured as a job and which in a very planned way prepares the individual for private sector employment. This is unlike the volunteering experience under OW.

Because of this focus on OW and on the volunteer experience, the crucial foundation for this proposed project would have to be the Ontario welfare program, and so fruitful discussions with OW administration were crucial if this proposal was going to proceed anywhere. The following recounts the trajectory of those discussions.

The first step involved discussions with the Ontario Works administration within the City of Toronto. While Ontario Works is a provincially-directed and funded program, the actual administration of the program is handled through local government entities. It was clear in these discussions with City of Toronto officials that while in principle municipal administrators felt that the proposed initiative had merit, such a program would require changes to the rules under which they operate, a matter which remains in the hands of their provincial overseers.

The next step then was to take up the cause with the provincial regulators. In short, their response was also positive and indeed, funds are available to support innovative pilot projects which could demonstrate alternative approaches to the provincial welfare program goals. Certainly, in principle, the view was that our proposal had merit and warranted further exploration.

However, provincial policy analysts felt that no such pilot project discussion could take place until an internal review of current employment programs under Ontario Works, being undertaken by the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Community and

Social Services, was completed, and depended upon the directions adopted following that review.

As a result, we met with the Parliamentary Assistant to discuss both broader principles relating to employment programs and individuals with barriers to employment, as well as the specifics of our proposal. These discussions were also very productive – indeed, this led to our project consultant being asked to provide further helpful input towards the eventual report prepared by the Parliamentary Assistant.

Emboldened by this experience, we returned to have a further discussion with the City. Again, while the interest was in principle there, the City was in the process of its reviewing its own OW employment programs, involving best practices research and consultations with the community sector, the culminating result being a new Request for Proposals for OW employment program contracts for the City.

Once the City became more involved in the review process, and in particular once it announced and had to administer the new RFP process, it was virtually impossible to get the attention of any of the senior officials in the City's OW administration, simply because they were consumed with designing and then administering the new RFP.

At one level, this certainly made progress with regards to a transitional job pilot project very difficult. At another level, though, a completely different dynamic was taking shape.

#### **4.0 The evolving critique of the employment services system as a whole**

In the course of meeting with government officials and discussing the merits of the transitional job approach, a constant refining of the critique of current employment programs took place. The critique that eventually emerged was the following:

- The various employment programs are too fragmented and unconnected to each other (spread among numerous funding streams: Employment Insurance, Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, SCPI);
- These programs often do not provide either the range or intensity of support that is required;
- The system does not provide an obvious path of staged steps to support people back into the workforce;
- The overall system has a strong bias toward individuals with greater attachment to the labour market;
- The system often lacks appropriate links with and involvement of employers;
- Projects operating under various programs are often too small, unconnected and lacking sufficient scale or timeframe to make a lasting impact.

To address these issues, the resulting prescription had to be much broader than one program such as a transitional job project; that is, what was required was an overhaul of

the employment services system. What was required was a comprehensive, integrated employment services system, reflecting the following principles:

- Comprehensive, ensuring that the range of employment, social and personal needs can be addressed in tandem (e.g. life skills training, access to education and skills training, help with overcoming barriers such as transportation or need for child care);
- Continuous, providing support through various stages, such as pre-employment, work experience, job search assistance and job placement, with special emphasis placed on post-job placement support, both job retention and job advancement;
- Robust, relying on effective tools, such as appropriate screening and assessment, personalized counselling, and case management of the range of issues;
- Strategic, adapting to participants' and labour market needs through such mechanisms as social enterprises (non-profit businesses serving social purposes), transitional jobs (temporary work experience), customized training for individual employers, and sector specific strategies (labour market development focusing on particular industries).

Thus, while DECDC was not finding much success testing the idea of a transitional job project, it started articulating an analysis of the larger employment services system, one that resonated not only among DECDC members, but also among government officials in the employment services field.

This is what caused DECDC to shift the focus of this project, resulting in a broader critique of existing employment services and the promotion of a holistic integrated employment system.

