



# IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

Five local directors reflect on their time at the helm

of the national Bridges to Work demonstration

Edited by Christopher Reardon

Field Report Series

Public/Private Ventures April 2001

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## FOREWORD

### Getting to work

No matter how carefully a demonstration is planned, it never fully anticipates the vagaries of program implementation. The neat design, the carefully thought-through assumptions, the months of planning eventually must conform to local circumstances and unforeseen events. While it certainly is important to invest in a careful and deliberate planning process, in the end, the success of the demonstration may hinge as much on the ability of participating organizations to adapt the design to meet local needs, impediments and opportunities, as on the quality of the original design. As chronicled in *Getting from Here to There* and *Overcoming Roadblocks on the Way to Work* (two other Bridges to Work reports), many of the original operating assumptions and requirements of our Bridges to Work demonstration had to be modified once the sites opened their doors to potential riders.

For program staff, the experience of making program changes on the fly, particularly during a carefully scrutinized national demonstration, is never easy. By and large the staff at the five organizations were able to address the challenges that emerged once the demonstration began. *In the Driver's Seat* describes how it felt to run Bridges, as told by the project directors to Christopher Reardon. The directors freely share their views on the prevalence of discrimination among employers and workers, who collaborated and who would not, the effect of a strong economy and welfare reform, and the difficulties of

random assignment, among other concerns. They do not always agree with each other, but considering they are operating in varied economic and social terrain, complete consistency would be surprising. And, of course, there is much that the directors have in common.

The full story of Bridges to Work is yet to be told; only after we complete the follow-up surveys in 2001 will we know whether the initiative had an impact on participants' employment and earnings. Regardless of the conclusion, however, *In the Driver's Seat* will remain an important chapter.

Mark Elliott  
Executive Vice President  
Public/Private Ventures

## CONTRIBUTORS

### About the project directors

**Robert Carter** served as project director of Chicago's Bridges to Work demonstration, known locally as Job Oasis, for three years. He is currently director of development for Suburban Job-Link Corp. He also served as a director of the Music Theatre Workshop, a performing arts company for at-risk youth, and as a trustee of the Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation. He previously headed the Garfield Counseling Center, a treatment and counseling facility for substance abusers; oversaw the National Merit Scholarship Corporation's program for African-American students; and directed the Inland Steel Company's grant-making activities. He earned a Bachelor's degree in government at Dartmouth College and served for seven years in the U.S. Air Force.



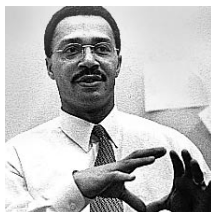
**Mandi Huser** is deputy director of Denver's Curtis Park Community Center, where she has been developing adult training and employment programs for nearly a decade. Under her leadership, the Center's Adult Career Educational Services program achieved a job placement rate of 95 percent and an employment retention rate of 85 percent. She directed the Bridges to Work demonstration in Denver from 1996 to 2001. She attended the Colorado Institute of Art on a merit scholarship and graduated at the top of her class with an Associate's degree in fashion marketing in 1991. She lives with her husband and their two children.



**Roz Staples-Streeter** directed the Bridges to Work demonstration in St. Louis from 1997 to 2001, and is currently directing a new transportation initiative. Previously, she worked in the areas of community empowerment and youth education, with a focus on teen pregnancy, for a University of Illinois extension program. She holds a Bachelor's degree in mass communications from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, where she is now doing graduate work in public administration. She is active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League and St. Alphonsus "the Rock" Church in St. Louis. She lives in East St. Louis, Illinois, with her father and son.



**Linda Stewart-Byrd** is a transportation planner in Baltimore who recently received her third Governor's Citation for Outstanding Leadership. After earning a Bachelor's degree in applied and behavioral psychology at Morgan State University, she spent several years in the private sector, mostly in the insurance industry. She returned to Morgan State for a Master's degree in transportation management and planning, then worked for the Maryland Port Administration and the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, the region's metropolitan planning organization. She directed Baltimore's Bridges to Work demonstration from 1996 to 2000. Shortly before this report went to press, she signed on as manager of alternative transportation with the Maryland Department of Transportation. She is an active member of Mt. Calvary African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and lives with her husband and four children.



**David Wilson** is executive vice president for the Private Industry Council, the Workforce Development Board for Milwaukee County, where he oversees research and planning, quality assurance, transportation and workforce development programs. Among these programs are JobRide, a state-sponsored program for job seekers and employers, and a pair of federally funded employment and training programs for dislocated workers and people with low incomes. He became the local project director for Bridges to Work in 1998. He has a Master's degree in business administration from Marquette University. He lives with his wife and three daughters in Brown Deer, Wisconsin.

#### **About the editor**

**Christopher Reardon** writes about the arts and social justice issues for the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and other major publications. He received a Master's degree in 1992 from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where he later spent a year as a mid-career fellow of the National Arts Journalism Program. He has served as a consultant to The Ford Foundation since 1992. He lives with his wife and daughter in Brooklyn, New York.





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## INTRODUCTION

### Voices of Experience

The shortest distance between two points, according to *The Elements of Euclid*, is a straight line. But as any modern commuter knows, this principle of classical geometry rarely holds true at rush hour. Getting to and from work in most American cities is often a circuitous ordeal, an *Odyssey* rewritten for an industrial age when braving potholes and traffic jams qualifies as a minor act of heroism.

Yet this daily sojourn can be even more arduous for the millions of working men and women who cannot afford a car. Many of them are city dwellers who have been left behind as the middle class, followed by a surge of employers, flocked to the suburbs in recent decades. In many metropolitan areas, public transit still follows a postwar model designed to shuttle commuters between bedroom communities and jobs downtown. Anyone seeking to travel in the other direction—and capitalize on the profusion of suburban jobs—is likely to encounter fixed routes and limited schedules that recall the old saw, “You can’t get there from here.”

Several years ago, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) set out to test the idea that improved access to suburban jobs might benefit low-income urban residents. The centerpiece of this effort is Bridges to Work, a four-year demonstration project that seeks to measure the impact of reverse-commute initiatives in five major cities: Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Milwaukee and St. Louis. Along with transportation, these sites provide placement assistance and support services to connect job-ready urban workers to suburban employment.

The men and women who planned Bridges acted on a set of assumptions that, in hindsight, did not play out as expected. Most significantly, at a time when the country was still pulling out of the recession of the early 1990s, they thought it would be relatively easy to recruit participants and relatively hard to attract employers. Consequently, they designed the program with a particular focus on finding jobs and coordinating transportation to outlying suburbs.

The reality, though, was quite different. What Bridges could not have foreseen was the unprecedented economic expansion that has trimmed the nation’s unemployment rate to 4 percent. With competition for both skilled and unskilled workers intensifying in most labor markets, the five sites found that many of their intended clients—jobless people who needed only minimal preparation for employment—had already found work.

The surging economy made it necessary for the directors to make dramatic changes in the way they ran their programs. Above all, they had to redouble their efforts to identify participants and rethink their transportation strategies. For example, they put more resources into short-term soft skills training and other supports designed to help riders overcome their barriers to work. In two cases, they also augmented a few large buses with a fleet of smaller vans.

Despite the many unforeseen obstacles they encountered, all five sites got their programs up and running. After a slow start, recruitment and placement figures rose, and Bridges began to gain momentum. The resourcefulness and dedication shown by the five project directors and their staffs has allowed Bridges to continue to play a meaningful role in helping to inform the fields of employment and transportation policy.

Two earlier reports looked at some of the interim successes, concerns, and challenges of Bridges to Work. As Bridges entered its third year of operation, P/PV's staff thought it might be instructive to let the project directors describe their experiences in their own words. And so, while meeting in New Orleans, they sat down individually

to share their frustrations, insights, reflections and recommendations. The following pages present some salient excerpts from these conversations and subsequent telephone interviews, organized around several dominant themes. Here, in the oral tradition, are five voices of experience.

### **A Snapshot of the Demonstration**

Bridges to Work was designed to test whether efforts to connect inner-city workers to suburban jobs by providing transportation, placement and limited supportive services would result in better employment opportunities and earnings for these workers. The goal was to serve 3,100 persons over the four-year life of the demonstration, from late 1996 to early 2001. Using a random assignment design, each of four sites—Baltimore, Denver, Milwaukee and St. Louis—had up to 24 months in which to recruit 800 persons, half of whom were randomly assigned to a treatment group and half to a control group. The fifth site, Chicago, sought to place 1,500 workers without the constraints of random assignment to see if a reverse commute program could achieve scale.

