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Providing Employment Services to the Long-Term Unemployed

INSIGHTS ON PROGRAM IMPACT FROM THE READY TO WORK PARTNERSHIP GRANT EVALUATION

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A key challenge facing policymakers and program administrators is how to develop effective strategies to help the long-term unemployed achieve reemployment in jobs commensurate with their experience and skills. These issues are particularly salient during steep economic downturns, when many who have been steadily employed, sometimes with high earnings, lose their jobs through no fault of their own (Jacobson, LaLonde, and Sullivan 2011) and then experience long spells of unemployment (Krueger, Cramer, and Cho 2014; Kroft, Lange, and Notowidigdo 2013).

To assist those experiencing long-term unemployment or underemployment because of the Great Recession of 2007-2009, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) funded the **Ready to Work (RTW) Partnership Grant Program** in 2014 to help such workers to prepare for higher-paying middle- and high-skill jobs. DOL awarded four-year grants to 24 partnerships of workforce agencies, training providers, employers, and other local organizations. Grants operated from 2015 to 2019. Per DOL guidance, targeted workers included those who had lost their jobs during or after the 2007-2009 recession and who either remained *unemployed* (for 27 consecutive weeks or more) or were *underemployed* (meaning those who had obtained short-term or part-time employment but











had not yet found a full-time job in line with their previous level of skill or earnings). The RTW grantees were to use the funds to provide such workers with a range of customized services including staff guidance on career planning, occupational training, work-based training, employment readiness courses, and job search assistance. Within these broad categories, grantees had flexibility to develop services that, based on their understanding of the local labor market, met the needs of the local economy and the individuals served.

To document the implementation of the grantees' programs and to estimate their effects on participant outcomes, DOL contracted with Abt Associates and its partner, MEF Associates, to evaluate the RTW program. Specifically, the **RTW Evaluation** includes an implementation study and an experimental impact study of four purposively selected RTW programs to describe grantees' program implementation and to estimate grantee program impacts on participant outcomes. This brief documents the impact of these four RTW programs on participants' service and credential receipt through 18 months after random assignment, and on participants employment and earnings through three to four years after random assignment. See Klerman, Herr, Martinson, and Copson (2022) and Klerman, Herr, and Martinson (2022) for the full findings of the RTW impact study.

The Ready to Work Partnership Grant Evaluation and Grantees

The RTW Evaluation’s implementation and impact studies focus on four purposively selected grantee programs. As Exhibit 1 below shows, although the four programs incorporated all of the service elements listed above, they varied in service area, target industries, and approach to service delivery.

Exhibit 1: Overview of Grantee Programs in the Ready to Work Evaluation

Grantee Lead Agency	Program Name and Characteristics	Target Industries	Key Grant-Funded Components
<p>Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation (AAWDC)</p> <p>12 counties in Maryland</p>	<p>Maryland Tech Connection (MTC)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Enrollment: 1,254 ○ Study Sample: 1,029 ○ Grant Amount: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Total: \$9,995,047 → Per person served: \$7,971 ○ Program Operation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → May 2015-Oct 2019 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Advanced Manufacturing  Bioscience  Healthcare  Information Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff assessed participants to develop customized services, with most initially attending a 2-week employment readiness course • Subsequent individualized services included occupational training, work-based training, and job search assistance
<p>Jewish Vocational Service (JVS)</p> <p>San Francisco, CA</p>	<p>Skills to Work in Technology (STW-T) and Job Search Accelerator (JSA)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Enrollment: 1,006 ○ Study Sample: 993 ○ Grant Amount: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Total: \$6,396,276 → Per person served: \$6,358 ○ Program Operation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → May 2015-Oct 2019 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Information Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • STW-T program consisted of three technical skills training courses: Business Administration Bootcamp, Digital Marketing, and Salesforce® Administration • JSA was a 2-week program focused on job search and readiness skills (implemented halfway through the grant)
<p>RochesterWorks!</p> <p>Monroe County, NY</p>	<p>Finger Lakes Hired (FLH)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Enrollment: 1,007 ○ Study Sample: 610 ○ Grant Amount: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Total: \$5,189,848 → Per person served: \$5,154 ○ Program Operation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Jan 2015-Jun 2019 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Advanced Manufacturing  Healthcare  Information Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff assessed participants to develop customized services • Emphasis on participation in 1-week employment readiness course and one-on-one assistance from staff • Other options included occupational training, work-based training, and job search assistance
<p>Worksystems Inc. (WSI)</p> <p>Portland, OR and Vancouver, WA</p>	<p>Reboot Northwest (Reboot NW)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Enrollment: 1,348 ○ Study Sample: 980 ○ Grant Amount: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Total: \$8,455,004 → Per person served: \$6,272 ○ Program Operation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Apr 2015-Jun 2019 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Advanced Manufacturing  Information Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff assessed participants to develop customized services • Service included 2- to 3-week employment readiness course, occupational training and work-based training, and job search assistance

