



WASHINGTON AREA  
**WOMEN'S**  
FOUNDATION

# LESSONS LEARNED & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FIELD

A Case Study of Nontraditional Job Training Programs for Women

**MAY 2013**





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# HISTORY & BACKGROUND

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Washington Area Women's Foundation's mission is to mobilize its community to ensure that economically vulnerable women and girls in the Washington region have the resources they need to thrive.

In 2003, The Women's Foundation released *A Portrait of Women & Girls in the Washington Metropolitan Area* (referred to as the *Portrait Project* and available at <http://thewomensfoundation.org>). The *Portrait Project* found that low-income, women-headed families (single women with children) are overwhelmingly the most economically vulnerable population in the region, and identified four key interdependent needs that trap these families in a cycle of poverty: (1) financial education and wealth creation opportunities, (2) pathways to jobs with self-sufficient wages and benefits, (3) affordable early care and education options and (4) health and safety.

In response to these findings, The Women's Foundation launched the **Stepping Stones Initiative** in 2005 to address some of these needs, to serve as a catalyst for best practices within each issue area and to help nonprofit organizations around the region work together to build the financial independence and economic security of low-income, women-headed families. In 2010, the Foundation issued an update to the *Portrait Project* that confirmed the current focus.

Stepping Stones focuses on women and girls in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area (the District of Columbia; Montgomery and Prince George's Counties in Maryland; Arlington and Fairfax Counties, and the city of Alexandria, in Virginia) who are living under 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Women-headed families are a priority within this population, but the Foundation has also explicitly identified the need to take a lifespan approach to its programmatic work, as a strategy for truly breaking the cycle of poverty.

Currently, Stepping Stones grants invest in community-based organizations working to increase the economic security of low-income women and girls through:

- *Workforce Development*: Investments build life-long economic security through better pathways to jobs with family-sustaining wages and benefits and/or career ladders that include wage and benefit progression. Stepping Stones supports job training and workforce development services, including job placement, retention and advancement focused on occupations and sectors that are most likely to pay family-sustaining wages and benefits or to have clear career ladders with potential for professional and wage advancement.
- *Asset Building*: Investments build financial knowledge and increase and preserve collective assets and income. Stepping Stones supports free tax preparation, housing opportunities across a continuum that leads to housing stabilization, home ownership counseling, and basic financial education

services. These services improve the financial knowledge of low-income women and build their economic security by reducing debt, improving credit and savings, preventing foreclosure and increasing long-term wealth creation and asset development potential.

- *Early Care and Education*: Investments improve access to high-quality, affordable early care and education for low-income families across the region. The Early Care and Education Funders Collaborative works to increase the capacity and institutional stability of the early care and education field throughout the region.

Since its inception, Stepping Stones has granted over \$7 million to more than 50 community-based organizations focused on workforce development, asset building, early care and education, and research and advocacy. Stepping Stones investments have helped women in the Washington region increase their assets and income by over \$35 million.

As a part of The Women's Foundation's investments in workforce development, Stepping Stones has invested in several nonprofit organizations offering women training in nontraditional occupations. The Women's Foundation used an independent consultant to complete a case study of investments made between July 2005 and June 2011, to help examine the effectiveness of these investments and to inform the Foundation's strategies moving forward. This report serves as a summary of several key findings useful to providers, funders, and policymakers interested in workforce development and the economic security of low-income women.

# INVESTMENTS IN NONTRADITIONAL JOB TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN

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## **HISTORY & CONTEXT**

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, nontraditional occupations for women are defined as occupations in which women comprise less than 25 percent of all workers. Examples of nontraditional occupations include construction and building trades, engineering, production, and transportation, and encompass technical, scientific, and labor-intensive work. Nontraditional jobs typically pay more than those traditionally classified as “female jobs”—often as much as 20 to 30 percent more. These jobs also frequently offer well-defined career paths, good healthcare and other benefits, and thus a strong pathway to economic security.