Each site targeted a residential area within the central city where participants were recruited and a suburban employment area where participants were placed in jobs. Each person in the treatment group was eligible for up to 18 months of Bridges to Work placement, transportation and retention services. People in the control group did not receive Bridges services but could reapply for them 18 months after their first random assignment. In the interim, the control group members could seek services from other agencies or programs. Before random assignment, each applicant completed a baseline survey conducted on the telephone. All treatment and control group members were interviewed again 18 months after random assignment.

The first random assignment site began implementation in June 1997; the last site in August 1997. The random assignment sites concluded enrollment of new participants in July 1999. Chicago began intake and placement in November 1996 and ended intake in February 2000. The sites experienced difficulty recruiting participants early on in the program. The Bridges to Work design assumed that a significant number of unemployed adults living in concentrated areas in the city were ready to work but lacked information about and access to suburban jobs. As the directors discuss in this report, the strong economy experienced during the demonstration meant that relatively few work-ready people were seeking employment assistance. Also, partnerships with training programs or other public agencies resulted in few, if any, qualified applicants for Bridges to Work. The Bridges programs responded to these

challenges by expanding and continually refining their recruitment strategies. In the end, the four random assignment sites enrolled a total of 2,360 people, or 74 percent of their original goal. Chicago enrolled 845 participants—56 percent of its original goal.

At some sites, staff realized early on that the applicants coming to the program were not qualified for the jobs they had developed. At all sites, staff found that many applicants were lacking some of the basic skills needed to obtain and retain a job. The Bridges programs responded by providing limited job preparation services, such as workshops on attitudes, dress, communication in the workplace and interviewing techniques. At the random assignment sites, 760, or 64 percent of the 1,183 people eligible to receive Bridges services, obtained employment through the Bridges to Work program. At Chicago, 607 people, or 72 percent of those enrolled, obtained employment through the program.

Four sites continued to provide transportation, placement and retention services to Bridges to Work participants through January 2001. The demonstration ended in Milwaukee at the end of May 2000. Sites offered re-placement services to participants who either lost a job or wanted to find a better opportunity at another company. The five sites made 389 re-placements. Some of the Bridges sites saw many participants leave their suburban jobs. Three reasons for this appear to be that jobs of similar quality were available in some central cities, some sites had to curtail their transportation services to reduce costs, and the participants who remained unemployed lacked basic employment skills and the resources needed to retain a job. Retention in suburban jobs was highest in Baltimore where the wage differential between city and suburban jobs appeared to be greater; transportation services were available 24 hours a day, seven days a week; and the program had developed a network of social service providers that offered support to the participants.

The Bridges to Work demonstration concluded at the end of January 2001. Data collection on the follow-up survey will continue through Spring 2001. Two of the five sites, Baltimore and St. Louis, have secured funding to continue providing employment and transportation services to link city residents to suburban jobs.

## BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

*There's more to it than having some vans and some drivers and knowing how to get from one point to another. If it were that simple, everyone would be doing it.*

—Roz Staples-Streeter

### The Reality of Reverse Commuting

Bridges to Work was designed to test whether transportation could span the gap between inner-city job seekers and suburban employers. P/PV's research had shown that in six of the nation's eight largest metropolitan regions, more than two-thirds of the jobs created during the 1980s were located in the suburbs. At the same time, poverty rates in the inner cities reached levels two to five times higher than in their corresponding suburbs, where workers tended to receive better wages and benefits.

Reverse commuting offered a possible solution to this spatial mismatch. The idea was to identify job-ready adults in selected urban neighborhoods, help them find jobs close together in the suburbs, and give them rides to and from work. The architects of Bridges also envisioned a range of support services to make the project a viable option for prospective participants. For example, workers were to be guaranteed a ride home in case of emergency, such as for a sick child.

The project directors for the five demonstration sites still largely agree with this strategy. Experience, though, has heightened their sense that while transportation may be the most apparent obstacle to gainful employment in the suburbs, it is by no means the only one. Without exception, the sites have run up against a slew of social and systemic barriers that included burdensome child care arrangements; limited literacy; and problems collaborating with other agencies that were caused by the mechanics of welfare reform, the research methodology and local politics.

Some project directors, notably Denver's Mandi Huser, have found that the suburban jobs tended to be quite spread out, making transportation more costly and complicated than expected. Like Milwaukee's David Wilson, she has also learned that suburban jobs do not always pay well enough to warrant a long commute. In Baltimore, transportation has been somewhat easier to arrange. The trickiest part there, says Linda Stewart-Byrd, has been grappling with recruitment, placement and other employment issues.

Perhaps the greatest constant has been the resourcefulness that all five sites have displayed in keeping the demonstration on track. The project directors and their staffs have frequently raced the clock to devise new ways to identify employers, recruit workers, and get them to their jobs on time within the constraints of the original design. Although the overall number of people recruited and placed in jobs was not as high as expected, Bridges is proving successful in generating crucial refinements that could enable reverse-commute programs to stand up to the strains and stresses of the real world.

**Linda Stewart-Byrd (Baltimore):** I think the potential is extraordinary. There are a lot of things that need to be worked out as far as the strategy and financing of Bridges, but overall it's a great concept and it gives hope. Some participants say it's an opportunity for them to change their lives—to get jobs with upward mobility, careers that have meaning, a livable wage, and benefits so they can actually take care of their families. In the Baltimore region, it's harder to find those types of jobs in the city if you have limited skills.

**Robert Carter (Chicago):** I think it's a sound strategy, too. We've had a lot of experience with using large vehicles, like buses, to transport people in Chicago. But there are some severe limitations to that,

so we're looking at some other things. You really have to explore a lot of alternatives to make this work: smaller vehicles, vans, car pooling. We're even working on an arrangement with the suburban rail system. So I'd say it's a good theory. I just think that it's challenging to work out all the kinks—like how to cover multiple shifts and destinations without letting the vehicle costs get out of hand.

**David Wilson (Milwaukee):** In every major metropolitan area, Milwaukee included, the demand for workers has been in the suburbs, so I think the overall concept is a good one. But I sometimes worry that our focus on getting people out there takes away from other issues relating to housing,

opportunities seem to exist more for employers, so you have to take people from one area to another. It's about empowering the work force. If companies within the city could offer the same wages and benefit packages as the ones in the suburban areas, we wouldn't have this problem. But it's something that exists nationwide. This is just a sign of the times, something we've got to do.

**Mandi Huser (Denver):** It's a good strategy, but it really depends on the method of transportation you use to get people out to the suburbs. A lot of methods are very costly. Putting a new bus route in is not a good solution for a small number of people. Paying a lot for shuttle services is

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*When a person has trouble finding transportation to work, they have transportation barriers with regard to other quality-of-life issues. How do you shop? How do you get your kids to day care? —David Wilson*

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self-sufficiency and economic development. Transportation is a barrier, there's no doubt about it, but not a barrier just to getting to work. When a person has trouble finding transportation to work, they also have transportation barriers with regard to other quality-of-life issues. How do you shop? How do you get your kids to day care? How dependent are you on other means of transportation, whether it's the bus, the cab, or that friend next door? Don't get me wrong: It's important that we do this. But we can't lose sight of the other issues that are there and the other problems that a lack of transportation compounds.

**Roz Staples-Streeter (St. Louis):** In St. Louis some people feel we should be funneling more resources and people into the city, and I agree to an extent. But I also understand that opportunities exist in the suburban areas. People have confronted us and said, "Why are you helping employers to move out farther from the city?" Well,

also not a good solution. So the challenge is finding a cost-effective way to help people get from the inner city to the suburbs.

**Chris Reardon:** How hard was it to put the transportation component in place?

**Roz:** When you hear about Bridges to Work, it sounds good, but it's not simple at all. And if you're not ready for it—if you're not prepared—the transportation will take over. There's more to it than having some vans and some drivers and knowing how to get from one point to another. If it were that simple, everybody would be doing it.

**Robert:** The biggest challenge for us in Chicago has been keeping the costs down, while still covering all the shift times and drop-off points, which is pretty hard to do with a fixed-route system. One alternative is to have a fixed route to a certain point and then use smaller distribution vans from there. That's what we've started doing, but we haven't had much time to

experiment with it. Otherwise, I think the costs are going to be somewhat prohibitive, and unless it's subsidized, it's not going to work. Unless you get a government subsidy, you're not going to be able to afford it, and the client's not going to be able to afford it.

**Mandi:** Transportation has been a huge challenge for us in Denver. For quite a while, we had excellent service; but the county changed paratransit providers, and the new company they contracted with didn't want to participate in Bridges. Now we can't find the transportation providers. Our mass transit has been excellent, but the little providers that we needed for the shuttle services just didn't have an

pickup points in the origin area and scheduled service based on the time that person had to go to work. The transportation was the easiest part, actually, in the entire program. I thought it would be the most difficult, but it has proved to be the easiest, most flexible part of the whole Bridges model.