SOURCE: Developed by Abt Associates based on staff reports and RTW grantee program materials.

Note: The study sample includes the number of individuals randomly assigned as part of the evaluation to either the program or control group, after excluding those who withdrew from the study after random assignment; see the opening sections of Appendices F through I in the Technical Appendix for the Interim Impact Study (Herr, Klerman, Martinson, and Copson 2022) for the counts of withdrawals. Grant amount per person served is calculated on the number of individuals served by the grant, not the number of individuals in the study’s program group. As discussed in the implementation study (see Martinson et al. 2017; Copson et al. 2020), in addition to members of their program groups, the grantees served other individuals such as veterans, incumbent workers, and people who enrolled before the study started and after random assignment for the study concluded.

To reliably estimate the impact of the offer of an RTW program on participants—that is, what difference the RTW program made—the impact study uses an experimental design (i.e., using random assignment, see Box 1). The evaluation estimates impacts on service and credential receipt through 18 months after random assignment, and impacts on earnings and employment through more than three years. The evaluation also calculates pooled estimates of the average impact on employment and earnings from 1 to 2.5 years after random assignment across the four RTW programs.

The evaluation draws on three data sources (see Box 2 on next page): (1) a Baseline Information Form (BIF), completed immediately before study members were randomly assigned, which collected information on demographic characteristics and employment history; (2) a follow-up survey fielded approximately 18 months after random assignment, which collected information on receipt of services and educational and employment outcomes; and (3) the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH), a national database of employer-reported quarterly earnings for all jobs covered by Unemployment Insurance (UI).

Findings from the Ready to Work Implementation Study

To provide context for the findings of the RTW impact study, this section summarizes the key findings from the implementation study (see Martinson et al. 2017; Copson et al. 2020).

Program context. When DOL developed the RTW grant program in 2014, U.S. unemployment rates, and in particular long-term unemployment rates, remained high after the Great Recession of 2007-2009. However, economic conditions improved sharply over the four-year term of the grants (2015-2019), with unemployment rates dropping steadily to among the lowest ever recorded.

Population served. Reflecting the RTW grant program's focus on the long-term unemployed, across all four grantees, more than 80 percent of study members were unemployed when they entered the study. About 30 percent of all study members were unemployed for a year or more.

BOX 1: THE RTW EXPERIMENTAL IMPACT ANALYSIS

The impact study for the RTW Evaluation uses an experimental design. Applicants at each of the four grantee programs included in the evaluation were randomly assigned, approximately evenly, between two groups: (1) the program group, which was offered the employment-related services funded by the RTW grant, and (2) the control group, which was not offered RTW services but had access to other resources in the community. (Services available in the community included an array of standard employment preparation and job search services funded by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and other partner programs, available through American Job Centers.) This design ensures that no systematic differences existed between the members of the program group and the control group at the time they entered the study; as a result, any differences between the groups can be attributed directly to access to RTW program services.

