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Building Opportunity and Good Jobs:

A Profile of the Building Services Industry Career Path Project

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Building Services Industry Career Path Project

Overview

The Building Services Industry Career Path Project is a labor-management partnership between Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 615 and seven employers, including both building owners and maintenance contractors. The project's purpose is to catalyze the creation of permanent, sustainable career pathways in the industry—from part-time building cleaners to skilled maintenance workers—by improving both English and occupational skills and by strengthening human resources practices and policies. The Workforce Partnership attends to the concerns of workers, maintenance contractors, and building owners as it develops pilot services and policy improvements that affect industry practices “locked in” through formal policies or collectively bargained contracts. The Voice and Future Fund, an industry-based nonprofit, staffs the project.

Many entry-level janitors are recent immigrants, with limited English skills and little formal or vocational education. On the employer side, job descriptions are rare and, when they do exist, do not describe job requirements accurately or thoroughly. Few job openings are posted, and there are few formal human resources personnel or practices. Natural career ladders that might enable workers to advance are rare in this industry.

The Building Services Industry Career Path Project has set out to change all this. In 2002, following an acrimonious strike, SEIU Local 615 created the nonprofit Voice and Future Fund to expand oppor-

tunities for working janitors. In 2004, the VFF received a SkillWorks planning grant to create a new Workforce Partnership, and in 2005, it received funding to implement career advancement services for part-time building cleaners by building worker skills and revising human resources policies. Ultimately, the union hopes to develop an education and training fund similar to those created by service unions in many other cities, including New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

In early 2005, the VFF began the Building Services Industry Career Path Project, a career pathway model of education, training, and career coaching. The project offers education in basic English, a 108-hour building maintenance course, and “clean room” training for employees cleaning biotech labs. In its first two years, 138 workers enrolled in an education or training course; 76 percent of the students who took the ESL course completed it; and 95 percent of the participants in the first building maintenance class graduated in 2006.

Project staff work closely with employers on “promotion projects” to improve the companies’ internal human resources policies and career advancement opportunities. The VFF has collaborated with OneSource and Unicco, in particular, to develop tools and processes for career advancement programs that define job descriptions and the competencies needed for better jobs. Moreover, some of the building owners for whom contractors work have become engaged in this win-win project.

New Leaders

Almost 20 years ago, when Margarita Restrepo immigrated to Massachusetts from Columbia, she went to work immediately, cleaning office buildings in downtown Boston. Because most janitorial jobs were part time, Ms. Restrepo worked two jobs to support her family. She had neither time nor money to take classes that would improve her skills and help her get a better job.

Ms. Restrepo was ready when the janitors’ union, SEIU Local 615, began offering English as a Second Language classes and building career pathways for cleaners. She enrolled in the

English classes, which were offered at 10:00 p.m. in the building where she worked, and soon she could answer questions, give directions, and read instructions.

With her improved language skills, Ms Restrepo now supports her family working only one job, for Evergreen Management as a cleaner at Everett’s Whidden Hospital. The Building Services Industry Career Path Project also provides leadership training for janitors, and Ms. Restrepo’s fellow workers have elected her to the executive board of her union, which represents 16,000 cleaners, maintenance workers, and security officers in higher education and commercial buildings.

The project has gained the commitment of maintenance contractors and building owners to education and training, as well as to providing career advancement opportunities. And against the backdrop of the contentious 2002 strike, it has demonstrated the value of a shared commitment to good jobs and career paths.

Program Design

The Building Services Industry Career Path Project focuses on improving worker skills and changing industry employer practices.

Improving Skills

The project has implemented work-based English language courses with three employers at six flagship sites, including Boston's famous John Hancock tower and its new convention center, as well as the offices of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. Classes are held at shift change to accommodate workers from incoming and outgoing shifts, with one hour on paid time and one hour on the worker's time. The course enables students to attend continuously, with progress assessments every six months. Participants—workers who have been in the United States for many years, who have been isolated by multiple part-time jobs, and who have never had the opportunity to take English classes—have shown how fast low-wage workers can progress if they have time and access to classes.

The English classes have led to a collaboration with the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority that focuses on higher-level, customer-service communication skills. And this effort is having beneficial spillover effects in Boston's Seaport district, pressuring other contractors in this burgeoning neighborhood to invest in education. And it has led to the new goal of creating a permanent program.

