

# News from Opportunity Chicago

A citywide effort to secure fulfilling jobs for Chicagoans and help local businesses find qualified employees



**OPPORTUNITY  
CHICAGO**

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### Opportunity Chicago leaders plan for lasting impact

As five-year workforce development initiative Opportunity Chicago heads into its final year, lead collaborators are diligently planning to ensure that all gains made through the initiative are permanently captured.

Driven by the city's Plan for Transformation, Opportunity Chicago was launched in 2006 to respond to the unmet workforce development needs of public-housing residents. The initiative's goal is to prepare and place 5,000 public-housing residents in employment over five years. Key partners are encouraged that Opportunity Chicago is on target to meet its employment placement goals, and are shifting greater focus on ensuring that the initiative leaves a legacy of systemic impact on the city's workforce development system.

Over the initiative's life, partners have shaped the workforce development system into one that is more adept at responding to the employment and career advancement needs of Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) residents and other disadvantaged job seekers. In 2009, Opportunity Chicago leaders created a Policy and Sustainability Working Group charged with assessing the successes and challenges of the initiative and working towards policy changes that will ensure the sustainability of programs and services for CHA residents after Opportunity Chicago ends.

The Policy and Sustainability Working Group has developed a work plan that details public and private partners' efforts for coming months. Key objectives that have been identified for lasting change include: 1) Securing funding streams for programs and services geared toward low-skilled, low-income jobseekers; 2) Ensuring continued collaboration among the CHA, Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, and City Colleges of Chicago so that CHA participants are prioritized by the city; 3) Continuing to integrate the **Employer Engagement strategy** with the broader workforce development system by establishing a mechanism to help providers that serve CHA residents foster the **dual customer system**; and 4) Developing a comprehensive communication strategy to share the Opportunity Chicago model with key audiences.

The concerted efforts and commitment of these groups are critical to Opportunity Chicago's long-term impact on the workforce development system. Their leadership will go far in helping Chicago's lowest-skilled, lowest-income workers get on the path to economic self-sufficiency.

### Demonstration program for CHA residents shows early promise

A new high-impact literacy program is yielding strong results for public-housing residents with multiple employment barriers. Over the course of 2009, Heartland Alliance (Heartland) has been piloting an approach that integrates contextualized literacy into a transitional jobs program for adult CHA residents who read below a fifth-grade level. Results to date show above-average gains in literacy and math comprehension, suggesting that the new model, funded by The Partnership for New Communities, is working.

The 12-week program combines paid work experience through numerous Heartland employment partners, ten hours of contextualized literacy training per week, and extensive support services. To deepen the context for learning, participants visit community colleges and bridge programs to find out about options for further education. They also hear presentations from Heartland's Business Services team, which works directly with employers, about future job opportunities and career paths.

Over sixty-five percent (24 out of 36) of participating residents completed the program, and that group has seen positive outcomes in both education and employment:

- "Completers" achieved an average gain of nearly two grade levels in reading (from 3.6 to 5.3), and more than one grade level gain in math (from 4.0 to 5.2).
- Of the 24 individuals who completed the program: seven remain involved in their subsidized employment placement, four have found unsubsidized employment, and seven are conducting job searches.

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For more information on Opportunity Chicago, visit:

[Opportunity Chicago](#)

[The Partnership for New Communities](#)

[Opportunity Chicago Public Agency Partners:](#)

[Chicago Department of Family and Support Services](#)

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[Chicago Workforce Investment Council](#)

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- Twelve of the 24 who completed the program have enrolled in further education classes: three in GED programs, four in bridge programs, and five in other trainings offered at City Colleges of Chicago. All of these programs lead to the attainment of a credential, which will make participants more competitive in the job market.

The success of this model may have policy implications as it tests a commonly held belief that more hours of contextualized educational programming are required to see such literacy gains in individuals who read below a fifth-grade level and have little work experience.

For more information regarding Heartland Alliance's transitional jobs literacy pilot contact Matt Weis, Associate Director of Workforce Development Programs at Heartland, at 312-287-8430.