Reflecting RTW's target population of workers with the experience or education appropriate for middle- or high-skill jobs, study participants were generally middle-aged (45 on average) and close to, or over half, had at least a bachelor's degree. The demographic characteristics of the study sample members varied across the four grantee programs, reflecting their different program designs and geographic locations.

Grantee staff observed that as the economy improved over the grant period, many of the long-term unemployed workers targeted by the RTW grant, particularly those with more education and work experience, were able to find jobs on their own, and therefore did not apply to the RTW program. As a result, grantee staff reported that many of those who did enroll in the RTW programs faced greater barriers to employment, and had lower skill levels and less work experience than grantees had anticipated when originally designing their programs.

BOX 2: RTW EVALUATION DATA SOURCES

Baseline Information Form: Completed by all study members at the time of application to the given RTW program but before random assignment occurred (July 2015 to September 2018). Collected detailed demographic and socioeconomic characteristics including education history, employment history, current barriers to employment and views about work, current wages and earnings, public benefits receipt, and total income. Also collected detailed contact information for the study member and up to three additional contacts to assist with locating efforts for the follow-up survey.

18-Month Follow-Up Survey: Fielded starting 18 months after random assignment (April 2017 to December 2019). For all members of both the program and control groups, the survey attempted to collect information on receipt of training and related supports; receipt of job search assistance; completion of additional education and receipt of credentials; current employment status and barriers to employment; job characteristics (e.g., hours worked and usual work schedule); current earnings; receipt of public benefits; and total income. The response rate was 79 percent.

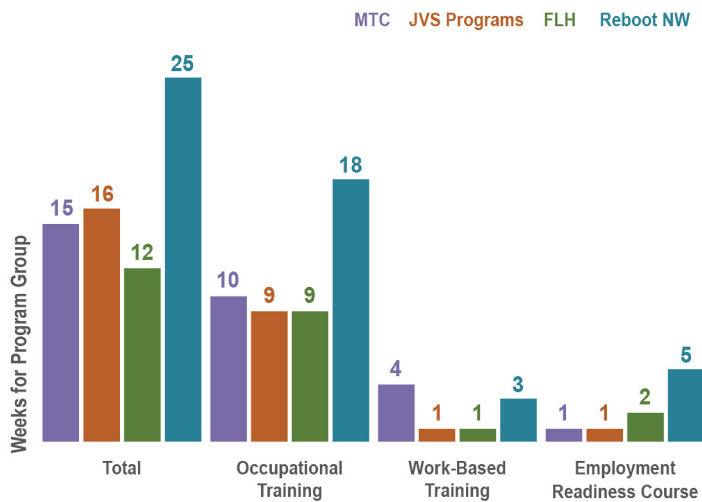
National Directory of New Hires: The NDNH, which is compiled and maintained by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is a national database of new hire date, quarterly wages, and UI data submitted to OCSE by State Directories of New Hires, employers, and state workforce agencies, augmented with federal government payroll information. The evaluation infers employment based on non-zero earnings. Because the NDNH captures information for all federal jobs and all jobs covered by UI, it provides quarterly earnings data for almost the full study sample (more than 98 percent).

Program design. The four grantee programs all provided activities and services consistent with DOL's *Solicitation for Grant Applications* (SGA, DOL/ETA 2014) for the RTW program, including one-on-one staff assistance, occupational training, employment readiness activities (that could include help with a resume, interviewing skills, and networking skills), and work-based training (unpaid internships, paid internships, or on-the-job training). The RTW programs also provided financial and behavioral health supports. Grantees varied in how they targeted and sequenced services and in the content of the services offered (see Martinson et al. 2017; Copson et al. 2020).

Service Receipt and Credential Attainment

The RTW programs were to provide employment-related services—primarily occupational training, work-based training, employment readiness activities, and job search assistance services—which were expected to produce an increase in program participants' educational attainment (i.e., certificates, credentials, licenses, or degrees), and ultimately to lead to increased employment and earnings (Copson et al. 2020).

