

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lifetrack Resources Advancement Plus Program

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EnSearch was awarded a contract by Lifetrack Resources for an evaluation of the Advancement Plus program. This preliminary report is an initial look at: the Advancement Plus model, the program and its evolution to date; summarized data collected on the participants enrolled from the program's inception through May 2001; an in-depth study of trainees at the Packaging First site; the lessons learned from this experimental program; and next steps toward future development. A comprehensive final report will be available Summer 2002.

Lifetrack Resources was founded in 1948 as a community human service organization providing services that help adults who are disadvantaged or have disabilities become employed and support families or live independently, and help children and youth achieve success in school or in the transition to work. On May 12, 2000, the organization received funding from the Joyce Foundation for the Advancement Plus program. Their target group was the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) of Ramsey County. The proposal stated:

The purpose . . . is to develop a model and demonstrate the effectiveness of a paid work experience program for persons moving from welfare dependency to work and to disseminate the results. The request . . . includes: staff development to benefit from lessons learned in similar programs; incentives to encourage participation; process evaluation for continuous improvement of the model and program evaluation; dissemination of information to interested parties [and nationwide networks].

Advancement Plus was described in the proposal to the Joyce Foundation as follows:

Our objective is to provide Advancement Plus in three settings: Lifetrack Resources' existing training enterprise -- Packaging First, public not-for-profit organizations, and private business. The purpose is to help people with multiple barriers become work ready by developing skills, work values and a recent work history. The program will add paid work experience to the spectrum of public employment services available to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) recipients in the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP).

Advancement Plus will serve . . . [TANF recipients] who have been unable to secure employment during the first two months of job search in MFIP. They may be long-term welfare recipients, have little or no work history, lack a

high school diploma or GED, have low basic skills, or have other barriers . . . [Additional components of the model will include] intensive case management, other direct service costs, and wage subsidy, to be funded through contracts between Lifetrack Resources and local funders.

As of May 1, 2001, the time of this report, there were three work sites: Packaging First, the Science Museum of Minnesota and Ramsey County. Between Fall 1999 and May 1, 2001, 105 individuals were served in the Advancement Plus program.

THE EVALUATION

EnSearch was asked to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. What is the Advancement Plus model? What are the most important elements of the program?
2. Who is being served by Advancement Plus? What are their characteristics?
3. What are the characteristics of the participants who are and are not successful in making the transition from paid work experience to employment?
4. What do staff, cooperating agencies and participants see as strengths and weaknesses of the program model and operation?

EnSearch conducted face-to-face, telephone and/or small group interviews with participants, staff, and referring job counselors. Some individuals were interviewed a number of times. For this report, 174 interviews were conducted. There were 97 interviews with 69 Advancement Plus staff, Lifetrack Resources staff, Packaging First staff, or referring job counselors. There were 77 interviews with 51 participants.

Case files for all 81 participants enrolled by December 31, 2000, were reviewed; application information was also reviewed for the 24 newly enrolled prior to March 31, 2001. More than 1,000 records were accessed.

Data were obtained from a number of electronic databases including the MN Department of Economic Security databases, DATAFLEX and MAXIS; the Lifetrack Resources Payroll Database, Check Requisition Database and Daily Payroll Database; and daily e-mail attendance reports.

This evaluation report contains data from progress reports submitted throughout the previous nine months. The process was set up to collect data and provide rapid turnaround so that staff could review the data, identify strengths and weaknesses and use these learnings for continuous program improvement.

THE ADVANCEMENT PLUS MODEL

Lifetrack Resources. Lifetrack Resources has an important history in the area of employment services. It has been providing transitional work in the community and community-supported employment for persons with disabilities since the 1980s. Its history in welfare to work services began as a provider in the STRIDE program in Ramsey County from 1993 to 1998. STRIDE was a mandatory program for two-parent families on welfare and voluntary for single parents. Included in the service-delivery design was a large-scale unpaid Community Work Experience program, CWEP, which placed approximately 400 per year in various public and non-profit work experience sites.

Advancement Plus. Staff of Advancement Plus wanted to explore the effectiveness of paid work experience as a vehicle for helping families make the transition from welfare to work. Although the key elements have remained in place, the time since Fall 1999 has been spent trying various approaches, learning what works and what doesn't and making modifications. Advancement Plus:

- Uses paid transitional work experience as an intervention for people with multiple barriers to employment and self-sufficiency, helping them develop skills, work values and a recent work history.
- Adds paid work experience to the public employment services available to TANF recipients in MFIP.

The Advancement Plus Manual for Paid Work Experience introduced the program as follows:

Welcome to Advancement Plus! Advancement Plus is a 6-month paid work experience program that will prepare you for long-term employment.

Advancement Plus is a Welfare to Work funded work experience created to assist individuals receiving public assistance in their transition to self-sufficiency.

The goals of Advancement Plus are: to assist you in building and strengthening your work experience, workplace behaviors and develop skills that will assist you in becoming a successful competitive employee.

You are required to participate in professional development sessions at each work site. At the Packaging First location, Functional Work English classes will be provided. Each session is offered 2 hours per week.

Advancement Plus offers you work experience in the areas of Packaging and Assembly, Customer Service, General Maintenance, Clerical and other positions.

The manual continued:

Lifetrack Resources pays your wages. Lifetrack Resources operates Advancement Plus. Advancement Plus will provide you with a positive work experience in which you will learn real job skills and practice good work habits. These habits include reporting to work every day and on time, dealing with supervision and organizing your personal life so that you can be a reliable employee.

