

Red Tape Ties Up D.C.'s Unemployed

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by Neil Irwin

When members of the Workforce Investment Council, a federally funded group of public and private executives, tried to fulfill their mission of coordinating job training in the District, they realized they had a big problem: Nobody knew exactly what programs were out there that needed to be coordinated.

It took three staff members more than six months to come up with the answer: There are no less than 61 government programs designed to help District residents prepare for the workforce. Those programs are administered by 24 federal and city agencies and cost about \$164 million annually. But the research could not answer another obvious question -- how many people had actually obtained jobs through these programs?

That lack of information, along with poor management and a dysfunctional bureaucracy, has crippled efforts to provide District residents with job training and placement, according to an examination by The Washington Post. This helps explain why, in a place with the strongest job growth of any large city in the nation and a business community hungry to hire even entry-level employees, unemployment is higher now than it was five years ago.

Some 17,700 District residents were unemployed in December, for a jobless rate of 6 percent. That's up from 5.7 percent five years ago and more than double the unemployment rate for the Washington region as a whole. Joblessness is lower in wealthy Ward 3 in Northwest than it was in 2000, but in Ward 8, east of the Anacostia river, joblessness rose to 15.8 percent in December from 11.1 percent in December 2000.

"With all of the employment programs we have and the number of jobs being created, we should not have the level of unemployment we're seeing in the city," said City Administrator

Robert C. Bobb, who gives the District's job programs a "D at best."

"It's beyond shameful," he said.

To help residents navigate the maze of job training programs, the District operates eight One-Stop Career Centers, the first of which opened in 1999. Nonetheless, negotiating one's way to enrollment in a job training program through those centers takes an average of 11 months, according to an analysis by The Post of a Department of Employment Services database obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. Agency officials disagree with this analysis, saying they start their calculations at a later point in the process, by which measure it takes 81 days to get into training.

Under the federal government's primary job training program for adults, 172 District residents completed training and found work in the year ended June 30, 2004. The city spent \$5.4 million from that program during the period when those people were trained. That rate of spending per successful training recipient, \$31,204, is almost double the national average and more than in any state.

A federal official who oversees job training programs described those costs as extraordinary. "That is higher than it should be. That's something we need to take a look at," said Emily Stover DeRocco, an assistant secretary at the U.S. Department of Labor.

D.C. Department of Employment Services officials said the money was also used to provide other services, such as job counseling. They also said the city should be compared with only other urban areas that have similar problems of concentrated poverty. Eight of 15 other large cities The Post analyzed had lower levels of spending per successful trainee.

"I'm not going to yank your chain and say that everything's working," said Gregory P. Irish, director of DOES. "What we have is a system designed much like every system in the country. But one size doesn't fit all. We're finding that we need a different system."

Besides the 24 government agencies with job training programs, Workforce Organizations for Regional Collaboration, a nonprofit group that seeks better coordination among government, nonprofit groups and others involved with job training, counts about 500 local schools, foundations, social service outfits, and other groups that help people get training and employment.

Some of the individual programs, such as D.C. Central Kitchen, have achieved strong results, but the lack of coordination has kept the job training efforts from having a significant impact on unemployment. "Everything is too fragmented," said Charlene Drew Jarvis, president of Southeastern University and a former D.C. Council member who has long been active in economic development matters in the District. "There is too much support for overhead of multiple nonprofits that are doing training and not enough consolidation of programs."

Daniel M. Pernell, 55, retrieved documents at the Library of Congress for 23 years before retiring early for health reasons. In early 2005, his health problems were mostly behind him, but his retirement savings were dwindling. He needed a full-time job with better pay than his part-time work at a storage-unit rental facility could offer. His experiences reflect much of what is wrong with job training in the District.

In April, Pernell went to the One-Stop Career Center on Naylor Road SE. He said he sat down with a caseworker, told his story, and asked if he might get training in computers and administrative work so that he might land a better-paying office job. He said she sent him to a computer to search for job listings, ignoring his requests to pursue training.

In the ensuing weeks, he called the caseworker about six times, hoping to find out about any training opportunities. He said no one ever answered the phone or returned his voice-mail messages. He went back to the One-Stop Center a half-dozen times, he said.

"It was a farce," he said of trying to get training.

He served as an elected advisory neighborhood commissioner and found he enjoyed reviewing construction drawings of proposed buildings. Pernell knew there was a lot of building work going on in the city and decided he wanted to be part of it. He figured there would be a big demand for building inspectors and others on the administrative side of the construction business.

Months passed with no word from a caseworker. Then one day, in his capacity as an advisory neighborhood commissioner, he received a mailing from the National Capital Revitalization Corp., a quasi-public development group, asking for help recruiting people for a construction program. He joined it himself.

In December, Pernell graduated from a construction pre-apprenticeship program at Goodwill of Washington, where he received a safety certification and learned such things as how to read blueprints and do construction math. Pernell decided to apply for jobs doing administrative work for construction firms, among other positions. Late last year, he tried calling his career-center caseworker again to find out if any such jobs were available.

She didn't call back, Pernell said.

Asked about Pernell's case, Irish responded: "I'm not going to tell you one person doesn't have a valid complaint. I'm just saying look at the overall satisfaction results." He noted that a survey the agency conducted found that 70 percent of One-Stop users were satisfied.

Besides the full-service One-Stop Career Centers on Naylor Road SE and Franklin Road NE, there are six smaller satellite facilities around the city. Each full-service center employs about a dozen people, including caseworkers, who generally have a college degree and are paid \$39,000 to \$47,000 a year. These caseworkers are supposed to help unemployed District residents get unemployment benefits, find a job or get into a federally funded job training program.

