

Rent assistance program pays off for folks seeking work

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A program that provides job-training skills to low-income Portlanders has shown that participants who are given rent assistance while in the program are far more likely to finish it, get a job and earn higher wages.

The Economic Opportunity Program is a job-training program of Worksystems, the local workforce development board for the Portland metropolitan area, that provides job training and career coaching to impoverished and homeless people.

Three years ago, the program began giving rent assistance to as many of its participants as possible. In a recently published report analyzing the impact that the rent assistance had, Worksystems found that people who received rent assistance were:

- 38 percent more likely to complete job training,
- 67 percent more likely to get a job in the career they wanted to pursue, and
- their income was at least twice as much as the income of people who did not receive rent assistance.

"To have the outcomes that we're seeing, it's a good investment," Blair Schaeffer-Bisht, a senior project manager at Worksystems who oversaw the program, said.

The Economic Opportunity Program began in 2012. Targeted toward low-income and homeless people, the program provides up to three years of job training, assistance with job searching and other services.

Schaeffer-Bisht said some program participants have little work history and work on skills as basic as English speaking, earning a general education diploma (GED), basic reading, writing, and typing skills.

Others need help writing resumes, interviewing for a job, or developing the interpersonal and communication skills to feel comfortable in a workplace.

Deandre Kenyanjui, a career coach who works at the social-service agency Central City Concern and has clients in the Economic Opportunity Program, said some people need to be taught to let their boss know if they are sick and can't come to work, or to cancel appointments a person cannot make instead of simply not showing up.

"To the population that we work with, that is completely foreign to them," he said.

While participants can pursue any job they want, Schaeffer-Bisht said, the program concentrates on providing skills and training in the health care, construction, manufacturing and IT sectors, due to demand, job security and the opportunity for advancement.

Three years ago, the program noticed that many of the participants who were either homeless or on the verge of homelessness either would not finish the program or, if they did, were unable to keep

a job.

"When housing and other basic needs aren't met, it's just too challenging to be at a work site at six in the morning or at a training program," said Patrick Gihring, a chief program officer at Worksystems.

In October 2015, the program started giving rent assistance to homeless or unstably housed people, using \$125,000 in funds from Home Forward, the Portland metropolitan area's housing authority, in the first year.

Early data showed that the funds were effective, and by the second year were increased to \$475,000, with money coming from the Portland Housing Bureau, Home Forward, and A Home for Everyone.

A total of 169 people were given rent assistance. On average, the monthly rent assistance contributions amounted to \$590 per person, for approximately four and a half months.

The amount of assistance each person was given varied depending on the situation, and in some cases paid 100 percent of the rent.

Some of the reasons people faced housing instability were circumstances that have become far too common due to the region's housing crisis. Gihring said one participant was evicted while she went through the program and lived in a truck stop.

Nearly a third of the participants who received rent assistance owed back rent to their current landlord or owed money to

former landlords, debts that had to be paid so they could find new housing. On average, each participant had \$890 in such debts.

Paying security deposits were the only barrier to housing for some program participants. The average security deposit payment the program made was \$1,242, for 26 people, 24 of which were homeless.

The report found that nearly every participant who received rent assistance remained stably housed while they went through the Economic Opportunity Program.

The program was not able to meet the total demand for rent assistance: 46 people who qualified did not receive assistance due to limited funding.

But that created a natural comparison group and a way to clearly see how receiving rent assistance affected a person's job prospects.

For instance, the report found that the average income of people who received rent assistance was \$24,678. The average income of people who did not receive assistance was dramatically lower, at \$14,410.

Gihring said he is not necessarily surprised by the results. "You expect it," he said. "Once you remove the barriers ... they're on equal footing and have similar results" to people who do not experience homelessness or stress related to staying in their housing.

Schaeffer-Bisht said that once someone is able to keep a job for six months to a year,

they're likely to remain employed, which, in turn, means a much better chance they will remain in housing.

That, Schaeffer-Bisht said, has important implications for ending a person's poverty and their reliance on public assistance.

"Once they have jobs that are not minimum wage, they no longer need rent assistance or other public benefits," said. "The economic stability allows them to (support themselves)."