Advancement Plus offers you three levels of work experience:

Level One: Level One work experience offers a wage of \$6.00 an hour and requires no minimum level of English or work experience.

Level Two: Level Two work experience offers a wage of \$6.50 per hour and requires a higher level of English and skill level.

Level Three: Level Three work experience offers a wage of \$6.50 - \$7.00 an hour and depending on work site could require a higher level of English, education and skill level.

The Advancement Plus Staff. Staffing provided a support network with individuals specializing in given areas. Key roles were training specialist, job counselor, retention specialist and job developer. This approach was described by the MFIP Director:

Our job counselors in general have more counseling skills and more social work background and can get at behaviors and what is behind behaviors. Our job developers can work very closely with employers and can really be sales people almost in terms of selling our participants to employers and look at the types of jobs and wages that are out there and be specialists in that area. Our job retention people can stay focused on the issues that make a person lose a job and how to address them early, before they become major problems.

The MFIP Director, curriculum supervisor, resource room specialist, child care worker, U-Work Community Resource Representative and mentoring coordinators support trainees as needed.

Lifetrack Resources has established agreements with other professionals; case files revealed that some of the trainees had psychological assessments while a few were referred for chemical dependency issues.

Other MFIP Vendors. MFIP vendors who referred clients to Advancement Plus were City of St. Paul Center for Employment Training, Chicanos Latinos Unidos En Servicios, East Metro Opportunity Industrialization Center, Hmong American Partnership, Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Ramsey County Career Counseling Unit, and Wilder JobsFirst.

Advancement Plus Work Sites. Between Fall 1999 and April 30, 2001, 89 trainees were placed at Packaging First. The program was expanded to the Science Museum of Minnesota in November 2000 and to Ramsey County in Spring 2001. Of the four trainees placed at the Science Museum in Fall 2000, none remained by the end of March 2001. At the time of this report three new trainees held clerical positions at the Science Museum. Lifetrack Resources and Ramsey County staff completed contract negotiations and placed two trainees in Public Works positions and were developing job descriptions for paid work experience in the Human Services department.

The Advancement Plus Orientation. Orientation was a 1-day session for the Packaging First site. After visiting other paid work experience programs, Advancement Plus staff created a 1-week orientation for the then newly created Science Museum site. Based on what was learned from the Science Museum effort and a site visit to Transitional Work Corporation--Philadelphia@ work, a 2-week orientation session was created. Demographic data support continuing a 1-day orientation for the Packaging First site and a 2-week orientation for the Science Museum of Minnesota and Ramsey County sites.

Advancement Plus Professional Development Activities. At Packaging First, training specialists were to hold classes twice a week. On occasion classes were canceled if a production deadline was pressing and all trainees were needed on the work floor. Trainees who were Limited English Proficient (LEP) could attend English classes twice a week.

When job positions at the Science Museum and Ramsey County were not yet available in Spring 2001 the program offered computer training, designed to help trainees improve the skills they would need in the mostly clerical positions. They also practiced interviewing skills and toured the Science Museum and Ramsey County sites.

Financial Support. Support for Advancement Plus came from sources including U.S. Department of Labor Welfare to Work and MFIP (through TANF funds). In addition to supporting staff and the paid work experience, a portion of the resources was used to help trainees with rent, car repair, gas, reconnecting discontinued electricity, obtaining work clothes, psychological assessments, replacing stolen documents and the cost of certification tests such as the GED. The mentoring services were partially supported by a grant from the Junior League of St. Paul. The Joyce Foundation supported incentives, travel for staff to visit other paid work experience sites, and the evaluation. An important development is that starting June 1, 2001, trainees placed in Ramsey County positions will be paid from county resources.

ADVANCEMENT PLUS TRAINEES

Between Fall 1999 and March 31, 2001, Advancement Plus served 105 trainees. To enroll in the program, individuals first had to exhaust an 8-week job search and meet the criteria developed by the U.S. Department of Labor. What were their characteristics?

- The majority were female (85%). This differed from the total MFIP individuals served by Lifetrack Resources in Ramsey County where 76% (1,020) were female and 24% (320) were male.
- Advancement Plus trainees tended to be slightly older when compared with all MFIP participants served by Lifetrack Resources; 48% (50) ranged in age from 20 to 34; 47% (49) ranged in age from 35 to 54, and 6% (6) ranged in age from 55 to 64.
- Family size ranged from 2 to 12; the average was 5. In total the 105 Advancement Plus trainees had 335 children; 27 had 1 child, 18 had 2 children, 16 had 3 children, 15 had 4 children, 14 had 5 children, 4 had 6 children, 5 had 7 children, 1 had 8 children and 3 had 9 children. The average number of children under age 18 per trainee was 4.
- Most trainees were single parents (65%), significantly less than the statewide MFIP population where 85% were single parents. Of the trainees, 35% were married and lived with a spouse whereas in the statewide MFIP population only 15% were married and lived with a spouse.
- Many spoke English as their first language (55%); 45% were Limited English Proficient (LEP). The languages spoken by trainees included Somali (13%), Sudanese (1%), Hmong (25%), Spanish (4%) and Khmer (2%).
- Non-citizens who lived in Minnesota before March 1, 1997, were eligible for the full MFIP grant that combined the food stamp and cash assistance grant, if they were pursuing English as a Second Language and citizenship. County staff are required to review each non-citizen case and redetermine eligibility. Most Advancement Plus trainees were U.S. citizens (58%); the remainder were eligible non-U.S. citizens (42%).
- Thirty-five (33%) of the Advancement Plus trainees had reached the 12th grade in the U.S. school system or had a GED. Almost a quarter (24%) had no formal education either in the U.S. or in their country of origin. Even though 35 had reached the 12th grade, only 26 (25%) had a high school diploma or a GED. In the statewide MFIP population for the year 2000, 51% of adults had at least a high school education or GED.
- Most trainees (65%) had been on public assistance less than 5 years.

