

Economic Mobility Pathways' (EMPath) Mobility Mentoring®

Summary

EMPath is a Boston-based nonprofit that uses the Mobility Mentoring coaching model with the goal of helping people with low incomes move out of poverty and reach economic independence. Mobility Mentoring is an alternative to traditional case management with four essential elements: coaching for economic mobility, the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency® assessment, goal setting, and recognition for progress made on goals. The model is informed by evidence from brain science research about the negative associations between the chronic stresses of poverty and the development of executive functioning skills. Mobility Mentoring seeks to help participants acquire the problem-solving and goal-setting skills necessary to successfully manage their lives and become economically mobile.

Funding source



EMPath is a nonprofit and receives state government funding and donations from individual donors, foundations, and corporations.

The Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development funds the delivery of Mobility Mentoring in EMPath's shelter and stabilization programs, and charitable donations fund the delivery of Mobility Mentoring in EMPath's nonresidential programs.

Intervention description



EMPath uses the Mobility Mentoring coaching model, an alternative to traditional case management, with the goal of helping people with low incomes move out of poverty and reach economic independence. EMPath defines Mobility Mentoring as “the professional practice of partnering with participants so that they may acquire the resources, skills, and sustained behavior changes necessary to attain and preserve their economic independence” (Babcock 2012).

Services provided

Case management;
Financial education;
Financial incentives;
Housing.



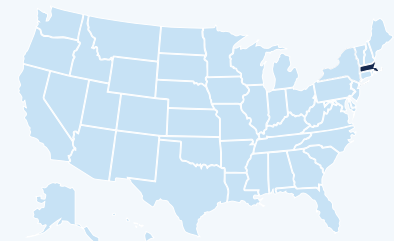
Populations served

EMPath serves people experiencing homelessness through its short-term shelter and stabilization programs, and it serves people with low incomes through its long-term nonresidential programs.



Setting

Greater Boston, MA, area
Tested in multiple settings



Year first implemented

2009 (ongoing at the time of data collection)

What are case studies?

Case studies provide practitioners with information about innovative interventions that states, counties, community-based organizations, or other entities are undertaking to improve employment outcomes for TANF participants and other individuals with low incomes, especially public assistance recipients. **Case studies cover interventions not included elsewhere in the Clearinghouse because they have not yet been rigorously evaluated.**

EMPath designed Mobility Mentoring based on emerging evidence from brain science research that the stresses of poverty are negatively associated with the optimal development of executive functioning skills (Babcock 2020). EMPATH cites research showing that poverty is negatively associated with the ability to think creatively and strategically; solve problems; be a resilient, motivated, and self-directed learner; and have the strong self-regulation and interpersonal skills necessary to work effectively with and lead others. Mobility Mentoring seeks to help people with low incomes acquire the problem-solving and goal-setting skills necessary to navigate the complex pathways out of poverty and become economically mobile.

EMPath coaches, called Mobility Mentors, deliver the four essential elements of the intervention:

1. **Coaching for economic mobility.** EMPATH approaches coaching as a participant-directed, one-on-one partnership. The coaching process begins with participants talking with their Mobility Mentors about their aspirations and then assessing themselves on the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency assessment. Mobility Mentors work with participants to strengthen their decision making, persistence, and resilience over time.
2. **The Bridge to Self-Sufficiency assessment.** The Bridge to Self-Sufficiency assessment is a multidimensional visual assessment designed by EMPATH to help intervention participants chart a path to economic self-sufficiency. The Bridge to Self-Sufficiency assessment is based on research showing that attaining full economic independence requires most people to improve their lives in five basic domains: family stability, well-being, financial management, education and training, and employment and career management. The Bridge assessment presents each of these domains as a pillar on a bridge and identifies five levels to each pillar. For example, the levels of the education and training pillar range from “less than a high school diploma or GED/High School Equivalency Test” up to “bachelor’s degree or higher complete.” Bridge assessments identify strengths and obstacles to success in each of the five pillars. The assessments help participants picture where they are on their journey to self-sufficiency, think about their strengths and

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challenges, and understand how various issues in their lives are interconnected. This is meant to help them think about how to set goals in a way most likely to help them get ahead. Mobility Mentors encourage participants to explore not only where they are situated on each Bridge assessment pillar but also why they are situated there and to think about the links between Bridge assessment pillars. EMPATH also calculates a Bridge assessment score with a maximum of 100 points across the 5 domains (each with a maximum of 20 points). EMPATH considers a participant’s Bridge assessment score to be a measure of their overall self-sufficiency and regards higher scores as indicating higher levels of self-sufficiency. EMPATH uses Bridge assessment scores to track aggregate progress over time across its shelter and stabilization programs and nonresidential programs.