Malcolm Hoover is one person who credits receiving rent assistance with being able to successfully complete the Economic Opportunity Program.

"I can't say that I wouldn't have made it," he said. "I don't know if that's true. But I wouldn't be as stable as I am now. I wouldn't have had that backstop."

He received six months of rent assistance through the program, which he said gave him the "mental and spiritual insurance" to not worry about housing and to focus on finding a job.

Hoover has a long history of working in government bureaucracies, including for the city of Oakland and Alameda County in California. He was living and working in Oakland when he saw "some traumatic events," including witnessing the deaths of more than one person. He started using coke, first using only on the weekends. But the habit soon became daily.

He moved to Portland and his life became more chaotic. He couch-surfed with different people and slept in cars. At one point, he wound up in a hotel with two duffel bags full of the only possessions he still had. He was too high at the time to even remember where he was, even to this day.

"My life fell apart. I just felt worthless. I felt horrible. It's the lowest I've ever felt in my life," he said.

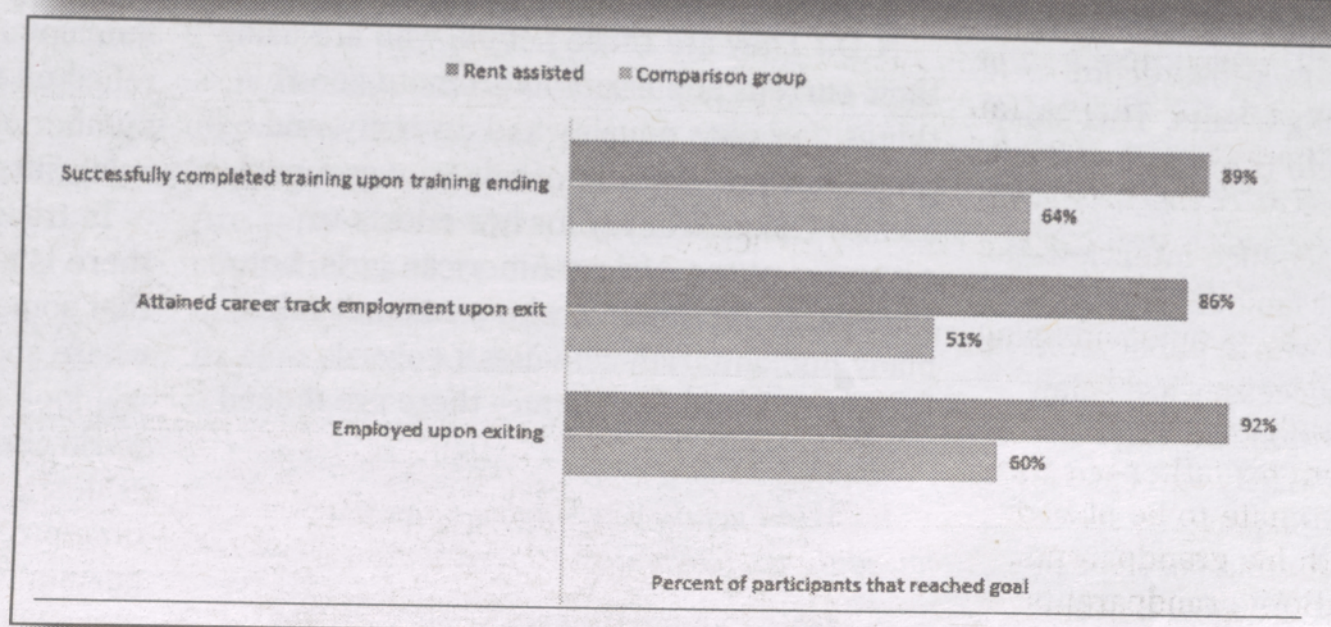
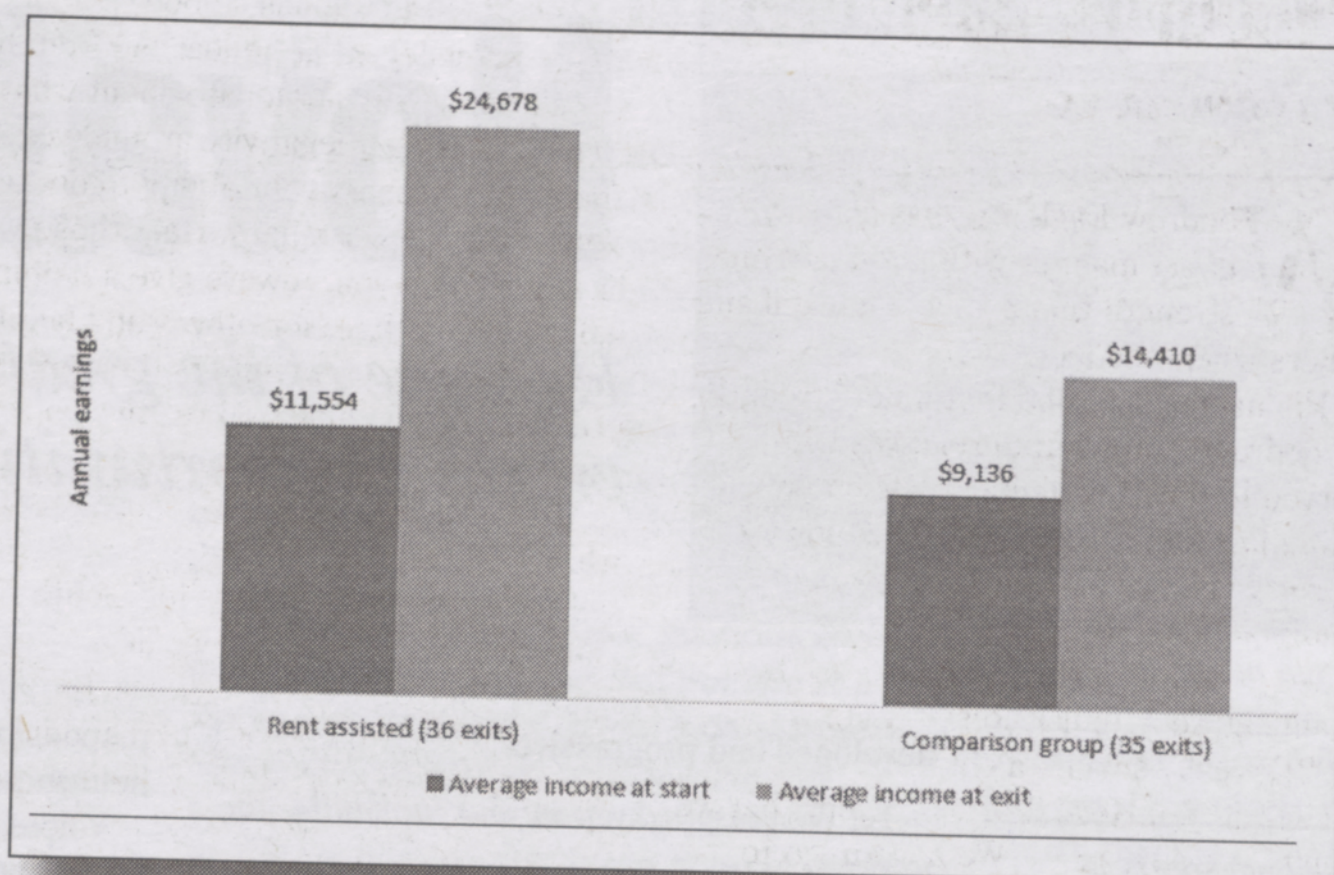
After a year and a half of using drugs, last year he entered drug treatment at Central City Concern. He also lived in housing provided by Central City Concern; the rent was paid for with rent assistance from the Economic Opportunity Program.

He now works as the equity coordinator at the Oregon Food Bank, a job he started last May. Kenyanjui was Hoover's career coach, mainly helping Hoover revise his resume, and provided a good dose of moral support. "He reminded me to talk about my achievements. Reminded me that I had achievements," Hoover said.

"He had all this (work) experience. He just needed some assistance," Kenyanjui said.

Kenyanjui said all the clients he provided career coaching to and who received rent assistance "are doing amazing." And he sees a stark contrast in people who are less stably housed.

"There are so many other people ... who would be doing so much better, and would be just as successful."



SOURCE: WORKSYSTEMS



Dignity



Poverty