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PARTNERS FOR A PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE

Building Services Career Path Project (BSCPP)

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Partnership Structure, Services, and Participants Served

Partnership Mission and Structure

The Building Services Career Path Project (BSCPP), a labor-management partnership between Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 615 and several employers, received a planning grant from SkillWorks in Year 1 and subsequently received four years of implementation funding. BSCPP's core mission was to create career ladders within the janitorial/building maintenance service sector in Boston, and to provide SEIU members with English language instruction, occupational training, case management, and career coaching services required to access the job opportunities. SEIU had a second clear, overarching goal for BSCPP. The union hoped BSCPP would serve as a pilot project, catalyzing support for a permanent SEIU-industry joint training trust to support ongoing worker skill development well beyond the SkillWorks funding horizon. SEIU also viewed the project as supporting a broader goal for its membership; SEIU saw skill enhancement as one approach to improve the quality of jobs for janitors and to raise the profile of janitors as deserving of better jobs. Improved English skills for janitors were considered by the union as one of the ways to bring janitors out of the shadows, increasing the awareness of their value and their current conditions.

BSCPP was led by the Voice and Future Fund (VFF), the nonprofit educational arm of the SEIU Local 615, which was responsible for the project design and delivery of most services. The list of employer partners evolved over the course of the project. The employers, which included both maintenance

contractors and institutions directly employing their own building service staff, were involved in subsets of BSCPP's overall menu of activities depending on their particular needs or interests. The initial partnership included seven employer partners: Acme, AM-PM Cleaning, American Cleaning, Harvard, MIT, OneSource, and Unicco. The partnership expanded in its second year as BSCPP added a new training program for skilled trades workers that was of interest to a new set of employers including a number of universities, such as Boston University, Tufts, and Wentworth, along with large institutions such as Museum of Fine Arts, Children's Hospital, and Dana Farber Cancer Institute. BSCPP also involved service provider partners that worked with VFF on delivering education, training, and counseling to participants.¹ These service partners were essentially vendors to BSCPP, but not partners in setting program direction.

The management, governance, and oversight of BSCPP differed from other SkillWorks partnerships in that it emphasized a strong voice for workers and generally favored decentralized governance and administration over a single all-encompassing partnership structure. VFF described the governing

¹ Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) provided career coaching services in Years 2 and 3; Boston Public Schools Adult Education and Community Services (AECS) provided the site used for vocational skills training; the Operating Engineers Union Local 877 provided the curriculum and the teacher for vocational training offered in Years 3 through 5; Asian American Civic Association provided the curriculum for the entry maintenance program offered in Year 2.

process as mirroring standard joint labor-management structure with employers on one side of the table and workers from those companies on the other. During planning stages and early in implementation, senior representatives of the union and employers jointly worked out the program's parameters and basic design. The group reached an agreement on standards for the use of the funds so one employer would not get more than another. Once broad agreement was reached, the detail work was handled within the boundaries of each company, replicating the basic relationship structure of strong representation of workers along with employers. For example, at each site where there were classes, workers would sit down with building managers to negotiate the details. Building service workers were heavily involved in developing the methods for participant selection, class locations and times, and influenced the curriculum to be covered. VFF has been responsible for day-to-day strategic and operational decision-making. VFF staff was in regular communication with employers and shaped programs based on employer input, however, there was no central governing body that approved strategy, course offerings, or service delivery approaches on a regular basis. Those discussions were far more decentralized, occurring at the level of an individual employer or at the level of a particular building.

Services Planned and Delivered

ESOL

Over the four years of services, 156 participants enrolled in BSCPP for ESOL classes. While the union had offered English and computer classes for a number of years, the BSCPP classes were unique in that they were offered at the employer site and were offered partially

on paid time. The two-hour class met weekly. Workers would arrive one hour before their shift or stay one hour past their shift; the other hour of class time overlapped with the worker's shift and was paid by the employer. These accommodations were particularly needed in an industry in which the majority of participants work multiple jobs making traditional classes difficult to fit in their complicated schedules. While the convenience of on-site classes was a plus for participants, a trade-off was that participants were drawn only from employees in the building making it difficult to assemble a class at a similar skill level. The classes generally focused on meeting the needs of those with the least English ability.