**Chris:** Can you describe some of the transportation barriers you met and how you worked to surmount them?

**Roz:** A lot of transportation providers didn't seem to appreciate the fact that we're taking people to a job, so being on time is important. You may get riders who are nervous or apprehensive about starting

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*We found a lot of employers outside of Baltimore who were willing to give on-the-job training, as long as people had a good work ethic. So that's what we focused on. And people gained the hard skills right in the work place, while they were working.* —Linda Stewart-Byrd

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interest and said it wasn't cost effective. In the beginning, our employer area was concentrated, and the goal was to take people who were coming from the city straight to a designated suburban hub. We would use existing routes and pay for three supplemental ones. It was extremely expensive and there were only one or two riders per route. And we couldn't cover the shifts that needed to be covered. It just wasn't cost effective. Also, the employer area was high-tech, and we were recruiting blue-collar workers, so we couldn't connect the two; we couldn't find enough jobs.

**Linda:** We were lucky in that we partnered with a private, for-profit transportation provider that had over 25 years of experience. We started out with one van, and now we're up to eight. And we were able to coordinate it based on destination. So we have one van that goes to Jessup, another to Columbia, another to Anne Arundel County. We had centralized

a job. Maybe they've never worked before. We've had a lot of problems with drivers who take the attitude that "These people are getting a free ride, and they'll get there when I get them there." No, they need to be at their job on time just like anybody else.

**Chris:** So how did you get your transportation providers, particularly the drivers, to show more regard for the riders?

**Roz:** I can't say we've found a complete solution. We have to address it literally on a daily basis. We've had all kinds of arguments and problems. Like I said, it's a daily struggle for us. Because you've got some drivers who are like, "Hey, my job is just to transport people from one place to the other, and I don't even have to care or look at what's going on in between." But you do. You really do, and you should if you are a professional.

**Linda:** We modeled our training after the STRIVE program in New York, which takes a tough-love approach. George, our transportation supervisor, already had that mentality, and he tried to instill it in the drivers. Then my staff and I actually spent two weeks at STRIVE, and after we came back, we had the drivers go through similar training. We also trained them in how to interact with riders and how to identify problems. We even required new drivers to sit in on the week-long training that the participants went through. That way they got to bond with the riders. They also learned how to identify problems early on and relay that information back to us so we could follow up and find out why, for example, somebody was missing work, showing up late, having an attitude or having a problem with a co-worker or employer.

**Chris:** What in particular made the transportation challenging?

**Mandi:** What we ended up doing was expanding our catchment area so we could recruit more clients and expanding our employer area so we could locate a variety of jobs. But both of those areas were spread out all over the area, which was what made it so hard to get the transportation piece to function efficiently.

**Chris:** How helpful were employers and business groups in identifying job openings?

**Mandi:** We worked a lot with the Southeast Business Partnership. In the beginning, that's where we established a lot of strong employer contacts. We placed ads in some of the newspapers, like the *Business Ledger*, and I think that helped us establish a good reputation with the employers. Then once we started working with an employer, they would refer us to others. That's how our employer pool expanded. In the beginning, we had a job developer. In fact, we had two different job developers, and when the last one left, we did not replace that person because we didn't need to. Job leads were just coming in.

**Roz:** We struggled at first because the businesses where we intended to place people needed workers with more hard and soft skills than the people we were able to recruit. After we expanded our recruitment area and began targeting different kinds of businesses, we were able to make better matches, and the employers grew more receptive.

**Linda:** The business groups have been great to us, particularly the economic development authorities, the private industry councils, and the business partnership out at BWI, the Baltimore-Washington International Airport. They all love the concept of Bridges, and economically it's a success for them because they need to get people to work. Employers are threatening to leave the county if they can't get workers. So they look at Bridges as a viable economic tool in getting people to work and helping the employers to be happy.

**Chris:** How did the jobs you found in the suburbs stack up against what was available in the city? Did the pay and benefits justify the longer commute?

**Robert:** The economy has caused a lot of people to fall off from Bridges because they can get jobs in the city. And while some of those jobs don't pay as much, when they add in being closer to their kids and being in a neighborhood that they're familiar with, the differential in the wages doesn't seem quite as much.

**Linda:** In Baltimore there are jobs in the city, but they're more entry-level, minimum-wage-type jobs with no benefits, working at a hotel. If you work at a hotel in Howard County, you're going to be paid three, four dollars more, and you'll get benefits.

**Mandi:** In the beginning, everyone thought that the suburban jobs were going to be these great, high-paying jobs with excellent benefits. I think it's good for the clients to have options and to give them support to get to those options, but I don't know that the jobs are all that much better in the suburbs.



I think if it were a different economy maybe it would be different, but right now there are just jobs everywhere—two jobs for every person. So it’s a harder sell to say, “You’re going to find a better job if you come and use our transportation,” because they can walk to McDonald’s two blocks from their house and make \$8.50 an hour flipping hamburgers.

**Chris:** Are they getting benefits in the suburbs?

**Mandi:** Most of them. But the employers expect more in the suburbs. The ones with the better benefit packages expect a better-quality worker, and to find that with unemployment this low is challenging.

**Chris:** How did employers handle the fact that many Bridges participants were not as job ready as everyone anticipated?

**Linda:** We found a lot of employers outside of Baltimore who were willing to give on-the-job training as long as people had a good work ethic. So that’s what we focused on. And people gained the hard skills right in the workplace, while they were working.

**Chris:** How has your staff been able to develop such strong relationships with employers?

**Linda:** All of my staff come from the private sector, so we realize how important it is to provide quality service and quality management. We also all have backgrounds in the social sciences. It’s been challenging, but I think we’ve been able to strike a balance. We stress in the training that it’s all about what the employer wants, because you’re there to give the employer a profit. That might sound harsh, but the employer doesn’t care whether your children are sick or whether you can’t come to work because of this or that. It’s not a social program, so we have to market it as a business. The fact is the employer wants qualified applicants who are going to really be beneficial to their bottom line. And other than that, they’re not going to hire you.

### **A Snapshot of the Participants**

At the random assignment sites, a total of 2,360 people completed baseline interviews and were assigned to the treatment or control groups.\* Half of these participants were women, and half were men. Only Milwaukee served a higher proportion of men (64%) than women. Overall, 42 percent of participants were under age 30 when they entered the program, 32 percent were in their 30s, and 26 percent were age 40 and above. Denver served a higher proportion of people who were under age 30 (56%). The majority of participants (98%) were members of minority racial or ethnic groups; 84 percent were African American. At program entry, 18 percent of participants lived alone. Just over half (58%) lived with children under age 18; 31 percent lived with children under age six. The Bridges programs tended to target people who had at least a high school diploma or GED; only 16 percent of all participants had no degree. The percentage with no degree was highest in Milwaukee (34%) and lowest in Baltimore (3%).

Many participants had a significant amount of work experience. Fifty-eight percent had worked in the same full-time job for two years or more at some point in their lives; 28 percent had done so for five years or more. In the year prior to program entry, 69 percent of participants had worked full time at some point. Thirteen percent were working full time when they enrolled in Bridges to Work, and another 14 percent were working part time. Twelve percent of participants had been unemployed for at least 12 months when they enrolled in the program. At their most recent job, 73 percent of participants earned less than \$8.00 per hour; 48 percent earned less than \$6.50 per hour. The most common reasons participants gave as to why they were not working at the time of enrollment were because they could not find work, they were recently laid off, or they did not have transportation to get to a job.

Despite their work experience, many Bridges to Work participants faced barriers to obtaining and retaining a job. To qualify for the program, participants had to have a transportation need and lack access to a vehicle that could be used for commuting every day. Even after they started working, the Bridges participants were unlikely to rely on a private vehicle for commuting, since only 34 percent of them had a valid driver's license. Health problems were another potential barrier for some participants: 5 percent said they had health problems that limited their ability to work and 12 percent lived with a child who had health problems that required special medicine or equipment. Criminal backgrounds and drug use may have also prevented Bridges participants from obtaining some jobs: 30 percent said they had ever been convicted of a crime and 12 percent said they had used illegal drugs within the past year.

While Bridges to Work does not target welfare recipients, many participants lived in households receiving some form of public assistance in the month prior to enrollment: 36 percent received food stamps, 19 percent received TANF or welfare, and 19 percent lived in public housing. One-third of the Bridges participants had ever been homeless for one or more nights. Participants' median household income in the month prior to program enrollment was \$850.

