

SkillWorks: Partners for a Productive Workforce

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The National Fund for Workforce Solutions has been shaped by the successes of five pilot projects underway around the country. Each has brought together a diverse group of supporters and participants who have crafted a workforce partnership that is meeting the local needs of workers, employers and the community.

Among these pilot projects has been SkillWorks in Boston, which has made remarkable progress. SkillWorks, which receives support from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, foundations, private employers and other institutions, focuses on three interrelated goals: supporting promising workforce training partnerships, advocating for public policies to encourage improved workforce service delivery, and building the capacity of organizations that provide workforce services.

SkillWorks funded workforce partnerships in key workforce sectors that are growing and experiencing workforce shortages: healthcare, hospitality, automotive repair and building maintenance. These partnerships use a variety of approaches, including pre-employment training, career coaching, mentoring and postsecondary education assistance, to create opportunities for workers. In all cases, these partnerships work closely with employers to meet their needs.

The results have been impressive. In their first two years:

- Partnerships placed more than 240 low-income residents in jobs in targeted industry sectors with placement wages ranging from \$11.07 to \$12.22 per hour.
- Participants who went through pre-employment programs increased their wages in new jobs by 13 percent to 34 percent.
- More than 900 employees received education, career coaching, or other services.
- More than 100 employees received promotions, and more than 425 received wage increases.

SkillWorks is also working to make long-term improvements in Boston's workforce development field. It provided a five-year, \$1.5 million grant to the Workforce Solutions Group to develop a policy advocacy agenda and promote the need for high-quality workforce development programs to bolster the Commonwealth's economic well-being. The work of this group has led to stronger advocacy for the SkillWorks agenda, significant new state funding for workforce partnerships, and a major review of Massachusetts workforce development programs – all based on SkillWorks philosophies.

Finally, SkillWorks is seeding the future by providing planning grants and capacity-building assistance to evolving workforce collaborations, as they seek to create new workforce partnerships in the fields of automotive repair, building maintenance and community health.

Changing Lives and Meeting Workforce Needs

The National Fund for Workforce Solutions will help SkillWorks and other initiatives expand their reach, and it will encourage the creation of new initiatives that build on the lessons in Boston and elsewhere. The Fund's goal is not simply creating new programs, but changing lives and building stronger regional economies by helping employers meet their workforce needs.

That means continuing to provide opportunities for workers such as Toddye Anderson in Boston. Ms. Anderson hit bottom when health problems – both her own and a relative's – caused her to lose her job and her apartment, forcing her into a homeless shelter with a niece and two nephews for who she was caring.

Ms. Anderson remained determined to get back to work and her prospects brightened when she was referred to Partners in Career and Workforce Development, which is led by Partners HealthCare and supported by SkillWorks. The Partners program works to prepare Boston residents for hard-to-fill jobs in its affiliated hospitals and provide career ladders for employees to advance. Ms. Anderson received job coaching and counseling, attention that helped rebuild her self-esteem.

After an internship, she accepted a medical secretary's job in the pediatric neurology department at Massachusetts General Hospital. Her hourly pay is more than 33 percent higher than that of any previous job.

"I absolutely couldn't have done this without the Partners program," Ms. Anderson says. "They helped me find the confidence I had totally lost at that point. I needed someone to say, 'You can do this, and we are going to help you.'"

Ms. Anderson, now 38 years old, is still looking ahead. She is in her third semester at Bunker Hill Community College, studying to become a nurse. After obtaining a nursing degree, she plans to study law and work as an advocate for patients.

"I've got a real career now, and I love studying to become a nurse," she says. "The kids are so proud of me, and I have really managed to turn my life around."

At the same time the Partners in Career and Workforce Development initiative is working closely with employers in Boston's large healthcare industry to meet workforce needs. The program trains, coaches and mentors employees either entering the healthcare field or trying to move up the career ladder into better jobs.

Partners HealthCare, a health system that includes Massachusetts General and Brigham and Women's Hospitals, leads the workforce effort. To date, hundreds of Partners' employees have received career counseling, graduated from pre-employment training or moved into jobs that will place them

on a career track for advancement. And leaders of the health system are extremely pleased with the results.

“It couldn’t be a better business proposition for us or be more consistent with our mission,” says Dr. Gary Gottlieb, president of Brigham and Women’s Hospital.

Dr. Gottlieb says the workforce initiative is helping not only to meet hospital workforce needs, but is also helping to rejuvenate struggling neighborhoods around the hospitals by hiring and promoting residents of those communities.

“The notion of being able to tap our community and neighborhood and help people gain access to training, mentoring and nurturance is emphatically a win-win for us,” says Dr. Gottlieb.