

# IMPLEMENTATION OF AN INTENSIVE JOB SEARCH PROGRAM FOR CASH ASSISTANCE RECIPIENTS: THE STRIVE PROGRAM IN WESTCHESTER COUNTY, NEW YORK

THE JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE  
STRATEGIES EVALUATION



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# Implementation of an Intensive Job Search Program for Cash Assistance Recipients: The STRIVE Program in Westchester County, New York

## The Job Search Assistance Strategies Evaluation

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## Overview

### Introduction

This report describes the operation of an intensive job search assistance program for cash assistance recipients in Westchester County, New York, and provides lessons for other policymakers and program administrators interested in the approach. In 2016-2017, Westchester County operated a full-time, eight-week course designed to teach job readiness and job search skills. Called STRIVE, the program was designed both to address participants' current attitudes and behaviors that might prevent them from obtaining or keeping jobs and to provide assistance in searching for and finding jobs. The STRIVE program was developed and overseen by a parent organization, STRIVE International, that licenses the curriculum to a range of public and non-profit organizations serving low-income and disadvantaged populations. The STRIVE program is commonly provided to low-income non-custodial fathers and ex-offenders. It has been provided less frequently for cash assistance recipients.

Overall, Westchester County's STRIVE program for cash assistance recipients generally adhered to STRIVE International's model, with staff noting they benefited from the technical assistance provided by the parent organization. However, county staff reported that a significant portion of cash assistance recipients who were mandatory for work were not eligible for STRIVE because they could not meet the program's full-time attendance requirement (i.e., missing no more than two hours of class per week). STRIVE staff also reported they made some adjustments to the content of the STRIVE curriculum to better meet the needs of cash assistance recipients. Specifically, this included softening the standard "confrontational" tone of the program and extending the time spent on the topics related to behavioral and attitudinal change. Still, the "no-show" and dropout rates in the STRIVE program for cash assistance recipients were substantial and staff reported this was due to difficulty in meeting the program's attendance requirement.

### Primary Research Questions

- What is the context in which the Westchester County STRIVE program operates?
- How was the Westchester County STRIVE program designed?
- How was the STRIVE program implemented? What features were strongly implemented? What challenges did managers and staff face?
- What are the operational lessons for program administrators interested in the approach?

## **Purpose**

The TANF program provides cash assistance to low-income families, as well as a range of other supports and services to help them become self-sufficient, such as employment-related services, childcare, and transportation. To date, employment-related services designed to improve cash assistance recipients' employment outcomes and reduce dependency have had mixed results. Many TANF recipients struggle to find and keep jobs and many families remain poor despite the assistance provided.

Although cash assistance recipients were not a common target group for the STRIVE program, Westchester County staff determined that its strong focus on employment and on attitudinal and behavioral change gave it the potential to be an effective component of the county's TANF program. This study documents Westchester County's experience operating the STRIVE program for cash assistance recipients and provides lessons for others interested in the program.

## **Key Findings and Highlights**

- Westchester County implemented the STRIVE program largely as designed, following the national curriculum and receiving technical assistance from STRIVE International.
- Staff reported that a significant portion of the county's cash assistance recipients who were mandatory for work were not eligible for STRIVE because they could not meet its attendance requirement. Common reasons for not being able to attend as required included part-time employment, court-mandated meetings, and substance abuse disorder treatment.
- Detailed information on a recipient's needs and circumstances was needed to determine whether they were appropriate and eligible for the STRIVE program.
- The "no-show" rate for the STRIVE program was substantial: over half (56 percent) of those referred to STRIVE did not attend the workshop.
- Almost two-thirds (60 percent) of recipients who started the STRIVE program did not finish it because issues arose that prevented them from meeting its attendance requirement.
- STRIVE's standard "confrontational" approach did not work well for some cash assistance recipients, resulting in some adjustments to "soften" the tone of the program.
- The aspects of the STRIVE curricula dedicated to improving cash assistance recipients' attitudes and behaviors took more class time than generally recommended by STRIVE International.

Overall, the study indicates several factors that should be considered by program administrators interested in adopting the STRIVE program to improve employment outcomes for their cash assistance recipients:

- STRIVE’s stringent attendance requirement may not be appropriate for some cash assistance recipients;
- Specific training for staff to make the determination of whether a cash assistance recipient is eligible for STRIVE is needed;
- Potentially substantial “no-show” and drop-out rates should be considered in program implementation, costs, and scale; and
- Adaptations to soften the program’s standard “confrontational” tone and to spend more time on issues of attitude and behavior may be needed.

