

Connecting Low-Income Families To Good Jobs

January 26, 2004

Despite its status as one of the most affluent states in the nation, Maryland is home to more than 100,000 working families who struggle to make ends meet in jobs that offer low wages, poor benefits and little hope for advancement. This is one of the key findings of our report, **Connecting Low-Income Families to Good Jobs: A Policy Road Map for Maryland** (www.jotf.org/research), which was released in January. The report shows that Maryland's efforts to assist low-wage workers achieve financial security are inadequate and in need of reform. It recommends policy changes in higher education, economic development, job training and other areas.

Commenting on the report, Congressman Benjamin L. Cardin said that it "outlines a number of interesting facts and worthwhile policy suggestions for improving the employment prospects of low-wage workers here in Maryland." He went on to say that, "ultimately, I want to live in an America where the words 'working' and 'poverty' will never be used in the same sentence."

AMONG ITS RECOMMENDATIONS, THE REPORT CALLS FOR:

- ➔ Allocating a larger share of higher education financial aid to need-based programs. Currently, only 53 percent of state aid is allocated on the basis of financial need.
- ➔ Expanding the state's adult education offerings to help low-wage workers achieve basic competency. Less than 1 in 20 adults in need of adult education is currently enrolled in such classes, with thousands remaining on waiting lists.
- ➔ Ensuring that Maryland's economic development spending is targeted to help create family-supporting jobs. Disclosure policies currently obscure what kinds of jobs state-subsidized businesses are creating.

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— Congressman Benjamin L. Cardin

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Quarterly Newsletter, Issue # 3 • Summer 2004

JOTF Works

OUTSIDE THE FENCE

A FORMER INMATE MAKES THE DIFFICULT TRANSITION FROM PRISON BACK INTO SOCIETY

By Kevin Griffin Moreno

When Michael Barnes

was released from prison over a year ago, he was determined not to return again. Realizing that employment and training were keys to his success outside the prison walls, the 46-year-old Baltimore native set about to find the resources he required to put his life back together.

"I needed a job," the father of seven says matter-of-factly.

He found aid from a person some might consider an unlikely source: parole officer, Stanley Boone, who works in the Department of Public Safety's Community Outreach Program. Parole and probation agents assigned to this program work to connect offenders under their supervision to job training and other community resources.

"Michael took it upon himself to succeed," says Boone, who referred Michael to a lead abatement and asbestos removal program run by The Gate, a job training and placement agency located within Baltimore's Empowerment Zone. "I gave him the referral, but after that did a lot [of the work] on his own."

After graduating from the program at the top of his class, Michael contacted companies listed in a Maryland Department of the Environment directory in the hope of finding a job where he could put his new skills to use.

The search was not an easy one. Michael found that businesses are reluctant to hire a person with a criminal record, since many employers conduct background checks when interviewing job applicants. Employers will often refuse to hire applicants who have a criminal record, even in there is no conviction, or if the conviction was for a minor offense committed many years before. Current Maryland law prohibits individuals like Michael from removing non-conviction charges from their records, even if they were subsequently convicted.

"Criminal records stand in the way of success," he remarks. Many employers "don't see ex-

offenders as human beings who have paid their penalty. It feels like we're still being punished." Most ex-offenders, he says, "just want an opportunity to contribute to the community."

Boone agrees. "Background checks are a big barrier. They should relax that law, because it hinders" ex-offenders from succeeding in the community.



Michael Barnes receives an award at a 2003 banquet. L-R: Proactive Community Supervision Coordinator Ernest Eley, Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, Barnes, Maryland Secretary of Public Safety Mary Ann Saar, Baltimore County Executive James Smith. (Photo courtesy of the Mayor's Office of Employment Development.)

Eventually Michael found an employer willing to take a chance on him, and he now works to remove lead from homes and restore historic houses.

"It feels good to make someone's home more beautiful," he reflects. "I'm giving something back."

In December 2003 Michael was honored for his accomplishments by Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley at a breakfast hosted by the Baltimore City Ex-Offender Task Force.

Boone is proud of his former client's accomplishments. "I get great satisfaction when I send someone out and they come back and tell me they have a job," he says.

Michael attributes his recent achievements in part to the education and training he received while incarcerated at Cumberland's Western Correctional Institute and at the Patuxent Institute in Jessup. During his time there, he actively sought out programs that would help him get back on his feet after he was released. Through the Maryland State Department of Education's Correctional Education Division, Michael was able to obtain certificates in horticulture and carpentry.

He laments the fact that correctional education programs like these, which he credits with giving him valuable skills, do not receive the investment needed to reach out to all the inmates eligible for them.

"[Correctional] educational programs helped me a great deal, but most of them are no longer in existence because of lack of funding," he says.

In February Barnes put this concern into practice when he joined JOTF in Annapolis to testify in support of a bill sponsored by Sen. Nathaniel McFadden to increase education programs in Maryland's correctional institutions. That measure was stalled this year, along with other legislation and budget items before the General Assembly that would have expanded transitional programs for inmates. (See related article.)