In a parallel effort to build worker occupational skills, the project collaborated with Madison Park Technical Vocational High School, Boston Adult Education and Community Services, and the Asian American Civic Association to offer an entry-level course in building maintenance. Classes in the 18-week course take place every Saturday for seven hours. Students learn carpentry, painting, electrical, plumbing, and basic HVAC, as well as occupational English skills that enable them to talk with tenants about building maintenance needs. With the assistance of SkillWorks, including technical assistance from the Boston Private Industry Council, the project arranged for the school to stay open on weekends—an arrangement that benefits other programs and the community.

VFF and its partners designed a “clean room” train-the-trainer course for janitors working for a cleaning company serving biotechnology firms. Cleaning jobs in biotech pay a premium because strict regulatory guidelines cover the disposal of biohazard materials. The curriculum meets industry standards and allows the cleaning firm to upgrade the skills of workers at relatively low cost.

During its contract bargaining at Harvard University, SEIU Local 615 negotiated the creation of the “Advancement Program” to assist janitors in seeking other jobs at the university. Classes focus on GED preparation and post-high school business writing, computers, and college prep, and the program also provides ongoing individual career and education planning. This agreement supports both direct Harvard employees and employees of the university's cleaning contractors. It builds on Harvard's existing Bridge to Learning and Literacy Program and has the explicit goal of connecting to other career path programs, such as the Health Care and Research Training Institute, in which Harvard is a partner.

New components are in the works. A pilot with Unico is underway to prepare Hancock Tower janitors for positions as machine operators, team leaders, and supervisors. A maintenance initiative with the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 877, which also represents building service workers, seeks to establish a state-approved education program for licensing HVAC refrigeration technicians. VFF is also completing the design of an “Opportunity Program,” based in part on Harvard's Advancement Program.

Each skills component of the Building Services Industry Career Path Project meets two needs. First, it delivers services to workers who are otherwise blocked from making career progress. Second, the services catalyze the creation of a sustainable, permanent program—through demonstrating value to all partners and through the enthusiasm of the participants.

Changing industry employer practices

The project is collaborating with Unico and OneSource, among others, on a pilot basis to develop new human resources tools, processes, systems, and policies. Because few Boston-area building services companies have human resources departments, it is almost impossible to forecast job openings, and there are few job descriptions or postings for job openings; job promotion structures are all but non-existent. Instead, frontline supervisors have control over hiring and promotion, and they are wary of anything that reduces their power to hire and fire.

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Unicco is committed to producing a weekly list of job openings and posting it at its hundreds of worksites. As part of planning the Advancement Program, Harvard developed a methodology for targeting appropriate job openings. Bargaining at Boston University has resulted in improved job descriptions based on this methodology.

Partners and Their Roles

The Union

SEIU Local 615 represents workers in the property services industry—cleaners, maintenance workers, and security officers in commercial office buildings and retail malls, special facilities like convention centers, airports, and the MBTA, and the region's many colleges, universities, and schools. The union is a prime player in the Boston area, promoting the view that living-wage jobs with career paths benefit everyone—employers, building owners, and the city and region, as well as the workers. The project is managed by the Voice and Future Fund, a nonprofit with the broader mission of improving the lives of the people who work in the industry, their families, and communities. Many partners assist in program development and service delivery.

Employers and the Industry

Property services are often outsourced, yet the property owner has the power to set standards even when a contractor is the direct employer. Historically, outsourcing has distanced building owners from property service workers, but the Building Services Industry Career Path partnership is facilitating a new pattern in which building owners take responsibility for the quality of service worker jobs. At Harvard, for example, some cleaners work for Harvard, and some are employed by 11 other companies that contract with Harvard, but all cleaners are SEIU 615 members and work under the same conditions.

There is other complexity in the industry as well. There are over 1,500 unionized worksites, many working multiple shifts. Employers range from small shops to large, national firms like UNICCO, which has 30,000 employees. In some cases, like Harvard and MIT, partners are both building owners who hire contractors and direct employers as well. Making regional change means involving all layers in the industry.