Occupational Training

BSCPP provided occupational training for 58 participants over the four years. Initially BSCPP offered an 18-week entry maintenance program that provided an introduction to a variety of trades including plumbing, electrical, carpentry, painting, and HVAC². After facing job placement challenges among program graduates in addition to some concerns among employers and participants that the program did not provide sufficient depth of training, BSCPP discontinued the program. BSCPP also developed a day-long introductory workshop to cleaning in a clean room environment. The program was offered once, for one day, for 10 people. The class was discontinued because the employer for whom the training was developed experienced turnover in its customers and no longer needed to prepare additional employees for work in a clean room environment.

² Heating, Ventilating, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration

The final and most intensive occupational effort initiated by BSCPP was an HVAC licensure preparation program. Over the course of three years, 38 participants enrolled. Participants could take an electrical class, a refrigeration class, or a refresher class (if other course work had already been completed) to prepare for the licensure exam. The instructor and curriculum were provided by a partner union, the Operating Engineers Local 877, but BSCPP provided staff to support SEIU members and to ensure that employers were providing the necessary documentation of HVAC experience.

Coaching, Support, and other Program Services

Coaching was not designed to be a core element of the BSCPP program. BSCPP employed a workforce development specialist for roughly half of its four years of funding. The services provided and the intensity of interaction evolved over time as BSCPP experimented with different arrangements. ESOL participants, more than 50% of total BSCPP enrollment, never received any coaching or case management other than what grew organically from their relationship with their teacher unless participants subsequently enrolled in another BSCPP offering that included coaching. The 48 participants in entry maintenance and HVAC did receive some coaching and support. In addition, 36 people were enrolled in what BSCPP called the Opportunity Program between 2006 and 2008. When introduced in late 2006, this was considered a career advancement program. The program was fully functional for about six months during 2007, but was discontinued when BSCPP's career coach left the organization. JVS had supervised BSCPP's career coach but its partnership with BSCPP came to an end in 2007. BSCPP enrolled more people in the

Opportunity Program in 2008; however, the primary services provided were assistance in gaining US citizenship.

BSCPP initially envisioned a linear path for participants starting with ESOL and progressing to occupational skill development. BSCPP believed it was premature to engage the assistance of a career coach for participants who were starting at the most basic level of English skills since they were unlikely to be able to advance without gaining some English skills first. BSCPP envisioned that participants would engage with a career coach when they were ready to move beyond English classes to consider career alternatives or advancement. As it turned out, many who started in English were not necessarily interested in a changing their current work arrangement and others were unable to make sufficient progress (given their starting point) to consider advancement. Without that progression from ESOL to more targeted career advancement services that would have involved career coaching, fewer participants received those services than expected. It is worth noting, however, that while a limited number of participants received extensive career coaching, the union structure provides a certain level of de facto case management that might fall under the banner of career coaching or case management services provided by other partnerships. Participant retention in BSCPP services does not appear to have been negatively impacted by the support structure used.

An additional support offered by BSCPP was a financial literacy course. The three-session class (with counseling and group follow-up) ran twice over the four years, enrolling 36 people. When initially proposed, the financial literacy class was intended to complement the career

advancement programs offered by BSCPP by helping those who secured economic gains through the program to manage their income effectively. However, in implementation, enrollment was not limited to those involved in other BSCPP programs. The majority of attendees did not participate in other aspects of the SkillWorks-funded BSCPP program although many had taken other union-sponsored English or computer courses.