Historically, the construction and building trades industry has been the primary target of nontraditional jobs strategies for women. Policy advocacy in the 1970s resulted in affirmative action rules governing apprenticeship programs that helped women gain entry in the trades. However, despite decades of efforts to increase women’s participation in the building trades, women are still minimally represented. They remain less likely to hold production jobs than they are to hold clerical/support or manager/professional jobs (21 percent, compared

to 52 percent and 27 percent, respectively).<sup>i</sup> Likewise, outcomes are not much better across nontraditional occupations in general—in 2008, less than six percent of all working women were employed in nontraditional occupations.<sup>ii</sup>

## ***Barriers to Nontraditional Employment***

Historic barriers to women’s workforce attachment and advancement in nontraditional occupations can be classified as both categorical and systemic. Categorical barriers include level of educational attainment, language skills, prior incarceration, disability, and lack of work experience. Systemic barriers include work supports, transportation costs, and workplace discrimination. Barriers can be so severe that they trump rational economic decisions to pursue nontraditional jobs.<sup>iii</sup>

As documented by Moir et al., “Women have been kept out and pushed out of the trades through discriminatory apprenticeship practices, overt discrimination from employers, sexual harassment on the job site and during training, and the lack of enforcement of legal policies that are now over three decades old.”<sup>iv</sup> Career advancement opportunities are limited because women often receive unequal



on-the-job training and access to skill-building tasks, are segregated by gender, or do not have mentors or role models to help them navigate worksite norms. In addition to workplace discriminations, women in nontraditional occupations often encounter negative attitudes from family members and friends.

Low-income women who are single heads of household face additional barriers and need extensive support services to help them remain in the labor market and navigate career pathways. Lack of education and training, childcare, and transportation are the three most common barriers to employment for low-income women. Over 84 percent of providers who serve Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and 72 percent of those who serve non-TANF recipients say these barriers hinder participants.<sup>v</sup> Job trainers and service providers face severe challenges in addressing the barriers faced by low-income women with children, regardless of the industry sector targeted.

### ***Redefining Nontraditional Occupations for Women***

Sector-based employment initiatives rely on regional labor market analysis to identify demand-driven industries and occupations that provide entry-level jobs and career advancement opportunities to low-income workers. Although sector-based employment initiatives are not exclusively aimed at women, many advocates of nontraditional occupations for women embrace them. Strategies typically integrate education, training and support services, and take a dual customer approach that benefits both workers and employers.

Many such programs that serve low-wage, low-skilled women target nontraditional sectors like construction, manufacturing and transportation. In the near-term,

women face competition from men already in these sectors, as well as those who have recently been displaced from other sectors of the economy. In the long-term, however, infrastructure needs will increase the demand for workers in a number of sectors including energy, logistics and transportation, utilities, telecommunications, water and wastewater systems. They will require entry-level and middle-skilled workers in a range of technical, professional, and managerial occupations—many of which are back office functions similar to occupations currently dominated by women, including office clerks, office and administrative support, bookkeeping, accounting, and first-line supervisors/managers.

Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) proposed reframing nontraditional jobs as high-wage/high-demand occupations—moving away from the old definition of nontraditional jobs as those in which women make up less than 25 percent of the labor force, and toward a strategy that seeks parity between men and women in high-growth fields that demand well-trained workers. WOW also advocated moving beyond the trades and vocational-technical fields in favor of occupations in the uniformed services, such as those in policing, firefighting and protective services, as well as male-dominated occupations in the service sector, such as information technology, telecommunications, finance, and real estate.<sup>vi</sup>

Attention must also be paid to the persistent wage gap that exists for women, in both male and female-dominated occupations. The Women's Foundation's 2010 *Portrait Project* noted that the Washington region's 20 percent gender wage gap is slightly lower than the national gender wage gap of 22 percent. However, the data underscored the racial dimensions of wage disparity in the region: while white women earn 27 percent less than white men, Asian women earn 41 percent less, African American women earn