## 5.0 DECDC Accomplishments

The earlier research project funded by WCHC, which resulted in a review of best practices in employment services,<sup>3</sup> together with this evolving critique of overall employment services, provided DECDC with a message and a goal, which has paved the way for DECDC to become an active participant in policy discussions and research initiatives, as follows:

As already noted:

- DECDC provided relevant input to the provincial government's review of employment programs under Ontario Works (the Matthews Report), and its work was favourably cited in that report;

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Zizys (2003), Paths to Employment in Southeast Downtown Toronto: An Employment Linkage Proposal Combining Employment Preparation, Employment Supports, Transitional Jobs and Employment Placement, Downtown East Community Development Collective.

- DECDC similarly provided input to the City's review of its OW employment programs, as well as advising regarding the shape of employment projects for the homeless and those at-risk-of-homeless under the Supporting Community Partnerships Initiatives (SCPI);

As well:

- DECDC has become a regular participant in The Toronto City Summit Alliance/St. Christopher House's Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working Age Adults, focusing on reform of employment programs;
- DECDC spearheaded a proposal with Ryerson University and 10 other university and community sector partners in an application for a grant from the Social Economy Suite of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to study ways in which the social economy can help individuals with barriers to employment find and keep jobs (a decision is expected in August).

This policy work has also strengthened DECDC as an intermediary organization, as well as given it a base to engage in program initiatives:

- DECDC as a network has been significantly energized as a result of the policy research and advocacy work it has undertaken:
  - Its monthly meetings are regularly attended by 10-15 representatives of various member organizations;
  - In December 2004, DECDC held a meeting of the Executive Directors of its member organizations, which culminated in a strong endorsement that DECDC should actively promote the idea of an integrated employment services system for the east downtown;
- DECDC has been an active partner with the Regent Park Resident Council (RPRC) in developing and delivering local training and employment programs related to the redevelopment of Regent Park:
  - DECDC was instrumental in putting in place a training and hiring program related to the demolition of the Division 51 Police Station;
  - DECDC, together with RPRC, is now in active discussions with Toronto Community Housing Corporation and George Brown College regarding an extended training and employment program related to the demolition and construction work associated with the building of 48 townhouses and the redevelopment of Phase I;
- DECDC also facilitated discussions among a number of its member organizations, with a view to sharpening each of their proposals in response to the City's OW employment program RFP and presenting each proposal as one component of a more integrated approach to meeting the employment needs

of downtown east ; each of the five organizations participating in this dialogue had their proposals recommended by City staff for funding.<sup>4</sup>

DECDC's promotion of a transitional job approach did not fall on deaf ears. Goodwill, a major social enterprise operating in southern Ontario, became attracted to the transitional job approach, partly because of the initial research work done by DECDC and supported by WCHC and adopted transitional employment as their primary operational principle. Goodwill has already begun applying this approach to their operation in Peel region, and hope to incorporate it across all their stores and operations over the next little while. They are also advocating on behalf of transitional employment with provincial government officials, through meetings with the Ministry of Community and Social Services, and through other means, such as their 2005 Pre-Budget Submission made to the Provincial Minister of Finance.<sup>5</sup> As well, Goodwill began participating in DECDC's network, which has resulted in opportunities for collaboration around employment programs.

## 6.0 Future prospects

As can be seen, much has happened as a result of the support provided to DECDC through this Wellesley Urban Health Enabling Grant. Indeed, it has been truly enabling!

There are basically four next steps that DECDC is pursuing:

- (1) DECDC is promoting the idea of support for an integrated approach to employment services via the effort being placed on negotiating a tripartite urban agreement for the City of Toronto, following the Vancouver and Winnipeg experiences; we have kept in touch with staff in both the Mayor's Office and the Chief Administrator's Office to make the case for this idea, and have also ensured that this concept gets picked up in other policy discussions (for example, The Toronto City Summit Alliance/St. Christopher House's Task Force);
- (2) In addition to a "top-down" approach for integrating employment services, DECDC is seeking to build from the bottom-up an integrated approach; it does so by facilitating on-going dialogue among DECDC members about what kinds of employment projects to pursue and how to ensure that each such project contributes to building the necessary intensity and staged progression of support that individuals with barriers to employment require to access and maintain sustainable jobs;
- (3) DECDC will be developing further research and service delivery projects, both to achieve the goals outlined in (1) and (2), but also to strengthen DECDC's role as an intermediary organization;

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<sup>4</sup> The five organizations were: Dixon Hall; Fred Victor Centre; Goodwill; Learning Enrichment Foundation; and WoodGreen Community Services. Notably, only half of the proposals the City received were recommended for funding (39 out of 80). See *Staff Report, Community Services Committee, Organizations to Deliver Employment Services to Ontario Works Clients in Toronto, May 12, 2005.*

<sup>5</sup> February 8, 2005.