- A total of 57 trainees (54%) had one or more type of disability; 24 a learning disability, 33 a physical disability and 27 had been or were currently being treated for mental illness.
- Most trainees had been unemployed for quite some time; 67% for 24 to 26 weeks.

Statistics alone fall short of telling the stories behind the numbers. Trainees were characterized by staff as having severe and multiple barriers:

The participants [at Packaging First] . . . have the most severe challenges to moving into unsubsidized employment. Some have issues with anger management, maybe some mental health issues, some chemical issues . . . Child care and lots of family issues. Not just, I don't want to put my little children in day care. It's, I don't know what to do with my 13-year-old child who doesn't qualify for MFIP child care. He needs child care more than my four-year-old does. Children issues, my child's truant, the social worker needs to see me at school or the teacher needs to see me at school, behavioral issues, children in trouble with the law issues, children with special needs, poor work history, lack of motivation, depression, just getting along with people in general . . .

Trainees were on welfare for a variety of reasons and because of a variety of circumstances.

I got on welfare because I had problems with my last child. I used to work at [name] and I was making nice money there. Then to go on welfare because I had a sick baby, it brought me down a lot . . . I couldn't go back because I had had so many problems while I was pregnant . . . This is the best program that I've [ever been in]. I think that because I get a paycheck every two weeks. And that's like how it used to be . . . I feel better about myself because I am working . . . and I know I'm on my way off of [welfare].

At the beginning welfare was helpful. We were like refugees. They brought us to this country. And that was the first help . . . I came because of the war in my country . . . I never thought when I went to sleep that one night [that] "I'm going to leave my country." . . . I used to drive [a] car and have [a] business and we were very wealthy. But we came here with nothing. There is no way to explain [to others about how a] person who had something in their own country and everything in one night was gone . . . We have to adjust ourself to being poor. (Translation)

A recent *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* carried an article on trainees working at Packaging First. One woman's story, Shannon Bernstrom's, is quoted here because the problems she spoke of were not uncommon. Fourteen

trainees missed work at Packaging First because of school-age child issues. These included having children kicked out of school, kicked off the bus, being arrested for stealing a car. One was convicted of a felony because her son took a gun to school.

Shannon Bernstrom's job packaging luggage tags . . . pays only \$6 an hour. Nonetheless, the 35-year-old single mother was glad to be back at work last week. She'd missed more than a week to stay home with her 10-year-old son, who was suspended from school for stealing a fire extinguisher which he took home and tested on a fire he set on the kitchen floor. Just a couple of months earlier, she missed a string of days after her boy punched a brick wall and fractured his knuckles. "I should have been fired a long time ago," she acknowledged during a morning break at Packaging First in St. Paul. Bernstrom has received welfare payments since her daughter, now 11, was born. She has worked, too, but has never held a job longer than a year. Her efforts to keep a job have been derailed by depression, cancer and troubled children . . . Bernstrom says she wants to work full time but can't.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL TRAINEES AT PACKAGING FIRST

What does success for the Advancement Plus program mean? The MFIP Director said in an interview:

I define success with a lot of variation. For some of our participants being able to walk through the door is a success. Maybe they have never had any employment history at all. They have to be extremely full of insecurities as they come to us for the first time . . . We have other people who have never been able to complete a full week of work. And if they can get to that point of coming in to work every day for 5 days, that is success. For other people who have perhaps never been able to get beyond certain cultural differences in people, if they can be on a work floor in an assembly plant with a variety of cultures around them, maybe a person in a wheel chair, maybe a person who is deaf, maybe a person who doesn't speak their language, or dress the way they do, if they can continue coming to work on a floor that is very diverse like that, for them that is success . . . I think [having a full-time job] is only one of the ways that our people succeed. We have a number of participants that have some . . . personality characteristic . . . that keeps them from being able to avoid continuous conflict . . . If we can make any headway with that, or at least help them see that we accept where they are right now, that we are willing to work with them to get to a better place, that is success, too.

To determine the characteristics of those who were or were not successful, the evaluators dealt separately with the 78 trainees at the Packaging First site. A sufficient number of trainees had been working there for a sufficient length of time to make it possible to begin to answer questions about success.

The evaluators studied the characteristics of those who were and were not successful in getting to work at Packaging First 90% of the time. The preliminary data indicated common characteristics among those who reached this 90% level. The profiles presented below should be viewed as very preliminary and caution should be used in interpretation.

Successful Trainees -- Success criterion = worked 90% of the time.

The 24 successful trainees tended to:

- be Limited English Proficient (LEP);
- be eligible non-U.S. citizens;
- have no previous work history;
- have stable housing;
- come from two-parent households;
- have no chemical dependency issue;
- be older (median age 38.5);
- have larger families;
- speak Hmong or Somali;
- have had fewer years of formal education.

Unsuccessful Trainees -- Success criterion = worked 90% of the time.