Harvard University's Advancement Program

The Harvard Advancement program is the result of SEIU-Harvard 2005 contract that stipulates \$300,000 be set aside to build career paths for SEIU workers at the University. BSCPP staff helped to shape the program design encouraging Harvard to make the trade-off of serving more people even if that meant a less intensive form of educational assistance. The program is run by the University's worker education program, Harvard Bridge to Learning and Literacy, and financially supported by Harvard as agreed to in the contract. In total, there are 49 individuals who are listed as BSCPP participants who primarily received services through Harvard's Advancement program. Offerings have included ESOL classes, GED and ADP (adult diploma program) preparation classes, computer courses, as well as individual tutoring, career development services, and paid internships.

Participant Characteristics

BSCPP served 314 participants in the four years of SkillWorks funding. These participants were overwhelmingly non-English speakers with fairly low levels of educational attainment. Only 12% of participants reported English as their primary language. Nearly half of

participants did not have a high school degree; some only had a few years of education in their native country and were illiterate in their primary language. Only 20% of participants had taken any course beyond high school. Of participants with advanced degrees, many had completed professional degrees in their native countries but found their experience and certifications not readily transferable to the United States.

Service Outcomes

Participant Outcomes

Of the 314 workers that participated in the BSCPP, notably 87% are still employed with the same employer in a union position. The economic downturn of 2008 has had an adverse impact on the sector as the overall retention rate for BSCPP fell from 94% in 2007.

All participants receive annual wage increases as a result of the union-negotiated contractual agreement with employers. In addition to the negotiated wage increases, 24 participants, less than 8% of all participants, have experienced an economic gain due to new job duties, a promotion, or side work resulting from their BSCPP assistance. Less than 6% of employed participants, 18 individuals, received promotions as a result of BSCPP assistance. A number of factors limited career advancement outcomes for BSCPP participants. The factors generally fall into three categories:

- ❖ Employer characteristics: The flat management structure of building service contractors meant few openings.



- ❖ Union environment: Supervisory positions were not always substantially more attractive than the union-negotiated wages and benefits offered to cleaners.
- ❖ Participant circumstances: Participants faced challenges in adapting their work schedules to accommodate new positions since many held multiple jobs.
- ❖ Current economic conditions: Many institutions have recently implemented hiring freezes that may be slowing advancement among participants who recently completed their HVAC certification.

“They do have me in mind more. In this case, there are not really promotions because my company doesn’t really offer promotions, but since I can understand more and do more things, they allow me to do more.”

–ESOL participant

Relatively few participants enrolled in or graduated from high school or college as a result of their involvement in BSCPP. Four participants completed an Adult Diploma Program. Additional participants have passed ADP diagnostics but new state requirements mandate that participants must pass the MCAS exam to receive a diploma so they are now preparing for the challenging assessment exam. One participant who was a high school student at the time of enrollment has since graduated. One BSCPP program participant has recently enrolled in college. These modest outcomes are not surprising given both participant and industry characteristics. Many participants had very limited English skills at enrollment and some

were illiterate in their native language. This reflects the labor force within building services to a certain degree, but also the criteria used to select program participants that favored those with the lowest skills. Modest educational outcomes are also likely related to the fact that career advancement within the building services does not frequently require a high school or college degree.

While few participants obtained educational degrees as a result of their involvement in the program, many improved their English language capability. Assessment data suggests that the majority of BSCPP participants improved at least one level through their participation in English classes³. VFF switched assessment tests over the course of Phase I making exact measurement of language progression difficult. However, teachers grouped numeric scores into levels of language ability⁴ to allow comparisons. Using these levels, analysis shows that 26% increased by one level, 23% increased their language ability by two levels and 12% dramatically improved their language ability, increasing three levels.

BSCPP’s occupational training has yielded some positive results. Six of the 38 individual enrolled in the HVAC program have now received their state license. Four other participants received occupational credentials (hairstresser

³ Analysis includes BSCPP participants who took English classes at the union on their own time in addition to those enrolled in the SkillWorks-supported building-based classes. Only those participants with two or more assessments were included in the analysis. N=93.