## Methods

This implementation report focuses on the operation of the Westchester County STRIVE program from September 2016 through July 2017. The study is primarily based on a site visit in July 2017 to document the operation of the STRIVE program as well as changes made over time and successes and challenges in operating the program. On the site visit, the study team interviewed Westchester County program managers and staff and STRIVE managers and staff. The study also uses a review of STRIVE attendance records from September 2016 to May 2017.



## 1. Introduction

Established by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is intended to foster economic security and stability for low-income families with children. TANF funds a wide range of services that address the program's four broad purposes, including providing monthly cash assistance payments to low-income families with children.<sup>1</sup> Balancing the provision of cash assistance with individual responsibility, the TANF program requires recipients to participate in a specified set of work activities (e.g., job search and readiness activities, work experience, vocational training) as a condition of benefit receipt. Even before the enactment of TANF, policymakers implemented and researchers evaluated services designed to improve cash assistance recipients' employment outcomes and reduce dependency on public benefits. However, programs that provide employment services as part of a cash assistance program have had mixed results to date, including those operating prior to TANF. Many recipients struggle to find and keep jobs, and families remain poor despite the assistance provided (Hendra and Hamilton, 2015).

This report describes the operation of an intensive job search assistance program for cash assistance recipients in Westchester County, New York, a large county located north of New York City, and provides lessons for policymakers and program administrators interested in the approach. In 2016-2017, Westchester County operated a full-time, eight-week course designed to teach job readiness and job search skills. The STRIVE program was designed both to address participants' current attitudes and behaviors that might prevent them from obtaining or keeping jobs and to provide assistance in searching for and finding jobs. STRIVE was developed and overseen by a parent organization, STRIVE International, that licenses the curriculum to a range of public and non-profit organizations serving low-income and disadvantaged populations. The STRIVE program is commonly provided to serve low-income non-custodial fathers and ex-offenders. It has been provided less frequently for cash assistance recipients.

Recognizing the interest in approaches to improving employment outcomes for cash assistance recipients, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), within the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, sponsored this study of the STRIVE program in Westchester County. Conducted by Abt Associates in partnership with Mathematica, this study is part of a larger evaluation—the Job Search

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<sup>1</sup> The four purposes of TANF are to (1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives; (2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and (4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. In creating TANF, PRWORA repealed the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which had previously provided cash assistance to needy families.



Assistance (JSA) Strategies Evaluation, also sponsored by OPRE—to examine job search assistance strategies for TANF applicants and recipients. Based on interviews with Westchester County Department of Social Services (DSS) and STRIVE staff and a review of attendance records, this report documents the design and implementation of the STRIVE program operated in Westchester County. It does not report on the effectiveness of the program in improving recipients' employment outcomes.

The next section of the report describes the program environment and research context for the STRIVE program in Westchester County and the study's data sources. The third section describes the key elements of the STRIVE program and how the program operated during the study period within Westchester County's cash assistance program. The final section presents operational lessons, intended to inform policymakers and program administrators interested in adopting the STRIVE program to improve employment outcomes for cash assistance recipients elsewhere.

## **2. Program Environment and Context and Study Design**

This section provides the program environment and context for the STRIVE program for cash assistance recipients in Westchester County and the study design. It includes a description of New York State's cash assistance program, and specifically how it operates in Westchester County; background on the STRIVE program; and a description of the JSA evaluation and the data sources used for this report.

### **2.1. Demographic and Economic Environment**

The demographic and economic environments in which STRIVE operates in Westchester County are important for understanding its implementation. Westchester County is a large county located north of New York City, covering 450 square miles, with a population of slightly more than 969,000 people. The county consists of primarily urban centers in the south (including White Plains, Mount Vernon, and Yonkers), suburbs in the middle as well as east and west, and rural areas in the north.<sup>2</sup>

Westchester County as a whole is a diverse county demographically and economically, with both high-income and low-income areas. Exhibit 2-1 highlights the key characteristics for Westchester County as a whole and for the city of Yonkers, a city within the county where many cash assistance recipients reside, as well as in the United States. As shown, Westchester County residents as a whole are wealthier than the U.S. population on average, while Yonkers is poorer. While Westchester County's median income is almost \$20,000 higher of than that of U.S. population, the median income for Yonkers residents is almost \$6,600 less. A larger

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<sup>2</sup> 2016 data as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2010-2016.

percentage of families with children live in poverty in Yonkers compared to U.S. population (20 percent compared to 17 percent), but Westchester County as a whole has lower percentage of families with children living in poverty (10 percent) compared to the U.S. overall.

Residents of Yonkers and Westchester County are more demographically diverse than the U.S. population at large. Compared to the U.S. population overall, a larger proportion of residents in Yonkers and Westchester County identify as Black or Latino. While a larger percentage of Yonkers residents have earned only a high school diploma as their highest credential compared to U.S. population, Westchester County as whole has larger percentage of residents with post-secondary degrees.