The 54 unsuccessful trainees tended to:

- speak English as their first language;
- be U.S. citizens;
- be individuals who had been in and out of many jobs;
- be single parents with children;
- be chemically dependent;
- be younger (median age 35.5);
- have had an average of 8 years of schooling (between 4th grade and 12th grade).

Another area examined was that of termination. Two categories were Successful Termination --Accepted Employment and Unsuccessful Termination. The profiles of the successful and the unsuccessful trainees presented below should be viewed as very preliminary and caution should be used in interpretation.

Successful Termination -- Accepted Employment.

The 27 trainees who were successfully terminated because they accepted employment tended to:

- be Lifetrack Resources clients;
- have no chemical dependency issue;
- be present an average of 78 days;
- have fewer years of schooling than those who were unsuccessful;
- not have worked before or have held only one previous job;
- have worked an average of 5 months at Packaging First;
- have one or more disabilities;
- drive a car.

Unsuccessful Termination.

The 12 unsuccessful trainees (those terminated because of attitude issues or because they left the program) tended to:

- come from other MFIP vendors;
- have chemical dependency as an issue;
- have more years of schooling than those who were successful;
- have had two or more jobs before starting work at Packaging First;
- have worked an average of 5.5 months at Packaging First;
- have few disabilities;
- use the bus to get to work.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

An evaluation question was, "What do staff, cooperating agencies and trainees see as strengths and weaknesses of the program model and operation?" Many weaknesses identified by staff or by the evaluators have been addressed or have the potential to be addressed with the new Advancement Plus Paid Work Experience Manual. Strengths observed in early interviews continued to be reinforced.

Science Museum and Ramsey County Sites

Four individuals were placed in Fall 2000 at the Science Museum of Minnesota site. Unfortunately this first group was unsuccessful. Most were terminated because of very poor attendance. The MFIP Director reported that Science Museum staff are happy with the three new trainees now at that site. They are at a higher skill level and better prepared, in part because of the 2-week orientation, the Advancement Plus Paid Work Experience Manual and follow-up professional development activities. There is also increased communication between Advancement Plus and Science Museum staff.

Adding the Science Museum of Minnesota and Ramsey County sites fulfills a long-held dream of having a variety of levels of work experience sites at which to place trainees. Staff hoped having this diversity would enable them to better match trainees and their skills and interests to appropriate sites.

Packaging First Site

The data for the Packaging First site are more comprehensive because that program has been operational since Fall 1999 and the evaluation has been in place since Fall 2000.

Strengths to Build on. Strengths of the model at Packaging First are:

Supportive Staff. Trainees often characterized staff as being supportive on a day-to-day basis and throughout some very difficult times.

My worst day was probably when I found out my kid got in trouble . . . we had a lot of stuff to do and I . . . fell behind because I was talking on the phone . . . with my [child]. But [my line supervisor] worked it out with me. She [said], "Come on, let's step outside and talk about it."

Any time you really need to talk to somebody, no matter who it is, they take a few minutes out even if they are really super busy and they will stop and say, "Let's go talk about it. Maybe I can help you out with this."

The supervisors and people who work here are very nice to us. They always talk to us and say, "Hi! How are you doing today? How do you like the job?" They always ask those questions. (Translation)

A Motivating Approach. When trainees were asked to describe their best day or what they liked about working at Packaging First, hints emerged as to what was motivating. These included: kindness, a sense of being supported, verbal praise, a feeling of being appreciated, recognition of their efforts, payday, when the work is made into a game, parties and celebrations that bring trainees and staff together, being

productive, and, for those who speak English as their second language, learning English. Sample comments follow:

Whenever I do a good job she comes and pats me on the back and says, "I really appreciated you. I really needed you today." And I feel good because she depends on me to come and do certain things. She . . . instilled into me that I can pretty much do whatever I want. . . "All you have to do is go out there and do it." When somebody tells you something so much, you start to believe it . . .

My best day was, we had a class one day and my supervisor and [name] surprised me with a gift certificate to Old Country Buffet because I had, me and a couple workers that were in the group, she had put us aside to get this order done and we got it done in 2 days and it wasn't due for a week.

They treat you like a person. They let you know that they need you here . . . It makes you feel good. It makes you come back the next day . . . We get a lot of stuff done before our deadlines. I feel good about that because she is a good person and she is the supervisor so I want to make her look good as well as myself. That's what keeps us all going.

I like going home at the end of the day knowing that I have accomplished something. It may not be much but it is something . . . The majority of us have kids. I think that is . . . being a good role model for your child . . . letting them know you have to go out and do this and you come home and you have earned something for the day and that makes me feel good.

We already had two parties. One was when one of the Hmong participants got a job after 6 months and we had a going-away party. We have ceremonies where they present awards to workers who have been on time for work and when we graduate and get jobs. (Translation)

The best day is the day they brought the gift for us. We got a jacket and we got t-shirts that say Packaging First. (Translation)

Monday, Wednesday and Friday [are our best days] because we have at least 1 hour of learning English. (Translation)

Cultural Diversity. Packaging First is Lifetrack Resources production facility which provides employment, work adjustment and work transition services for persons who are disabled or disadvantaged. The diversity of the trainees at Packaging First was viewed by trainees as a strength. They believed that they were learning how to work together, a skill that will help them in future jobs.

