

THE MET CENTER

A REGIONAL APPROACH TO PROMOTING ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY

BACKGROUND

The St. Louis region has attracted national attention since the police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, in the suburb of Ferguson in August 2014. Amid the protests and demonstrations that followed Brown's death, a picture emerged of the profound demographic and economic changes the suburb has faced in recent years. Not only has this once white suburb transitioned into a majority African American community, but the economically turbulent 2000s saw the poor population double amid declining wages and rising unemployment.

Ferguson is not alone. It is just one of 91 suburban municipalities in St. Louis County, and one of more than 270 suburban jurisdictions in the greater St. Louis region. Between 2000 and 2013, the number of residents living below the federal poverty line in the St. Louis' suburbs grew by 53 percent, while the city's poor population held steady. By 2013, more than three-quarters (77 percent) of the metropolitan poor lived in suburbs, up from 69 percent in 2000.

As a region, St. Louis shed jobs during the 2000s, and has yet to recover all the jobs lost in the Great Recession. The unemployment rate has fallen in recent years as economic recovery has slowly taken hold, but it remains higher than before the downturn hit, and the majority of the region's unemployed live in the suburbs. Moreover, throughout the 2000s, jobs continued to shift away from the urban core. More than 61 percent of the region's jobs are located more than 10 miles away from downtown, making it one of the most decentralized labor markets among the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas.

As poverty has grown across metropolitan St. Louis' fragmented suburban landscape, and the region grapples with the need to connect low-income residents with economic opportunity in a far-flung regional labor market, the Metropolitan Education and Training (MET) Center has crafted an integrated workforce development model for a metropolitan scale. Located in the inner-ring suburb of Wellston, just 15 minutes from Ferguson, MET Center has for the past 15 years focused on contributing to a competitive regional economy by promoting the economic self-sufficiency of low-income workers through sustainable work.

THE INNOVATION

MET Center has developed a model to improve employment outcomes for its clients and the region that:

- **Works at a metropolitan scale and offers an integrated continuum of services.** MET Center operates a "one-stop shop" within walking distance of public transit that serves clients throughout the metropolitan area. Located in a former electrical plant owned and maintained by St. Louis County, MET Center's facilities house 16 different programs, from adult basic education and reintegration services for the formerly incarcerated, to training programs in business administration, carpentry, precision machining, diesel technology, nursing, and bioscience technology, and job search and placement services. The center also has a credit union on site, which offers financial and asset-building services in addition to free tax preparation for clients at tax time. Recognizing the importance of a two-generation approach to promoting economic self-sufficiency, MET Center recently opened a child development academy adjacent to its main building. The academy offers early childhood care and education services and parenting programs in addition to child care.
- **Embraces collaboration.** To provide its continuum of employment, education and training, and work support services, MET Center works with 21 different partners throughout the region, including employment agencies, community colleges, school districts, and nonprofit providers. Through its open enrollment process, the MET Center works to sequence and bundle services by determining what programs and support services would best help each client achieve economic self-sufficiency. To that end, each client is assigned a case manager and financial literacy coach who crafts a tailored training and employment plan, a financial plan, and a transportation plan to ensure the client can access the training and employment opportunities proposed. The case manager and coach also serve as the point of contact as the client moves through various programs located within the center and the region. Partners meet at the center once a month, which gives them an opportunity to discuss the progress of clients participating in multiple programs and to identify and coordinate any adjustments needed in their integrated plans.
- **Aligns programs to the needs of the regional labor market.** To ensure clients receive training for in-demand skills that lead to employment, the center's staff has built relationships with more than 700 employers accessible via public transit throughout the St. Louis Region. MET Center not only fashions its programs with these employers in mind, but employers

CONFRONTING SUBURBAN POVERTY IN AMERICA

also now know they can turn to the MET Center to fill open positions. For instance, through this network, the MET Center identified a demand for process technicians, a position that does not require a four-year degree for support work in the labs of pharmaceutical, food, beverage, and cosmetic companies and research universities. In partnership with St. Louis Community College, MET Center developed a pilot training and certification program for process technicians. Based on the success of that pilot and demand for this skill set, MET Center recently added a biosciences and technology training center and wet lab to its facilities to expand the program.

- **Invests in data and tracking impact.** A key component that makes MET Center's integrated and collaborative approach successful is its investment in an integrated database system. Not only can MET Center and its partners follow the progress of each client through his or her various programs, adjusting and responding to needs or challenges as they arise, but they also track outcomes for clients more than a year after they leave the center. That means MET Center, its partners, and its investors have information on placement rates upon graduation as well as retention rates months later, which helps inform MET Center's programming and strategies over time.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Each year, 7,000 people access MET Center's programs. More than 600 individuals benefit from the center's financial literacy services with more than 18,000 customer transactions performed by the St. Louis Community Credit Union annually. In addition, more than 2,200 clients participate in job training/search and work support services, of which 65 to 75 percent, on average, are placed in a job upon completion of the program. As many as 90 percent find employment after completing programs such as the Diesel Technician Training. MET Center graduates find jobs that pay \$9.00 per hour, on average, \$1.50 above Missouri's minimum wage.

CHALLENGES

In building its programs and regional reach, the MET Center has confronted a number of challenges:

- The MET Center and its clients benefit from the center's integrated data system, but for data reporting requirements from government and other funders, the MET Center confronts fragmentation rather than coordination. Roughly 85 percent of MET Center's funding comes from the federal government, but that funding flows from multiple sources across different programs and departments, each with separate and uncoordinated requirements and reporting schedules. Navigating this fragmented system creates unnecessary administrative burdens and costs.
- Although successful outcomes for clients often require long-term and multiservice engagements, program-specific funding often operates on shorter and uncoordinated cycles. Clients can spend years moving through the center's various offerings, with some job training programs lasting up to two years. However, program-specific funding is only so flexible, even when combined with other supports, meaning that capacity to see clients through transitional periods between programming can be limited.
- Creating successful and sustainable collaborative relationships requires a commitment to building trust among partners, particularly when using shared data and resources. It also requires investment in the collaborative infrastructure and a clear delineation of the roles and responsibilities of each partner. Both are ongoing challenges as partners change and the continuum of services offered expands and adapts to regional labor market and client needs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

To continue to build on the success of the MET Center and pave the way for more scaled and integrated service models like it, policymakers, funders, and practitioners should:

- Work to align data reporting systems and requirements where possible to streamline implementation and cut down on duplication, which would save on administrative costs and allow for more of these limited program dollars to be applied to client services.
- Allow for more flexible funding sources that could help bridge program-specific grants, recognizing the importance of keeping clients engaged in transitional periods in their programming to boost retention and successful job placement.
- Invest in the capacity-building and maintenance needed to create effective and sustainable collaborative models. Getting to scale does not have to mean going it alone, but coordinating and implementing programming with other organizations to provide scaled and integrated services takes time and organizational support.