



West Philadelphia Skills Initiative (WPSI) Customized Job Development Intervention

Summary

WPSI’s customized, cohort-based job development intervention links adults living in Philadelphia who are unemployed or underemployed to long-standing local employers with job vacancies or high-turnover positions. WPSI aims to prepare, support, and connect Philadelphians to career pathways opportunities through soft skills training and work readiness activities, one-on-one or group coaching, on-the-job training that leads to certification or credentialing, post-employment services to help participants stay in their jobs, and an alumni support program to help build the social capital of intervention alumni.

Funding source



WPSI’s technical training is supported by federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds and Philadelphia Works, Inc. (Philadelphia’s workforce development board). Other intervention services are paid through private grant funds and donations.

Intervention description



University City District is a partnership between long-standing employers, small businesses, and residents in Philadelphia’s University City neighborhood that focuses on community revitalization.

In 2009, University City District created WPSI to bridge the gap between Philadelphians who are unemployed or underemployed and

Services provided



Education; Employment retention services; Financial education; Financial incentives; Soft skills training; Supportive services; Training (*Occupational or sectoral training*); Work and work-based learning (*On-the-job training*); Work readiness activities (*Job development/job placement; Job search assistance*)

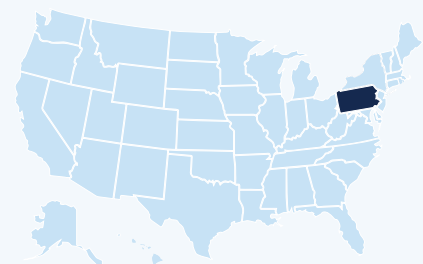
Populations served



WPSI serves adults living in Philadelphia who are unemployed or underemployed, have a high school diploma or GED, and face barriers to securing and maintaining employment. The service population includes individuals who were formerly incarcerated. WPSI serves neighborhoods with high concentrations of people living in poverty.

Setting

West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



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.**

large employers that have a long-standing presence in the community and struggle with high numbers of vacant positions or high turnover. WPSI created a job placement intervention that uses a tailored cohort model to prepare and train local workers for the employers' available job openings. WPSI's Customized Job Development Intervention has three main components that connect Philadelphians to career pathways opportunities: a Signature Professional Development Program (SPDP), a Certified Skills Program, and #workwithWPSI.

SPDP. The WPSI employer engagement team begins by recruiting and engaging employers to have them identify a position with multiple openings, and then creates a program that prepares eligible job seekers for that position. Programs are at least three weeks long.

Employers must meet the following criteria to participate: (1) offer at least 10 jobs that can be available to participants to form an SPDP cohort, where the jobs have opportunities for career advancement; (2) pay \$15 per hour or more, or, if a job starts at a lower wage, it must have a pathway to wage growth; and (3) ensure jobs are accessible to individuals with at minimum a high school diploma or GED.

- **Intervention design.** Once WPSI selects an employer, WPSI staff analyze the individual job role in depth to inform the design of the SPDP. Specifically, they examine the employer's hiring, onboarding, and promotion processes, successes and challenges in retaining and training employees for the job in question, any reasons for high turnover, and company culture. The WPSI team also conducts site visits to employers and interviews current employees in the position to learn about day-to-day operations. The job role analysis and formation of the SPDP can take between 6 and 24 months depending on the employer's administrative requirements and prior collaborations with WPSI. The employer decides the number of cohort participants (between 15 and 25) and the cohort's graduation date.
- **Participant selection.** Using the information collected during the employer engagement phase, WPSI develops a customized recruitment and interview process to identify qualified participants for the selected position.

WPSI created a job placement intervention that uses a tailored cohort model to prepare and train local workers for the employers' available job openings.

WPSI recruits participants through various methods such as alumni networks and electronic mailing lists, flyers posted in the community, and information sessions with the employer. The SPDP's application criteria and eligibility requirements vary by employer. Generally, WPSI staff help participants (1) complete an online application detailing their employment history, (2) take a reading assessment, (3) submit a background check, and (4) write a personal statement about their goals and aspirations in lieu of a resume. Some employers have additional requirements, such as passing a drug test or having a driver's license. Qualified applicants are also interviewed in person or virtually by a WPSI staff member.

- **Intervention delivery.** Once they are accepted into the intervention, participants receive a \$150 weekly stipend during their participation in the SPDP and attend an orientation that outlines the intervention's expectations. WPSI staff and partner facilitators support and prepare participants to apply for the job to maximize their prospects in hiring. WPSI partners with various businesses and agencies to deliver some of the intervention services. The services include:
 - Courses that teach work readiness activities to prepare participants for the employer's application and interview process. These activities include creating a resume, practicing interviewing skills, professional networking and personal branding, and career goal setting and attainment. At WPSI's guest speaker events, participants may also connect with WPSI alumni working with the same employer to learn about their experience with the employer and their time in WPSI.
 - Referrals to case management services, housing, and other social services for participants experiencing any barriers to employment or needs for supportive services.