We understand each other now very well. There was frustration at the beginning because of the barrier of the language. But now we are learning . . . we are trying to understand them. Now we understand each other. We are learning about different cultures . . . (Translation)

[I have learned] that I can work with anybody. That just because somebody has a disability or can't see or hear doesn't mean that you can't talk to them or you can't laugh with them . . . [I had never had experience with people from so many backgrounds] and that kind of intimidated me when I came to the orientation . . . I didn't realize I had a problem with that until I came in here. I mean, I've seen deaf people. I've seen blind people. And it dawned on me, well, I must have a problem if I'm scared to work here. And there's nothing to be scared of, you know. People are people, you know. And I didn't know how to interact.

Careful Attention to First Day Experiences. Trainees said they were nervous when they first arrived at Packaging First but most reported that they felt supported and were made to feel comfortable.

I was kind of iffy about the people, the kind of people who work here, with disabilities or mental illnesses or what not. I was kind of nervous about that part but soon as I sat down people started talking to me. It was a real friendly atmosphere . . . I felt good the first day. That made me come back.

The first day [an MFIP job counselor] showed me how to do the job . . . I thought that it's [going to] be very difficult if I did not have anybody to help me every day . . . But then after I got on to it, it's not that difficult. (Translation)

The first day I thought that I won't be able to do it because I thought it's [going to] be very hard. But then I looked and there were some Hmong people here whom I could ask questions and watch them do the work and try that. (Translation)

Clarity Regarding Purpose of the Advancement Plus Program. The evaluators found that trainees were able to articulate why they had been enrolled in the program. They said they were in the program to get work experience, to gain skills in production and build a work history so they could more easily get another, higher paying job. For trainees for whom English was a second language, learning more English was also part of this experience.

Packaging First is An Excellent Place to Gain Work Experience. Most trainees enjoyed working at the site. This was especially true for the LEP

trainees who reported that this was their first job, or at least their first job in America. Some learned that they could work at a job and be successful. Others, who had worked before, found that Packaging First gave them a supportive place to learn the ins and outs of the American workplace.

[When I get a] different job it will be easier for me [because] I've seen it and I have had experience . . . I used to be a business person [in my home country] where I had a lot of groceries and a department store back home. So I worked always, but in America this is my first job. (Translation)

Although the statistical data suggest that Packaging First may not have been the best placement for English-speaking U.S. citizens, that was not true for all trainees. Some found the support they needed at this site. One said she is now "ready to move on":

[When I first came here] to me it didn't look too important, like well, whatever. Just toss some junk in [packages]. But after the months went by I realized that they really have something going for themselves here. A lot of people come to them for them to package things for them. Or [I thought], "It's just a training program." But it is a real job. This company really has a good reputation and they really take pride in what they do. And that kind of trickles down to you that you start feeling like, "Hey! Wow! We're doing things that are important to people." I mean, there are companies out there . . . products that you see out in the stores and you're the ones that package that and it makes you feel good sometimes seeing the stuff.

[The training specialist] helps me a lot. Like right now she's helping with my resume. She tells me things I need to know and that I don't [know] . . . I appreciate that, too, because I went through a lot of problems . . . So I think that's why I've been here so long. You know, because my attendance wasn't right, and I can't get a good job with all that stuff going on. [The training specialist] was real supportive of that. My supervisor was real supportive of that. I just let them know what was going on. They respected me for that . . . And so now I can go on job search . . . I'm ready to move on.

Weaknesses to Address. When the data were first presented regarding weaknesses to address, the following issues were raised. Many have been addressed. They are presented to show an important strength, that staff take feedback seriously and address the issues.

Microwave. The evaluators found conflicts over the microwave one of the first issues to address. It was an easy "win/win" in that more microwaves would help

solve the problem. These comments illustrate how individuals in conflict sometimes applied a cultural interpretation to a situation. Others felt the conflict was of a territorial nature. In a neutral analysis the solution became as simple as purchasing additional equipment and making scheduling changes.

[Hmong] are very rude. [You have your food in the microwave] and they'll keep opening or closing the door on your hand . . . They put all their containers in [the microwave] . . . Or big bowls and in half a minute it [isn't going] to warm up . . . I just throw my sandwich in the microwave for a couple, a half minute to get it warm. But the Hmongs throw their things in there and your things are usually already in there and they could just wait a couple minutes to take yours out . . . and we have a fight over that stuff.

Some people, they try to take over the microwave. They put their food in there and then they will not allow anybody to touch it until their food gets hot. [This makes it hard] for other people to put their food in there, too. [They wait until] their food is done while a lot of people are waiting to put their food in there, too. (Translation)

The Packaging First site made two changes. First, more microwaves were purchased. Second, the break and lunch times were staggered so that there would be fewer individuals at any time trying to get access to the microwaves. Interviews conducted in the Spring indicated the issue had been resolved.

Production Pressures -- Attendance and Related Issues.

Between August 2000 and the end of February 2001, the attendance, on any given day, ranged from 27% to 70%, the average being 52%. Line supervisors felt frustrated in meeting the production goal with a work force that they could not depend on to show up. Part of the job of production staff is to provide work direction to participants and to maintain Packaging First as a viable business venture. Advancement Plus staff did not want to terminate trainees because for many this was their last chance before being sanctioned. Participants sometimes perceived they were "yelled" at by line supervisors, often when production timelines put everyone under severe stress. The range of views regarding this complex issue follow:

[I would have] consequences for [poor] punctuality, attendance, behaviors on the work floor . . . These behaviors are not accepted in the community by any boss, any company. And they should not be allowed to happen. (Packaging First staff)

We will have somebody who all of a sudden comes for a couple of days . . . but then nothing. Yet we are under the gun on a daily basis for deadlines that we aren't making. (Packaging First staff)

We had hourly people that used to work here and we actually laid them all off because of this program coming in . . . We don't have anyone anymore we can count on so we end up with no people at all. Then we have a customer calling, yelling and screaming. (Packaging First staff)

Some people out there don't give you respect . . . When the supervisors holler at you, or they treat you like you're a kid . . . They need to be respectful if they want to get respect. I [talk about it] but they never change. (Trainee)

Child care and transportation were major barriers to participants maintaining good attendance.

