



Consumer Input Focus Groups April 7, 2017

Two focus groups were held at SEARCH regarding experiences with the Income Now program which provides employment assistance.

8:30 am Group

The first group consisted of 6 new participants, 5 males and 1 female. One person had already found employment through the program and one had had an interview pending.

REFERRAL

Five of the six participants had participated in the Income Now program. One participant is not a part of Income Now and has been working with SEARCH to find a job. A Hispanic male (Edwin from WFS) has been helping him a lot. He has a huge smile and encourages him a lot. He went to the Harrisburg WFS Career office. He may have been working with Income Now without knowing it

Most participants heard about the Income Now program at the Star of Hope Men's Development Center (SOH); one heard from a person at the Houston Food Bank. They were referred to SEARCH after Coordinated Access assessment where they were provided Income Now services. There was an informational meeting at SOH about the Income Now program and participants recommended continuing this session. After initial referral, it was less than a week before they were contacted which they felt was an acceptable time. However, others said they would like to be able to see a caseworker that same day rather than waiting for an appointment or to be able to talk to someone about job leads or the process.

COUNSELORS

Focus group participants said that they were treated with respect in the Income Now program and that counselors were easy to contact and listened to participants and answered their questions. Israel was mentioned as someone who gave his cell phone number to participants and is super easy to contact. He would also call and remind them about work the next day with the time. He brought boots and clothes needed for work. Another counselor, they felt, would give them the run around and seemed to busy at times. For instance, he did not know the dates of licensure classes or information about bus routes, etc. He would tell them that he has a lot going on. He was not available before or after hours. These 2 participants switched to a different counselor. Two participant had seen employment counselor, Jackie, a few times but she was helpful.

INCOME NOW PROGRAM

Participants were complimentary about Income Now and mentioned several ways the program had helped them find work. Job leads had been helpful. One person had help getting his electrical license renewed and another the OSHA certification that they needed to get a job. Biweekly bus passes helped a lot as well. One person had used Career Gear to get interview clothing and job-related uniforms. Participants knew that

The Way Home

Career Gear was available to provide boots or other job-related clothing needed after employment. Access to the Gold Card also was mentioned as being useful.

Suggestions for improvement included having the process explained better – be more transparent. Development of a brochure was suggested which could include what are feasible outcomes from participating. Sending emails regarding program changes and how it affects them would be useful. Emails regarding job leads was deemed useful. Participants found the group setting worked as a good networking experience but felt the one on one sessions are important for confidentiality and more in-depth conversation.

PAID JOB EXPERIENCES

Most of them have been able to work with the Houston Food bank which either trains them or sends them to a job with training, which they found useful. One person had to turn it down because it is only 25 hours a week. They would like to see the paid work experience involve other partners besides the food bank.

WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS CAREER OFFICE

Most who have been to Workforce Solutions felt accepted. One person said the assistance was fast while another said that it has a government run feeling to it, but it offers great classes. Due to a large number of people applying for most jobs, it is hard to get a job; and some participants felt pressured to accept any job even though it may not fit their skills or training. If that happens, they may not perform well in the job which can cause unnecessary stress. One person said that they were told that they can get the job if they have an eligibility letter to receive specific resources. This can be frustrating because they need the resources in order to get a job. They also have a problem that the job offers in the email because it includes many opportunities that they do not qualify for. It is frustrating to be inundated with emails of jobs that are not relevant.

Suggestions were that emails should be screened to be specific to participant's training, whether or not a person can be hired with a felony, etc.

WORK EXPERIENCE

Several participants had worked at the Food Bank. One had car auction work experience every Thursday which was helpful but he had to switch to the Food Bank. A few have not had the opportunity to use the work experience yet. One participant said that with his age, he cannot do construction anymore. He wants to get into the truck industry now. Also with age, he needs a higher paying job.

SERVICES USED DURING THE EMPLOYMENT PROCESS

Participants found the bus fare services and subway gift card when attending a job fair very useful. Lunch when working at the Food Bank was also appreciated. Help with the job portfolio was very helpful when going to job fairs. No participant had used child care services or received work supplies, although they knew people who had. The mock interview which taught how to deal with gaps in employment, felony convictions, etc. was found useful.



SERVICES NOT CURRENTLY AVAILABLE THAT WOULD BE HELPFUL

One person said that it is difficult to obtain the tools necessary for the job and pre-employment access to tools would be useful as sometimes you can't get employment without the tools but the service only gives tools if you're employed. The cost for tools can be over \$1500, e.g. vacuum pump, braising tools, etc. Also mentioned was help with tuition expense certifications and licensing needed to get jobs. One person had training and a license but it expired and needs to be renewed. Also mentioned as helpful would be help with job placement after receiving training. Another suggestions was to provide mock interviews. If you could bring in qualified HR people to do mock interviews, it would be helpful because they can provide constructive feedback and give encouragement. It gives a confidence boost before going into an interview.

