

THE TRAIN KEEPS GOING

WHY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IS ALWAYS A WORK IN PROGRESS

BY JUDY TEMES
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Regina Mills would shop late at night, when her two sons and neighbors were not around, because she was ashamed that she needed the state’s food assistance program to pay for groceries. She had been rejected from one job after another because of a charge of possession and burglary that, though dismissed, kept showing up on employment background checks.

“I had nothing to do with it,” recalls the 58-year single mother of two grown sons. “I was in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people.”

To get by, Mills worked for friends cleaning houses or making phone calls. “I was crying all the time.”

Today, though close to retirement age, Mills is learning new skills, including Microsoft Office and Excel, and is hoping to land a job with a living wage. Though she is not yet employed, she is working

with the YWCA Seattle King Snohomish Economic Advancement and Works Program, where she receives a guaranteed income of \$500 per month along with employment readiness training.

“People with no assets and no savings (get) some breathing room to focus on new skills or an education,” says Mike Schwartz, regional director of economic advancement for the YWCA, which serves about 1,000 job-seekers in the region. It placed about half of those in jobs last year.

Seattle’s workforce development agencies have long worked to train and match workers with unfilled, living-wage jobs. Today, as the city comes to grips with both a labor shortage and the racial inequalities made bare by the pandemic, the focus is increasingly on marginalized groups and underemployed people like Mills.

“We have seen great wealth generation in this city. But we have been gutting middle-class jobs and excluding people of color,” says Marie Kurose, executive director of the Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council (WDC), the backbone of the many programs that train and place people in jobs. She adds, “Marginalized people have not been reaping the benefits of this economic growth.”

A 2021 WDC report found significant wage gaps by race in Seattle. About 90% of White workers earn at least \$15 an hour, but only 75% of Black workers and just 64% of Latinx immigrants make that wage. White workers in King County earned, on average, \$65,133 in 2021. BIPOC workers, though, earned less than \$37,448 a year, or what the University of Washington considers the self-sufficiency standard to live in King County.

Seattle’s Office of Economic Development, King County, WDC, the Port of Seattle, the Seattle Jobs Initiative, and Seattle Colleges are just some of the organizations that make workforce development part of their mission, but they do so separately, with their own funding streams, and often without a shared vision or plan.

A recent review found that at least 15 city of Seattle agencies — from Seattle City Light to Parks & Recreation to the Office of Finance and Administrative Services — have workforce development initiatives. “This is both a good thing and bad,” says John Lederer, director of workforce development for the city’s Office of Economic Development. “We all realize workforce development is important, but it can lead to a lack of coordination and strategic direction.”

Too often, funds are rarely strategically allocated or pooled, actionable data are not shared, community partners have to apply to multiple agencies using different intake forms to place workers, and employers looking for workers lack a central resource with whom to engage.

“We’re program rich but system poor,” Kurose adds. “If you look at our progress over the years, the racial disparities have only widened. It’s not just a skills gap. There’s been an erosion of living wage jobs as costs in the region have skyrocketed.”

Those costs have increased 170% between 2001 and 2021, she says, citing a report from the University of Washington, noting wages statewide have gone up just 60%.

Despite these challenges, the various agencies leading workforce development have made progress. In the past two years, the WDC and its partners served more than 2,000 businesses, many of them small to mid-sized companies, and helped 39,701 job seekers.

Among those is Esfalem Habtom, a 36-year-old refugee from Eritrea, who escaped a war in his homeland, found his way to Brazil, crossed the harrowing Darien Gap across the Panama jungle on foot, and found his way to Seattle. Three years later, he was repairing two-way radios for first responders and installing sophisticated video security systems as an electronics technician after enrolling in a training program made possible by Seattle employment agency TRAC Associates.

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—ESFALEM HABTOM

Six weeks after completing his training, he was offered a job with Seattle-based Industrial Communications. While living on roughly \$3,000 a month in Seattle is not easy, he is grateful for the chance to start life over in a place without daily violence.

“It feels like I was born again,” Habtom says. “Now I can work, I can send money to my kids, I can go anywhere I want, I can save money. I can see a future. There is no word for how happy I feel.”