Barnes realizes he still has a long road to travel. Among the challenges he faces is a massive child support debt incurred while he was in prison, and the loss of his driver's license as a result of being in arrears. With the support of the Maryland Legal Aid Bureau and others, he is attempting to pay off his debt and have his license reinstated so he can commute to work more easily.

Even more daunting is the prospect of reestablishing relations with his children, who grew up while he was incarcerated. "When I was in prison they didn't really know me," he says. "Now I'm trying to be a father."

Still, he is grateful for the assistance he has received along the way from individuals in the community and "behind the fence." In addition to his employers, he particularly credits parole officer Boone and his counselor at Western Correctional Institution with pointing him in the right direction.

"I have a lot of people to thank," he says seriously. "Everything is coming together."

BUILDING A SKILLED HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE

By Tom Waldron



Momentum is growing

behind efforts to build a skilled healthcare workforce in Baltimore, efforts that hold promise for low-wage workers and employers alike.

This momentum was evident during a March 2 symposium in Baltimore that brought together more than a hundred representatives from hospitals, unions, colleges, foundations, and community groups.

Organized by JOTF and supported by grants from the Abell Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Open Society Institute-Baltimore, and the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers, the conference sought to examine key issues surrounding healthcare workforce development by looking at the results of local and national efforts.

A recent analysis of the Baltimore region's economy pinpointed healthcare as an industry sorely in need of workforce development. That issue is being addressed by the Baltimore Healthcare Coalition, formed last year to consider new approaches to attracting and training healthcare workers.

"There's a lot of momentum coming together to develop a coordinated plan to meet these workforce needs," said coalition member Patrice Cromwell, associate director of OSI-Baltimore. "There are real opportunities for collaboration and this conference was a great opportunity to connect the various people and institutions that will be involved."

Attendees at the conference heard from leaders of workforce programs in Philadelphia, Boston, and St. Paul. Speakers outlined program successes and sketched out challenges that the Baltimore effort can expect.

In Philadelphia, the 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund is financed in part by annual payroll contributions from 59 employers. Fund director Cheryl Feldman said that collective approach has been crucial. "By pooling the funds of employers, we can make the whole bigger than the pieces," she said. Feldman highlighted the fact that the Fund has two sets of customers – employees and employers. "We're very, very intent on addressing the workforce and recruitment needs of employers. It's a win-win situation," she said

Sarah Griffen, director of the Boston Healthcare and Training Institute, echoed the need for training programs to work collaboratively with employers, and not just with top-level executives. Support from mid-level supervisors at healthcare institutions is crucial as well, as they deal directly with employees.

“Workforce development is economic development.”

– GWIB executive director Robert W. Seurkamp

While Baltimore does not yet have a large-scale, collaborative workforce initiative for healthcare workers, some employers and workers have benefited from the Skills-Based Training for Employment Promotion (STEP) program. Under STEP, local grant recipients team with employers in selected fields to provide training for certain occupations. The cost is shared: the state-funded STEP program pays for the training while the employer pays the wages of workers being trained. However, no funding was allocated for STEP in this year's state budget.

Jo-Ann Williams, human resources manager for the University of Maryland Medical System, said STEP has helped the hospital address pressing workforce

needs. And giving low-wage workers an avenue for advancement to jobs with higher pay and better career opportunities has improved morale.

"People are feeling good about the place they work," Williams said. "It's just been a wonderful experience."

Projections show a growing need to recruit and train healthcare workers in Baltimore and Maryland. Catherine Crowley, vice president of the Maryland Hospital Association, said solving the staffing problems collectively will require new thinking on the part of employers.

"For at least 15 years, the hospitals in Maryland have been committed to the concept of 'grow your own' employees," Crowley said.

Keynote speaker Robert Giloth, director of Family Economic Success at the Casey Foundation, saluted the conferees for exploring new approaches. He said that adaptability and collaboration among various partner groups were critical to the success of these types of programs.

"You need to be entrepreneurial and flexible," Giloth he said. "This is not a one-time design. It needs to happen again and again."

The stakes are high, he added – for workers struggling to make ends meet in low-wage jobs, as well as employers and the larger society.

Among the attendees at the symposium was Robert W. Seurkamp, executive director of the Governor's Workforce Investment Board. He applauded the group for working collectively on a solution to a pressing workforce problem. In particular, he said he was pleased that the discussion focused on assisting both workers and employers.

"Workforce development is economic development. That's become the new mantra for the state," Seurkamp said. "It's clear that if we don't do workforce development, we'll be struggling with the economy."

WRAP-UP OF THE 2004 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

By Deborah Povich



Despite a lack of sufficient state revenue for important public programs, JOTF is

pleased at the number of successes achieved during the 2004 legislative session. We took no position on revenue, either through taxes or slots, but remained focused on policies and programs that would improve outcomes for low-wage workers and job seekers.