Using the Freedom of Information Act, The Post obtained a database of 655 people who received training through One-Stop centers from 2001 to 2003. The database showed that the average

trainee needed 3.4 meetings with his or her caseworker before getting into training. On average, 341 days passed between the time when the applicant first registered at a One-Stop center and when he or she entered a program.

In 2002, the D.C. Employment Justice Center, a nonprofit group that advises the poor on labor matters, tried to help 42 District residents get job training through the One-Stops, but 41 of them gave up because of lengthy delays. Another group, **Wider Opportunities for Women**, reviewed the One-Stop system in 2004 and found similar faults.

Irish said many people who register with the centers do not actually pursue training, sometimes for months. Thus, Irish said it is more valid to assess how long it takes to get people into training by starting the clock when the applicant and the caseworker begin talking in detail about the training programs. By that measure, it takes 81 days.

By comparison, once a person at a One-Stop Career Center in Baltimore is found to be qualified for training, it generally takes about a month to complete the paperwork to place him or her in a program, according to Karen Sitnick, director of Baltimore's Office of Employment Development.

Daryl Hardy, the District's deputy director for training and development, said complaints about the One-Stops overstate the scope of the problem. "Is everything perfect? Of course not. But we've made a lot of progress." He said that in the past six months, the agency has hired new caseworkers who are skilled at dealing with the public.

Hardy also said many people experience good customer service from the One-Stops. As an example, the agency furnished the name of Lamour Rogers, a Southeast Washington resident who said he received excellent service from a One-Stop caseworker who helped him explore training options after he lost his job in a dental office. He waited about two weeks before entering government-funded training to get his commercial driver's license. He now operates a Metrobus and is making more than he was before. "I'll give them mad praise for having that program," he said. "It's working out well for me."

Most large cities in the United States have a

workforce board comprising business and government officials. It is supposed to coordinate efforts by governments and private entities to get people employed.

The District's Workforce Investment Council has had little success making the job training system more effective, say some current and former members. "We have a lot of very nice brochures, but we've not made a real difference in putting people to work" said Barbara B. Lang, president of the D.C. Chamber of Commerce, who was named chairman of the Workforce Investment Council late last month.

The board has 39 members, including business representatives and top city officials. According to minutes of its meetings, in the group's past four quarterly business meetings, only eight members, on average, personally attended. Seven more sent a representative. Among the members who are not listed as having attended any of those four meetings (though each sent a representative to at least one): Department of Employment Services Director Gregory P. Irish, D.C. Schools Superintendent Clifford B. Janey, Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development Stanley Jackson and D.C. Council member Vincent B. Orange Sr. (D-Ward 5).

Irish and Jackson and spokeswomen for Janey and Orange said last week that staffers provide effective representation at Workforce Investment Council meetings.

Lang said that sparse attendance makes it difficult for the board to reform the city's job training programs and that she will no longer let staffers act on behalf of board members.

Unlike in many cities, the Workforce Investment Council has not put in place rules to ensure that successful job training programs get the most money. That may be a factor in what an analysis by The Post found to be mediocre results from job training programs operated through the One-Stop centers.

In the year ended June 2004, the District's One-Stop Career Centers paid 52 training providers, out of 71 eligible organizations, to train 751 students, according a document obtained from DOES under the Freedom of Information Act. The tuition averaged more than \$6,000 per student, and subjects were as varied as cosmetology, food service, phone-line repair and

office software.

DOES cannot be sure which training providers are most effective because it does not have software that would let it collect such data, though such a system is being developed, Hardy said.

Other cities place restrictions on which training providers can receive government money. For example, for New York City job training providers to be eligible to receive students through that city's one-stop centers, 75 percent of the people who enter the training must graduate and 50 percent must get a job.

In the District, by contrast, the only requirements for training providers are that they are not debarred from contracting with the District, are accessible to those with disabilities and meet seven other criteria that don't speak to their effectiveness in getting trainees a job.

"Money is being doled out to people to get training with no accountability for the results," Lang said.

Bobb, in an interview in his office in December, walked behind his desk and pulled out a poster-size map of the District with color coding indicating that many census tracts, especially east of the Anacostia River, have jobless rates of 20 percent or more.

"The way things have been," he said, "are simply not acceptable."

Bobb said that, starting in the 2007 budget year, he intends to create three new "employment czar" positions, one for each of the high-unemployment wards of the city -- Wards 7 and 8, both east of the Anacostia, and Ward 6, which includes Southwest Washington and Capitol Hill.

These people would be city employees who would have the task of coordinating the myriad private and public programs dealing with joblessness in each neighborhood. They might officially work for the DOES, he said, but would be authorized to deal directly with Bobb, the city's No. 2 official after the mayor, if they face bureaucratic obstacles. Bobb was appointed by Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D), who plans to step down in January 2007; the next mayor could have different priorities.

In addition, the D.C. Council this month approved legislation to tighten requirements that employers who benefit from city contracting or financing hire District residents or contribute to a fund to provide further job training.

The Workforce Investment Council also is considering rules that would bar any training providers who do not meet minimal standards, such as placing 50 percent of their trainees in a job, said Executive Director Keith D. Mitchell.

These proposals, if enacted, would begin to address the lack of accountability and coordination. But even Lang and Bobb acknowledge that the problems are so deep that these efforts are only a start, a sentiment shared by those who deal with the problems firsthand.

"Money is a very important thing," said the Rev. Lionel Edmonds, the pastor at Mount Lebanon Baptist Church in the Shaw neighborhood, where unemployment is at 15 percent. "But throwing money at the problem without dealing with the root cause of unemployment, it's like spitting into the ocean."