⁴ Levels used: No verbal English, Low Beginner, Beginner, Advanced Beginner, Intermediate, and High Intermediate.

license, two truck driver licenses, and home health aide certification) which, in some cases, have allowed them to earn supplemental income. Progress of a different sort was noted at Harvard where BSCPP participants have become program teachers; one participant is now a teaching assistant in a computer class and another taught conversational Spanish to supervisors of the restaurant contractor at Harvard Business School.

Interviews with participants and program staff raise other benefits related to the skill enhancements. Participants are pleased with their ability to communicate with their children and doctors. Many used their improved English skills to help them gain U.S. citizenship. At least 35 participants became U.S. citizens following their participation in BSCPP. While citizenship was not an original goal of BSCPP, staff became aware of participants' interest. Recognizing the value to participants in terms of stability and employability, staff support for citizenship was integrated into the BSCPP offering and combined with citizenship classes offered by the union.

Employer Outcomes

The outcomes employers were seeking varied by the components of BSCPP in which they participated. Many employers sought modest improvements in English capabilities in order for workers to perform their current positions more effectively. Cleaning contractors involved in building-based ESOL classes were particularly interested in upgrading the skills of those with the least English capabilities. Career advancement for their employees was rarely expressed as a goal of their participation. Given their goals, employers were pleased with the

outcomes. Supervisors noticed a difference among some participants in their ability to comprehend some English and, in a few cases, in their willingness to speak it. Employers see this as an improvement in customer service whether that means the janitor better understands customers' cleaning requests or is better able to answer a question of a convention guest. Additionally, some employers noted an improvement in employee morale that they believed was translating into more motivated and productive workers.

While neither a direct employer of SEIU workers nor a signed partner of BSCPP, the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority (MCCA) was a crucial supporter of BSCPP's goals, and has ultimately underwritten a portion of the paid class time for convention center participants. MCCA, a quasi-public institution, has a mission to generate economic impact for the state and sees its support of the class as aligned with its mission. Still MCCA's primary impetus for involvement was improved English skills for employees with the weakest capabilities. It is quite satisfied with the classes in that participants are able to provide better service to guests such as giving directions within the convention center. MCCA considers the additional successes such, as one promotion and additional participants receiving his U.S. citizenship, as meeting its broader mission as well.

While MCCA was a unique stakeholder because of its quasi-public status with a broader mission of economic impact in the state, it is representative of a unique set of stakeholders within the building services industry—building owners, in particular the large real estate firms that own prime office space downtown. These building owners were not

explicitly in the partnership structure since they do not directly employ the maintenance staff. Most were neither aware of nor directly involved in BSCPP. However, the union has argued that, as wages for union janitors increased, building owners demanded better customer service (in the form of higher English skills among janitors) from maintenance contractors, which provided incentive for the contractors to participate in BSCPP. The union refers to this as wage-led skill enhancement in which the wage advances precede the demand for higher skills. Evaluators did not have access to interview the building owners to verify this theory of change nor to assess what benefits building owners actually derived from the services provided. Senior management from the largest maintenance contractor interviewed for this evaluation did not believe that building owners were closely enough involved in the day-to-day maintenance activities in the buildings to appreciate any advancement in the English skills of participating janitors. Building owners, as long-term real estate holders in Boston, do have incentive to see social progress and economic gain overall since this is generally important to sustaining the real estate market in the city. Building owners' interest in supporting skill enhancement as well as higher wages and improved job quality for janitors may be more closely linked to a broader interest in the overall economy of the city.

Employer participation in the HVAC certification program was more closely aligned with goals of career advancement. At the program's inception, many institutions had a difficult time filling HVAC technician positions. By helping participants attain their HVAC license, not only would they have access to new higher paying

positions, but employers would also be able to promote loyal, long-term employees into hard-to-fill positions. The benefits to employers are still unfolding since the HVAC classes were not up and running until Year 4 and the process of achieving licensure is a long one involving class time, documenting 1,500 HVAC-related work hours, and sitting for a rigorous exam. Less than a quarter of the HVAC participants have completed this process and received licensure to date. In some cases, the economic downturn has eliminated the vacancies that employers were initially hoping to fill, which may minimize employer outcomes in the near-term.