After two years of our working for additional funding for correctional education programs, the General Assembly responded by providing more resources for education and job training programs in state prisons. Educational attainment and incarceration are closely linked. Sixteen percent of Maryland residents 16 and over do not have a high school diploma; for Maryland prisoners, that figure jumps to over 50 percent. The Budget Financing and Reconciliation Act transfers \$1 million in proceeds from State Use Industries (Maryland's prison industries arm) to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) for correctional education starting in FY 2006 and continuing through FY 2009.

Obtaining employment with a criminal record is difficult. For ex-offenders without education and training, the task is even more challenging. Research shows that when prisoners have access to education and training programs, they are much less likely to return to prison after release. While additional funding for correctional education is not the complete answer, this investment will pay off in reduced recidivism. Senator Nathaniel McFadden championed additional funding for correctional education as a way of providing a smoother transition for persons returning from jail to the

community. Thanks to Senator McFadden for his commitment to improving outcomes for ex-offenders and their families.

Many of the 15,000 people returning from Maryland prisons each year accrue large amounts of child support arrearages due to lack of income while they are incarcerated. These arrearages are a significant barrier to employment and to family reunification. Consequently, obligors with high arrearages are often driven into underground economies. Although the legislature did not support legislation that would stop the accumulation of arrearages when obligors with no financial resources are incarcerated, it did remove one barrier to employment many ex-offenders experience if they are behind on child support – the loss of a driver's license.

Thanks to all who wrote, called, testified and spoke out...

Few non-custodial parents are aware that they can petition the court for a modification to their child support debt as the result of a change in their circumstances. Current law requires the Motor Vehicle Administration to suspend a driver's license if the individual is 60 days or more behind on child support. When the incarcerated parent is released from prison, the lack of a driver's license reduces his or her chances of finding employment. Starting in October, an obligor will be able to retain his or her driver's license if removal of the license would create undue hardship. Senator Sharon Grosfeld and Delegate Kathleen Dumais championed this issue.

Legislation increasing funding for adult education was not approved because of lack of resources. But the budget committees requested that the MSDE identify a method of funding additional

services for adult education. Over 614,000 adults have less than a high school diploma and 86,000 foreign-born workers have limited English. Adult basic education is a cornerstone for the workforce development system and is vital to the state's continued economic success. It is crucial that Maryland find a way to adequately finance adult education programs. The return on investment will pay off in increased wages and taxes, stronger families, and a more qualified workforce.

Money was found to increase need-based financial aid for post-secondary education. Need based aid by \$12.3 million for full-time students by \$725,000 for part-time students. More must be done to increase access to aid for part-time students and to update the cost of living allowance for commuter students. Making post-secondary education accessible to low-wage workers, who can only attend school part-time, will help them develop the skills needed to move ahead.

Full accountability for economic development expenditures will continue to elude the public. Legislation was defeated that would have required the Department of Business and Economic Development to disclose company-specific information about the number of jobs created, wages, and benefits paid by businesses receiving state economic development benefits. The issue was referred to interim study. JOTF will continue to push for full disclosure of the results of economic development subsidies.

The successes achieved this legislative session were a result of the hard work and commitment of many people. Thanks to all who wrote, called, testified and spoke out for policies that benefit low-income workers and job seekers. Real benefits will redound to Maryland's families, the tax base and the business community if public resources are focused on improving outcomes for low-income residents.

FROM THE PRESIDENT:

RACE AND EMPLOYMENT: A NEW VENTURE FOR JOTF By Joanne Nathans



Throughout the U.S. and most of the world, the color of one's skin matters greatly.

Perceptions and decisions based on race are often part of everyday life, and result in patterns of segregation in housing, schools, social/economic activities, and employment.

Here in the Baltimore region as elsewhere, despite federal, state, and local laws

that prohibit employment discrimination based on race, we see discrimination at every stage – in hiring practices, wages paid, the selection of employees who are offered training, and who is promoted. So in the spring of 2003, the JOTF board decided to explore what JOTF can do to bring about fair workplace practices in the region.

After several months of planning, we adopted a three-phase project with the goal of JOTF becoming a resource and an advocate for diversity in the workplace, and promoting work environments that welcome and value workers of all races. *cont'd on p3*

Phase 1: In April '04 the board and staff, with the help of a facilitator, began to increase our knowledge and share our own attitudes about issues of race, giving special attention to how race has historically impacted and continues to impact employment opportunities.

Phase 2: We will identify principles and goals regarding race and employment in preparation for developing an action plan for JOTF. A work group will draft a plan for consideration by the board.

Phase 3: The board will approve a plan and we will begin implementation with the goal of increasing multicultural competence of employers and creating workplaces that welcome and value people of different races and cultures.

We welcome your interest and your comments now and as we develop this project.

For more information on the JOTF Race and Employment Project, contact Joanne Nathans at (410) 234-8347 or joanne@jotf.org