Westchester County had a strong economy during the study period, and was similar to the national average, with an unemployment rate of 7.1 percent.

**Exhibit 1. Demographic Characteristics, Yonkers, NY and Westchester County, NY, 2016**

Characteristic	Yonkers, NY	Westchester County, NY	United States
<b>Median household income (\$)</b>	61,272	86,226	67,871
<b>All families with children below age 18 below poverty level (%)</b>	20	10.	17
<b>Households receiving cash public assistance (%)</b>	4	2	3
<b>Households receiving food stamp/SNAP benefits in the last 12 months (%)</b>	17	9	13
<b>Race and ethnicity (%)<sup>a</sup></b>			
White, non-Latino	57	66	73
Black or African American, non-Latino	18	14	13
Other race, non-Latino	11	19	14
Latino	36	24	17
<b>Highest educational attainment<sup>b</sup> (%)</b>			
Less than high school diploma/equivalent	17	12	13
High school graduate	26	20	28
Some college, no degree	18	15	21
Associate's degree	8	6	8
Bachelor's degree	18	24	19
Graduate or professional degree	14	23	12
<b>Unemployment rate (%)</b>	7.4	7.1	7.0

Source: 2016 data as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2010–2016

<sup>a</sup> Race and Ethnicity sums to more than 100 percent because respondents could identify as two or more races in the survey.

<sup>b</sup> Among respondents age 25 and older.

## 2.2. Cash Assistance Programs in New York State and Westchester County

### Cash Assistance in New York State

Families with children and pregnant women whose incomes and assets are low enough to meet program requirements qualify for monthly cash benefits through the state's TANF program, known as Family Assistance, which is administered by the state's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA). In addition to the TANF program, New York State operates a cash assistance program for those not eligible for TANF or other assistance programs, called Safety Net Assistance. It primarily serves, but is not limited to, single adults, childless couples, and households with dependent children that have reached the 60-month lifetime limit on receipt of federal TANF benefits.

Federal TANF rules require that states meet the federally defined work participation rate (WPR), measuring the extent to which families with a work-eligible individual engage in employment-related activities as a condition of benefit receipt.<sup>3</sup> The federal law also establishes criteria for when cash assistance recipients need not be included in the WPR (e.g., because they are incapacitated or caring for an infant). To meet the WPR, a state's cash assistance recipients must participate in one or more of several types of employment-related activities, including job search and job readiness activities.<sup>4</sup> States are also required to impose sanctions on recipients who do not satisfy their work activity requirements (e.g., by reducing their cash assistance). In addition, a 60-month lifetime limit applies to families in which an adult receives federally funded benefits. These TANF rules are made at the federal level, but states have wide discretion to set eligibility and program requirements, as well as to make benefit determinations.

New York follows federal TANF guidelines, requiring family members receiving cash assistance who are determined mandatory for work to participate in work activities for a specified number of hours per week to avoid sanctions for noncompliance.<sup>5</sup> As TANF requires, New York State established penalties for noncompliance with work requirements. Once a case is approved for benefits, cash assistance is reduced for any household member who is not in compliance with

<sup>3</sup> The WPR calculates the share of the state's TANF families with a work-eligible individual participating in countable work activities for the required number of hours.

<sup>4</sup> To meet the WPR, cash assistance recipients may participate in several core activities: unsubsidized and subsidized employment, work experience, on-the-job training, job search and job readiness assistance (limited to 6 weeks, or to 12 weeks when certain conditions are met, in a 12-month period), community service programs, vocational educational training (up to 12 months), and child care provided to an individual who is participating in a community service program. NOTE: the job search time limits are based on the preceding 12 months; the vocational educational training 12-month limit is a lifetime limit. Also, the job search limit is converted to an hourly equivalent, so it can be spread out. Just FYI.

<sup>5</sup> Cash assistance recipients are exempt from work requirements if ill or incapacitated; caring for an infant or an ill or incapacitated family member; age 62 or older; pregnant; a victim of domestic violence; in drug, alcohol, or mental health treatment; or lacking access to adequate child care for children under age six.

work requirements, but is restored once the member participates and complies in a reconciliation process.

### **Cash Assistance in Westchester County**

Though the OTDA oversees Family Assistance and Safety Net Assistance, both programs are administered by New York's individual counties. The Westchester County Department of Social Services (DSS) operates Family Assistance and Safety Net Assistance within the state's basic guidelines. Most employment services for cash assistance recipients are provided by vendors contracted to DSS.