Exhibit 2: Weeks of Services Attended through 18 Months After Random Assignment in Total and by Service Type, by Program Group



KEY: Total=All structured employment-related activities (occupational training, work-based training, or employment readiness courses).

SOURCE AND FOLLOW-UP PERIOD: 18-month follow-up survey, as of 18 months after random assignment.

NOTES: The sample sizes of the program groups are as follows: 455 for MTC, 411 for the JVS programs, 250 for FLH, and 400 for Reboot NW (for full grantee and program names, see Exhibit 1). Each average includes program group members who did not attend any services and therefore have zero weeks attended. For the JVS programs, the exhibit reports “adjusted” weeks of services attended, reflecting the inclusion of information collected during the 18-month survey interview as text responses of training types attended, asked only of program group members who initially reported no training. Because the population with incomplete data on weeks of services attended varies by type of service, the average weeks of services for the three underlying types among those with non-missing data do not sum to the average weeks of total services for those with non-missing data for all three types. See Appendix G of the Technical Appendix for the Interim Impact Study (Herr, Klerman, Martinson, and Copson 2022) for more discussion. For the JVS programs, unadjusted measures of weeks of activities attended are four weeks of occupational training, one week of employment readiness courses, and six weeks of all activities combined (there is no adjustment necessary for weeks of work-based training). For the other three programs, the number of weeks of total services may not equal the sum of weeks for the three underlying types of services because of rounding.

Types and amounts of program services attended.

The types and amounts of services that participants in the RTW programs attended varied across the four grantees, reflecting differences in program design (see Exhibit 2 above). The follow-up survey collected study members’ self-reports on their length of attendance in three key program

activities: occupational training, work-based training, and employment readiness courses.

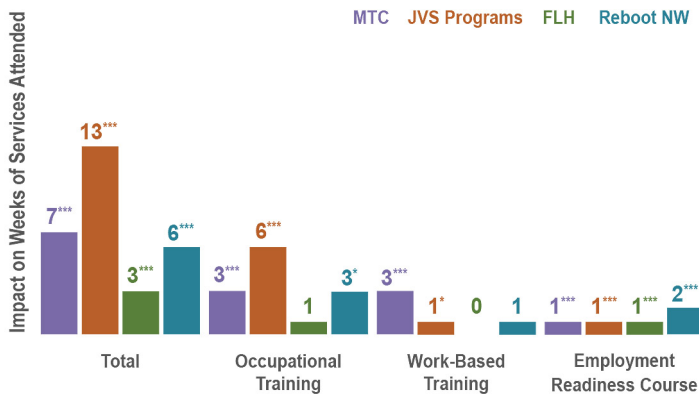
Across all four grantees, average attendance for the program group (including those who did not attend) was:

- *Occupational training*: approximately 9 weeks in three grantee programs and 18 weeks in the other (Reboot NW).
- *Work-based training*: 1 week in two grantee programs (the JVS programs and FLH) and 3 to 4 weeks in the other two (MTC and Reboot NW).
- *Employment readiness courses*: 1 to 2 weeks in three of the grantee programs and 5 weeks in the other (Reboot NW).
- *Total “structured employment-related activities”*: 3 to 4 months of these three services combined in three grantee programs and almost 6 months in the other (Reboot NW).

Impacts on weeks of services attended. While the program group attended a substantial number of weeks of structured employment-related activities in their RTW program, the control group also attended a substantial number of weeks of structured-employment related activities elsewhere in the community. As shown on Exhibit 3 (next page), in net, the impacts on weeks of structured employment-related activities (that is, the difference between the program and control group) are smaller than the number of weeks of services attended by the program group (see Exhibit 2 on the left). For example, while on average the MTC program group attended 15 weeks of services, the impact on the length of attendance was 7 weeks.

