

Detroit at Work Program Evaluation: Lessons from JumpStart and Skills for Life



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Executive Summary

Detroit’s economy is rebounding from the COVID-19 recession and experiencing a business and building boom that is bringing job opportunities and investment to the city. Since exiting bankruptcy in 2014, Detroit’s employment and per capita income have grown steadily. During the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment in Detroit peaked at 39 percent in May 2020. Although it rebounded relatively quickly, employment did not return to pre-pandemic levels until early 2023 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025a). Still, many Detroit residents continue to struggle to make ends meet (Boudette, 2024). Detroit’s poverty rate is over 30 percent, and the typical household’s income was just under \$40,000 in 2023 (U.S. Census, 2024). In 2024, Detroit’s unemployment rate was 9.5 percent, higher than the Michigan state and national rates of 4.0 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025b). Many Detroit residents experience barriers to employment, such as not having a high school degree, lack of reliable access to transportation, or having a disability (Holzer & Rivera, 2019). As employment opportunities grow in the city, residents are seeking the skills and experience needed to fill those jobs. Detroit’s distinctive economic history and labor market conditions require a tailored approach to workforce development strategies.

Federal funding through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) enabled Detroit at Work to test two new programs aimed at boosting residents' skills, education, and employment outcomes on a large scale: JumpStart and Skills for Life (detailed in Exhibit ES.1 below). Representing substantial new investments, these programs were largely designed from the ground up and implemented rapidly. This approach required intricate coordination between numerous city departments and community-based partners.

Exhibit ES.1. Overview of JumpStart and Skills for Life programs

	JumpStart	Skills for Life
Eligibility Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detroit residents, 18 years or older • Have not been employed or received education or training for at least six months. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detroit residents, 18 years or older • Physically capable of doing program jobs (primarily outdoor labor).
Program Overview	Local community organizations provided participant recruitment and mentorship. Participants received monthly cash stipends while engaging in at least one of four program tracks: Skills Refresh, High School Diploma/GED, Job Training, or Employment. They also received career advising and support from career coaches, access to education and training partners, and referrals to supportive services for up to 18 months.	Participants received compensation to work for the City of Detroit three days per week and attend educational activities or occupational training two days per week. Participants earned an hourly wage (\$15.00-\$15.30, with potential small increases) for all 40 hours and received career coaching and supportive services. City jobs included working for Grounds Maintenance or Blight Remediation teams.
Number of Enrollees	1,842	835
Dates of Operation	February 2023 – June 2025	August 2021 ^a – April 2025

a. Note: A Skills for Life pilot started in August 2021; the main program launched in January 2022.

This program evaluation, utilizing a mixed-methods approach, drew on retrospective program data from Detroit at Work, staff and partner interviews, and participant focus groups. It aimed to describe and assess program implementation challenges and successes, as well as participant experiences and outcomes. The evaluation identified lessons learned and developed recommendations that can inform future strategies for Detroit at Work’s workforce development programming.

JumpStart Results

The JumpStart program was designed as a multifaceted approach to supporting Detroit residents experiencing long-term unemployment. It weaved together recruitment and mentorship provided by community-based “in-Detroit organizations” (IDOs), monthly stipends and supportive services for participants, and individually tailored referrals to education, occupational training, and job search services. Exhibit ES.2 summarizes JumpStart participants’ quantitative results related to program engagement across different components, rates of track completion, and participant outcomes. Exhibit ES.3 summarizes overall implementation findings, including strengths, challenges, and lessons learned.