45 percent less, and Latinas earn 63 percent less than white men.<sup>vii</sup> The report also pointed out that occupational segregation and the gender wage gap remain persistently connected, with women often relegated to “female occupations” that typically pay less and offer fewer benefits than male-dominated occupations. A survey of median earnings for 104 women-dominated occupations found that women earn more than men in only four such occupations: teacher assistants; bakers; life, physical and social science technicians; and dining room, cafeteria

attendants, and bartender helpers.<sup>viii</sup> Even in nontraditional Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) jobs, where women can earn 33 percent more than women in non-STEM jobs, there remains a gender wage gap: women in STEM still earn 14 percent less than their male counterparts.<sup>ix</sup> The gap is smaller than in non-STEM careers, but a disparity nonetheless. A nontraditional jobs strategy must recognize and seek to combat the gender wage gap that exists across occupations.

# CASE STUDY FINDINGS

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At the start of the Stepping Stones Initiative in 2005, the Washington region was experiencing considerable economic growth. In response to the 2003 *Portrait Project* findings, The Women's Foundation designed a long-term strategy specifically aimed at low-income women with children. Investments were intended to support job training in occupations and sectors with clear entry-level pathways to family-supporting jobs that offer wage progression and career advancement. Several high-growth sectors were identified as meeting these criteria, including health care, real estate, protective services and, later, information technology. The region's strong economic activity stimulated demand in the building trades and construction, which was also considered a high-growth industry at the time.

In weighing these high-growth sectors, The Women's Foundation recognized the historically important opportunities that nontraditional occupations have provided to low-income women. Nontraditional occupations became a central part of Stepping Stones' objective of moving women out of poverty and into the middle class. A number of these investments targeted the construction industry as a primary source of nontraditional jobs for

women. At the same time, investments also targeted occupations in the region's high-growth sectors—including both male-dominated occupations as well as those high-growth sectors in which women are well represented, such as health care.

The Women's Foundation awarded 21 planning and implementation grants for nontraditional job training programs between July 2005 and June 2011. Grantee Partners provided job training and support services to 3,636 women from the target population and placed 2,834 in higher paying jobs. A total of 525 participants were placed in nontraditional occupations, and 360 were placed in internships, apprenticeships, or mentorships. (Job retention outcomes are not summarized here—an issue detailed later in lessons learned and recommendations.)

Beginning in 2008-2009, the effects of the economic crisis impacted Grantee Partners and their programs. By July 2009, the Washington region's unemployment rate was 5.9 percent and 31,700 jobs had been lost in the preceding year.<sup>x</sup> By June 2011, the unemployment rate had risen slightly to 6.2 percent, compared to 9.2 percent nationally. While the Washington region's job

loss was less dramatic than other regions of the country, parts of the region were disproportionately impacted. The District of Columbia, with its higher concentration of low-income and minority residents, reached an unemployment rate of 11.9 percent, and unemployment in Ward 8, one of the District's poorest and most segregated neighborhoods, was 18.6 percent.<sup>xi</sup> Job losses were pronounced in several sectors targeted by Grantee Partners, including construction. Between the 2007-2008 and 2010-2011 grant investment years, overall placements in nontraditional occupations dropped by 89 percent, largely reflecting the contraction of the construction industry. While some of the assumptions about high-growth sectors still held, the level of competition for a shrinking jobs pool put the typical job training participant at a disadvantage.

The Women's Foundation's staff selected a sampling of five Grantee Partners to be included in this study:

- **CASA de Maryland** received support for its Women's Workforce Initiative, which was designed to place low-income Latina and immigrant women in jobs that pay a living wage. It sought to place women in permanent, temporary, and daily-hire jobs in the building trades and landscaping.
- **Goodwill of Greater Washington** received support for its Female Construction Employment Training Program, which provided vocational job training, gender-specific case management, and employment retention services.
- **Urban Alliance** received support for its Health Alliance Program, a partnership formed with an area hospital and a higher education institution to provide low-income women with training for high-demand, middle-skilled jobs in nursing.