BARRIERS TO GETTING A JOB

Barriers mentioned include:

- Felony conviction
- Lack of experience
- Employment gaps in resume
- Lack of preparedness for job interviews
- Older age
- Transportation: one participant has his license suspended until he can get a job but he cannot get a job without being able to drive because the bus can take two hours to get there. Another example is that there may be a job in Baytown but transportation is not available. That could mean getting up at 3 in the morning to get to work and then getting home late. One participant feels that people can get a job quickly if they had the transportation. One solution suggested is to provide bicycles – participants could ride the bus and then bike the remainder of the way. (Note: Chain Reaction is donating brand new bicycles.)
- Men at Work program only lets people work on certain days, two days a week. They have to follow the rules but need some flexibility for a job. They are getting work experience which is good, but it can be embarrassing. They are in a volunteer situation. They run the center on certain days and that provides a lot of experience

HELP RECEIVED IN OVERCOMING BARRIERS:

Counselors and the Income Now program in general were felt to be helpful. Even if participants do not meet the program requirements, each participant learns something that will be useful down the road. On-the-job training helped overcome the lack of experience barrier. One participant thought it would be nice to have access to probationary on the job training to open more opportunities. One person had gotten a job through On the Bonding for participants with a felony and one had not. Participants found the new location very convenient and more helpful than the Star of Hope location. The partnership between SEARCH and Star of Hope also has been very helpful as was having the men's development center being built down the road.



10 am Group

The next group consisted of five females. All were participants in Income Now.

REFERRAL:

One participant was referred by Sally's House and one by Mission of Yahweh (which provides transportation). Another participant was referred by rapid employment and one by SEARCH.

COUNSELORS:

Time to hear back from a counselor varied. One person is still waiting for a response, one heard back in less than 24 hrs but another person didn't hear for two weeks. The Houston Food Bank referred one of the participants and she heard back in a reasonable time. All felt like they were treated with respect. They have very respectful and courteous case workers and one participant had a very empathetic, good listener and very helpful case worker. The case workers all have phones and participants are able to contact their case workers by phone or text. One participant has found that she can text her Workforce Solution case worker who is very responsive. Counselors help as much as they can.

INCOME NOW PROGRAM:

Participants mentioned several things that worked well. Getting the paid work experience with the Food Bank right away was super helpful. It was a turning point for one participant. Bus passes were very helpful as was having continual support after getting a job. Suggestions for improvement included making sure that the case manager has support and is well taken care of. They work hard to help each person, and they need to be taken care of as well.

JOB EXPERIENCES:

One person got a job immediately at Popeyes, but her hours have been cut because of a knee injury; another found full time employment. One person is employed through the Food Bank but she is still looking for employment. She has a lot going on in her personal life but is trying to get a job as her mom's provider. One person is still looking for a job. A suggestion was to screen jobs better to make sure that they are still hiring.

WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS CAREER OFFICE:

One participant goes to the Northline Commons Location. They are nice and helpful. She works with the ones who volunteer from Interfaith ministries who are particularly helpful. Several participants go to the Harrisburg location. She gets extra bus passes which really helps. She said that the case workers at Workforce Solutions can be detached. They are not as helpful. One person has not gone yet and another person used it but does not anymore. She has a job. It was beneficial when she used it. They all felt accepted at Workforce Solutions.

The Way Home

Workforce Solutions screens jobs based on qualifications. This can be frustrating because they cannot view all of the jobs but only those for which they meet the requirements. For example, one participant cannot search for real estate jobs. One person said that it was very crowded. Online applications can have bugs that prevent them from using them. Some workers have had issues with case workers who don't make eye contact

SERVICES USED DURING THE EMPLOYMENT PROCESS:

All participants had used bus passes which they found very helpful. They were able to get work supplies and uniforms and one person had used Dress for Success. No one had used childcare services yet. Only one person used the training options, getting hands on experience with shipping. The others felt they could have used that help. One person had wanted to use the training for the loan officer training but she was not able to use it. All had used the gift cards. None of the participants had done mock interviews with their counselors, although one did with Dress for Success.

SERVICES NOT CURRENTLY AVAILABLE THAT WOULD BE HELPFUL:

Participants felt better screening of jobs would be helpful. They want full time work, not part-time or seasonal work. Counselors should make sure employers are full time hiring before telling the participants.

BARRIERS TO GETTING A JOB:

Transportation was mentioned as a major barrier. Busses do not go every place that you need to go and so you have to find a job where the bus goes. The time involved can be a barrier because shelters have a curfew so you can't get back too late. It can also be hard to find a babysitter to stay late. Another barrier is that a lot of jobs want you to have a vehicle and do not want you to take the bus.

Childcare needs can be a barrier to getting a job and it can be hard to find child care after 8 pm. Two people mentioned that they could only find evening jobs which makes it hard for them to find sitters. Other barriers include a knee injury and gaps of employment due to being sick. Shelter rules also were mentioned. Shelters have chores that residents have to do, and they assign the chore time to participants which might conflict with a job.

HELP RECEIVED IN OVERCOMING BARRIERS:

One person's employment counselor helped her go around the barriers. She puts jobs in her queue and helped her feel more optimistic. Many reiterated that the counseling aspect helps overcome barriers.

OTHER COMMENTS:

One person said the staff at her shelter "picked on" her after she was selected for rapid rehousing and found an apartment. Another person had experienced the shelter reject them in an emergency situation.