Exhibit ES.2. JumpStart By the Numbers

	Engagement	Completion	Outcomes
	<p>Enrollment & Reach: 1,842 participants enrolled across four tracks: 87 Skills Refresh, 487 High School Diploma/GED, 992 Job Training, and 276 Employment. 79% of Jumpstart participants (n=1,454) enrolled in more than one track during their tenure.</p>	<p>Career Readiness was required of all enrollees; however, 76% started and 60% of starters completed it (n=842). Rates were lower than expected due to changes in the enrollment process.</p>	<p>On average, participants received monthly stipends for 12 months. However, stipend payments dropped substantially after a new compliance policy was adopted in March 2024. Additionally, 1,401 participants received in-kind supportive services, including laptops and transportation aids.</p>
	<p>Education tracks: 580 participants enrolled in an education course. As of June 2025, 24 (4%) successfully completed a course and 30 (5%) were still enrolled. Completion data was missing for 192 (33%) participants from one partner. 270 (47%) transferred to another track and 64 (11%) were incomplete.</p>	<p>Job Training track: 840 participants enrolled in an occupational training course. 62% (n=519) had completed their training by May 2025. Construction, healthcare, and IT/Cybersecurity courses were most popular.</p>	<p>Employment track: 1,703 participants were ever enrolled in the employment track and 75% (n=1,374) of participants across all tracks received any career advising service. Individual advising, job search assistance, and financial coaching were most common.</p>
	<p>Milestones: Completion varied by track. As of April 2025, 24 (5%) education enrollees completed GEDs; 393 (43%) training enrollees completed programs; and 769 (64%) employment enrollees completed 30 days on the job.</p>	<p>Education: Among participants in education courses with pre- and post-tests (n=172 reading and n=195 math), modest average gains in reading (+0.5 grade levels) and math (+0.3 grade levels) were observed.</p>	<p>Employment: 1,099 JumpStart participants (60%) reported post-program employment; full information was available for 821 of those reports (45%). Median hourly wage was \$17.00 (average: \$17.40).</p>

Exhibit ES.3. JumpStart Implementation Findings

Strengths & Successes	Challenges & Lessons Learned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptability: Detroit at Work demonstrated notable flexibility, reducing enrollment wait times, adjusting compliance policies, and shifting roles and responsibilities to manage staff capacity better. Valued Components: Participants and staff highly praised Career Readiness and Digital Literacy courses for building essential skills. Barrier Removal funds were valued for addressing critical needs. Overall, participants expressed satisfaction and appreciation of the program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning & Partnerships: A compressed planning period strained initial implementation and partner coordination. Better role clarity for coaches and mentors was needed. IDO Payment Model: The milestone-based payment structure proved insufficient to support the intensive mentorship needed, hindering IDO capacity and stability. Staff Capacity: High caseloads, particularly after a period of mass participant enrollment events, hindered staff. Track Progression & Training Quality: Education tracks had low completion rates and long durations. Concerns were raised about some training programs' quality, relevance, and job placement support.

Skills for Life Results

Skills for Life was a career development program that hired and compensated Detroiters to work on City projects three days a week and attend education activities or occupational training two days a week. After completing occupational training, participants returned to work their program job full time while they searched for employment outside of the program. Throughout the program, participants had access to career advising and other supportive services to reduce barriers to program activities. Exhibit ES.4 summarizes Skills for Life participants’ quantitative results related to program engagement across different components, rates of track completion, and participant outcomes. Exhibit ES.5 summarizes overall implementation findings, including strengths, challenges, and lessons learned.

Exhibit ES.4. Skills for Life by the Numbers

Engagement	Enrollment & Reach: 835 participants enrolled in Skills for Life. Of these, 728 (87%) enrolled in either educational or occupational training activities and are called “engaged participants.”	Career Readiness was required of all enrollees. 751 enrollees (90%) attended any career readiness training. Of these, 409 (73%) completed career readiness after the course transitioned to one week in October 2022.	Career coaches provided 714 participants (98%) with an average of 12 career advising sessions per person and referrals to supportive services . 632 (87% of participants) received gas cards, the most common support provided.
Completion	Participants were employed three days per week. 275 engaged participants (43%) worked as Environmental Techs and received \$15-16/hour. 371 engaged participants (57%) worked as Blight Remediation Techs and received \$15.30-16.30/hour.	Participants could attend educational activities two days per week. 418 engaged participants (57%) enrolled in education activities. Of these, 209 (50%) completed them, though completion rates varied by activity: 77% skills refresh, 28% GED, 20% tutoring, and 93% ESL.	Participants completed training activities two days per week (after education, if necessary). 486 engaged participants (67%) enrolled in training. Trainings for heavy equipment, electrical, and CDL licenses were most popular. Of those enrolled, 371 (76%) successfully completed training.
Outcomes	Education: Of the participants who took pre- and post-tests (n=130 reading and n=248 math), there were average gains in both reading (+0.9 grade levels) and math (+1.4 grade levels).	Employment: 349 engaged participants (48%) secured post-program employment. This varied by training (e.g., 81% for CDL-B vs. 27% for Carpentry). 63% of employed participants earned ≥\$17/hour.	Patterns in successful program completion: 65% successfully completed the program. Participants without a HS diploma had lower completion rates (37%) compared to those with some college (81%) or HS grads (73%).