- **Year Up National Capital Region** received support to enroll low-income women in its training program for jobs in the information technology sector.
- **YWCA National Capital Area** received support for its Pre-Apprenticeship Construction Training, which was implemented in partnership with other organizations committed to improving women's access to union jobs in the building trades and construction.

Despite a number of challenges—including the economic environment, the categorical and systemic barriers for women in nontraditional occupations and sectors, and challenges in program design for serving low-income women—the lessons learned from these investments were numerous. In many cases, Grantee Partners were, for the first time, implementing programs with a gender lens. Others were reaching into new sectors, or new geographic service areas. For The Women's Foundation and its Stepping Stones Initiative, it was critical to capture and distill these lessons learned.

As part of the case study, grant evaluation data was examined and paired with valuable insights from interviews with Grantee Partners and key regional experts. Based on this information, several themes and key program components emerged, and were found to directly impact the outcomes of workforce development programs for low-income women; these lessons learned and recommendations are outlined in the following pages.

# LESSONS LEARNED & RECOMMENDATIONS

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## **ORGANIZATIONS LOCATED IN LOW-INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS, OR THOSE THAT HAVE STRONG PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARTICULAR COMMUNITIES, ARE BETTER ABLE TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN CLIENTS.**

Stepping Stones investments supported organizations with a variety of “place-based” ties—those that had experience working in low-income neighborhoods, those that were not rooted in low-income communities, and those that had a broader regional focus. Community-based organizations that were located in or providing direct services to residents of, low-income communities reported little difficulty recruiting and serving program participants. Grantee Partners that were not located in low-income neighborhoods, or did not have programs serving these residents, generally had a difficult time identifying candidates for targeted job training programs. However, many of the organizations that entered the initiative with weak community ties established stronger connections to community organizations, service agencies, churches and others groups that could help them build relationships with low-income women. Strategic investments—like those through Stepping Stones—can therefore help foster and support new connections between training programs and communities not previously being served, and it should be expected that these relationships will grow over time.

## **CASE MANAGEMENT AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES ARE CRITICAL TO PARTICIPANT SUCCESS.**

Case management and support services are essential components of successful job training, retention and career advancement programs, and need to be provided on an on-going basis. The type of support will change at different stages of the participant’s progression toward her career goals. Organizations need specialized staff, strong partnerships with external organizations, and deep knowledge about program participants and the targeted industries in order to deliver services effectively. All of Stepping Stones’ Grantee Partners offered case management and support services directly or in partnership with other providers. However, organizations that did not have extensive prior experience with low-income women were not well-equipped to address the multiple barriers women faced—both in terms of their understanding of the complexity of participants’ lives as well as having the resources to sufficiently help them. Case management and supportive services need to be considered an integral and required program component.

## PERSISTENT BARRIERS TO WORK, AS SEEN IN NONTRADITIONAL JOB TRAINING INVESTMENTS.

Low-income women with children face a range of barriers that affect their ability to complete training programs and stay employed, particularly in nontraditional occupations. In the Washington region, transportation is a pervasive barrier for low-income workers, and is particularly pronounced for some nontraditional occupations. Construction worksites are often located away from public transportation routes and, where it is available, it typically does not run early enough to get workers to sites on time. Grantee Partners struggled to address transportation barriers for both women living in underserved urban neighborhoods as well as those living in suburban areas, where increasing numbers of the working poor are concentrated.<sup>xi</sup> In a few cases, Grantee Partners moved components of their training programs to locations that were more accessible to public transportation.