We ride the bus for 2 hours. The problem is that the transportation is very bad. We only get paid 7 hours . . . but we start at 4 in the morning . . . We need to be home when [the children] come home from school so we can do the homework, cooking and other things for our children. (Translation)

I would change it like 9 to 3 or 8 to 3 because I have to see my other kids all in school . . . I want the job counselor to be more lenient, understand is all . . . you [aren't] going to leave three kids . . . in the house. They [have] to be at school at 8. I am [supposed to be at Packaging First] at 7:30 . . . I like to see them out the door when I leave . . . Only [the counselor doesn't] understand that.

A number of things were tried to address the production pressure issues. Attendance has improved and in interviews trainees no longer brought up incidents where they felt disrespected.

- Trainees were offered varied start times.
- Trainees were offered the option of part-time positions.
- A few trainees who were chronically late and who had the most negative attitudes about the work experience at Packaging First were terminated. This appears to have changed the tone of the work site.

This suggests that a program should not be afraid of a termination policy. One trainee saw that change in policy as important:

A lot of people didn't think it was fair. But I think it's fair for the simple fact that if you're not going to come here every day or try to do something with yourself, . . . there's no need for you to be here . . . Those type of people she eliminated because she's making room for people who do want to do something . . . Advancement Plus looked bad in here. And I didn't appreciate that because I'm in that group. You know how they say, "Birds of a feather flock together," and I didn't want to be in that category.

Cultural Misunderstandings. In Fall 2000, trainees cited conflicts arising from cultural differences and from an absence of acceptance and tolerance.

I don't speak English and [co-workers] treat me bad because I don't speak English . . . [Another trainee asked, "How do you know if these people are talking about you? You don't speak English."] There were some American people and I understand a few words and especially those kinds of words, "illegal", and they were always asking for trouble. (Translation)

Some of the people that don't talk English like to be rude, just cut in front of you, and pushing you . . . We were watching some kind of a video tape after break and stuff like that and they just kept going in front of me and walking out and just didn't say excuse me or [anything] like that.

[Some of the workers] had a question about our culture . . . One day they called us in this room and we had to explain why we dress the way we dress and we felt a little bit unwelcomed . . . It had been very difficult, even in the workplace, when we were working. We were laughed at, teased . . . Also, the food, we bring our lunch and [co-workers say], "Oh yuck." I think because of the spices it smells bad . . . They also complain about why [are] you here? Where did you come from? . . . [Staff] apologized to us and they say they will change it. They talked to [co-workers] and said, "You have to leave them alone. This is their culture and this is the way they dress." (Translation)

From the trainees' perspectives there have been changes in cultural understandings and sensitivities. The new Somali trainees, for example, talked about how their needs have been accommodated:

We are hoping that we will do a good job here. And we will get the experience. And also that we will have a good referral saying we did a good job here. [This is the first job for all of us]. We enjoy working here . . . Our bosses are very good bosses. (Translation)

And then the best thing is that we are happy . . . There's not a lot of pressure on us. We do the jobs, and we leave home being happy. (Translation)

We have been treated very good here. (Translation)

We even have a place for praying when we need to pray. And we've been understood very nicely. There's no problem. (Translation)

Language Barriers. Non-English speaking trainees, Spanish, Hmong and Somali, had difficulty at times being understood by supervisors and co-workers. The

language barriers became problematic when there was a crucial issue, someone was not clear about the job, was ill, needed to leave their area, or had a need that was not being understood.

When we are working on a machine you can't just say, "That machine is not hot enough! Don't run it yet." We said it about three times this morning, not to turn it on yet, but they didn't understand us. They tried to run it anyway.

Even though there were plans to have translators available once a week to answer questions, this has not always happened. For example, at a recent all-company meeting there apparently wasn't a Somali translator and when certificates were handed out and no Somali received one, they wondered why.

There was a big meeting today, for example. [When other training specialist] was early she would call in the translator but today they were just like talking about the budget and how the company benefited, about the growth [of the company]. We did not understand anything so we had to stand there and listen. (Translation)

When [the old training specialist] was here also we used to get certificate. Today for example other people got it but Somali didn't get the certificate. (Translation)

Thefts. In Fall 2000, stories circulated about lunches and pop being stolen, about someone's purse and someone's jacket being stolen. The refrigerator was moved into an area where it could be seen to discourage such behavior. At a subsequent staff meeting, a discussion was held about ways to address the theft issue. Packaging First staff tried to obtain secure lockers but the cost was prohibitive. Staff also talked about theft being an indicator of deeper problems. One talked about individuals who had come to him because they had no money for food. All were made aware that there were resources available to help individuals in need and ways to access petty cash when needed. During the Spring 2001 interviews, thefts were no longer mentioned.

Confusion Regarding Finances and Wages. Although trainees basically understood that the program gave them an opportunity to gain skills and work experience, there was confusion about whether or not they were benefiting financially. For some, the increase in wages increased their rent. For some, their grants seemed to go down more than they had expected. The \$6 an hour wage was seen by many trainees as too low. Some would like to see small raises during the time they are there, others would like to see wages at \$7 per hour. The per hour rate continued to be a source of conversation during the interviews conducted Spring 2001.