In 2013, Westchester DSS contracted with Westhab to provide employment services to the county's cash assistance recipients, including the STRIVE program. Westhab is a non-profit organization located in Yonkers, New York, that has been providing a range of employment, housing, and supportive services to low-income families since 1981.<sup>6</sup>

### **2.3. The STRIVE Program**

STRIVE International developed its STRIVE program in 1984 to help adults with chronic unemployment, with no income, or with involvement in the criminal justice system to obtain and retain jobs.<sup>7</sup> The program originated in Harlem, New York City but now operates in a range of locations across the country. STRIVE International licenses its STRIVE curriculum to a network of affiliate organizations (Westhab being one); they in turn deliver STRIVE as part of their program services. By paying an annual fee, STRIVE affiliates have access to STRIVE curricula as well as initial training from STRIVE International on operating a STRIVE program. In addition, STRIVE International also regularly observes affiliates' STRIVE trainers and invites them to attend an annual STRIVE conference for refresher training and to connect with other organizations operating STRIVE programs.

STRIVE International offers affiliates several employment programs, but its signature curriculum, and the one used in Westchester County, is a four-week, full-time group workshop that teaches job search and job readiness skills.<sup>8</sup> The primary focus is changing the attitudes and behaviors that have limited the ability of job seekers to obtain and retain jobs in the past. Westhab had not previously operated STRIVE for cash assistance recipients; however, since 2010, it had operated STRIVE for other low-income populations including non-custodial fathers.

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.westhab.org/> for more information about Westhab.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://strive.org/> for additional information about the STRIVE program objectives and design.

<sup>8</sup> STRIVE International calls that four-week workshop "Career Pathway." It also offers two other versions of the STRIVE program: (1) "Future Leaders," geared to young adults ages 18-24, and (2) "Fresh Start," to assist former prisoners in reentering the labor market.

Westchester County DSS contracted with Westhab to implement and operate its STRIVE program in 2013. Although cash assistance recipients were not a common target group for STRIVE, Westchester County staff determined that its strong focus on employment and on attitudinal and behavioral change gave it the potential to be an effective component of the county's TANF program.

## 2.4. JSA Strategies Evaluation and Data Sources for This Report

The JSA Evaluation includes five sites, each operating a different approach to providing job search assistance to help cash assistance applicants and/or recipients transition to work. The evaluation is designed to provide information both about the relative effectiveness of various job search assistance approaches (through impact studies) and about the operation of promising job search programs (through implementation studies).

In two sites—**Ramsey County, Minnesota**, and **Westchester County, New York**—the JSA evaluation assessed the implementation of promising programs in order to draw lessons for other program administrators. The Ramsey County site implemented a goal-oriented coaching program; Westchester County (the subject of this report) implemented a full-time 8 week job search program focused on job search and job readiness skills. The implementation studies in these sites do not examine the effects of the programs on recipients' employment and earnings.

In three sites—**New York City**; **Genesee and Wayne Counties, Michigan**; and **Sacramento County, California**—the JSA evaluation conducted impact and implementation studies. For the impact studies, the JSA evaluation used an experimental design. In New York City and Sacramento County, the impact evaluation examined the relative effectiveness of more- and less-rigorous participation requirements for cash assistance applicants. The Michigan impact evaluation focused on the effects of goal-oriented coaching in helping applicants and recipients find employment and leave cash assistance. The JSA evaluation also has produced a report summarizing the findings across the three impact studies.<sup>9</sup>

### JSA Evaluation Sites

#### Impact and Implementation Studies

- New York City
- Genesee and Wayne Counties, Michigan
- Sacramento County, California

#### Implementation Studies

- Ramsey County, Minnesota
- Westchester County, New York

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/job-search-assistance-evaluation> for the reports on the other JSA evaluation sites.

## Westchester County Implementation Study

This implementation study of Westchester County's STRIVE program examines its operation from September 2016 through July 2017. The JSA evaluation in Westchester County was originally designed to be an impact study as well, testing the effects of the STRIVE program compared to less intensive job search services.<sup>10</sup> The impact study was launched, but Westchester County could not generate a sufficient sample size due to low numbers of cash assistance recipients determined eligible for STRIVE and low attendance of those eligible at program services. As a result, the impact study was discontinued. The JSA implementation study in Westchester County continued, however, to document Westchester County's experiences operating the STRIVE program.

### Data Sources

The implementation study in Westchester County is based on site visits conducted by the study team. A July 2017 visit provides much of the information for this report. The goal of that visit was to document the operation of the STRIVE program as well as changes made over time and successes and challenges in operating the program. The study team interviewed DSS program managers and staff and Westhab managers and STRIVE staff. This report is also informed by several prior site visits during 2016 and 2017 that were focused on developing the impact study. Finally, the study uses a review of 73 STRIVE attendance records from September 2016 to May 2017 (originally collected for the impact study). These provide information on STRIVE participation and completion rates.