Challenges in both training and employment included issues related to work-life balance and the relative cost of participation. Few nontraditional jobs offer family leave or sick time, and social networks are usually unpredictable or inadequate to help women meet multiple family, work and job training demands. Access and availability of quality, affordable childcare remains a key barrier. The typical work schedule for construction jobs makes it especially difficult for mothers to secure childcare services. Additionally, most incumbent workers needed to maintain income during training—an indication of widespread asset poverty, and a consistent factor in overcoming barriers. Some programs provided stipends; others expanded their referral networks to help participants address costs related to housing, transportation and childcare, and one enrolled participants in affordable health insurance plans.

Identifying employment opportunities for previously incarcerated women is especially problematic. Grantee Partners working in construction were frustrated by rules barring people who had prior involvement in the criminal justice system from working on federal worksites. Similar barriers exist in many protective services jobs. Limited physical strength and stamina also challenged women in many nontraditional jobs. Additional barriers that surfaced, but are not exclusive to nontraditional careers, include: homelessness and housing insecurity; being a victim of domestic violence or other abuse; physical or mental disability; chemical dependency; and immigration status.

**JOB RETENTION AND EMPLOYMENT SPECIALISTS ARE AN ESSENTIAL AND OFTEN MISSING ELEMENT FOR PARTICIPANT SUCCESS.**

Job retention and career advancement services need to be strengthened. One-year retention and on-going self-assessment are best practices for training programs, but are not often implemented. The purpose of establishing a lengthy post-completion retention phase is not simply to “track” participants’ progress, but to deliver a responsive set of services and supports that will help participants advance toward well-defined career goals. Organizations should consider hiring specialized staff to provide retention and advancement support for a minimum of one year into a woman’s job placement, and have the data systems in place to not only monitor progress,

but to assess outcomes for individualized and programmatic course correction. Retention services include on-going case management, support services, basic skills instruction, and connections to bridge programs that help participants move from basic skills to higher levels of education and training. Career advancement strategies should be grounded in career pathway analyses that help participants identify and meet post-secondary education and training requirements, as well as navigate internal career ladders and career crosswalks to other sectors. Retention and advancement services should be strengthened, and additional investments should be made in building organizational capacity to do this work.

**OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN RETENTION SERVICES**

An important distinction, that was not readily apparent in the programs examined for this report, is the difference between case management and job retention services that are designed to keep participants on the job and help them pursue career advancement goals. Typically, job retention or employment specialists implement retention strategies. They are not the same as case managers. Although they may work together and share some of the same skill sets, retention specialists are much more knowledgeable about the targeted industry and its career paths, have strong relationships with employers, and are committed to helping participants reach explicit career advancement goals. Few of the Stepping Stones Grantee Partners were in a position to segment these functions. Some relied upon partner organizations to fulfill the role of job broker, but most used the same case manager(s) to serve participants during training and post-placement (to the extent that explicit retention services were provided).

Job retention standards and protocols varied across the Grantee Partners. Stepping Stones had a six-month retention goal for nontraditional job placements. However, the Grantee Partners all had different internal retention standards and protocols. Some only tracked participants for as little as 30 days. A few followed established best practices of 12 months or longer. Additionally, the type of retention services offered to participants varied widely, and none exhibited a particularly robust set of services. Those organizations that had short retention targets tended to lack the infrastructure and resources to track participants, much less to substantively engage them in enhanced services. Employer engagement strategies generally were not designed to help them address their retention problems.

**TRAINING AND ADVANCEMENT NEED TO ADDRESS BASIC SKILLS AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION NEEDS.**

Transforming the lives of low-income women cannot occur without a commitment to developing participants' basic skills. Basic skills proficiency is the precursor to post-secondary education and career advancement. Innovative strategies are needed to reduce the amount of time under-prepared adult learners are required to spend in developmental

education classes before being admitted to credit-bearing programs. The inclusion of basic education in job training programs is a key factor to participant success. Bridge and career pathway programs are specifically designed to provide academic, work readiness, and technical skills to better position workers for additional education and training, employment and advancement. Without investments in basic skills, career advancement will remain elusive for many low-income women.