Three of the programs had positive impacts on total structured employment-related activities attended (ranging from 6 to 13 weeks). Two programs increased weeks of occupational training attended (MTC and the JVS programs; 3 and 6 weeks respectively). One program increased weeks of work-based training (MTC; 3 weeks). All four programs increased weeks of employment readiness courses (ranging from 1 to 2 weeks).

Exhibit 3: Impact on Weeks of Services Attended through 18 Months after Random Assignment, in Total and by Service Type



KEY: Total=All structured employment-related activities (occupational training, work-based training, or employment readiness courses).

SOURCE AND FOLLOW-UP PERIOD: 18-month follow-up survey, as of 18 months after random assignment.

NOTES: The total sample (those who completed the 18-month follow-up survey) are as follows: 831 for MTC (455 program group and 376 control group members), 793 for the JVS programs (411 program group and 382 control group members), 477 for FLH (250 program group and 227 control group members), and 747 for Reboot NW (400 program group and 347 control group members). (For full grantee and program names, see Exhibit 1.) For the JVS programs, the exhibit reports impacts on “adjusted” weeks of services attended, reflecting the inclusion of information collected during the 18-month survey interview as text responses of training types attended, asked only of program group members who initially reported no training. See Appendix G of the Technical Appendix for the Interim Impact Study (Herr, Klerman, Martinson, and Copson 2022) for more discussion. Statistical significance based on two-sided hypothesis tests; significance levels are as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Impacts on credential receipt and other outcomes.

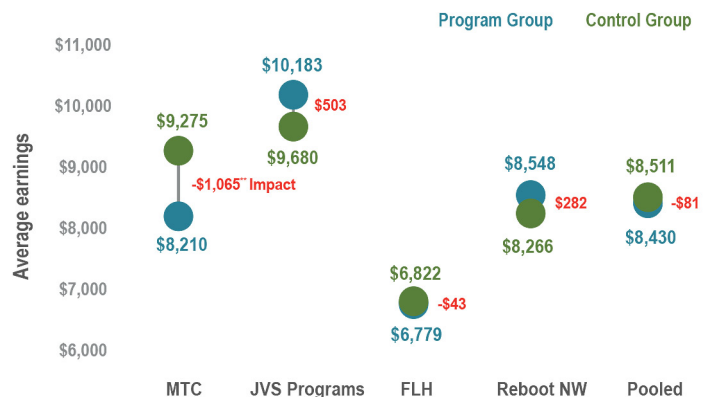
As measured by the survey, impacts on program services attended—in particular, occupational training—led to impacts on educational attainment (i.e., certificates, credentials, licenses, or degrees). MTC, the JVS programs, and Reboot NW (the programs with the largest impacts on service receipt) had a positive impact on educational attainment (10 to 22 percentage points, or 33 to 159 percent of the control group level). Most of these were certificates for completion of a short-term occupational training course, and few received professional certifications. The exception is FLH, where no impact on educational attainment was detected. For all programs other than FLH, the evaluation also detected impacts on receipt of financial support for occupational training. For no programs were impacts detected on

confidence in career knowledge or factors that affect the ability to work.

Earnings

The evaluation focuses on a single pre-specified confirmatory outcome, average quarterly earnings for the period between 1 year and 2.5 years after random assignment, as the evaluation’s main indicator of the extent to which a given RTW program had impact. For no program did the study detect a favorable impact in earnings during this period (Exhibit 4). Similarly, pooling across the four grantees to yield more precise estimates of impact, no impact on earnings was detected. Moreover, for no RTW program did the study detect an increase in employment during this period (Klerman, Herr, and Martinson 2022).