## 3. The STRIVE Program in Westchester County, New York

This section describes the STRIVE program operated by Westhab for cash assistance recipients in Westchester County, including the eligibility requirements for the program and the design and content of the services provided.

### 3.1. Eligibility for and Referrals to the STRIVE Program

At the time this study was conducted, all cash assistance applicants in Westchester County who were approved for TANF benefits and determined to be mandatory to work first met with DSS staff. During this meeting, DSS staff worked with the recipient to develop an employment development plan, detailing the activities the recipient would attend and how any barriers to work would be addressed, and referred the recipient to an employment-related activity. These

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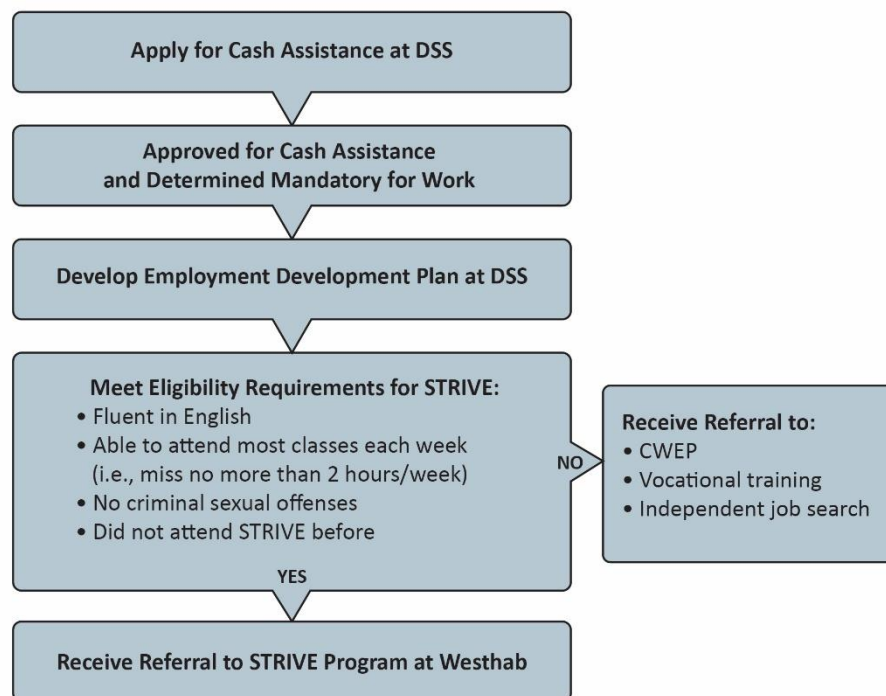
<sup>10</sup> Limited rigorous research is available on the effectiveness of the STRIVE program in improving employment outcomes. One experimental study was conducted to measure the impact of STRIVE on employment and other outcomes for recently released offenders in California. The study found no statistically significant effects of the STRIVE program on education, employment, or recidivism outcomes (Farabee, et. al, 2014).

activities could include attending the STRIVE workshop, unpaid work experience in the County's community work experience program (CWEP), vocational training, or independent job search.

Based on guidance provided by STRIVE International, to be eligible for referral to the Westhab STRIVE program, a cash assistance recipient must (1) be fluent in written and spoken English (the STRIVE curriculum is only available in English); (2) be able to attend the STRIVE classes, defined as not missing more than two hours of class time per week; (3) not have certain sexual offenses on their criminal record; and (4) not have attended STRIVE in Westchester County before. During the period of this study, DSS referred all recipients who met these eligibility criteria to the STRIVE program operated by Westhab.

Exhibit 2 provides an overview of the steps from application for cash assistance to referral to STRIVE. Once at the Westhab office, the cash assistance recipient met with Westhab staff to confirm their eligibility for STRIVE, particularly whether the recipient would be able to attend the required number of classes. If Westhab staff identified any remaining barriers to participation, they worked to address those issues. However, if the barriers could not be resolved and would affect participation in STRIVE, Westhab staff referred the recipient back to DSS for reassignment to independent job search, vocational training, or CWEP. Recipients who fully met the eligibility criteria for STRIVE were scheduled for the next STRIVE workshop. A new workshop started approximately every six weeks.

#### Exhibit 2. Overview of Eligibility for and Referral to the STRIVE Program in Westchester County





### 3.2. STRIVE Program Structure and Curriculum

Westhab's STRIVE program largely followed STRIVE International's prescribed model. Classes met eight hours a day, from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, for eight weeks. Following a half-day orientation, recipients participated in four weeks of job readiness training followed by four weeks of supervised job search.