Job Seeking. Some trainees were unsure what they could expect in terms of the job search. They were not clear when they should start looking, if they could get help looking when they first started the program, if Advancement Plus was going to get them a job after the 6 months were over, if staff would offer help to get the kinds of jobs they really wanted.

How long do we have to be here to get help finding a new job? (Translation)

[The hardest thing about coming here is] knowing this job is only temporary . . . Right where my 6 months ends is Christmas . . . I kind of want to see if they'll let me stay until after Christmas and then go out and find another job because I like it here.

Some trainees are getting the help they need to complete job applications and take the next steps. At a May 2001 staff meeting where the statistical data were discussed, staff expressed concern that although the LEP trainees were successful in terms of being reliable employees, present 90% or better, many were not making the transition to full-time work. The MFIP Director reported that the contract for Welfare to Work dollars expected that the MFIP vendor would provide job placement support. The more recent contract expects this support to come from Advancement Plus. The job developer expressed concern and frustration over the labor market for LEP trainees. He reported that at the beginning of the program there was an employer who hired Advancement Plus LEP trainees, but that employer no longer needs workers. He also reported that when positions are available, the LEP trainees with the best English are hired first. The evaluators, at that same meeting, spoke about a LA-MANO report to The Minnesota Futures Fund -- a coordinated response by the Minnesota Council on Foundations, the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, and the Minnesota Council of Churches to the issue of devolution. The LA-MANO report stated that 56% of job openings require a high school diploma, many of the jobs available require both a high school diploma and advanced training, employers consider English ability as a prerequisite to employment, those with a high school education will compete with three other job seekers for every job opening. Only one of the 37 LEP trainees at Packaging First had a high school diploma or GED. In this job market it will be difficult to help even those Advancement Plus LEP trainees who have been successful at Packaging First make a successful transition from paid work experience to regular employment.

Turnover in Training Specialist Staff. Since the beginning of the program, there have been four training specialists at the Packaging First site. Part of the issue appears to be the demands of the position and possibly the level of pay. One interviewee's comments reflected others:

[In 21 months there have been four training specialists at Packaging First and it] is presently without a full-time training specialist. I hear the same thing from everyone who holds that position, that it is too much for one person to manage. The training specialists want to be able to do more than be someone who tracks attendance and tracks people down. I've heard from them that they want to be a support person and trainer but there isn't time to do it all.

New Insights -- Learnings regarding managers showing appreciation across cultures. During the second round of interviews with trainees, the evaluators discovered that the Hmong female trainees could not recall a day when they were told that their work was appreciated at Packaging First. This finding was shared with management and a meeting was held with the interviewer, Hmong interpreter, senior management at Packaging First and Lifetrack Resources, the Hmong line supervisor and the Hmong lead production worker.

It was learned from the Hmong line supervisor that it was uncomfortable and culturally inappropriate for him to extend praise to Hmong women on an individual basis, as is common in the American workplace.

It was learned from the Hmong lead production worker that she also generally let people know as a group that they were doing a good job. At times she would tell a female worker individually that she had done a good job if she had worked especially hard on a project. She said, however, she did not tell male workers individually that they had done a good job as it would not be culturally appropriate for her to do so.

It was learned from the interpreter, the Hmong line supervisor and the Hmong lead production worker that supervisors typically extended praise to the group so all felt appreciated and so no one felt left out or unacknowledged. It was also learned that it is typically uncomfortable to give or receive praise from someone of the opposite sex.

Solutions identified included:

It was suggested that senior management send out a memo that can be read by Hmong staff to the Hmong trainees to let them know the management is happy with their work.

The operations and sales manager reported that they will put a list of greetings and common expressions in Hmong, Somali, Spanish and American Sign Language up in the lunchroom to encourage supervisors and all workers to use one another's language to indicate a willingness to show respect for one another's culture.

It was suggested that all staff learn how to say "Good Job!" and "Thank you!" in all languages represented at Packaging First and that they use these expressions regularly.

Job Counselors -- Bringing Them Into the Loop. Job counselors employed both by Lifetrack Resources or other MFIP vendors were interviewed during October 2000 through March 2001. Work remains to bring job counselors more fully into the loop.

- There is a need for increased communication regarding the key components of the program and increased coordination between job counselors and Advancement Plus staff.
- Interpreters need to be readily available.
- Job counselors suggested Advancement Plus offer training in other skill areas, at different work sites and for a wider variety of jobs.

Job counselors now receive daily e-mail attendance reports. The distribution of the Advancement Plus Manual for Paid Work Experience to all job counselors and the expanded distribution to Packaging First trainees may address the issues.

Advancement Plus Staff Respond to Issues and Concerns. As a part of their commitment to continuous quality improvement, Lifetrack Resources staff present issues and responses to the Board of Directors annually. The report of the MFIP Director and staff presented in the Spring of 2001 covered many of the concerns raised during the first year and a half of the Advancement Plus program:

Issue: Participants unprepared for the reality of the workplace.

Response: Two-week orientation class [created and offered] prior to placement.

Issue: Many limitations exist in the [hard to employ] families -- usually three to five barriers in each. Issues include mental health, chemical dependency, learning disabilities.

Response: Use of screening tools for the above. Received [MN Department of Children, Families and Learning] grant for screening, diagnosis and accommodations.