While the WDC’s role is funding and guiding programs like TRAC, the city’s Office of Economic Development works to identify key industries including health care, construction, and “green” jobs that will provide refugees and BIPOC workers with better opportunities.

“What we want to do is fund not operational activities but capacity building,” says Lederer, who stepped into the role 16 months ago after a career in higher education. That means supporting and funding apprenticeship programs like those of the Service Employees International Union and the Seattle Jobs Initiative’s Introduction to Healthcare

A training program gave Esfalem Habtom the skills and confidence to launch a career.

Apprenticeship Program, both of which have identified pathways into the health care field that do not require a credential or even a degree to start. “The idea is to make these programs more accessible to more people, especially people of color.”

Employers themselves are grappling with an aging workforce and a shortage of traditional workers. Swedish Medical Center, which, like all area health systems has 50% more nursing jobs than people available to fill them, is far more flexible than it once was when it comes to hiring, says Mardia Shands, chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer.

“Who is the ideal candidate has been completely redefined,” she says. “No longer are employers sitting there saying, ‘I’m only hiring someone with a four-year degree and 10 years of experience.’ We are able to segment how we care for





Regina Mills is taking advantage of a YWCA training program to learn new skills. She's hoping to find a permanent job soon.

people, and that has reduced barriers and opened up multiple opportunities for people to enter the field.”

For instance, a food service worker with just a few years of training can become a pharmacy tech. To encourage this career path, Swedish grants 200 nursing fellowships each year to those who want to pursue a degree.

Dinah Romero tried nursing, but after Covid, discovered it wasn't the right path for her. The 27-year-old Shoreline resident then became a flight attendant for Alaska Airlines — a serendipitous move that helped her discover her passion. She is now studying to become an airplane mechanic.

“I started noticing all the flyers at Sea-Tac (Airport) for a free class on airplane maintenance,” she says. “I went and fell in love with working with my hands.”

Workforce development became part of the official mission of the Port of Seattle, which operates Sea-Tac, in 2020. The program

prioritizes youth, marginalized groups, and women like Romero. Those between 18 and 24 have high unemployment rates, says Luis Navarro, the Port's director of workforce development. The Port last year trained 688 people and placed 1,600 in jobs and apprenticeships, most of them from targeted, lower-income zip codes.

Among them is Romero, one of just six women completing a two-year airframe and powerplant mechanics program at South Seattle College. She looks forward to a starting wage of at least \$30 an hour, almost double what she made as a certified nursing assistant.

A key goal is to help women access male-dominated fields such as construction and airplane mechanics, where most of the better jobs have historically gone to predominantly White men.

“Her story is part and parcel to what we're trying to achieve here,” says Peter McGraw, the Port's media relations officer. “One of the best things we can do for the economic recovery of our region is to make sure that high-paying family-wage jobs reach every corner of our jurisdiction. This is equity.”

Seattle Colleges has a similar mission. Facing enrollment declines of more than 10% in each of the past three years, along with a high minority dropout rate, the system is changing its approach. Hundreds of program and course offerings have been segmented into eight focused areas of study. “Rather than tell students to pick one of 300 things they can study, we will recruit into those areas of study and help them be more directed about it,” says Chancellor Rosie Rimando-Chareunsap.

Seattle Colleges is also trying to bring awareness to trade and vocational educational opportunities that lead to family-wage jobs. A traditional college degree isn't for everyone, she adds.

“There's been a lot of emphasis in high school on the need for a four-year degree, and that's great,” Rimando-Chareunsap says. “But there hasn't been as much space given to how one can learn to be an aviation tech, where you can make a minimum of \$80,000 a year without incurring any debt,” she says.

Kurose admits that coordinating efforts and battling societal inequity is an audacious goal.

“We're dealing with some big issues here,” she notes. “These are root causes, like an education system that creates disparities, an unequal playing field, and industry practices that have not been historically inclusive. It's not something any one of us can do alone. Employers, community organizations, and labor all collectively have to do it.” **sbm**