Systemic Changes

Changes in employer practices

BSCPP's greatest achievement was its role in creating systemic change in the sector that assures building services workers have permanent access to workforce development services. BSCPP played a catalytic role, building support among employers, building owners, political stakeholders, and union members. BSCPP built that support by serving as a pilot that demonstrated the value of providing access to education and skills development for a worker group that is overwhelmingly immigrant, low-skilled, and with limited English. In contract negotiations completed in 2007, commercial employers agreed to fund a joint union-management training program supported by an hourly contribution that will provide ongoing support for educational activities of building services employees. This was the first time such a training fund has been supported by building service employers in Boston. The training fund has a budget of roughly \$300,000 this

year and that amount will increase over the course of the contract.

“The project was a useful way to raise the profile of janitors in the city. It got the mayor’s attention and the attention of building owners and got these key stakeholders to focus more on the need to raise standards in the industry.”

–SEIU 615 President, Rocio Saenz

In addition to the creation of the formal training fund, other changes in employer practices have resulted from BSCPP. For instance, release time for ESOL classes has become more accepted. When BSCPP first started, it was a struggle to get employers to sign on to paid release time to cover some of participants’ time in ESOL classes. At present, the two largest employers and primary BSCPP partners on English classes have continued their commitment to paid release time since the completion of SkillWorks funding. This established trust has also increased employers’ willingness to support off-site classes on paid time as well.

“By getting the training fund into the master contract, the approach has truly become an industry workforce development program not an isolated partnership. The master contract creates one set of standards for 60 employers in Boston. It brings everyone to the table.”

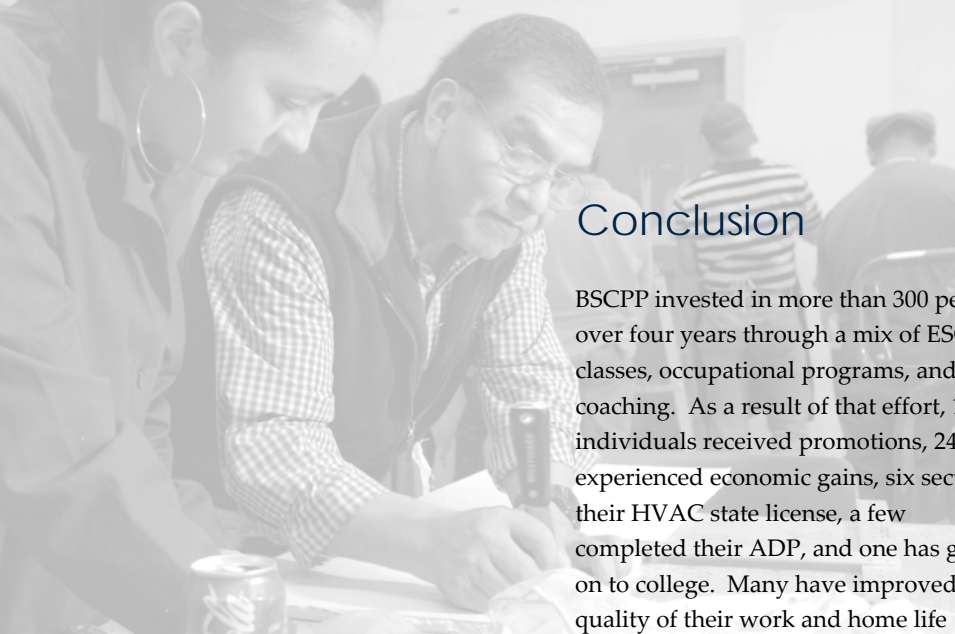
– VFF Executive Director and BSCPP Partnership Director, Weezy Waldstein

Another positive sign regarding potentially permanent changes in employer practices is at Harvard University. Harvard’s Career Advancement Program was initially only

guaranteed for the life of the contract but interviews suggest that once the University has agreed to such a benefit they are unlikely to rescind it. While questions remain on the level of funding going forward, it is likely that SEIU employees will continue to benefit from the educational and career advancement support provided by Harvard’s Bridge program.