- (4) DECDC will continue to seek core funding to allow it to perform these facilitative and advocacy functions.

## 7.0 Overall learnings

Learnings arising from this project came in several forms:

About policy advocacy: There are a number of factors that contribute to *undertaking policy advocacy* well. These include preparing a well-researched case, engaging a large number of policy officials, and a certain degree of persistence.

*Having an impact* in one's advocacy work is another matter, and partly depends not only on the willingness of policy officials to entertain innovation, but also their readiness to be engaged with new ideas and overall timing in the policy development cycle. With the provincial government undertaking a broad review of OW employment programs, the DECDC message found a sympathetic ear for its overall assessment of employment programs and the principles underlying its prescriptions.

In the case of the City, the timing was less fortunate. The City had embarked on an internal review of its employment programs, and once DECDC was ready to promote the transitional job model, the City had already shaped much of its thinking regarding the future design of OW employment programs, which it then submitted to a consultation process. Its subsequent RFP process established boundaries for what kinds of projects could be considered, and the short-time frame to respond to the RFP did not allow for enough developmental time to be invested to craft a transitional job program that could fit the City's requirement.

Thus, in the case of the Province, DECDC's timing was just right. In the case of the City, DECDC came to the policy formulation and project submission stages late. One would have been hard-pressed to know with any precision at the beginning of this project what the timing circumstances would be. This makes effective advocacy a far more challenging proposition, because in addition to have a well-thought out and well-promoted concept, it also depends on right timing.

Collateral benefits on advocacy: Engaging in advocacy, even if not ultimately successful, can still have collateral benefits. In the case of the DECDC, it provided it with a focus and a purpose, one that evolved into a broader analysis of the employment services system, resulting in a further advocacy position. This work acted as a catalyst in energizing and growing the DECDC membership, and also contributed to enhancing its credibility. This in turn permitted DECDC to take on further projects, further enhancing its focus, direction, energy and credibility.



As noted, DECDC's promotion of transitional employment was not entirely without impact. Goodwill adopted transitional employment as an approach and is working with DECDC on collaborative approaches to support greater integration among employment services.

Importance of an intermediary organization: Community agencies rightly bemoan the silo-mentality of government departments, which isolates government programs and forces community agencies to broker various funding sources to deliver an integrated set of services. But agencies also get caught up in their own constraints, not always of their own making. Restricted access to core funding and the reliance on more project funding means that community agencies are far more absorbed in dealing with the challenges of delivering the services they are contracted to deliver as opposed to considering and proposing ways to address effectively the needs of the communities they serve. There is a very limited ability to step back from the workload and crisis management that envelops most mid- and senior level agency staff. An intermediate organization, even an informal network such as the DECDC, provides a space for that stepping back to take place, as well as a vehicle that can take on the tasks that emerge from that analysis. A single agency would be hard-pressed to assume this function; a network of agencies offers a wider range of perspectives and a broader coalition to support more far-reaching initiatives.

The value of demonstration projects: DECDC's involvement in the training and hiring program related to the demolition of the Division 51 Police Station provided a practical demonstration model of both the benefits, as well as the challenges, of having a number of agencies coming together to each provide an essential component of an employment program. This experience provides a very concrete example of the kind of approach we are advocating for and it adds immediacy and practicality to our advocacy work.

The value of flexibility: DECDC was able to exercise a great degree of flexibility in how it approached implementing this project, including adapting its direction over time. This would not have been possible without the enabling attitude adopted by WCHC. Had there been a firm perception that the only focus of this project was the promotion of the transitional job model, then many of the eventual positive outcomes of this project would likely not have been realized. Moreover, had there truly been a sense that such a goal was the only measure of success, then this would likely have contributed to a feeling of frustration. Instead, broadening the scope of its advocacy energized the DECDC, allowing it to mobilize a larger constituency and engage a wider range of policy stakeholders. It suggests that too tight a definition of success at the beginning of a project might limit its possibilities, not all of which can be articulated in advance.