Exhibit ES.5. Skills for Life Implementation Findings

Strengths & Successes	Challenges & Lessons Learned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training Completion: Participants achieved high rates of successful completion across most occupational trainings offered. • Education Gains: Participants in education activities showed substantial average improvements in CASAS scores. • Hybrid Training & Employment Model: Both staff and participants praised the program model as it provided participants with real work experience, soft skill development, and income stability, all while pursuing education or training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program Launch & Scale-up: Rushed program launch led to early organizational challenges of partner communication, causing inefficiencies and participant frustration. • Participant Needs: Broad eligibility led to challenges serving individuals facing significant barriers to employment (e.g., learning disabilities). Services could be better tailored. • Training & Job Placement: While training completion rates were high, participants raised concerns about accessibility (long waits for CDL), relevance (some certificates insufficient for employment), and lack of adequate job search support from training providers. Many participants aimed to keep City jobs rather than searching for external job placements.

Data limitations

The operational program data included in this evaluation did not cover the whole implementation period. Participation data was collected from January 1, 2022 (program launch) through June 10, 2025. Some JumpStart participation data, such as completion of educational courses and receipt of barrier removal services, were collected in external data systems and were not included in this evaluation. In general, program staff noted that post-program hire records are not systematically collected (participants voluntarily reported this data) and may underestimate actual employment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The JumpStart and Skills for Life programs capitalized on the substantial ARPA funding to invest in providing robust and flexible employment supports for Detroit residents. Overall, Detroit at Work did an admirable job of designing and launching two complex and large-scale workforce development programs on a very rapid timeline. However, this rapid launch led to many implementation challenges. The findings of this evaluation provide valuable insights for Detroit at Work's future strategic planning processes, particularly regarding program design, participant targeting, and operational structures.

- **The career readiness course was a success.** Although there were minor differences in the career readiness curricula across JumpStart and Skills for Life, both provider and participant feedback was unanimous in highlighting the utility and value of this program component.
- **Occupational training programs should be vetted by employers and aligned with employer needs.** Ongoing efforts to ensure that training programs meet employer demand and provide skills sufficient for employment in related fields should be continued and strengthened.
- **Skills for Life's hybrid employment and training model, which provides participants with full-time compensation, has potential.** This model appears promising and was highly valued by participants. However, future iterations will require careful integration of work and training activities and the development of strong partnerships between program staff and potential employers.
- **JumpStart's financial assistance strategy could be revised to better align with program goals.** Different forms of financial assistance can be used to support financial stability and stress reduction (monthly stipends), remove barriers that block participants from engaging in the program or gaining employment (in-kind supports and barrier removal payments), or incentivize program engagement and progress (milestone payments or transitional benefits). The structure of financial assistance should be adapted based on the program's goal.
- **The community-based mentorship model faced many implementation challenges, but it worked well for the IDOs that figured it out.** The milestone-based funding structure for IDOs was inadequate remuneration for the amount of labor required. In addition, a centralized management system (i.e., having IDOs contract directly with Detroit at Work rather than the City) would likely have supported better coordination and program operation. However, IDOs that figured out the system were very successful and praised by participants.

Both JumpStart and Skills for Life demonstrated successes and provided critical lessons that can inform future investments and programming. Future programs should prioritize clear goals and strong partner alignment, build sustainable operational structures and data-sharing systems, ensure that job training programs are vetted by employers and aligned with their needs, and further tailor participant pathways to different levels of need and employment readiness.