Evaluators at Roosevelt University and the Lakefront SRO have released a major study of social service provision provided by Lakefront SRO to residents in and around selected public housing developments on the south side of Chicago. Additionally, the study compares client characteristics, services and outcomes of the public housing community with those of residents of Lakefront's SRO (Single Room Occupancy) buildings.

The evaluation presents a number of findings of practical use to those designing or administering social services aimed at securing or supporting employment for persons with low education or loose attachment to the labor market.

- What sorts of interventions are most likely to lead to shorter and longer term employment outcomes.
- How to use training and employment preparation resources most effectively.
- The types of mental health issues faced by low income persons.
- How gender affects social service delivery.
- What motivates clients to persist in working with a social services provider as opposed to dropping out of a program.

Low income clients seeking employment typically need a variety of other services as well, but may have little patience for being evaluated for them, or receiving them. Programs seeking to serve them will need low staff-client ratios with intensive follow-up with the client. The evaluation discovered clear differences between the neighborhood clients of Near South, and the SRO residents with respect to willingness to participate in drug abuse or mental health services, although observation of both groups indicated needs for these services. It is possible that the willingness to seek services determined the choice to live independently as opposed to living in a SRO. On the other hand, it is also possible that the closer connection to the client formed by the SRO tenant relationship helped the client to feel more secure in seeking needed, but stigmatized, interventions. To the extent that this is true, it suggests that community, and housing communities in particular, could be useful vehicles for helping needy people obtain services.

A larger percentage of clients had significant problems in the broad category of mental health, including depression, low self-efficacy, and difficulty conducting human relations sufficient to make job retention problematic. Some mental health or relational problems make it hard for clients to get jobs; but they also can make it hard for them to keep jobs once found. In many instances, becoming employed contributes to the emergence of these types of problems as work leads to a variety of stresses. The study suggests that creative community-based mental health programming could make a major contribution to improved employment retention.

The evaluation discovered that the persons studied tended to attribute what successes they had to 1) high levels of motivation, 2) strong skills, or 3) strong support systems. People who trusted in their skills tended to have better employment outcomes than those who trusted more in motivation. While strong motivation is surely important, it does not seem to be a good substitute for the education or ability that make someone a valued worker.

The evaluators found that clients participating in job readiness or educational programs were more likely to find employment during the course of the project than were clients participating in job training programs. There appeared to be a number of reasons for this. In some instances, it was not clear that clients participating in job training were very committed to working in the fields for which they were being trained. Consequently, they made little effort to find a job in the particular field. Participation in training in a particular field did not guarantee that the client had aptitude for the field and so some participants effectively "washed out" through the training process. In some instances, there did not appear to be a close connection between trainers and potential employers, making it difficult for the client to be placed in a job in the field for which he or she had just been trained.

On the basis of these observations, one would conclude that hard skills training should be used for clients who can demonstrate a commitment to a particular field and can demonstrate some aptitude for it. Ideally, training programs for the low-skilled would also secure commitments from specific employers to hire their program graduates.

The Near South program demonstrated that placing low-skilled clients with barriers to employment in entry level employment is easier than sustaining that employment. Social services provided by Lakefront successfully mitigated the negative effects of lack of work experience for many of the Lakefront clients. But while it therefore appears a reasonable expectation that most in this group would be able to find employment with some support, it also appears unlikely that they would enter a career path, achieve upward mobility, rise very far above poverty, or retain jobs for as long as a year without additional support in the form of social services or more education. Entry-level jobs do not have wage/benefit structures conducive to supporting families, are highly vulnerable to swings in the fortunes of individual businesses, and employers have not invested in low-wage workers sufficiently to retain them in their jobs when personal problems such as health, child-care or transportation breakdowns inevitably occur.

Copies of the complete report are available from Roosevelt University's Institute for Metropolitan Affairs, James Lewis, Director. 312-341-3541 or jlewis@roosevelt.edu