Project partners include Acme Building Services (a niche cleaning contractor at Harvard and MIT, as well as other colleges and schools); American Cleaning Company; AM-PM Cleaning Corporation (a specialist

in high-tech, clean-room environments); Harvard University; OneSource (a large national contractor with over 1,000 local employees at the airport, MBTA, the prime State Street Towers, and other sites); UNICCO (the largest local contractor, with almost 5,000 employees in the region), and the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority, which owns and operates the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center and the Hynes Convention Center, both cleaned by UNICCO.

The building owners who contract with cleaning companies are relevant because they have more influence on workforce decisions made by cleaning companies than do the customers of many other industries. Building owners, their tenants, and their guests interact frequently with the cleaning workforce; therefore, they tend to be interested in the English language and communication skills of the workforce. For example, convention center managers have supported courses to build the English skills of workers who interact with out-of-town conference planners and conventioners.

Building owners have other resources to offer the project as well. Most cleaning companies have limited office space because their employees work in facilities owned by other companies. At the request of contractors, the union and project have approached the building owners to provide spaces to offer classes.

Different employers participate in different project components, depending on their own needs. OneSource and Unicco selected high-profile locations for English classes where cleaners have significant public or tenant contact and where their customers are seeking improved communication skills. AM-PM wants to enhance its competitive edge in the high-tech niche.

Community-based Organizations

The VFF collaborates with several organizations to provide services.

American Asian Civic Association: The entry-level building maintenance course at Madison Park High School is an adaptation of a longer, more intensive class designed and delivered by AACA. VFF and AACA collaborated to shorten and accelerate the original class and to deliver the new course on Saturdays. AACA also helped to procure suitable training materials.

Harvard Bridge to Learning and Literacy: The Harvard-SEIU 615 Advancement Program is funded with newly negotiated union training funds, jointly

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designed with the Building Services Industry Career Path partnership. It will be delivered at the Bridge program, with assistance from the Voice and Future Fund.

Jewish Vocational Service: JVS assists with career advancement activities by providing case management services, tools, and tracking. JVS also helps employers define and create career advancement tools, systems, and policies. It employs a “workforce development specialist” who works with companies in preparation for meeting with individual workers on career options and plans.

Madison Park Technical Vocational High School, Boston Public Schools Adult and Community Services: VFF’s partnership with the city school system and Madison Park significantly enhances the project’s training capacity.

New partners include the International Union of Operating Engineers, with its national HVAC curriculum, and other SEIU-industry joint training trusts, including the Thomas Shortman Training Center in New York City and joint programs in Chicago and California, which are providing VFF with curricula and advice.

Management and Governance

During a planning year, representatives from various partner organizations laid out the program’s parameters and basic design. Now, VFF is responsible for day-to-day, operational decision-making, while governance of site-specific components is decentralized to company-union pairs (usually made up of an account representative from the cleaning company and union site stewards). VFF has a strong commitment to including workers in governance and provides leadership training workshops for interested union members who then participate in service planning and design.

Outputs and Outcomes

In addition to its quantifiable outcomes for participants (see chart), the Building Services Industry Career Path Project pilot process is resulting in employer job postings, improved job descriptions, and analyses of available openings. While most workers are covered by contracts that do not expire until 2007, the process of establishing the first local joint fund of \$300,000 at Harvard, and of establishing a program with the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority, are creating ripples of support for education and training for property service workers.

Outcomes: Building Services Industry Career Path Project

The data for 2004-2005, covering December 2003 through November 2005, has been validated by the SkillWorks evaluators. The data for 2006 is preliminary; it covers December 2005 through November 2006. The total participants served is a non-duplicated count of people receiving any of the following training or non-training services: occupational training, coaching, literacy, ESL, placement assistance, retention assistance, referrals, tutoring, mentoring, and mapping career pathways. The number of participants completing training includes multiple counts based on incumbent workers who participate in multiple training courses. The Building Services Industry Career Path Project began operations in 2005, and it has no pre-employment component; the data reflect these conditions.