## **New Chicago career brochures receive national attention**

Job seekers have a new tool to help them identify promising career paths. Five new brochures detailing healthcare, manufacturing, hotel, retail and restaurant career information are now being used to inform low-skilled jobseekers about local opportunities in each industry.

Opportunity Chicago led the creation of the brochures in collaboration with its industry sector partners - ServiceWorks, ManufacturingWorks, and the Metropolitan Chicago Healthcare Council. The materials are a direct outcome of Opportunity Chicago's employer engagement strategy and will be used by workforce development program and service providers who work with Chicago Housing Authority residents. Service providers will use the brochures to inform job seekers about career paths in each industry, while industry sector centers will use them for recruitment. The brochures detail specific positions available along career paths in each industry, as well as the skills needed, earning potential and anticipated demand for jobs in each field.

Opportunity Chicago presented the brochure in a recent Manufacturing Affinity Group webinar, which gave national participants a chance to interact with leaders supporting manufacturing in their respective regions. In addition to the presentation of the brochure as part of ManufacturingWorks' recruitment strategy, ManufacturingWorks discussed its industry sectoral strategy with the group. The National Fund for Workforce Solutions (NFWS) provides funding to the The Manufacturing Institute, an affiliate of The National Association of Manufacturers, to host the webinars. The NFWS is one of Opportunity Chicago's funders.

## **Spotlight On Success: The Little Family**

Siblings Andre, America, and Kevin Little\* all have a talent for service. Recognizing their interest early, the brothers and sister – all high-school aged residents of Chicago Housing Authority developments – tapped Chicago ServiceWorks for job training. Together they completed ServiceWorks' weeklong customer service training workshop titled, "Getting Started as a Service Professional," which helped prepare them to be successful in the service industry. ServiceWorks also provided the Littles with case management, job readiness training, tutoring in basic skills, employment and re-employment services and career exploration.

As a result of their involvement with ServiceWorks, America and Kevin both held numerous service positions during high school. Kevin has worked for a variety of employers, including Ben and Jerry's, Home Depot and Chicago Alderman Walter Burnett's office. He is now employed at Macy's.

ServiceWorks supported America as she faced social adversities, and has worked closely with her on becoming economically self-sufficient. Through ServiceWorks re-employment services, America has held positions at Rainforest Café, AirServ, Marshall Fields, Pompeii and, at present, Cosi.

Andre, too, faced adversity in high school. After a brush with violence, ServiceWorks reached out to Andre with employment and support services, and ultimately placed him in a position at Famous Footwear. By his senior year, Andre had received two promotions, eventually becoming assistant store manager. Today, Andre works in a management role at Family Dollar.

Despite their young ages, Andre, America, and Kevin Little are gaining solid work experience in an industry with room and opportunity for advancement. ServiceWorks' ongoing engagement with the Littles provided a range of supportive services that helped the family overcome barriers to employment success.

Chicago ServiceWorks is a Chicago Workforce Center that helps meet the workforce needs of employers by preparing city residents for careers in hospitality. In 2009, ServiceWorks became an Opportunity Chicago partner that collaborates with the initiative's providers to ensure that public workforce programs and services are offered to CHA residents.

*\*The names in this article have been changed for privacy purposes.*

Opportunity Chicago is a citywide commitment involving employers, government agencies, foundations and non-profit community groups to help local businesses find qualified employees and to help Chicagoans secure real and meaningful job opportunities. This multi million dollar initiative—developed by The Partnership for New Communities, Chicago Housing Authority, and the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development (now the Department of Family and Support Services)—seeks to help 5,000 public-housing residents prepare for and find lasting employment over five years (2006-2010).

This newsletter is a regular publication of the [Chicago Jobs Council](#), produced on behalf of Opportunity Chicago. As facilitator of the initiative, CJC is responsible for convening and fostering effective cooperation among members of its Strategic Advisers Group and its Public Agency Partners committee; driving the strategic planning process; managing the initiative's program evaluation; assisting in fundraising, communications and grant-making; and promoting continuous improvement of the Initiative's program model. Please send your questions, comments, and concerns to Sarah Klerk, Senior Policy Associate for the initiative ([sklerk@cjc.net](mailto:sklerk@cjc.net)).

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