Exhibit 4: Impact on Earnings 1 to 2.5 Years after Random Assignment

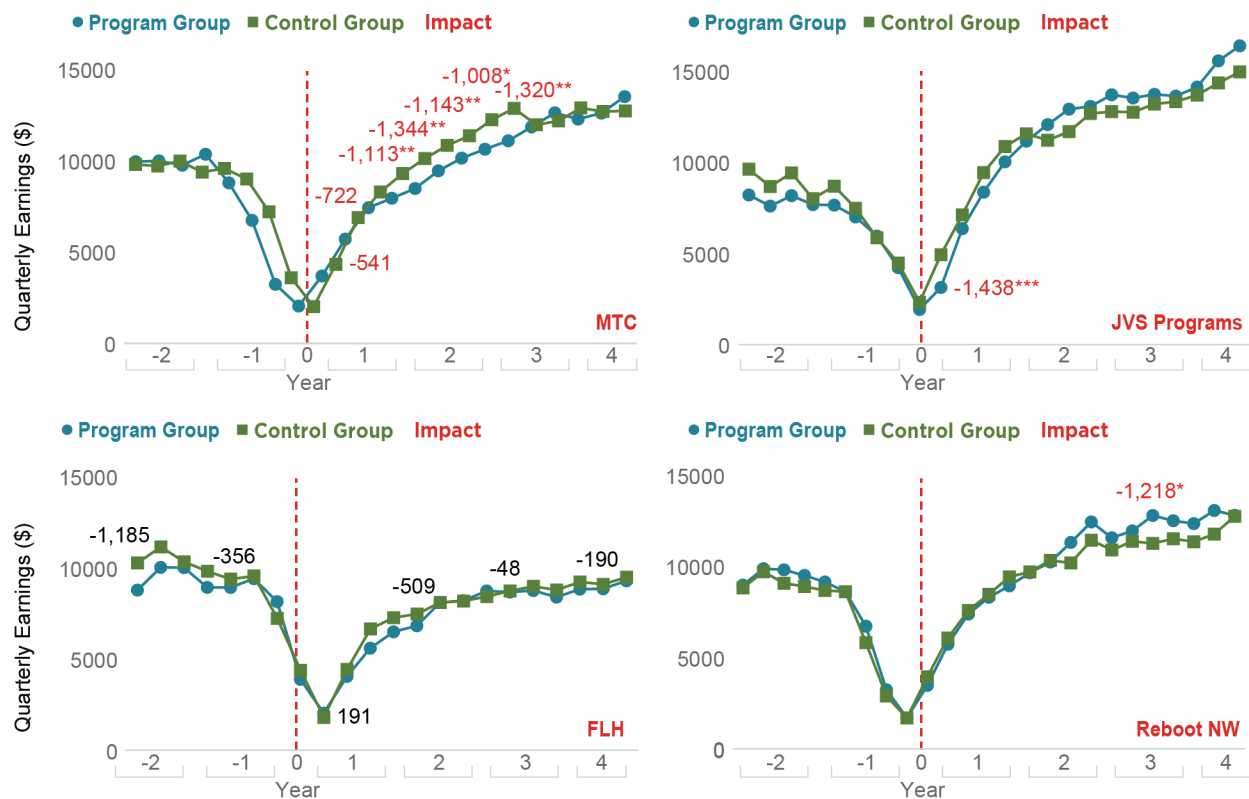


SOURCE AND FOLLOW-UP PERIOD: National Directory of New Hires; through 10 quarters (2.5 years) after random assignment.

NOTES: Reported impact may not equal the difference between the reported program and control group means because of rounding. For MTC, the full sample of 1,022 includes 536 program group and 486 control group members. For the JVS programs, the full sample of 965 includes 491 program group and 474 control group members. For FLH, the full sample of 595 includes 300 program group and 295 control group members. For Reboot NW, the full sample of 972 includes 489 program group and 486 control group members. Statistical significance based on two-sided hypothesis tests; significance levels are as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Across all four grantees and through approximately four years after random assignment, the evaluation again detects little evidence of positive impact on earnings (see Exhibit 5 below). The one exception is evidence of a positive impact for Reboot NW three years after random assignment, however, there is no detected impact thereafter.

Exhibit 5: Quarterly Earnings Levels and Impacts



SOURCE AND FOLLOW-UP PERIOD: National Directory of New Hires; through 16 quarters after random assignment.