As discussed above, STRIVE was designed to serve disadvantaged populations that face significant barriers to work, with the aim of teaching participants the culture of work and the interpersonal skills they need to succeed in the workplace. Delivered through a simulated workplace environment, the STRIVE curriculum focuses on attitude, accountability, personal responsibility, workplace ethics, professional etiquette, and interpersonal skills.<sup>11</sup>

Westhab staff reported that the STRIVE curriculum is designed to achieve these attitudinal changes through an approach they described as "confrontational" and "no-nonsense." This approach pushes recipients to face their weaknesses, admit to past mistakes, and consider the personal changes they need to make to succeed in a work environment. For example, facilitators reported that they sometimes call out an individual's behavior that is outside the acceptable range of workplace behavior, such as arriving late or wearing jeans, in front of the entire group in order to help them recognize changes that should be made.

The goal of STRIVE is to truly assess ones employability, not hard tangible skills, but their attitude about going to work and life in general. How did you get here? Where are you going? A lot of them haven't tapped into who they are and what they want. STRIVE is the like the gateway to services.

— STRIVE manager

Exhibit 2 below provides an overview of topics covered in each of the eight weeks in the Westchester County STRIVE program. Attitudinal and behavior change is a major topic of the **first two weeks** of the workshop. Westhab staff reported that they challenged recipients to engage in self-reflection, identify behaviors that prevented their success in past jobs, and develop potential solutions to these issues. Staff did this through a series of individual and group exercises and assignments requiring recipients to examine their past experiences that led to this point and their goals moving forward.

The **second two weeks** of the workshop focused on traditional job search activities, including completing job applications, developing resumes, and interviewing techniques. It also included a range of other important employment-related skills such as networking, negotiating a salary, and financial literacy. Still, during this period, Westhab staff reported they typically continued

<sup>11</sup> See <https://strive.org/vision>.

to focus on developing recipients' attitudinal and behavioral skills, including communication, critical thinking, and appropriate decision-making.

### Exhibit 3. Westchester County's STRIVE Program Topics, by Week

Week	Topics
½ day orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductions</li> <li>• STRIVE overview and background (national program)</li> <li>• Rules, expectations, and dress standards</li> </ul>
<b>Job Readiness Training</b>	
Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of rules and expectations</li> <li>• Goals and expected outcomes</li> <li>• Addressing chronic unemployment and employment barriers</li> <li>• Attitudinal training: correcting negative behaviors and attitudes</li> <li>• Dress do's and don'ts</li> <li>• Benefits of working: self-respect, esteem, independence, role model for family</li> <li>• Available work supports; child care, Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program</li> <li>• Work readiness, including applications, resume writing, cover letters, references, and thank you letters</li> <li>• Health and nutrition</li> </ul>
Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitudinal training: self-defeating attitudes and behaviors, listening skills</li> <li>• Dress for success: clothing resources</li> <li>• Work readiness, including handshake, eye contact, resume review, interview techniques</li> <li>• Online job search and computer basics</li> <li>• Health and nutrition</li> </ul>
Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pros and cons of work</li> <li>• Workplace culture and dress code</li> <li>• Social networking</li> <li>• Resiliency and personal values</li> <li>• Basic needs, budgeting, and finance</li> <li>• Financial literacy</li> <li>• Balancing work and family</li> </ul>
Week 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job search strategies, including search logs and documentation</li> <li>• Mock interviews</li> <li>• Tips for being a good employee</li> <li>• First impressions</li> <li>• Listening skills</li> <li>• Finalize resumes, job applications, and cover letters</li> <li>• Computer job search</li> <li>• Nutrition</li> </ul>
<b>Supervised Job Search</b>	
Weeks 5-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job search (supervised and independent)</li> <li>• Group job search exercises and projects</li> <li>• Staying motivated</li> </ul>

The **last four weeks** of STRIVE incorporated structured supervised job search, including basic computer skills. For assistance with their job search, recipients typically met with Westhab job developers, who worked across programs at Westhab to identify specific job openings. Staff taught recipients how to use computers and conduct job search activities online as recipients also searched for jobs independently. This final four-week phase was developed by Westhab to help recipients identify and apply for specific job openings with the goal of finding a job by the end of the workshop and was not part of the standard STRIVE curriculum.

Throughout the program, recipients received support from a case manager, meeting once or twice a week and as needed, with a focus on addressing barriers to employment. The majority of Westchester County's STRIVE curriculum was delivered by three STRIVE facilitators, although one primarily served as the case manager. STRIVE International requires that two facilitators be in the room at all times, but because of length and intensive nature of the Westchester STRIVE program, Westhab staff reported they used three trainers, who worked together to lead the program and could facilitate its various pieces interchangeably.

"We want people to put some skin in the game, commit to the process, own up to their failures. Once we see they put the skin in the game, this will open up a window of opportunities."

