

## **The Cara Program: Job retention metrics show ability to deliver motivated, reliable workers**

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Alternative staffing organizations (ASOs) understand the importance of metrics in making their business case to employers and demonstrating their social impact to donors and investors. Yet many ASOs find it challenging to track their workers' employment status after they leave the ASO. In the [Alternative Staffing Demonstration](#) that studied worker outcomes, for example, four participating ASOs were able to contact an average of 43% of workers to document their employment status and earnings six to eight months after leaving the ASO. In the Benchmarking Project, a national study that aggregated data from 200 community-based organizations providing workforce development services to disadvantaged job seekers, 58% of the participating organizations were able to provide 6-month retention data and only 25% could report retention at 12-months.

The Cara Program (now [Cara Chicago](#)) has an impressive system for tracking and publishing their employment outcomes and considers metrics an important element of their brand. Among other performance measures, they are able to document a 70% retention rate one year after job placement. They also monitor average wages, weekly hours worked, personal savings, and permanent housing status of the individuals they place. We spoke with Cara's Chief Operating Officer Maria Kim to learn more about both their retention success and how Cara remains connected with participants to monitor their progress after external job placement.

### **Overview of The Cara Program**

Founded in 1991, Cara empowers adults affected by homelessness and poverty to find quality employment. The organization gets its name from "cara," the Gaelic word for friend, and likens itself to a friend who "coaches, pushes and supports a community of motivated individuals on their journey towards success." About 40% of Cara's participants have a felony conviction and a quarter have less than a high school education.

Cara makes direct job placements on a no-fee basis and operates two social enterprises. One is TCP Staffing (now [Cara Connects](#)), their alternative staffing enterprise launched in 2013. The other is Cleanslate, a provider of neighborhood beautification services since 2005. Cleanslate contracts with over 40 customers in greater Chicago including Business Improvement Districts, community development corporations and event management companies.

### **Retention Philosophy**

As Maria explains, Cara's retention messaging begins at the moment of an individual's admission into the training program and continues by affirming participants' success at each milestone going forward through a year on the job. Advancement through Cara's Life and Career Skills Training is merit-based and can be completed in as few as six weeks, but more typically is a five to seven-month process. Cara has

found the first two weeks of training to be critical and loses up to 30% of their students during this time. While some leave for employment, others opt out after orientation or because they find the rigor of the program is too much or not a right fit for them. Cara carefully monitors this attrition and sees it as a healthy way to expose candidates to the demands of employment.

Individuals begin the training as part of a cohort of 30 to 50 students. An important part of their daily routine is Cara's trademark "Motivations." Each morning participants gather with staff and respond to a question such as, "Tell us about a challenge or obstacle you have overcome that will motivate someone else." Through this process, Cara's students build community, and inspire and energize each other to persevere and succeed.

### **Training Milestones**

Cara's Life and Career Skills Training combines lessons in personal transformation and life skills with job readiness and professional development. Students are considered eligible for being sent out to Cara hiring partners when they have:

- Had a sample application and resume reviewed
- Secured stable housing and childcare
- Completed interview class and class homework
- Achieved a satisfactory score in mock interviews
- Obtained appropriate documentation of education, background and medical conditions as applicable
- Consistently adhered to the dress code policy
- Demonstrated adequate skills in conflict management, time management, team building, professionalism and communication

During the training process, students may also get work experience through internships or employment with Cleanslate or TCP Staffing, which also places graduates with employer customers.

### **Job Quality**

Cara's wage and benefit standards are no doubt a contributing factor to their retention success. Cara focuses on placing students into "quality employment" defined as a minimum hourly wage of \$11 for individuals facing "moderate" obstacles to employment and \$10 for those facing "high" obstacles to employment. Moderate obstacles include recovery from substance abuse, survival of domestic violence, no high school diploma or GED, and/or limited work experience. High obstacles include the challenge of no work experience, low levels of literacy, a record of multiple convictions or recent incarceration. Like most ASOs, Cara also seeks out jobs with benefits or the near-term opportunity for benefits.

### **Retention Supports**

Five staff retention specialists each support 40 to 60 individuals, seeing them in person once a month following external job placement and as needed by phone or text to address issues that arise between visits. Retention supports go well beyond work-related issues like transportation, child care and success on-the-job. A one-year coaching template includes counseling and periodic check-ins related to health and stress management, housing, personal finance, goal setting and psychological barriers to success.

The financial coaching, led by a full-time financial literacy specialist, focuses on budgeting, especially to help new wage earners adjust to the loss of public supports, and promotes personal savings habits. At the end of one year, workers who save at least \$25 per month for at least 10 of the 12 months receive a match in the form of a \$500 US savings bond. About 20% of workers meet this requirement and receive the match.

Retention data is entered into a database developed in house. Currently, though, Cara is transitioning its data collection to integrate with Salesforce, which they use for customer relations management. The conversion process will be completed in about 12 months.

### **The Power of Metrics**

Cara's performance update is issued quarterly and provides a snapshot of outcomes related to their success securing employment and promoting self-sufficiency for its participants. The ability to demonstrate a 70% one-year job retention rate resonates with employers looking to minimize their turnover costs and funders seeking to maximize the return on their grant contributions. As Cara expands its fee-for-service job placement services through its staffing enterprise, the retention measure is direct evidence of their ability to deliver motivated and reliable workers and serves as a powerful tool in attracting more business customers.