At times, Bridges to Work staff had to help participants overcome their misgivings about traveling to and working in the suburbs. While a majority of participants had visited people, shopped or attended events in the suburbs in the past 10 years, 26 percent had not done so. Just over half (53%) had ever looked for work in the suburbs. Only 16 percent had lived in the suburbs at some time in the past 10 years, but 28 percent said they would consider moving to the suburbs within 18 months of enrollment in Bridges to Work.

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\* Baseline interviews were not completed with participants in Chicago.

## HELP WANTED

*Most of the participants who came to us needed the money. They didn't want to go through a long, drawn-out training program when they needed to buy a box of Cheerios for their children.*

—Linda Stewart-Byrd

### Trawling for Talent in a Tight Economy

One of the assumptions in designing Bridges to Work was that the demonstration sites would be able to identify large numbers of city dwellers who were ready and willing to commute to the suburbs. Just as significantly, Bridges anticipated that the sites would be able to locate correspondingly large numbers of entry-level job openings in the suburbs.

However welcome the nation's economic boom has been for the newly employed, it compounded the challenges of directing the local demonstrations. It was not simply that qualified participants became scarce; Bridges also faced unexpected competition from urban employers, some of whom began ratcheting up their pay scales in order to attract and retain workers.

The attractiveness of suburban jobs also varied greatly within each regional economy. Some employers in the suburbs did not pay much more than their urban counterparts, or they did not provide benefits, or their businesses were too remote for parents to justify the extra time spent commuting.

A few sites responded to these problems by expanding the areas in which they tried to recruit and place clients. But in doing so, they made it harder to provide transportation efficiently and affordably. Better results came from efforts to develop new recruiting strategies. St. Louis and Denver, for example, saw their recruitment figures soar after placing advertisements in the mass media.

**Mandi:** Unemployment is very low, so we were really scraping to find people. The goal of this project was to bring in job-ready people who had skills. In Denver, things are very spread out, so if you've got skills and a job, you're going to get a car. It's a car city. People use cars as their mode of transportation 9 out of 10 times over the bus because public transportation is just not laid out the way it is in many other cities. So it was really difficult to find people who had skills and did not have transportation.

**Robert:** When Bridges was designed, the thought was that there were a lot of work-ready people out there. But that's not the case now, so we've had to burrow down deeper and deeper into the local population. We've run into trouble because we've continued to recruit from the same area for such a long time, and because there's a lot of competition for clients. Everybody is after the same group of folks. So we've had to look at other population groups, like the homeless. I'm sure Bridges had no idea originally that we'd be dealing with that population, or with ex-offenders. Currently, about one-third of our clients are ex-offenders on work release, and the retention has been better there than in the general population.

**Linda:** I don't have a background in employment, so I never realized there were so many barriers to it. I always thought it was the transportation piece that was the problem. I used to do research, and that's what employers told me: "We can't get people to work because they don't have transportation." But actually there was a lot more that went into the equation than just the transportation.

**Chris:** Like what?

**Linda:** Early on, we found there were a number of barriers that go along with poverty and permeate the neighborhoods our clients live in. Crime affects everybody in the community. Substance abuse is a big barrier; if your husband is coming home

drunk or whatever, that affects the entire family. And literacy is a big factor. We had to turn a number of people away because of their educational levels—not having a high school diploma or GED, not being able to read or write, not being able to fill out an application.

To help participants overcome some of those barriers, we've instituted a number of support systems: to deal with domestic violence, to help workers whose children have asthma, to help workers who are also taking care of their mothers or fathers, and to build self-esteem. For example, we implemented a program to help people prepare themselves for the interview and to secure the job.

**Robert:** We've had to change our recruitment strategy, too. Most work-ready people were already working, so we developed a community-based outreach effort to find people who might not normally be considered for this kind of program. We expanded the geographic area a little bit, but the main thing was looking for a different character of person: ex-offenders, homeless people. It's completely different from what the framers of the program anticipated, but we felt it was the best way to go given the current economic climate.

**Chris:** How do your clients view the economy? Are they heartened at the range of opportunities or discouraged by not reaping the benefits sooner?

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*I think if you're going to do "work first," you've got to have a very strong retention system built in on the back end, a lot of hand holding once they're on the job.*

*—Mandi Huser*

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**Chris:** In what ways did you revise your recruiting strategies?

**Mandi:** I finally had to lay off the two recruiters and use the money from their salaries for mass media. That's where we got our people, because there wasn't some person from another agency saying, "Uh, uh. That's not a very good service." But when they heard it on the radio, people would be like, "Hey, I just heard it on the radio. Let me call Bridges to Work." It was amazing the difference we saw.

**Roz:** We've advertised on the radio, passed out fliers, rented billboard space. Nothing out of the way or fabulous or so new that no one ever thought of it before. Just the basics, and it's doing quite well for us. We've gone to grocery stores and Laundromats. We've considered what kind of radio they listen to, whether it's rap or Christian, and placed ads on those stations. You have to reach people where they live.

**David:** I think some clients view it as, "Oh, I can pick and choose. If things don't work out for me here at this job, I can get—or you will get me—another one." I think the economy has spurred a false sense that they can be relocated anywhere.

On the flip side, I think there are some people on the outside looking in. They hear everybody talking about how good things are: demand is high and paper billionaires are popping up everywhere. Yet when that person gets a job at \$8 or \$9 an hour, he finds out that he's paying more in taxes and losing child care and health care subsidies. In the meantime, his employer is getting a tax credit for employing him. Even with the earned income tax credit, the person still isn't any better off.

**Chris:** Does that create cynicism or confusion?

**David:** I think it's confusion. Since this whole welfare reform piece came into play, no one has ever really told these folks, "This is what you need to make an hour to support a family." We just said, "You gotta get off welfare and go to work." So now they're working and finding out that they're worse off.

**Mandi:** Although the economy was really strong, our participants could not get jobs, which is insane. There are thousands of jobs out there, yet our people could not secure any of them. We had to really sell our product; we had to go in and say, "I realize this person has two felony convictions, but let me tell you why he would be a good candidate for you." Some

With Bridges, you've got a handful of people who do really well just getting a job. But I think if you're going to do "work first," you've got to have a very strong retention system built in on the back end, a lot of hand-holding once they're on the job. I think we learned too late that you've got to do a lot of career planning: "This is your first step. This is how we're going to help you move up and up and up." But with Bridges we had to focus on one thing at a time: first transportation, then recruitment, then job placement, then retention. It was never a situation in which we could develop all these systems so they run really well together. So we lack in retention, and I

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*We've gone to grocery stores and laundromats. We've considered what kind of radio they listen to, whether it's rap or Christian, and placed ads on those stations. You have to reach people where they live.*

—Roz Staples-Streeter

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employers told us, "We normally wouldn't hire this person, but we're going to take a chance because you said you think he'll work out." But a lot of them still couldn't get in, so I don't know whether they felt that the economy was booming, because they were still unemployed.

**Chris:** What has your experience with Bridges taught you about when it makes sense to provide employment training and when it's better for people to work first?

**Mandi:** I come from a training and employment background, so my philosophy is training, then employment. The last program I managed provided 10 weeks of extensive services, with a 95 percent placement rate and an 85 percent retention rate. Those rates were high because we hit them on work ethics, job readiness, and self-esteem day after day, even after they were employed.

think that's because we focused more on recruitment and placement than on how people were going to retain their jobs.

**Chris:** If given a choice between a job-training program or Bridges, what do you think your clients in Baltimore would prefer?

**Linda:** Most of the participants who came to us needed the money. They didn't want to go through a long, drawn-out training program when they needed to buy a box of Cheerios for their children. So it worked out well. We have one employer that trains people to become certified nursing assistants. It paid for their books, their state certification—it even paid them to do the training. All they had to do was agree to work there for a year. So the participants are getting a paycheck sooner and gaining valuable work experience

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because it's the kind of training the employer needs, not what an agency thinks employers need.

**Chris:** How do you reconcile your dual loyalties to the clients and employers?

**Linda:** We're fair; we understand that there are other social issues that affect someone's ability to be successful on the job. That's why we set up systems where we can be supportive. They can come to us if they have a problem. We can go out and talk with the employer and the employee and provide conflict resolution and negotiate on behalf of the employee. We've been successful in that area. But up front we let the employees know, you can't go out there and act a certain way. There are already barriers and stigmas and stereotypes of how city people are. You can't go out there and play into that.

## THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD?

*Our main job developer is a white guy, and sometimes employers level with him and say they're not very keen on doing business with us. It was fairly clear why.*

—Robert Carter

### Dispelling Urban and Suburban Myths

As Bridges got under way, one recurring concern centered on the prospect that inner-city workers, most of them members of a minority group, might face discrimination in the suburbs. These fears were borne out most trenchantly at a restaurant outside Baltimore, shortly after several Bridges participants began four weeks of paid training in food service and restaurant management. The training was meant as a prelude to jobs at a related franchise in a neighboring county, but a small group of white people who lived near the training facility found the mere presence of black men from East Baltimore intolerable. In protest, they circled the restaurant and delivered a message warning the trainees—who were not there at the time—not to return. They identified themselves as members of the Ku Klux Klan.

There may be legitimate reasons to question the merits of reverse commuting. Even the project directors, after investing a few years of their time, expressed some qualms. Yet the form of opposition that posed the greatest threat to Bridges was neither the informed criticism of transportation and workforce development professionals nor the avowed racism of the Klan. Rather, it was the more subtle apprehension that many suburban residents, employers, and co-workers might feel toward outsiders of another race or social class.

As it turns out, 95 percent of the Bridges participants were members of minority groups. But while each of the project directors reported some isolated problems with cultural biases, these incidents did not always conform to expectations. For one thing, the stereotypes sprang from every direction, coming from suburban

residents, employers, co-workers, and clients alike. Denver's Mandi Huser even recalled how a well-meaning staff member, by raising the issue of discrimination so frequently, sowed doubts in employers' minds and nearly made it a self-fulfilling prophecy. The most frequent problems arose between co-workers, as with blacks and Hispanics at a hotel near Denver and at a factory just west of Chicago. On the whole, though, the cultural biases that Bridges encountered proved to be temporary obstacles, not insurmountable barriers.

**Linda:** We probably spent the first year breaking down those barriers of perception and stereotypes. When the Ku Klux Klan came out, people were frightened. We said, "How are we going to deal with this?" After consulting with the trainees, we decided to avoid further confrontation, and we stopped sending them out there. We found someplace else for them to go because we didn't want to put anybody's life in jeopardy. Actually, the employer let the Bridges participants complete their training at the franchise in Howard County, where they soon joined the regular staff.

**Chris:** What about more subtle forms of discrimination?

**Linda:** They exist, but I think over the last couple of years the situation has improved. Initially, we were viewed as a social program that bused people from the city and to the employment sites in the suburbs. What the employers recognized, after they gave us a chance, is that our clients are just like anybody else. They were actually more ambitious than some of the employees they were hiring on their own. After a while they forgot they were Bridges to Work participants. That's why we don't want to market it like a social program. Don't do us a favor. Our participants are just as good as anybody else if you give them a chance.

**Chris:** Did their co-workers know they were part of this program?

**Linda:** Yes, they saw the van when it pulled up. Some of the co-workers are calling us and saying, “Can we get a ride?” And Bridges workers have established good working relationships with their co-workers. So I think there wasn’t a lot of peer pressure. There might have been a couple of isolated incidents of discrimination, but overall it didn’t affect us.

**Roz:** We face discrimination quite a bit. It’s an ugly thing, but there are a lot of stereotypes actually on both ends, among the clients we serve as well as at the destination or employer area. If we found an employer who thought our people only should have been house-keepers or laundry room people—and

do this and this and that. You need to apply for this job.” We give them a pep talk and remind them, “You’re going to face this kind of adversity almost anywhere you go in this world. But you need to focus on your attitude, the attitude you portray when you’re interviewing. If you’re a no-nonsense kind of person, if you really want this kind of job, and if you’re not caught up in all these different stereotypes, that impression is what’s going to be shown.”

We try to encourage them not to dwell on negative stereotypes because that’s already a given. You try to look beyond that. But if you get out there and discrimination is apparent, then that’s something you need to look at. Is it the kind of environment

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*It’s an ugly thing, but there are a lot of stereotypes actually on both ends, among the clients we serve as well as at the destination or employer area.*

—Roz Staples-Streeter

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they may have associate degrees or 6, 7, 10 years of experience—and that’s the best they could offer them, then we chose to place them elsewhere.

On the other hand, many of our clients say they don’t want to go out there. Why is that? Our destination area, Chesterfield, has a reputation as an upwardly mobile suburb: 95 percent white, upper upperclass. A lot of our commuters automatically think the only jobs out there are for dishwashers and room-keepers and things that “they”—the people who live there—do not want to do. And they think they’re going to be mistreated out there.

**Chris:** How do you persuade them to try it, and how do you prepare them for the mistrust they may encounter?

**Roz:** We tell them, “Yes, this is what Chesterfield is known for, but there are other jobs out there.” And we look at their skill levels. We say, “Okay, you have customer service experience, and you can

you can work in? Is it the type of environment that you want to work in? And it’s not for everybody, because some people just cannot deal with racism or prejudices. Not that they have to. Some people can deal with it better than others. Some people just have an attitude: “I’m here to work. I want to put my eight hours in, get my check and go.” If you can do that, fine. If you cannot, you need to think about it. Maybe this area is not for you. That’s how we handle it. It’s not a matter of forcing anybody to go out. It’s a personal choice. But we try to help them focus on the good that’s within them, what they have to offer, more than the stereotypes or reputations or the stuff that’s going to linger regardless.

**Chris:** In retrospect, has discrimination been more or less of a problem than you expected?

**Roz:** Actually less. I don’t know whether it’s because it’s passing or whether it’s just hidden, to be honest. But we really didn’t



have to deal with it a lot—either because we were very selective about the employers we worked with or because we were selective about the people we referred out there. But we really never had a lot of problems.

**David:** That is one of the pitfalls when you're moving central-city residents out to suburban areas. It's not unique to Bridges; it's unique to any transportation program where there's a reverse commute. You've got people who are integrating not only into the workplace but also into the community of that workplace. And let's face it: there are going to be issues. It's just that few of them reached the level where they couldn't be resolved in the workplace, where they had to come to us.

makes it a point to speak Spanish most of the time. So where does that leave the African Americans? Even though it may not be an intentional prejudice, it leaves them feeling out of the loop in terms of being part of the organization. We've had a number of employers who have embraced the ex-offenders, most of whom are black also. So I would say for the majority it's not a problem. Once in a while you run across it. Our main job developer is a white guy, and sometimes employers level with him and say they're not very keen on doing business with us. It's fairly clear why, and sure, you're going to have that. We're in a suburban area where a lot of people who run companies moved to get away from the city.

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*What the employers recognized, after they gave us a chance, is that our clients are just like anybody else. They were actually more ambitious than some of the employees they were hiring on their own.*

—Linda Stewart-Byrd

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**Robert:** There's some discrimination in Chicago, too. Out in the suburban ring around O'Hare Airport there are a number of employers who make it very clear that they want Latinos, not African Americans.

**Chris:** Do employers assume that Latinos are going to work harder because more of them are recent immigrants?

**Robert:** Well, some of them are illegals. We would not become any part of that, but it goes on. It's not supposed to, but it's going on. The other thing we find in the focus groups is that some of our clients—who are mostly African American, like the community we recruit from—indicate that after they're hired and on the job and doing fine, they feel like they're isolated. What will happen is there's a large percentage of, say, Mexican employees and the foreman speaks Spanish. So he

**Chris:** Have you encountered discrimination or discomfort with hiring the population you're serving in Denver?

**Mandi:** The only difficulty we saw was with co-workers at hotels, between blacks and Hispanics. That was on a co-worker level, but not as far as the hiring authorities or supervisors. No legitimate complaints. We'll have people say, "Oh, they discriminated against me," but once we got down to the meat and potatoes of it, it wasn't discrimination. It was that they weren't doing their job. But we had nothing concrete, which was surprising. People were extremely concerned about that in the beginning. I think it depended on the staff person's approach.

The first job developer I had really thought there was going to be a problem with discrimination. Her attitude was that we're sending these low-income city people out

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into the suburbs and employers are not going to be receptive. And some of the employers that she recruited weren't. I don't know whether it was because of the aura she was sending, signals she was giving to the employers. But with the last job-placement person I had, it didn't matter what color you were or what your economic status was. When she was doing placement, she was simply placing people with employers. It just wasn't an issue.

We had one employer who was labeling our people, saying, "The Bridges people aren't getting here on time" or "The Bridges people are having these problems." We had to tell them, "You know what? These are your employees. They're not 'the Bridges people.' We provide them with transportation, but they are your employees. So if you want to label them anything, label them your employees." And they agreed and corrected the problem. So if we saw anything that could have started to be a problem, we tried to stop it right up front.