— STRIVE facilitator

Westchester County did allow some flexibility in meeting the official STRIVE attendance standards (of missing only two hours per week). Recipients could remain in the program unless they missed three consecutive days of class or arrived late six times, in which case they were referred back to DSS. If recipients missed class or were late only sporadically, the STRIVE facilitators worked to determine why the classes were missed and determine if it was appropriate for them to continue in the program.

#### 4. Experiences Operating the STRIVE Program

This section describes lessons from Westchester County's experiences operating the STRIVE program for its cash assistance recipients.

- *Westchester County implemented the STRIVE program largely as designed, following the national curriculum and receiving technical assistance from STRIVE International.*

Westhab staff were able to implement the STRIVE program in Westchester County largely as designed, providing the training both on attitudinal and behavior change and on job search skills. Westhab staff reported that, as a STRIVE affiliate, they received curriculum materials and support from STRIVE International that allowed them to implement the key elements of the program. Westhab also had experience operating STRIVE for other low-income populations, prior to this program for cash assistance recipients, and this helped facilitate implementation. Staff from STRIVE International conducted site visits and webinars to ensure services were

provided uniformly across the county, provided technical assistance, supported trainer development, and shared best practices. Moreover, STRIVE International offered opportunities for Westhab's STRIVE facilitators to connect with peers across the country via its electronic portal. Facilitators could post questions and receive responses from that peer network. It also sponsored an annual meeting for STRIVE trainers.

- *A significant portion of the county's cash assistance recipients who were mandatory for work were not eligible for STRIVE because they could not meet its attendance requirement.*

As discussed above, STRIVE in Westchester County was a full-time, eight-week program; recipients could miss only two hours of class time per week. DSS staff reported that this attendance requirement was the most difficult for recipients to meet, and often made them ineligible for STRIVE. In particular, DSS staff reported that part-time employment, court-mandated meetings, and substance use disorder treatment were the most common commitments that made recipients ineligible for STRIVE. Some staff also reported that Westchester County's cash assistance caseload had a large number of Spanish-speaking recipients, who were also ineligible for the STRIVE program. For these reasons, DSS staff reported that significantly fewer recipients were eligible for STRIVE than anticipated.

- *Significant information on a recipient's needs and circumstances was needed to determine whether they were eligible for the STRIVE program.*

DSS staff reported that determining whether its cash assistance recipients were eligible for the STRIVE workshop and could meet STRIVE's rigorous attendance requirements required them to gather and review detailed information on recipients' ability to commit to a full-time schedule for eight weeks and on what barriers they faced in doing so, particularly previously scheduled appointments and commitments and child care or transportation issues. DSS staff also needed a thorough understanding of the STRIVE program and its requirements. They reported that to be able to make that determination took more time and training than did other more routine referrals to job search or CWEP. In spite of DSS staff efforts to assess recipients' suitability at time of referral, Westhab staff reported that occasionally DSS referrals were inappropriate for STRIVE, primarily because recipients had barriers that prevented a full-time commitment.

- *The "no-show" rate for the STRIVE program in Westchester County was substantial.*

The study team reviewed STRIVE attendance records, finding that 44 percent of those referred by DSS to the STRIVE program attended at least one class session. This level of "no-show" is common in welfare-to-work programs when referrals are made to employment services (Hamilton, 2002). Recipients' reasons for not attending were not available. The study could not determine the extent to which no-shows were due to the nature of STRIVE's services, its eligibility requirements, or to non-programmatic reasons such as finding a job or moving.

Nonetheless, the high no-show rate affected Westhab's ability to fill STRIVE classes in a timely manner. As a result, Westhab sometimes had to wait longer than the standard six weeks to the next workshop and to operate classes that were smaller than desired. The no-show rate also raised concerns about Westhab meeting the terms of its contract with DSS regarding service levels, although Westhab staff reported it did meet its contractual obligations overall.

- *Many recipients did not finish the STRIVE program because issues arose that prevented them from meeting its attendance requirement.*

A review of STRIVE attendance records found that of recipients assigned to the STRIVE workshop, fewer than two thirds (60 percent) completed the program. Recipients who were referred to STRIVE but missed three consecutive days of class or arrived late six times were not allowed to complete the STRIVE program and were referred back to DSS for noncompliance with TANF's requirements. Westhab staff reported such attrition from the STRIVE workshop was common due to a range of issues including child care, legal, and housing. Although both DSS and Westhab screened cash assistance recipients for participation barriers prior to their entry into STRIVE, Westhab staff reported issues sometimes arose after recipients started the program and as a result, kept them from completing it. Those recipients referred back to DSS were typically determined to be noncompliant and engaged in the standard reconciliation process. The result could be referral to another employment-related activity or benefits sanction.

