

# Employment Challenges

## *Safety Net, Training, and Understanding— All Crucial to Getting and Keeping Jobs*

by Carol Ward

Five years ago Jessica Hill was a statistic. Today her successes are numerous. She never dreamed she would be a college graduate much less a small business owner. The young woman from Mississippi bore two children while still in high school, and at age 17 moved out of her parents' home and into subsidized housing. She worked at a fast food restaurant but remained on public assistance, as the pay was inadequate to support her family.

Hill, who became involved with a man who was abusive, says she felt like she did not have any options. She says abusive relationships “happen to a lot of young women with children who are living in poverty. We think we have to settle,” Hill says. “Our Southern heritage makes many feel they have to stay and hope things get better.”

Hill stayed for a while, through a couple of other failed jobs and another baby, before finally finding the courage to make a change. She sought financial assistance and enrolled at the state university, graduated, and now runs her own business from her home. “Where I come from, we don't get to do that, only white people do that,” Hill says, still incredulous at her turn in fortune.

“I used to be known as the girl who came to work in sunglasses to hide a black eye, who used to have an attitude because I was so unhappy with my life,” she says. “Now I know that people in poverty can succeed if they really grasp the training and help that is available, learn how to be a professional and learn to be a team player. I'm now trying to set the example of an independent, successful woman.”

Her story is not unusual, but for every successful climb out of poverty there are dozens of failed attempts. It takes an

extraordinary amount of perseverance, usually coupled with training and assistance from others, to break out of the cycle.

“One common thread is that there is no hope,” says Sharon Taylor, director of operations for the Evansville Christian Life Center. “These people are so busy trying to survive and get food for their kids that they have no way to plan for the future.”

Philip DeVol calls it “the tyranny of the moment.” DeVol, an author on poverty issues and consultant for the Aha! Process, says that living in poverty is so stressful that people bury their dreams and just try to make it through the day. “When you're so busy trying to solve concrete problems, that's what you spend all your time doing and you lose track of your future orientation, lose track of your goals,” he says.

### **“Why Don't They Just ...”**

Those goals often revolve around getting, and keeping, a job that allows a person to earn enough to support himself and his family, with perhaps a bit left over at the end of the month. The question, “Why don't they just get a job?,” is uttered in some form or another by those in the middle and upper classes who have little understanding of the barriers to employment often faced by those living in poverty.

While each individual situation is different, service providers say there are some common threads inhibiting those in poverty who want to work from finding sustainable employment.

“One of the biggest challenges is transportation,” explains Nakiya Kirton, director of community relations and market-

ing for Cincinnati Works, noting that the group's clients are taking part in job skills training and employment counseling by choice and are highly motivated to work. "There are also those who have housing challenges, people who have legal barriers, even if it's something as small as a misdemeanor. Or it can be something as simple as child care. Then there are things like coping skills, time management, and life skills."

In Evansville, Indiana, Taylor says lack of comprehensive public transportation is the single biggest obstacle to connecting people in poverty who want to work with the jobs available in the region.

"People are always saying, 'Well, there are jobs available,' and sure there are," Taylor says. "There are some higher paying jobs just north of our community, factory jobs that offer benefits. They are entry level jobs that require a skill set that people in poverty could learn, but they work factory shifts and people can't get to work."

There may be jobs available in certain communities like Evansville, but opportunities are hard to come by in many other parts of the country. "With soaring unemployment rates there are far more job seekers than there are jobs," points out Suzy Epstein, managing director of jobs and economic security for New York's Robin Hood Foundation, which targets poverty by funding job training programs.

The reality is the current economy has made it more difficult for people living in poverty to compete for any positions that are available. "Ever since the fall of '08 a whole bunch of middle class and working class people have slipped into institutional poverty," says DeVol, noting those who have lost jobs or fallen victim to the economic crisis. "The labor pool is absolutely packed with people who want to work, and the people who were struggling to get and keep jobs in the first place are now forced into that L-shaped poverty.

We're returning to the idea of the 'undeserving poor,'" DeVol continues. "Instead of having sympathy for the people at the bottom of the economic ladder, there is more criticism because there is sympathy for people in institutional poverty."

### One Crisis Away

Once people living in poverty get a job, it is often difficult to keep it. For the average salaried worker, a day missed due to outside circumstances usually does not have any



*A job seeker fills out a job search application at Cincinnati Works. This organization pairs up unemployed or underemployed individuals with employers looking to fill entry-level positions in an effort to eliminate poverty in and near Cincinnati.*

real repercussions, but for those working entry-level jobs, it can mean loss of a crucial day's pay, or even loss of a job.