- Weekly classroom-based courses or one-on-one coaching to help participants create career-related goals, learn soft skills, build problem-solving skills and self-regulation, practice mindfulness as a self-regulating technique, increase self-efficacy through coursework focused on recognizing the power over one's choices and understanding how one's experiences affect their perspectives, and learn workplace culture and self-advocacy as an employee at the organization they are preparing to enter.
- **Consideration for position and post-employment support.** WPSI participants are guaranteed an interview with the employer during the intervention, but are not guaranteed placement and must apply for the position. If the employer hires the participant, WPSI provides post-employment and retention services such as one-on-one and group retention coaching and support for completing onboarding requirements such as background checks and paperwork.

Certified Skills Program. Once participants complete the SPDP curriculum, they may begin a Certified Skills Program that offers short-term sectoral or on-the-job training to obtain certifications or credentials needed for the position. In the past, they have obtained credentials such as CPR certification and commercial driver's licenses (CDLs). WPSI staff collaborate with the employer to determine the training needed for the job.

During the employer engagement phase and the development of the SPDP, WPSI identifies whether a Certified Skills Program is needed to help participants prepare for the job and if the training will be provided by the employer, WPSI staff, or a third-party training provider. The training varies in length from one week to six months and the content is generally employer-led. The employer's degree of involvement in the training varies depending on their capacity and resources; for example, some employers provide the entire training themselves, and some conduct aspects of the training such as presentations or mock interviews. During the Certified Skills Program, employers and participants can meet and learn about each other as prospective employees and employers.

The Customized Job Development Intervention has been designed for multiple positions and industries such as transportation, health care, and private security. As of the writing of this case study, WPSI partners with 7 employers and runs 13 SPDPs with 2 Certified Skills Programs for 9 different job roles.

#workwithWPSI. WPSI also offers an alumni engagement component called #workwithWPSI that provides job networking and professional development services for WPSI graduates. The component aims to help former participants build social capital; give them additional support post-intervention such as personal coaching, support with attaining postsecondary education through scholarships, and financial advising; and offer opportunities for alumni to provide feedback on the program and suggest potential improvements. The alumni receive newsletters, participate in alumni networking events, are notified of job opportunities, and receive resources on certifications and upskilling opportunities. The alumni services also help former participants who were not hired after the intervention by connecting them with other hiring employers. Employers who engage with WPSI but need job openings filled immediately are directed to the alumni network to recruit former and recent WPSI graduates for their openings. As noted, alumni whose employers are engaged in the SPDP sometimes serve as guest speakers for current participants.

WPSI acts as an intermediary between employers and government funding to subsidize intervention services and training and ensure resources are available to participants free of cost that are meant to help them secure and hold a job. For example, WPSI arranged a CDL training for a Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority Bus Operator program using funding from the city's public workforce development board and partnered with Goodwill Industries to deliver the training.

One of the challenges WPSI faces is helping employers understand it is not a short-term solution, and developing an SPDP takes time and a significant commitment from the employer. For this reason, WPSI dedicates enough time to the employer engagement phase to help employers understand the mission, goals, and expectations of the Customized Job Development Intervention.

WPSI expanded from three to eight full-time staff to increase service capacity. Staff with roles specifically dedicated to participant services include a senior manager of employer relationships, a managing director of participant relations, a director of programs, and 11 contractors or facilitation partners who deliver specific components of the curricula and technical training sessions.

All intervention services are free for participants. A 2019 analysis reported that the intervention cost an estimated \$4,500 per participant hired into a job. WPSI's operating budget is more than \$1.1 million (2019 dollars), and the intervention costs include staff salaries, coaching and facilitator contracts, and alumni network services.

Research on intervention to date



This intervention has not been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness. In 2019, an external researcher who analyzed WPSI's administrative

data found that WPSI placed almost 530 graduates either in a full-time job with benefits or on a path to full-time employment with benefits, and the graduates earned an average hourly wage of \$15.49. Of the WPSI graduates who were hired, 82 percent maintained their positions for at least a year. However, in the absence of a comparison group, these outcomes cannot be attributed to WPSI's intervention, as other factors might explain these changes.

Case study information sources

During the summer of 2022, the Pathways Clearinghouse collected information for this case study from telephone interviews and emails with leaders at WPSI. The Pathways Clearinghouse shared a draft of the case study with WPSI and incorporated revisions to ensure 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](#).

More information



More information on this intervention is available at <https://philadelphiaskills.org/>.

Katz, B., and M. Humes (2019). *West Philadelphia Skills Initiative*, Philadelphia, PA: Drexel University Nowak Metro Finance Lab. Available at <https://dev-wpsi.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/WPSI-A-Model-For-Urban-Workforce-Development.pdf>.

University City District (UCD) (2021). *West Philadelphia Skills Initiative program overview*, Philadelphia, PA: UCD. Available at https://issuu.com/universitycity/docs/wpsi_program_overview.

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