

A Vigorous Recruiter of Workforce Trainees

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by Neil Irwin

More than 70 companies and nonprofit organizations compete for trainee referrals from the Department of Employment Services' One-Stop Career Centers.

One of the most successful at winning these trainees has been Opportunities Industrialization Center of Washington, which is headed by F. Alexis H. Roberson, who ran the Department of Employment Services from 1987 to 1991 and 1996 to 1997.

The city paid OIC \$240,236 to train 55 adults for the workplace in the year ended June 30, 2004. The nine-month programs focused on Microsoft Office or computer repairs.

Roberson says her organization gets more referrals from the One-Stops because it understands how the system works and what the jobless need. District officials agree, adding that OIC is willing to tackle some of the toughest cases.

OIC is part of a national network of organizations founded by the Rev. Leon H. Sullivan in 1964 to prepare residents of poor neighborhoods for the workforce. The Washington group was established in its present form in 1999. It had revenue of \$1.05 million in 2004, according to its federal tax filing. Of that, all but \$3,205 came from "fees and contracts from government agencies."

In addition to its adult training courses, OIC has programs for Ballou Senior High School students and 18- to 21-year-olds.

The organization recruits people at churches and schools, distributes fliers in high-unemployment areas of Southeast Washington, and advertises on a radio show, Roberson said. OIC staff members send potential trainees to the One-Stop Career Centers to apply for funds, helping them navigate the many bureaucratic hurdles at the center.

"We know the nature of this population," Roberson said, "and we don't want them to stop because they face some obstacle."

There is nothing improper about OIC's assistance to trainees. Indeed, it is difficult to get through the job training bureaucracy without outside help, according to many who have used One-Stop centers.

Ultimately, even those OIC helps can choose another program, and under the rules, applicants must visit three training providers before selecting one. The agency caseworker and other officials also must approve the applicant's choice.

But the result is that individuals are not necessarily making an informed choice, said Joan Kuriansky, who as executive director of **Wider Opportunities for Women** has advocated for changes in the system. "The goal of the One-Stop system is not to create opportunities for training programs to get business."

Of the 55 OIC trainees, 23 had finished training and 12 had gotten jobs by August 2004, meaning 22 percent of those who enrolled got a job, according to agency documents. That compared with a 28 percent success rate among all providers. But Roberson said those figures are inaccurate because they do not reflect the fact that some students were in training and others found jobs after the data were collected. She produced data that indicate that 68 percent of OIC's enrollees got a job in 2004.

City officials say they are reluctant to judge training firms solely on success rates. Some of those with lower placement rates "are the programs that take in the people with the most needs," said Daryl Hardy, deputy director of employment services.

Roberson was paid \$136,477 in 2003 and \$105,466 in 2004, according to OIC's tax filings. Roberson said part of those payments are from funds the group obtains from sources other than its government contracts.

The typical salary for the top officer at a nonprofit organization the size of OIC is \$80,000 to \$90,000, according to Trent Stamp, president of Charity Navigator, an organization that analyzes the finances of nonprofit groups.

"For an organization of that size and scope, the salary is slightly higher than the industry average," said Stamp, who reviewed OIC's tax filings at The Washington Post's request. "In theory, there's nothing wrong with that, so long as the organization is delivering on what they promise."

Asked how job training in the city could be made more effective, Roberson said more money is needed.

"It takes a skilled person to work with the less fortunate. We have a lot of attitudes we have to deal with, hostile attitudes," she said. "We've got to turn them around. If we can't do it, who's going to do it? We do need more resources so that we can provide better service."