"When everything around you is breaking down, whether it's the housing you're in or child care or something else, it's difficult if you don't have resources to solve problems," DeVol says. "Poverty is very stressful, so there is lots of illness and that interferes with going to work. When your car breaks down, that interferes. All those things mean it's much harder for you to get to work every single day."

Epstein agrees that the rate of job retention can be frustratingly low. "We've found that many people can get a job but not everybody can keep a job," Epstein says. "Several elements make things crumble. For folks with histories of addiction and mental illness, there is substance abuse and relapse. At the other end of the spectrum, child care can be a huge issue and make it hard to keep a job. The first affects men more and the second affects women, but we see a lot of job losses because of these."

And sometimes the job losses are just a function of the economy. Joyce Lavery, executive director of the Safe

Haven Family Shelter in Nashville, says she has seen a lot of job loss in her community simply due to the economic crisis. The impact is worst when people have no place to turn.

"The biggest criteria I see with families that are homeless is that they do not have any kind of support system," Lavery says. "They're one crisis away from becoming homeless, and when that crisis happens—like a job loss or a medical emergency—they have no place to turn."

## Creating a Network

Several programs and agencies are turning their attention to helping people create that network of people they can rely on in times of crisis. Move the Mountain Leadership Center has a goal of ending poverty nationwide. One initiative is its Circles Campaign, which pairs families working to get out of poverty with "allies" from the community who are willing to befriend and support the family through the process.

Karin VanZant, national Circles coach, says the program simply provides a platform for local service providers to connect with each other as well as influence decision-

makers on the issues facing people living in poverty. "Circles doesn't provide any of the services," she says. "We just help with the connections and the network and the way to discuss what the needs are and how those needs can be matched with the resources, without replicating or competing with any existing programs going on in the community."

Kirton of Cincinnati Works also says the network of support is crucial. "When they don't have a network of their own—whether it be support from family or close friends—that's where some of our key partners come into play," she says, mentioning, for example, a child care facility partnership that will allow temporary



*A young woman who became successfully employed through Cincinnati Works. The program places more than 600 people annually with a high rate of retention.*

or occasional placements of children whose regular child care has fallen through.

The goal is to “develop the mindset of longevity on the job,” Kirton says. It may not be the ideal job, or even a good job, but sticking it out through the rough patches proves to employers that they are committed to being employed.

“Once we have helped them create that stability, then we can look at what’s keeping them from moving forward,” Kirton adds. “It may require a skill set, or simply brushing up on interview skills. We help them work towards their goal and pull themselves out of poverty.” ■

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## When It Does Not Pay to Work

A report released in October 2008 by the Working Poor Families Project found that 28.2 percent of American families with one or both parents employed were living below 200 percent of poverty, identified as the “working poor.”

The report, “Still Working Hard, Still Falling Short,” found that 9.6 million families lived at that level, including more than 21 million children in 2006. In 13 states, 33 percent or more of working families were low-income, and in 13 states, 50 percent or more of minority working families were low-income. The report also found that nationally, 22 percent of jobs paid wages that fell below the federal poverty threshold.

The report noted that working poor families “lack the earnings necessary to meet their basic needs—a struggle exacerbated by soaring prices for food, gas, health, and education.”

About 60 percent of low-income working families were forced to spend more than one-third of their income on housing, and nearly 40 percent lack health insurance for one or both parents.

Such data give credence to the idea that sometimes it just doesn’t pay to work. A 2006 study entitled “When Work Doesn’t Pay, What Every Policymaker Should Know,” conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty, illustrates the difficulty. “To assist low-wage workers and their families, the federal and state governments provide a set of ‘work supports’—benefits such as earned income tax credits, child care subsidies, health care coverage, food stamps, and others,” the report notes. “Those benefits are means-tested, so as earnings increase—particularly as they rise above the official poverty level—families begin to lose eligibility even though they are not yet self-sufficient.

The result is that parents can work and earn more without their families moving closer to financial security.”

A project entitled “Making Work Supports Work,” also published by the National Center for Children in Poverty in February 2010, makes a similar argument. Noting that while work support policies vary across states and localities, patterns are generally similar.

“To better reward and encourage employment, reforms are needed to expand access to benefits by increasing eligibility limits and covering more eligible families; phase benefits out more gradually to soften or eliminate cliffs; and pay attention to program interaction so that families don’t lose multiple benefits at once,” the paper advises. “With these strategies, policymakers can create a work support system designed to truly make work pay.” ■