Changes in Workforce System Practices

VFF learned valuable lessons in effective service delivery as a result of its leadership of BSCPP. While the union had provided English and computer classes prior to SkillWorks, it is clear that its capacity to deliver services increased over the four years. For instance, VFF now realizes the importance of developing an ESOL class with participants at roughly the same level of capability and has expanded courses to offer more levels of ESOL. VFF has also moved to a scattered site model rather than a building-based model in order to draw more participants at the same skill level. VFF also realized the value of more hours of class time a week for ESOL training and has worked to move classes from once a week for two hours to twice a week, for a total of three hours, when possible. VFF also learned lessons around occupational training. It became more strategic in selecting the areas of occupational skill enhancement on which to focus, and will focus going forward on licensure opportunities for participants with employers that have established HR practices with clear pathways for advancement.



Conclusion

BSCPP invested in more than 300 people over four years through a mix of ESOL classes, occupational programs, and coaching. As a result of that effort, 18 individuals received promotions, 24 experienced economic gains, six secured their HVAC state license, a few completed their ADP, and one has gone on to college. Many have improved the quality of their work and home life through improvements in their English capability and 35 were able to gain U.S. citizenship. Employers are pleased that their employees can deliver a higher level of customer service as a result of their increased language capabilities.

BSCPP's greatest success was ultimately securing a permanent source of funding for workforce development in the building services sector in downtown Boston. As a result, BSCPP shifts from a series of ad hoc union-employer partnerships to a true sectoral initiative with an established governance and funding structure composed of union and management. BSCPP also increased the capacity of its lead organization—SEIU's training entity, VFF. Given that VFF will be the primary source of services provided through the new training fund, SkillWorks' investment in VFF's learning should pay off in improved services to employees over the long run.

Key Lessons for Workforce Partnerships:

- ❖ **Understand sector characteristics and how they are likely to impact program outcomes:** Partnerships need to be realistic about advancement opportunities within a specific sector when setting goals for career advancement. In the case of the building services sector, few pathways exist for career advancement, particularly within the contractor portion of the sector. The environment in the building services sector was more amenable to system change and BSCPP crafted a strategy to achieve significant impact in that area. Partnerships should develop strategies and set program outcomes, that reflect appropriate goals for the sector, taking into consideration both individual and system frameworks.
- ❖ **Moving participants along a career pathway requires an explicit strategy and implementation of appropriate coaching and service delivery mechanisms.** BSCPP created independent service delivery elements (ESOL, entry maintenance, HVAC) but the program never developed the mechanisms that would move a participant from one element to another progressively.
- ❖ **Be strategic in developing a plan to achieve sustainability.** The path to sustainability in the building services sector was different than that of any other SkillWorks partnership. The strong voice of workers and, ultimately, the union's ability to align political will and building owner interests with that of the janitors led to a permanent source of funds for skill enhancement.
- ❖ **Recognize the value that unions can play in sector partnerships.** The union is a natural link between the workplace and the workers. Sector understanding, employer knowledge, and participant relationships make the union well-suited to a sector-focused skill enhancement project. Furthermore, the collective bargaining process offers the potential to lock in career paths as well as potential funding streams that can keep career advancement viable long past the end of SkillWorks funding. However, practitioners need to consider how the union's goals align with the overall goals of the partnership. The union's core belief is that collective gain is the primary path to achieve individual gain. Ultimately, the union's focus is on helping all members earn

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