3. **Goal setting.** The Bridge to Self-Sufficiency assessment acts as a blueprint for participants to set goals. After participants have assessed themselves on the Bridge assessment, Mobility Mentors ask participants to contemplate the future and the most important things they would like to achieve. Mentors encourage participants to think strategically about the next steps they could take to achieve their aspirations. Participants then create SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) goal agreements with their mentors. In these agreements, participants outline their commitments to their goals, the steps they plan to take to achieve these goals, and target dates for completing the steps. Participants determine their own goals, and mentors support participants in prioritizing what they would like to work on, strategizing about potential barriers and challenges, and thinking through options for additional resources and support. Mobility Mentors offer encouragement, facilitate reflection, and help refocus if necessary. As participants achieve goals, they move up the Bridge assessment closer to economic self-sufficiency.

4. **Recognition.** Mobility Mentors acknowledge and celebrate participants when they are working toward and accomplish a goal through recognitions, such as celebrations of success, certificates, supportive messages, or monetary incentives.

EMPath currently provides Mobility Mentoring to participants served in its shelter and stabilization programs, as well as its nonresidential programs:

1. **Shelter and stabilization programs.** EMPATH operates shelters across the greater Boston area. Shelter residents are selected by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development based on their eligibility for homelessness-related transitional housing. Residents receive Mobility Mentoring for the duration of their stay in EMPATH's shelter programs (8 to 24 months). EMPATH uses Mobility Mentoring to help shelter residents successfully transition into permanent housing and become more self-sufficient. Upon initial placement in emergency housing, families work with a Mobility Mentor and focus on setting goals related to stabilizing the family in the new environment. Once families are stable, they work with their mentor to focus on goals related to housing, education, employment with a clear career path, and the establishment of a robust savings plan. EMPATH also provides Mobility Mentoring through its stabilization program to formerly homeless families who are in permanent housing in neighborhoods throughout Boston.

2. **Nonresidential programs.** EMPATH also serves families in supportive housing, public housing developments, and rental-voucher-assisted housing (not operated by EMPATH). Participants in EMPATH's nonresidential programs receive Mobility Mentoring for three to five years. EMPATH uses Mobility Mentoring to help participants in its nonresidential programs gain their footing and build economically stable and secure lives in their own homes. Nonresidential clients are also eligible for EMPATH's Career Family Opportunity (CFO) program. The CFO program is distinctively designed as an intensive, five-year program that focuses on long-term goals. Individuals are required to apply to participate, and the program aims to serve parents with low incomes who are the heads of their households, hold a high school diploma or GED, are in school or working part time, and

live in permanent, subsidized housing. CFO participants receive Mobility Mentoring and map out their long-term education, career, and financial goals, which often include saving money, completing college, and achieving housing stability. CFO also provides participants with matches to savings of up to \$3,425 of their own money. CFO program offices are located in south Boston.

EMPATH provides participants in its shelter and stabilization programs and nonresidential programs with a variety of other services, directly or via referral, through its Center for Learning and Practice, housed at EMPATH's Boston downtown office. At the Center for Learning and Practice, specialists with expertise in career management, financial literacy, higher education, well-being, and other skills help participants increase their knowledge in these areas and refer participants to community resources.

Mobility Mentor positions require a bachelor's degree or equivalent related work experience (for example, four years of experience or an associate's degree plus two years of experience). All staff receive several days of classroom training, including specific training in motivational interviewing and coaching techniques, and several months of job shadowing before they meet individually with participants. All staff receive a foundational training called Mobility Mentoring Foundations (an online course developed by EMPATH). Staff are required to complete 30 to 36 hours of training every year and have opportunities to participate in multiple workshops and webinars held by EMPATH's capacity-building department every month. Mobility Mentors are supervised by staff who are typically former mentors themselves.

Research on intervention to date



This intervention has not been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness. No rigorous evaluations of the Mobility Mentoring intervention have been completed; only descriptive analyses of outcomes and pre-post evaluations have been conducted. Brandeis University researchers conducted a pre-post evaluation of EMPATH's pilot implemented in 2009 and found that participant earnings, tax payments, individual savings, and postsecondary degree attainment increased after program completion (Prottas and Gaiser 2016). The

pre-post analysis also suggested that total program benefits (including earnings gains, subsidy reductions, and increases in taxes) exceeded program costs by \$8,000 per participant per year (Prottas 2015). EMPath tracks data on key participant outcomes that showed that in fiscal year 2021, 74 percent of participants increased their Bridge assessment scores; 94 percent of participants who exited shelter programs moved into stable permanent housing; and participants reported a 9 percent increase in annual income on average. These data also showed that 71 percent of participants saw increases in their credit scores, and 30 percent of participants enrolled in an educational or training program (EMPath 2021c). However, in the absence of a comparison group, these outcomes cannot be attributed to EMPath, as other factors might explain these changes.