## FRIEND OR FOE?

*The employers needed workers, the agencies needed to meet their numbers, and we were really the only one in town who could provide the transportation. So we focused on explaining where the benefits lie and how we could help enhance somebody's services without trying to reinvent the wheel.*

—Linda Stewart-Byrd

### Making Collaboration Work

Bridges to Work actually dates back to 1993—more than three years before the formal demonstration project began—when nine sites took up P/PV's call to build strategic partnerships, or “collaboratives,” within their metropolitan areas. The rationale was that reverse-commute programs would succeed only if key stakeholders were willing to share information, resources, and political support.

Over the course of two years, the nine original sites attempted to forge ties with churches, community groups, business alliances, transportation providers, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), private industry councils (PICs), service delivery areas (SDAs), and other city and suburban institutions. Five of the sites were then selected to take part in the demonstration based on their capacity to build, manage and sustain these complex new relationships.

In principle, these partner organizations were expected to assist with recruitment, transportation and support services. Yet once the demonstration got under way, many of them appeared to lose interest in the project or feel threatened by it. In some cases, the project directors found that persistence, diplomacy and a successful track record could rekindle these alliances. But often they had to reorient themselves, seeking out new partners and forging more meaningful relationships on the fly.

With a few notable exceptions, public agencies and nonprofit job training and employment programs tended to be the least helpful. Community-based organizations (CBOs) proved far more responsive.

**Linda:** The overall model was set up where referral partners—like the nonprofit programs that did job training and placement—would steer individuals directly to Bridges to Work. Basically, all we would have to do was the placement and transportation. But that didn't happen. It became very competitive, where programs were just trying to control their own resources and they wanted to meet the numbers. We were all going after the same pool of people, so they wouldn't refer people to us.

**Chris:** Was that because the job-training and employment programs were going after welfare-to-work money by placing people themselves?

**Linda:** Yes, they wanted to get placement credit. I'm thinking of those that really control the money. A lot of the programs had contracts directly with the Department of Social Services (DSS), or Health and Human Services, or the Department of Labor to place individuals who are coming off of welfare into work opportunities. They didn't want to refer them to Bridges because it would look like they weren't doing their job, like we were doing it for them. We had to prove our credibility and show that we weren't trying to compete.

**Chris:** How did you do that? If you placed them, did you get the placement credit?

**Linda:** Not really, because we didn't have a contract with DSS. So we were providing services even though we weren't getting paid through DSS. We have the money for the transportation, but it was through HUD. Over time we established those relationships, and they started trusting us because we would provide the transportation and help boost their numbers. And they still could get credit for the people they served.

**Mandi:** In Denver, very few programs would say, “Oh, you know what? You can place this person. You can give them transportation for 18 months. It’s a win/win situation here. Let’s take advantage of it.” It was more competition, which was very odd because Bridges is not competitive. They would still get credit for all of the placements, and we would do the follow-up services with that client. But we had to try to find job-ready people. And there is so much territorialism that other programs are not going to send us their best clients. Why would they do that? Then they don’t have that person. That was their philosophy: Why would we send you our best clients and then not be able

We finally just said “forget it.” It was too hard to work around all of their new rules. They were going through so many changes that it was easier for us not to use them as a recruitment source. If people came from welfare, yes, we would serve them. But we didn’t use the welfare department as a referral source.

**Robert:** In Chicago, too, the original collaborative mostly involved other job programs. It turned out to be a substantial bust. That became very clear even before I got there, and we started to develop relationships with CBOs and churches and ministers and alliances with the alderman and the congressman up there. They have these job fairs all the time. There are so

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*No matter what approach we used, no matter who went out and talked to them, no matter what benefits we could show them, about 1 in 10 would say, “Okay, we’ll send you some clients.” Then if they did, it was the people they didn’t want to serve. —Mandi Huser*

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to count that person? And no matter how much we explained it to them, they still thought we were stealing their clients.

**Chris:** You’re talking about public agencies, like the ones charged with moving people from welfare to work?

**Mandi:** Right. It was extremely difficult to work with the welfare department. We would have interviews set up for the clients and they would say, “Oh, no. They have to be at a meeting over here today.” So do you want them to go to a job interview or do you want them to come to one of your mandatory meetings? Let them go to the interview and they’ll have a job tomorrow. I told one of the welfare caseworkers, “I can guarantee you this person will have a job tomorrow if she shows up at the interview.” And she said, “No, we won’t excuse her from this meeting.”

many other avenues that we’ve had to look at; we can’t rely on referrals from the one-stops.

We recently moved one of our orientation sites to the Chicago Department of Human Services building, where they’re letting us operate at no charge because we are serving some of their emergency service folks. These are people who were basically homeless. The good thing about that is that they have a caseworker, and if we’re able to get them a job, then the kind of support services that our staff wouldn’t have enough time to provide can be provided by the caseworker. So we’ve had about five or six good placements, and we just started doing this in the last month. They’re pretty solid too—no problems. They’re really motivated.

**Chris:** It sounds like there were real communication barriers at some of the sites. How did you and your staff in

Baltimore succeed in conveying the structure and goals of Bridges to your partners and get them to really buy into it?

**Linda:** Well, it took a lot of hand holding, a lot of favors. By favors, I mean really trying to get in there with people like OED, the state Office of Employment and Development, and other members of our collaborative. For instance, OED may have a delegation coming in from another country, and they need somebody to pick them up from the train station. If we had a van available, we would charge a small fee to cover our operating costs, but we would do it. We would do things like that to encourage collaboration. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

invite people to come out on the next day. Members of their congregations helped with recruitment and doing the applications, and with the training and support. A number of congregation members had social-work degrees and volunteered to do counseling. They offered clothing, suits and dresses for people to wear when they went on interviews. So they were really supportive.

Other organizations we tapped into that people in training programs traditionally wouldn't think about were the missions, the shelters. They were able to help some of our individuals who were in transition for housing, and we were able to help a number of their residents get jobs and get

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*We built up our relationship with them by exchanging staff visits and having them come out to see what we do and just get familiar with the process. They quickly realized that, unlike a lot of programs out there, we actually had something to offer. It was not just talk. We had jobs.*

—Robert Carter

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**Chris:** Did that pay off in any tangible way? What did OED do for you in return?

**Linda:** They started referring people to us. We used their training rooms for our orientation. We did joint job fairs. So the relationship really grew over time. Same thing with the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, the MPO for the Baltimore region. We did a couple of panel discussions down there and they eventually helped us obtain Access to Jobs funding. It got to be a real, true collaborative.

**Chris:** How helpful were churches and other community-based organizations?

**Linda:** The other CBOs were absolutely great to us. We partnered with the churches, which were our number one source of referrals. When we did job fairs, they would announce us during the Sunday morning worship service and

on their feet. Now they have their own apartments, and they're self-sustaining. So the CBOs and the churches and the neighborhood associations were pretty good. Everybody on the grassroots level pretty much saw that we were having an impact on unemployment in East Baltimore.

We have a list of a good 60 partners—like community-based organizations that started feeding people to us and providing other support services. If they offered child care, we could refer people. It wasn't that they were in competition with us, but they saw the advantage of partnering and teaming up together.

**Chris:** "Collaboration" has become quite a buzzword in recent years. But how do you get partner organizations to see your relationship as an integral part of their work?

**Robert:** Well, take the Safer Foundation, which works with ex-offenders. We built up our relationship with them by exchanging staff visits and having them come out to see what we do and just get familiar with the process. They quickly realized that, unlike a lot of programs out there, we actually had something to offer. It was not just talk. We had jobs, and when those connections were made, they could see results right away. That was certainly an attractive situation.

Plus we built on existing relationships. We had a person on our staff who had been with Safer earlier in his career, so that was a natural in terms of his ability to communicate with them. Our staff would exchange phone calls and visits with their counterparts at Safer, so any time any of their clients had a need—these are ex-offenders on work release—we would be notified. After a while, they ended up providing us with as much as 50 percent of our clients.

**Chris:** In Denver, how well did you fare with collaboration?

**Mandi:** In the beginning P/PV really wanted us to focus on schools, churches, CBOs, and training and employment programs. And no matter how much we told them “this is not working,” it seemed like they kept pushing: “Go after these groups. It makes more sense.” Which it did. I was right on the same page with them in the beginning. But in reality, it just wasn’t going to happen. No matter what approach we used, no matter who went out and talked to the organizations, no matter what benefits we could show them, about 1 in 10 would say, “Okay, we’ll send you some clients.” Then if they did, it was the people they didn’t want to serve.

**Chris:** Do you think potential partners were more receptive to smaller community-based organizations like you had in Baltimore and in Denver, or to a larger MPO like in St. Louis, or to a PIC with closer business ties in Milwaukee?