Issue: Participants express a feeling of lack of options for positions.

Response: Science Museum of Minnesota [and Ramsey County] recruited to be sites.

Issue: Employee frustration at Packaging First over microwaves at noon break.

Response: Purchase of additional microwaves/wiring to accommodate.

Issue: Need for improved cultural understanding within Packaging First staff.

Response: Team of consultants brought in for a workshop discussing Hmong, Hispanic and Somali cultures.

Issue: Participant lack of punctuality at start time at Packaging First.

Response: Survey of participants and resulting options for start time.

Issue: Poor attendance and punctuality.

Response: Paid Time Off (PTO) considered and developed.

CONCLUSIONS

The Advancement Plus staff have created a program model with many strengths. These include:

- The staff. Trainees identified the staff as a key strength. They were characterized as caring, understanding, helpful and sensitive.
- A motivating approach. Verbal praise, recognition, payday, having work linked to a goal or game, parties, celebrations, and, for the non-English speakers, learning English were motivating.
- Efforts to build on cultural diversity. Trainees reported that they were learning about other cultures and learning how to work with people from different cultures.
- The newly created 2-week orientation. Trainees' assessment of the 2-week orientation was that it was valuable, that most of the sessions were worthwhile and that it helped them become ready to work.
- The new manual. The Advancement Plus Manual for Paid Work Experience emerged from a collection of handouts to a booklet where information regarding the key elements of the program are spelled out.
- Levels One, Two and Three work sites. Adding the Science Museum and Ramsey County sites fulfills a long-held dream of having a variety of levels of work experience at which to place trainees. This enables staff to better match trainees to appropriate sites.

What Advancement Plus will ultimately learn about barriers and what works to overcome them and what doesn't, may give important insights to others who wrestle with the issues. In the public debate and as Advancement Plus staff and its partners work on the next steps, a few of the barriers and program weaknesses need specific attention:

- As Advancement Plus staff and the public-at-large continue to hold as a goal a successful transition from welfare to employment, effort is needed to create bridges to employment. In a strong economy with low unemployment, finding the next step jobs is manageable; however, with any downturn in the economy the task becomes more difficult, especially for those with multiple barriers.
- Data suggest the importance of strengthening language skills of LEP trainees and helping trainees obtain GEDs or diplomas. Staff should continue with English and try to get GED classes on-site.
- The data indicate that individuals less likely to succeed had a housing crisis. Creative solutions need to be examined by the public-at-large.
- In public discussions about welfare reform, lack of public transportation has often been mentioned as a significant barrier. Several staff wondered if providing transportation would hurt the trainees as taking public transportation is a skill they need to learn. However, the harsh realities of the parents dealing with children, school, day care, long distances, infrequent and inconvenient bus runs would suggest that providing transportation during this developmental stage might encourage success. Creative solutions can be explored, one perhaps being on-site drivers' education and practice.
- The training specialist position at Packaging First needs to be stabilized.
- Distribute the Advancement Plus Manual for Paid Work Experience widely to make sure that all involved, staff and trainees, fully understand the Advancement Plus model.
- Day care for pre-school and school-age children in crisis situations continues to be a barrier. The individuals less likely to succeed appear to be single mothers with children. The school-age child care issue is one that Advancement Plus, and MFIP as a whole, has yet to address.
- Many trainees have chemical dependencies, domestic violence issues or mental illness, including post-traumatic stress disorder. Chemical dependency was most present in individuals who were unsuccessful. Continue to seek screening tools and approaches that will uncover these issues early in the 6-month program.

Advancement Plus wanted to demonstrate the effectiveness of a paid work experience for persons moving from welfare dependency to work. They have been successful in serving individuals with multiple barriers. They did not, as is sometimes the case, select only those most likely to succeed.

Consider that of the 105 trainees:

- Only 33% (35) had reached the 12th grade and 24% (25) had no formal education.
- Most (65%, 68) were single parents.
- The size of the families ranged from 2 to 12 with the average family size being 5.
- Most (67%, 70) had been unemployed for quite some time, 24 to 26 weeks.

Additional information was available for the 78 placed at Packaging First by December 31, 2000.

- 97% (76) had no significant work history.
- 49% (38) had never had a job outside the home before starting at Packaging First.
- 29% (23) had previously held two or more jobs.

Many came to Packaging First with a number of issues and potential barriers to success:

- 18% (14) were victims of domestic violence.
- 19% (15) had chemical dependency issues.
- 65% (51) had one or more disabilities.
- 47% (37) had limited English skills.
- 32% (25) had a housing crisis and 18% (14) had a crisis with a school-age child while at Packaging First.
- 22% (17) had a criminal history and of these, 7 had been convicted of a felony.
- 71% (55) used the bus as their primary or only mode of transportation.

The model holds promise for helping individuals with significant and multiple barriers transition from welfare to work or to a more appropriate type of assistance. Of the 78 in the study group, 59 had left the program at the time of this report. Of these 59, 27 (46%) accepted employment and 10 (17%) were terminated because of doctors' orders or because they were reassigned to Social Security Income (SSI) status for reasons such as psychosis, borderline personality disorder, or severe PTSD. There has been success and, now that the model is stabilized, there is even greater potential for it becoming an important state and national strategy in this time of welfare reform.

Staff from Advancement Plus, Lifetrack Resources, Packaging First, Ramsey County and the Science Museum of Minnesota are to be commended. They have created a caring environment. They have been willing to talk about what was not working, to identify and to implement solutions -- key strengths to celebrate.



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