- *STRIVE's standard "confrontational" approach did not work well for some cash assistance recipients, resulting in adjustments to this aspect of the curriculum in Westchester County.*

A key element of the STRIVE program, the confrontational approach is designed to encourage self-reflection so that STRIVE participants can start to change the attitudes and behaviors that contribute to their challenges in the workplace. STRIVE's approach, which was originally designed for those who volunteered to attend, is based on the premise that participants are willing to engage in the workshops and are open to changing their behavior and learning workplace skills. However, STRIVE facilitators in Westchester County reported that cash assistance recipients, who are required to attend the workshop, did not always respond as expected to the approach. Specifically, using the confrontational tone, particularly at the beginning of the course, sometimes negatively affected cash assistance recipients' interest in the program. Westhab staff noted that they often "softened" their tone in the first week of the course compared to the standard STRIVE approach, in order to build trust and engage the program's participants.

- *Changing cash assistance recipients' attitudes took time.*

In part because of the less-confrontational approach they took, STRIVE staff reported that they needed to spend more time working with cash assistance recipients on attitudinal and

behavioral changes than generally recommended by STRIVE International. Whereas the standard STRIVE curriculum typically dedicated the first week to these issues, the STRIVE facilitators in Westchester County found that its cash assistance recipients benefitted from spending more time on that topic. As a result, as discussed in section 3.2, staff reported continuing to work on attitudinal and behavioral-related skills, such as communication and problem solving, throughout the duration of the program.

## 5. Conclusion

Westchester County's STRIVE program for cash assistance recipients, operated by Westhab, generally adhered to STRIVE International's model, with Westhab staff noting they benefitted from the technical assistance provided by the parent organization. Westhab staff reported they made some adjustments to the content of the STRIVE curriculum to better meet the needs of cash assistance recipients. Specifically, this included softening the standard confrontational tone of the program and extending the time spent on the topics related to behavioral and attitudinal change. STRIVE facilitators reported that these adjustments were needed in part because cash assistance recipients were mandated to attend, rather than being voluntary participants as was more common in STRIVE programs for other populations. Because cash assistance recipients may not be ready and able to engage in this rigorous program, staff reported that a more encouraging approach was needed to promote participant engagement.

DSS staff reported that a significant portion of cash assistance recipients who were mandatory for work were not eligible for STRIVE because they could not meet the program's full-time requirement (i.e., missing no more than two hours of class per week). Common reasons for not being able to attend as required included part-time employment, court-mandated meetings, and substance abuse disorder treatment. To be able to identify cash assistance recipients who would be appropriate for STRIVE and would meet its attendance requirement took significant staff training at DSS. Other STRIVE eligibility requirements, such as English fluency and no record of criminal sexual offenses, were also barriers to participation.

"No-show" and dropout rates in Westhab's STRIVE program for cash assistance recipients were substantial. Of the cash assistance recipients who were referred by DSS to STRIVE, more than half did not attend any workshop classes. This pattern is common in welfare-to-work programs, but they caused Westhab operational difficulties, particularly in Westhab sufficiently serving enough recipients to meet the terms of its contract with DSS. Moreover, more than 60 percent of those who started the eight-week workshop did not complete it. Staff reported this was because recipients had difficult meeting the intensive STRIVE attendance requirement.

Overall, Westchester County's experience operating the STRIVE program indicates several factors that should be considered by program administrators and policymakers interested in adopting it to improve employment outcomes for their cash assistance recipients.

- Cash assistance recipients had difficulty meeting STRIVE’s rigorous attendance requirements, due to a range of barriers. This indicates STRIVE’s structure may not be appropriate for some cash assistance recipients.
- Determining whether a cash assistance recipient is an appropriate match for STRIVE requires a thorough understanding of both the program requirements and the recipient’s background and barriers. Specific training is necessary for staff to make these determinations.
- Like other employment programs for cash assistance recipients, the STRIVE program in Westchester County typically experienced substantial “no-show” and dropout rates. Administrators need to consider these participation patterns on program implementation, costs, and scale.
- Westhab staff found it was beneficial to soften the program’s standard confrontational tone early in the workshop, and also to spend more time on issues of attitude and behavior change as the workshop progressed. Cash assistance recipients may be a population for whom such adaptations are necessary.

The experience of Westchester County implementing the STRIVE program indicates that, with some adaptations, the program does provide a range of important employment-related services that are appropriate for a cash assistance recipient population. Moreover, the STRIVE curriculum is well developed, and technical assistance provided by STRIVE International allows for consistent implementation and ongoing support. Further research is needed, however, to estimate the impact the STRIVE program might have on a cash assistance recipient’s employment, earnings, and public benefits receipt.



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