**Linda:** That’s a tough one. I imagine there are advantages and disadvantages to each. As a CBO, we were able to reach out to the community a lot easier without having to establish a lot of new relationships. But we also already had relationships with some of the larger organizations, and we had the buy-in of the city, the state, and Johns Hopkins. All of that helped with getting press coverage, and the kickoff with the governor showed that we weren’t a fly-by-night organization, that we had some real potential. So we were pretty much on both sides.

**Chris:** In your view, did the nature, size or history of the host organization have any impact on the quality of collaboration?

**Roz:** I don’t want to speak for the other sites, but as part of an MPO we have a good reputation in St. Louis, and that really helped. The popularity of East-West Gateway opened a lot of doors for us where otherwise people would not have paid much attention. Even though the referral agencies didn’t send us as many people as we wanted, I think they were more receptive than they would have been otherwise. And employers in the destination area were definitely more receptive. If we had been a smaller program coming out of the community, I think it would have been harder to get them to listen to us and take us seriously.

**Chris:** What did other training and employment programs think about Bridges?

**Roz:** I’d say at first it was easy to sell, and then it got very difficult because the results were slow. Now this is strictly for St. Louis, of course. But once we finally made it—once we finally started placing some of their people, developing a name and actually showing that we were making a difference—they began to think highly of us. They see us as a no-nonsense kind of program because that’s what we had to become.

**Chris:** How did you overcome the challenges of collaboration?

*Linda:* With a lot of blood, sweat and tears. It was hard work. How did we do it? We hung in there. We kept the lines of communications open. We tried not to let people feel so intimidated. We tried to reach them at the human level, not at the organizational level. Again, with trust.

Another element was showing that we were meeting a need with this collaborative, explaining what the services are, what the benefits are, the options. I think that's what made it successful. The employers needed workers, the agencies needed to meet their numbers, and we were really the only one in town who could provide the transportation. So we focused on explaining where the benefits lie and how we could help enhance somebody's services without trying to reinvent the wheel.

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## HEADS OR TAILS

*Many of them would not send their clients to us because they did not like the random assignment. They felt like we were setting their clients up for failure.*

—Mandi Huser

### The Challenges of Random Assignment

The purpose of a demonstration project is to put good intentions to the test, to see whether programs and policies that look sensible on paper can function in the real world. Ideally, the knowledge that is gained along the way can then be used to shape future initiatives and inform decisions about how best to allocate funds. It is a tricky enterprise, though, as the empirical aims of social science often brush up against the more immediate concerns of serving people in need.

tested their own commitments to policy research and social service.

In all likelihood, these problems were magnified by the scarcity of job-ready clients. If recruitment had not been so difficult, the projects would have had to turn some people away to avoid having too many participants. In that case, designating some of them as members of the control group might have been easier to accept.

**Linda:** The fact that we had the random assignment was a stigma in our partners' eyes, because if they referred a client to us, we might refer them right back as a control anyway. They didn't want to put people through that process, so that was a big barrier. We kept trying to explain that you have to have something to compare it with.

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*I don't think any of my staff liked random assignment. The clients we're serving already deal with enough rejection.* —Roz Staples-Streeter

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This tension is reflected in Bridges to Work's design. In Baltimore, Milwaukee, St. Louis and Denver, half of the candidates recruited were randomly assigned to a treatment group and provided with Bridges to Work services. The other half were assigned to a control group and were ineligible for these services.

Random assignment was used at these four sites because it has the greatest credibility with policymakers. If a program can show a positive impact, as measured against a control group, then it can have a powerful impact on how public funds are allocated in the future. Yet random assignment poses a real dilemma for the staff trying to implement a program. The Bridges directors in Baltimore, Milwaukee, St. Louis and Denver quickly found that random assignment weakened their relationships with potential participants and partner organizations and at times

**Chris:** But it's hard on the people you don't get to serve.

**Linda:** They feel like guinea pigs, especially in our community. That's why we changed the name. We didn't say "treatments" or "controls." We made it "commuter" versus "non-commuter," and it didn't sound as lethal. That was a big change.

**Chris:** Did you meet any resistance in Denver to the fact that some people were assigned to a control group and were not getting served?

**Mandi:** Yes, especially from the CBOs, training and employment programs, those types of things. One reason some of them would not send their clients to us was because they did not like the random assignment. They felt like we were setting their clients up for failure. We were very up front with our people. During the orientation we laid everything out on the



line and said, “This is the deal. Do you want to take advantage of it or not?” We had people get up and walk out in the middle of orientations because they didn’t feel like taking that 50/50 chance—a better chance of getting a job than going to an employer and being 1 out of 100 applicants.

**Chris:** Was random assignment the main reason you weren’t able to collaborate effectively, or were there other significant factors?

**Mandi:** It was a factor, but random assignment was not an excuse for our inability to bring in the amount of people we needed to. What really made it hard for our partners to refer people to us was the economy.

**Chris:** But isn’t that part of doing social-science research?

**Mandi:** Right, that’s what it was, research. We started sending our controls \$10 gift certificates to a grocery store, just for spending the time completing the survey. That seemed to help some. We got a little bit of bad word of mouth at the beginning because people weren’t very happy about random assignment. But as we went along, we got better at explaining it and calming people down. I guess it’s always going to have an impact because there’s no happy, positive way you can explain random assignment.

We had to get to the point where we accepted that it was a research study. We’re a human-services agency; we try to help people. And it didn’t feel like you

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*We told people their participation could help promote reverse commuting in the future...And we reminded them that Bridges was a test case that could make a real difference in their community.*

*—Linda Stewart-Byrd*

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**Chris:** How did your staff feel about it?

**Mandi:** It was really hard for them at first. Every time we had an enrollment, we’d say, “Okay, if this person is a treatment, we could place them here, here, and here.” You’d see these great people come in, and you knew where you were going to place them. Then they’d end up being a control. Our service coordinator would have to call and tell them they were in the control group. Left and right, people would be irritated: “I don’t understand why I didn’t get in the good group. Was it how I answered the questions?” No matter how many times we would explain it to them, they would get upset. It was frustrating for the staff as well because an employer might need six people to do a job, and the six who would have been a perfect match might be assigned to the control group.

were helping people when you had to kick half the people back out. Once the staff got past that, it was easier.

**Chris:** How did random assignment go over in Milwaukee?

**David:** I didn’t like it any more than the other directors. There were some misunderstandings with participants who thought they were going to get a job and then ended up as controls. But even when they did understand, it was hard. Here you are: controls are calling for referrals, but you’re limited in what you can do. Since Bridges is part of the Milwaukee County PIC, there are lots of other services we could tie them in to. But in theory they would have to go out on their own to find employment or training. The problem is that in Milwaukee County we’re tied into all of those programs, or at least a good portion of them.

The concern was the integrity of the data, skewing it in some way, and I totally understand that. It's a demonstration grant, and it's a study to make a determination for future funding and for future policy. But what are you going to do? It's one of those things where you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. How deeply do you get involved? When controls called, we communicated with them. In some cases, we've worked with them on their resumes, or said, "Okay, this is what you need to do." We made referrals to the one-stop system. But that was as far as we went. There was nothing else we could do.

**Chris:** Was random assignment a problem in St. Louis?

**Roz:** I did not like it at all. I don't think any of my staff liked random assignment. The clients we're serving already deal with enough rejection. To scoop them up and get them excited about a new, innovative program and then tell them that you have another selection, another criteria, or that someone is going to determine your fate at a push of a button, did not sit well. I never enjoyed telling people. I didn't like that at all. Look at the clients we're serving: they get rejection all the time.

**Chris:** How did you overcome the challenges you faced as a result of random assignment?

**Linda:** We established trust. We gave the big picture of why you needed random assignment. We didn't just do it; we thoroughly explained it in the orientation and with our collaborative. We really had to make sure that people understood what we were doing, and we explained the long-range benefits.

**Chris:** And what did you tell them those benefits were?

**Linda:** Well, we told people their participation could help promote reverse commuting in the future and help change public policy as it relates to transportation and employment in the suburbs. We told them they could help influence the decision makers in Maryland public transportation, in local jurisdictions, and everybody who was involved. And we reminded them that Bridges was a test case that could make a real difference in their community.

## CONCLUSION

*It takes so long to get things moving,  
we're planning for the year 2020 now.  
That becomes really frustrating when  
somebody needs to get to work tonight.*

—Linda Stewart-Byrd

### Taking in the Local Landscape

Running a demonstration project is hard work. Site directors and their staffs have to build the capacity to pull it off, operate under constant scrutiny, produce results within a narrow time frame, and then face the possibility of having to scale back or shut down just as things start to hum. Yet the reality of this struggle, and what it says about the strategy being tested, is often overlooked in reports about initiatives like Bridges to Work.