	2004-2005	2006
Incumbent Workers Enrolled	66	134
Incumbent Workers Completed Training	0	105
Incumbent Workers Promoted	0	17

The Future: Planning for Sustainability

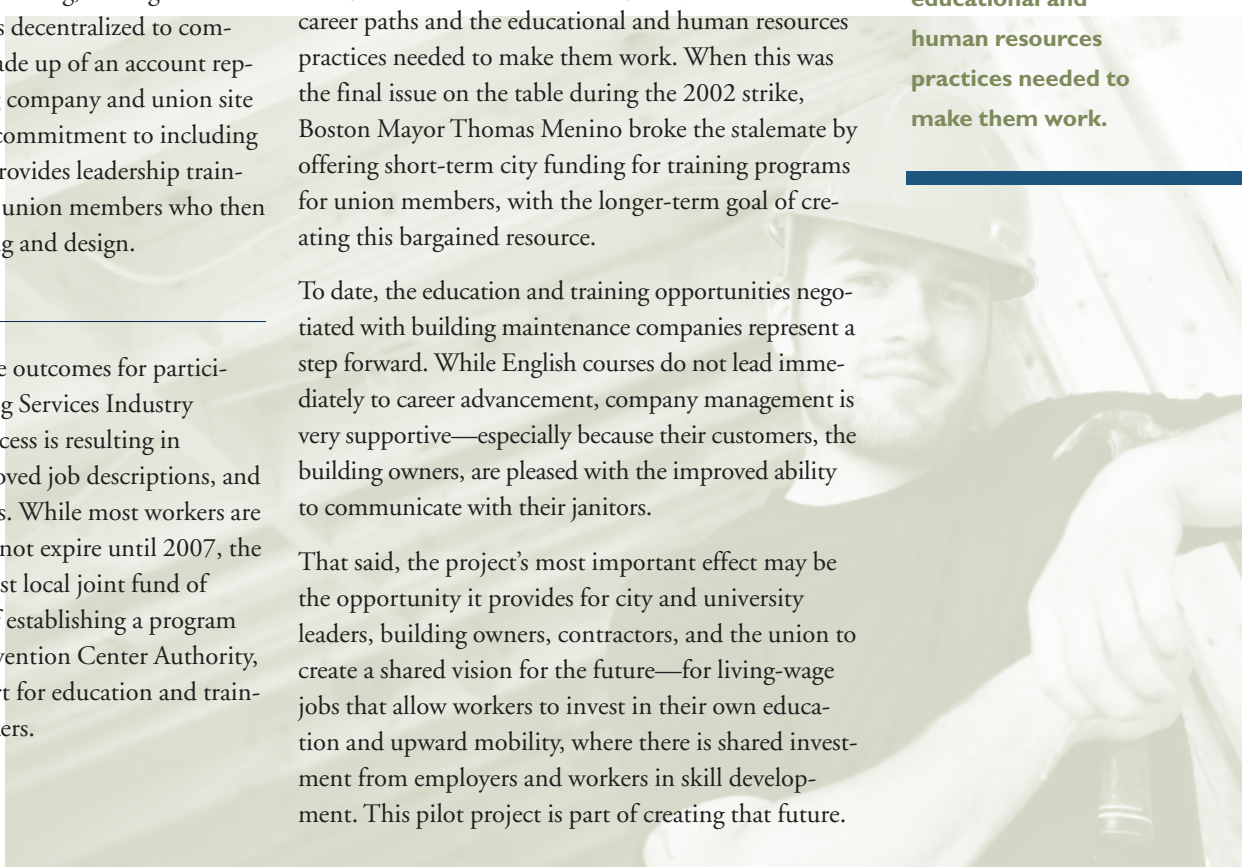
Developing the institutional infrastructure for career paths is a long process. The project’s ultimate goals are: to create an industry education and training fund; to ensure that all jobs provide the wages, benefits, and schedules that enable workers to invest in their own skills; and to use access—to information and services—to create an industry labor market that benefits employers, workers, and the region.

In other words, the Building Services Industry Career Path Project is a means to a sustainable end: a strengthened industry in which good jobs include career paths and the educational and human resources practices needed to make them work. When this was the final issue on the table during the 2002 strike, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino broke the stalemate by offering short-term city funding for training programs for union members, with the longer-term goal of creating this bargained resource.

To date, the education and training opportunities negotiated with building maintenance companies represent a step forward. While English courses do not lead immediately to career advancement, company management is very supportive—especially because their customers, the building owners, are pleased with the improved ability to communicate with their janitors.

That said, the project’s most important effect may be the opportunity it provides for city and university leaders, building owners, contractors, and the union to create a shared vision for the future—for living-wage jobs that allow workers to invest in their own education and upward mobility, where there is shared investment from employers and workers in skill development. This pilot project is part of creating that future.

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