EMPath provides training, consultation, and support to member organizations of EMPath's Economic Mobility Exchange so members can implement their own Mobility Mentoring-informed models. The Exchange is a network of human services organizations and includes nonprofits, child care centers, schools, colleges, health care providers, government agencies, direct service providers, and philanthropic

More information



More information on this intervention is available from the following resources:

EMPath website: <https://www.empathways.org/>

Anderson, M.A., E. Brown, E.W. Cavadel, M. Derr, and J.F. Kauff (2018). *Using psychology-informed strategies to promote self-sufficiency: A review of innovative programs*, OPRE Report #2018-41, Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research. Available at <https://www.mathematica.org/-/media/publications/pdfs/labor/2018/goals-program-brief.pdf>.

Babcock, E. (2012). *Mobility Mentoring™*, Boston, MA: Crittenton Women's Union. Available at <http://s3.amazonaws.com/empath-website/pdf/Research-MobilityMentoring-0512.pdf>.

Babcock, E. (2014). *Using brain science to design new pathways out of poverty*, Boston, MA: Crittenton Women's Union. Available at <http://s3.amazonaws.com/empath-website/pdf/Research-UsingBrainScienceDesignPathwaysPoverty-0114.pdf>.

Babcock, E. (2018). *Using brain science to transform human services and increase personal mobility from poverty*, Washington, DC: U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty. Available at https://www.mobilitypartnership.org/sites/default/files/using_brain_science_to_transform_human_services_and_increase_personal_mobility_from_poverty.pdf.

Babcock, E. (2020). *New strategies for fishing: coaching for economic mobility in the 21st century*, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute. Available at <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/New-strategies-for-fishing.pdf>.

Butrica, B.A., K. Martinchek, M. Galvez, H. Hahn, S. McKernan, and S. Spaulding (2020). *Effective programs and policies for promoting economic well-being*, Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Available at https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/101105/Effective%20Programs%20and%20Policies%20for%20Promoting%20Economic%20Well-Being_2.pdf.

organizations. Several members are tracking participant outcomes, and some are conducting impact evaluations of their Mobility Mentoring-informed models. With recently expanded funding from Blue Meridian Partners, EMPath launched a randomized controlled trial study of the effect of Mobility Mentoring delivered by AMP Up Boston, a three-year program for residents of the Boston Housing Authority; participant enrollment began in fall 2022.

Case study information sources

The primary sources of information for this case study were materials available through the EMPath website and elsewhere on the internet. The "More information" section below provides references for these materials. In addition, the Pathways Clearinghouse conducted a telephone interview and emailed with leaders at EMPath in July and August of 2022. The Pathways Clearinghouse shared a draft of the case study with EMPath and incorporated revisions for accuracy and completeness. For more information about the methods for selecting and developing the case studies, please see the Protocol for Pathways Clearinghouse Case Studies on the [Pathways Clearinghouse project page](#).

Derr, M., and K. Joyce (2020). *Options for building coaching practices into TANF programs: A comparison of five models*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Available at https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/uploaded_files/ProjectImproveCoachingPractices-508.pdf.

EMPath (2021a). *Annual report FY 2021*, Boston, MA: Economic Mobility Pathways. Available at http://s3.amazonaws.com/empath-website/pdf/FY21_Annual_Report_Final.pdf.

EMPath (2021b). *Economic Mobility Exchange annual member report FY21*, Boston, MA: Economic Mobility Pathways. Available at http://s3.amazonaws.com/empath-website/pdf/FINAL_EmpathExchangeReport_2021_SHORTENED.pdf.

EMPath (2021c). *Mobility Mentoring® 2021 impact report*, Boston, MA: Economic Mobility Pathways. Available at http://s3.amazonaws.com/empath-website/pdf/FINAL_FY21_EMPath_Impact_Report.pdf.

Protas, J. (2015). *Return on investment of Career Family Opportunity*, Waltham, MA: Brandeis University.

Protas, J., and M.D. Gaiser (2016). *Evaluation of EMPATH's Career Family Opportunities program*, Waltham, MA: Brandeis University.

Ruiz de Luzuriaga, N. (2015). *Coaching for economic mobility*, Boston, MA: Economic Mobility Pathways. Available at http://s3.amazonaws.com/empath-website/pdf/EMPATH_Coaching_Brief_Web.pdf.

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