



Seattle Vocational Institute (Pre-Apprenticeship Construction Training Program) students show the demonstration solar roof they built. Photo credit: Green For All

Back to Our Roots, Just Greener this Time

Community Development Corporations and Workforce Development

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Introduction

Community Development Corporations (CDCs) were created in the late 1960s to help low wealth communities address the range of problems associated with economic and political exclusion. Although CDCs initially engaged in a broad array of activities, from community organizing to economic development and job services, many developed an almost exclusive focus on affordable housing development during the 1980s.¹ A survey conducted by the Urban Institute indicated that by the early 1990s, only about half of the responding CDCs (55 percent) engaged in workforce development.² As the economy continues to struggle and layoffs persist, CDCs have a timely opportunity to return to their roots as providers

of workforce development services that target underserved communities.

Workforce development provides skills training and career preparation services that prepare jobseekers for entry and advancement into high-demand occupations in rapidly growing industries. The results of such efforts are careers that provide living wages, benefits (such as healthcare and paid sick leave), and marketable skills that improve the economic viability of community residents. This article will discuss the role of CDCs in providing workforce development services and highlight some of the strategies and innovations, such as the green jobs movement, that will shape the future of this important field.



Participants in a job training seminar at Marin City Community Development Corporation.

The Role of CDCs in Workforce Development

CDCs are well positioned to provide direct workforce services because of their strong community ties and their established presence as a trusted resource. Many CDCs provide a range of workforce services and align pre-vocational services such as classes in job readiness, basic training in math and writing, and computer skills courses.

For example, West Angeles Community Development Corporation (WACDC), located in south Los Angeles, offers work-readiness skills training, mentoring, and career counseling to help low-income jobseekers secure quality employment. WACDC also provides affordable housing and asset development services and has linked credit repair counseling and homeownership services to its workforce development efforts. WACDC maintains an in-depth knowledge of its client base and has a deep understanding of the requirements for success in the modern workplace; it can utilize these strengths to provide customized coaching and support. According to Dr. Lula Ballton, Executive Director of WACDC, those who have been “chronically unemployed can be what they can see.” In other words, as these clients gain skills and confidence through workforce development services, they can begin to see the real prospects and benefits of steady employment. WACDC provides leadership development and mentoring, and focuses on developing strong math, speaking, and writing skills to make clients job-ready. In addition, they provide conflict resolution training, which is an important workplace skill that improves job retention and encourages overall career success. WACDC partners with the local Urban League and Workforce Investment One Stop Career Center to connect job seekers to occupational skills training and more advanced employment services.

Successful CDCs can extend the reach of their services in the workforce development field even further. Those organizations that demonstrate expertise and have a proven track record of accomplishment have become excellent providers of technical assistance to other workforce development CDCs. For example, after receiving numerous requests for technical assistance, Marin City Community Development (MCCDC) decided to develop this core competency and now supports capacity building for workforce development service providers. In addition to helping to promote best practices, this new business line contributes to MCCDC’s financial sustainability through the fee for service contracts.

CDCs also play a role as policy intermediaries, ensuring that the public workforce and economic development systems provide meaningful services to underserved populations, and that community and faith-based organizations remain integral to the workforce delivery system. CDCs can encourage the effective implementation of policies that prioritize underserved populations facing multiple barriers to employment. One important strategy is to actively participate on the local or regional Workforce Investment Board, which has oversight of an area’s primary workforce development efforts. CDCs often have the required core competencies to provide “intensive services” within the workforce development system, and are able to enhance results because of their specific expertise with target populations. CDCs can also help to bring together other workforce institutions within the community. For example, CDCs have the flexibility to work with targeted industries, the public workforce system, educational institutions, and occupational skills providers to support the complex effort of sectoral workforce development strategies.

CDCs are particularly well-suited to serving as workforce intermediaries, since they tend to be more flexible and entrepreneurial. One example of this is the recent policy and industrial shift to “green industries” and the mission to create “green collar jobs.”

The green jobs movement is an important part of the future of workforce development, as it seeks to improve career opportunities for low-wealth communities while significantly improving the environment. Van Jones, who recently became the White House Special Advisor for Green Jobs, Enterprise, and Innovation, is an important leader in this movement. As the former Executive Director of the Ella Baker Center in Oakland, he helped develop the Oakland Green Jobs Corp Program with the Apollo Alliance. This innovative work of connecting environmental advocacy issues with the emerging growth of the green sector caught the attention of Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The idea that this new green economy could “lift all boats” by ensuring that underserved pop-

ulations become priorities in occupational skills training spurred the creation of the national Green Jobs Act, which authorizes up to \$125 million to establish job training programs for green industries.³ There was an overwhelming national and international response, with many other governmental entities requesting assistance to craft similar legislation. The organization Green for All was established on January 1, 2008 to focus specifically on green jobs policy.

The green jobs movement is an exceptional approach to community economic development, as it engages low-income communities in creating social, economic, and environmental change. Recognizing this opportunity, Marin City CDC has developed a workforce development sectoral strategy for the green industry. The work of MCCDC initially began with solar industry employers providing photovoltaic installation training to job seeking clients, after initial classroom based preparation, academic advancement instruction, and a variety of other comprehensive career supports. As green sectors became more easily identifiable and opportunities in the energy efficiency industry were projected to increase, MCCDC realized the potential to link workforce training efforts to the agency's housing preservation services for local low-income homeowners. MCCDC partners with GRID Alternatives, a provider of low cost solar installation services, to promote a workforce development strategy that provides increased training, energy efficiency measures, and realized savings for low-income residents of the community. This project has also helped reach underserved residents, who benefit greatly from authentic job skills training when it is offered in their own community, along with easily accessible vocational supports. In addition, their training contributes to the community in a meaningful way. The next phase of the program will include training for weatherization and other energy efficiency services and is close to implementation. These types of programs offer meaningful benefits for jobseeking clients as well as community residents as a whole.

Conclusion

CDCs can utilize a variety of funding sources to provide skills training to address the current challenges of unemployment in low-income communities. Investments into workforce development efforts are varied

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and have recently increased with new governmental commitments to job creation and environmental protection. Many public entities, such as the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Energy, and HUD, are strengthening support for workforce development efforts. Philanthropic organizations, many of which have reduced support in recent years and are struggling with diminished corpuses in the current economic climate, have formed effective workforce funding collaboratives throughout California and other regions in the country. These collaboratives develop and expand investments of foundations, the public sector, and private businesses, and increase flexibility by combining a diversified funding approach with collaborative and coordinated decision-making on grants.⁴ The private sector is an important contributor to workforce development through direct involvement in training and the provision of resources; collaboration with an industry partner often authenticates the relevance and core business value of an initiative. Many large companies and industry associations have foundations or other sources of revenue to support workforce development and many banks and financial institutions support this effort through their Community Reinvestment Act commitments.

Effective workforce development strategies are strategically aligned with the mission of community development corporations, which began with a focus on employment and career training services. Housing development and asset building strategies recognize the importance of successfully increasing incomes as an essential element to building self-sufficiency. With this mission to increase income and expand employment opportunities in high growth industries, such as the new green economy, community development corporations have the chance to reconnect with their roots, and become even more effective contributors to this dynamic field. **CI**

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