Like any national demonstration, Bridges began with years of careful planning. The goal was to develop a model that stood a reasonable chance of success and—equally important—that could provide meaningful information about how and why things turned out as they did. Yet the dominant chord that the five project directors strike in this report is how difficult and how critical it was to adapt the original design to make it work in very different contexts. Time and again they found that economic, political, and cultural dynamics varied greatly from suburb to suburb and site to site. These differences were anticipated in the program design, but they could not be dealt with in the abstract.

As the demonstration got under way, the project directors also wrestled with conditions that had changed considerably since Bridges was designed. The economy rallied and unemployment plummeted. Local partners that had promised to refer clients to Bridges seldom delivered, and a few transportation providers bailed out when the jobs were too far away or ridership dropped. The prospects for survival and success ultimately hinged on how effectively the five project directors managed these complexities and how shrewdly they

adapted the blueprint to fit their local landscapes. These are some of the lessons they learned along the way:

- **Transportation:** *It may not be the only barrier to employment in the suburbs, but transportation does pose some formidable challenges.* The challenges and costs of providing transportation services were one of the biggest surprises for some of the directors. Among the many logistical issues to be resolved were the needs of employers (covering staggered shifts, making provisions for overtime) and employees (coordinating child care, running a household) and the relative distribution of jobs and people in different metropolitan areas. Most of the sites also found they could not take quality service for granted, which led Baltimore, for example, to train its drivers to show more respect for riders. Given these complexities and the costs associated with them, many directors felt that reverse-commute programs may only be feasible if government or employer subsidies are available to supplement the costs to riders.
- **Recruitment and Placement:** *With the nation's economy surging, the sites had to modify their strategies to attract and serve a less work-ready population than anticipated.* As labor markets tightened and the number of job-ready workers dwindled, it grew increasingly hard to recruit qualified participants, place them in jobs and keep them employed. Several sites expanded their recruiting areas but found that such action exacerbated the problems with transportation. They also explored new approaches to recruitment, like radio advertisements in St. Louis and Denver and outreach to homeless people and ex-offenders in Chicago. Baltimore, meanwhile, found it helpful to provide riders with soft-skills training based on the STRIVE program in New York, which emphasizes a positive attitude and good communication skills.

- **Discrimination:** *The marketplace, whose dominant ideology is the profit motive, can sometimes be a catalyst for racial tolerance.* The project directors noted that many employers, out of concern for their bottom line, did not seem to care what race their workers were so long as they were industrious and reliable. Denver and Chicago reported that a number of Bridges participants experienced conflicts with co-workers, while Baltimore had one memorable run-in with some suburban dwellers: a group of restaurant and hotel workers drew opposition from the Ku Klux Klan. But overall, the sites encountered far fewer problems with racism and stereotypes than expected.
- **Collaboration:** *Partnerships that look good on paper may not bear fruit in the real world, particularly if they lack provisions for incentives or accountability.* All five sites struggled, in varying degrees, to develop meaningful relationships with other public and private organizations. The original collaboratives often broke down on account of communication barriers, perceived competition, confusion over welfare reform and resistance to random assignment. Baltimore was able to revitalize these partnerships by trading favors and gaining trust, while other sites forged new alliances that were both more strategic and more viable.
- **Random Assignment:** *Despite its noble intentions, social-science research can appear heartless and drive away potential partners and participants.* Coping with resistance to random assignment when recruitment lagged was one of the toughest

challenges the sites faced. In a weaker economy, with higher unemployment and more job-ready workers, it might have been less problematic. But because the sites were struggling to meet their recruitment goals, turning away qualified participants was doubly hard. Denver found that it helped to thank applicants who fell into the control group by offering them gift certificates, while Baltimore sought to explain their vital role in informing and shaping public policy.

As the Bridges demonstration nears completion, the five sites are looking ahead to new services and new sources of funding. The organizations that operated Bridges in Baltimore, Milwaukee, and St. Louis continue to provide transportation services. In Chicago and Denver, the agencies plan to redouble their efforts to provide job training and employment services. Whichever path they take, they will be sure to remember one message that underlies all of the observations in this report: the need to adapt the project's original design to better suit current needs and real communities. "It's an inevitable part of any grant, demonstration or otherwise," said Milwaukee's David Wilson. "There are some changes that you make midstream. You're always tinkering. The folks putting together the design have no control over the external factors once that program has been launched. You'll see that with any demonstration, any grant, any product. They call it continuous improvement, and it's a way to address the changing nature of a changing environment."

## APPENDIX A: SITE DESCRIPTIONS

The five Bridges to Work demonstration sites shared a number of characteristics. In each case, participants from designated urban neighborhoods (the origin) were driven to and from jobs in specified suburbs (the destination). Each project provided a targeted commuting service—typically a ride on a van or bus, or both—that connected the origin and destination using routes and schedules that reduced commuting time and distance as much as possible and that filled gaps in public city-to-suburb transit services. In cases of illness or personal emergencies, workers were guaranteed a ride home from work in the middle of their shift. Each project also provided limited support services to participants and employers. Each site had a project director, who managed all day-to-day activities, and a convener, who executed the cooperative agreement with HUD and had overall responsibility for the project.

**Baltimore.** In East Baltimore, Bridges to Work staff ran the program from a renovated row house near the Johns Hopkins Hospital complex. Baltimore Bridges was part of the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition, one of six entities that administer programs in the city's federally designated Empowerment Zone. Baltimore recruited participants in East Baltimore and helped them find jobs in Howard and Anne Arundel counties, often near Baltimore-Washington International Airport. Fourteen-passenger vans transported riders from designated points in East Baltimore directly to their work places. The vans were owned by Bridges and leased to Yellow Transportation Inc., an experienced, private, for-profit transit company that trained the drivers, handled maintenance and insurance costs, and worked closely with the Bridges staff to manage the routes and schedules. Riders paid \$37.50 per week for this seven-day-a-week, 24-hour-a-day service.

**Chicago.** In Chicago, Bridges to Work was operated under the aegis of the Suburban Job-Link Corporation (sjl), a job-placement and transportation service that has been serving disadvantaged workers since 1971. Job development, placement, and support activities took place primarily at sjl's facility in Bensenville, a community that abuts O'Hare International Airport. Participants were recruited in several neighborhoods on Chicago's West Side and placed in jobs near O'Hare, in one of the nation's largest industrial parks. Participants commuted on 50-passenger buses which were operated by SJL. The buses brought riders to the SJL offices from which point they took a smaller van to their place of employment. Riders boarded the buses at locations in their neighborhoods and paid \$4.00 per round trip.

**Denver.** Bridges operated under the auspices of Curtis Park Community Center, under contract to the Mayor's Office of Employment and Training. The program operated in Denver's Five Points-Curtis Park neighborhood, 10 blocks from the heart of downtown. Participants were drawn from low-income neighborhoods in Denver and Arapahoe County and placed in jobs primarily in the South Side I-25 corridor, the Denver West Office Park, and other suburbs. The targeted commute combined bus services provided by the Regional Transit District, the metro area's public transit provider, and shuttle vans operated under a contract with a private, for-profit vendor. In the Spring of 1999, the vendor discontinued these services, and a suitable replacement could not be found. The remaining Bridges participants rode the public transit buses to and from work for free for 18 months.

***Milwaukee.*** The Milwaukee Private Industry Council operated Bridges out of its downtown headquarters. Participants resided in neighborhoods in the northern and southern sections of the city and were placed in jobs in Washington County to the north, Waukesha County to the west, and Racine and Kenosha Counties to the south. Almost all commuted to their jobs on 14-passenger vans owned by, and operated under contract with a number of providers throughout the demonstration, including Goodwill Industries of Southeastern Wisconsin, a private, not-for-profit transit provider and three private, for-profit providers: Transit Express, J & W Transport and TW Transport. Vans departed from three major pick-up points and took riders directly to their suburban work sites. Bridges participants received free transportation for 18 months.

***St. Louis.*** The East-West Gateway Coordinating Council, the region's metropolitan planning organization, ran Bridges from offices in downtown St. Louis. Project staff recruited participants primarily from neighborhoods on the city's north central, north-western, and south end sections, as well as several inner-ring suburbs of neighboring St. Louis County. Workers were placed in jobs west of the city in the Chesterfield Valley. The targeted commute combined bus service operated by the Bi-State Development Agency, the region's public transit agency, and van service operated by Abbott Transportation Services, a 30-year-old, private, not-for-profit ambulance and Medicaid transportation provider. Workers gathered at a Bi-State transit hub, where a Bridges van picked them up and took them to work. Riders paid \$1.25 each way for the Bi-State portion of the trip. The Bridges van services were available for free for 18 months.

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