NOTES: On the x-axis, negative numbers indicate years before random assignment; 0 indicates the quarter that random assignment occurred. The evaluation has data for each grantee program's full sample through seven quarters before random assignment and data for between 92 percent and 99 percent of the full sample through the eighth quarter before random assignment. Impacts that are significantly different from zero are reported in red text; impacts reported in black text are not significantly different from zero. Reported impact may not equal the difference between the reported program and control group means (see Herr, Klerman, and Martinson 2022) because of rounding. For MTC, the full sample of 1,022 includes 536 program group and 486 control group members. For the JVS programs, the full sample of 965 includes 491 program group and 474 control group members. For FLH, the full sample of 595 includes 300 program group and 295 control group members. For Reboot NW, the full sample of 972 includes 489 program group and 486 control group members. Statistical significance based on two-sided hypothesis tests; significance levels are as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Discussion

The RTW evaluation detects no sustained positive impact on earnings or employment for any of the four RTW grantee programs through approximately four years of follow-up. Even considering the four programs together, no impact is detected. Given that most program services were received within a year of study entry, it seems unlikely that still longer follow-up would detect impacts. This pattern of positive impacts on receipt of services and credentials but not on earnings or employment is a common finding in recent experimental impact studies of job training programs (Peck et al. 2021; Juras and Buron 2021).

There are four possible and not mutually exclusive explanations for this pattern of findings.

- Sample Sizes Too Small to Detect Impacts.** It is possible that the programs generated positive impacts on earnings that are large enough to be policy relevant, but samples were too small to detect those impacts. Given the study's sample sizes, conventional power calculations suggest that the evaluation could reliably detect a program-specific earnings impact of \$1,400 per quarter but no smaller. Pooling the four programs, the evaluation could detect impacts of about half that size, approximately \$700 per quarter. Even then, no

impacts are detected. To facilitate efforts to build evidence on effective programs, future evaluations of RTW-like programs should consider research designs that could detect smaller impacts.

- **Changed Economic Environment.** The RTW programs were designed in 2014 to help workers who lost their jobs during the Great Recession of 2007-2009 “through no fault of their own and [who were] facing long spells of unemployment for the first time in their careers” (DOL/ETA 2014). In contrast, the programs were implemented, and study members looked for work, during a long and robust economic recovery. Even if the programs did not have positive impacts during this sustained recovery, there might have been positive impacts if the programs operated during a less robust economic period.
- **Insufficient Contrast in Service Receipt.** The RTW control group—those study members who were not offered RTW services—participated in employment-related services provided in the community even in the absence of the RTW program. This suggests that some RTW participants would have had access to and would have attended employment-related services from other sources on their own. Although the RTW programs provided considerable employment-related services to participants—more than they would have received otherwise—evidence suggests that to generate even moderate impacts on earnings requires substantial impacts on employment-related services. In designing future programs, the focus should be on how the new program will lead to the receipt of considerably more employment-related services than participants would have received otherwise.

- **Appropriate Service Mix.** Compared to the general population served by the workforce system, participants in the RTW grant programs were expected to be—and were—older and more educated. Perhaps there was some mix of services that would have been more effective for this population in the rapidly improving economy in which they were seeking employment. Further efforts to identify such a service mix might benefit from refining the theory of action: Given other services already available in the community, for older and long-term unemployed workers, what specific employment-related services would be particularly impactful? In what sequence? Such a theory of action might help to generate useful conjectures about how to design a program with a service mix that would increase earnings for the target population, given other employment-related services available in the community.

Closing Thoughts

In sum, RTW grantee programs attempted to increase the employment, with higher earnings, of a key population: the long-term unemployed, in particular the long-term unemployed during a deep recession. Perhaps due to details of the evaluation design, due to a rapidly improving labor market, or due to the program design and services, this evaluation did not detect that the RTW programs had such impacts. Work should continue to identify program approaches to serve them and evaluation designs that can detect smaller impacts.

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