**THE BASIC SKILLS GAP**

No matter the sector or the level of support services, success will be hard met unless greater attention is given to the severity of the basic skills gap among low-income women. Low educational attainment rates are one of the most pervasive challenges facing low-income women, and particularly women of color. The Women's Foundation's 2010 *Portrait Project* documented that 57 percent of Latinas and 39 percent of African American women in the Washington region have only a high school degree or less. Research shows however that, by 2018, 72 percent of all jobs in Washington, D.C., 67 percent of jobs in Maryland, and 66 percent of jobs in Virginia will require some sort of post-secondary education or training.<sup>xiii</sup> This situation requires that steps be taken to address the basic skills gap, helping under-prepared adult learners sequentially move from remediation into post-secondary education and training—regardless of whether women are working in nontraditional jobs or other occupations.



**BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND EMPLOYERS.**

Community colleges are important workforce development partners. In addition to having technical training programs that align with industry-recognized credentials, community colleges have connections to employers and industry groups through formal advisory committees and are abreast of industry changes that affect skill needs and labor demand. Several Stepping Stones Grantee Partners established partnerships with local community colleges and other higher education institutions. In addition to using basic skills and occupational training curricula, several programs established articulation agreements through which participants could earn college credits. One Grantee Partner was designated a satellite campus of a local community college and another established a dual enrollment program—strong incentives for participants to pursue further education and training. Community colleges are likewise

important partners in bridge programs, and are increasingly providing support services such as on-site childcare and referral services.

Employer partners are also instrumental resources for training programs, well beyond their job placement role. They help training providers customize curricula, gain access to in-kind resources, and re-tool programs during times of fluctuating job demand—which was particularly important for Stepping Stones Grantee Partners targeting nontraditional employment projects in construction. In addition to employers, some organizations formed partnerships with business and trade associations, which gave them access to more employers, customized training curricula, and other resources.

# CONCLUSION

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At the start of this case study, The Women's Foundation sought to understand whether investing in nontraditional occupations is an effective workforce development strategy for the Foundation's target population. **Considering the findings of the case study, and a broader picture of the local economy and the job opportunities available to low-income women, the Foundation's assessment is that a nontraditional jobs strategy remains a viable component of a broader workforce development strategy. There are, however, a few caveats.**

For example, the outcomes of the Foundation's particular investments in nontraditional job training programs for women were affected considerably by the recession; but Grantee Partners did also encounter multiple implementation challenges that were independent of market conditions and specific barriers. Organizations grappled with the intensive needs of low-income women they may not have previously served, new industry-specific curricula and partnerships, and varying capacity to connect near-term placement outcomes with long-term career advancement and self-sufficiency objectives. Deep and strategic planning is essential, and organizations must have the capacity to provide a wide variety of support services during education and training, placement, and retention.

Currently, The Women's Foundation continues to invest in sector-based strategies. Although the Foundation has moved away from concerted investments in construction and the trades, the Foundation continues to support investments in high-growth and high-demand sectors such as information technology. The Foundation has increased its investments in basic education, and programs at community colleges that pair basic skills and post-secondary education with occupational skills training. The Foundation has likewise increased its investments in retention services, and continues to lift up and invest in comprehensive services and work supports, including childcare and transportation.

**Despite challenges documented in this study, The Women's Foundation still concludes that it proved instrumental to make these investments with a gender lens.** Barriers remain, but it is important to invest in building the programs and partnerships that will learn, test, and do the hard work of serving women in job training programs well. Women-headed families remain the most economically vulnerable in the Washington region, and it is critical to invest in better career opportunities to help put more families on the path to economic security. Providers, funders, and policymakers should address these lessons learned in their work, in shared pursuit of increased opportunities for low-income women and girls.

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