

# A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

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## INTRODUCTION

For most American adults, employment is critical. Jobs provide economic stability, and work anchors the day. But for some, particularly low-income and low-skilled individuals, employment is hard to get and keep. Employment is typically preceded by some form of job search, which may continue after an initial job is found. Effective job search methods are therefore important for a large portion of the population, including those receiving cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

Job search assistance (JSA) programs – short-term, relatively low-intensity and low-cost programs to help job seekers find jobs – are a key component of many government-funded assistance programs, including TANF and Unemployment Insurance. JSA programs may focus on helping job seekers find jobs more quickly than they would on their own, or on helping them find better jobs than they would on their own – or both. A “good” job is one with decent pay, benefits, job security, and stable work hours. The goals of government-funded JSA programs may or may not be well aligned with job seekers’ own goals. For example, due to the benefits paid by income support programs, job seekers might choose to search less intensively and to accept fewer jobs than they otherwise would. In contrast, the programs may want to encourage job seekers to search more intensively for work and to accept offers for jobs they might otherwise refuse in order to speed entry into employment and reduce need for income support.

Despite the crucial role of job search in helping individuals find and sustain employment, limited research has been conducted on the effectiveness of various job search methods and of the individual components that make up JSA programs. While there has been some research on the effects of job search assistance bundled with other services, there has been less research on the separate contributions of individual components within the bundle. There is also little research based on variation in state and local economies. Finally, much of the literature is now several decades old, and the labor market has changed since then, particularly for disadvantaged workers. That said, earlier research has taught us several things:

- ❖ Job search assistance is effective at speeding entry to work.
- ❖ The impacts from job search assistance are modest. While some TANF recipients find jobs through JSA programs, others find jobs without these supports. JSA appears principally to increase the speed at which people find jobs, rather than affecting the quality of the jobs they attain. These are usually not “good” jobs and they often do not last long.
- ❖ Some of the evidence suggests requirements to participate in job search activities - or face sanctions for failing to do so - lead primarily to reductions in cash assistance, with weaker impacts on earnings. Some speculate that this is because requiring people to participate in a full-time program for several weeks limits their ability to work at an unreported job. Others speculate this is because while not working (and receiving cash assistance) may be viewed as better than working (even with the earnings it provides), working (and the earnings it provides) may be perceived as better than participating in required job search assistance activities (without earnings).
- ❖ More intensive and more personalized job search assistance programs do not have clearly better outcomes.

To address the limitations of existing research, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded a contract for the Design Options of the Search for Employment (DOSE) study to Abt Associates in September 2011. This project began with a review of the literature and discussions with experts.<sup>i</sup> The project went on to explore design options for an evaluation of job search assistance, with a specific focus on the TANF program. These design options are not covered in this brief; additional information may be found in *Design Options for an Evaluation of TANF Job Search Assistance*.<sup>ii</sup>

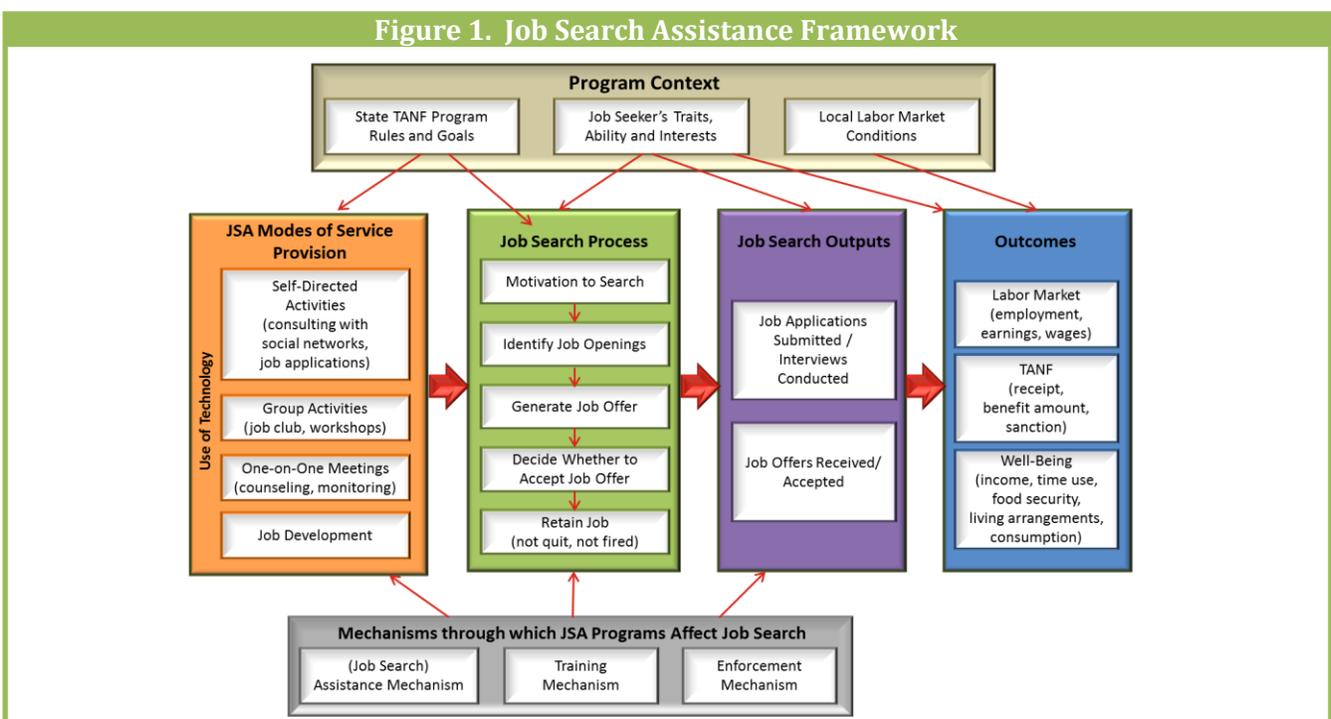
This Practice Brief describes an overarching framework for thinking about JSA programs, including an overview of service delivery methods, key JSA program components, and the key steps that make up the job search process. It then describes the mechanisms affecting the job search process, including program goals. Finally, the brief presents two narratives to characterize job search assistance programs.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE

While JSA programs are a common activity under TANF, individual programs vary considerably. Thus, it is helpful to think about them within a guiding framework (Figure 1). Under this framework, individual TANF JSA programs are influenced by three key contextual elements that affect how they are structured, what activities they offer and participant outputs (e.g., job applications submitted or offers received) and outcomes (e.g., employment or cash assistance). Specifically:

- ❖ **State TANF Program Rules:** JSA programs operate under state TANF program rules and goals, including benefit levels, funding levels for welfare-to-work activities, sanction policies, and general program goals and philosophy.
- ❖ **Job Seekers' Characteristics:** JSA programs are influenced by job seekers' abilities (in part developed by their previous education, training, and work experience), interests, and previous TANF experience and are structured to meet the needs of specific clientele.
- ❖ **Local Labor Market Conditions:** Sometimes it is quite easy to find a job; sometimes it is very difficult. Opportunities vary as well. For example, some local labor markets have relatively more jobs in manufacturing, while others have relatively more jobs in hospitality.

Figure 1. Job Search Assistance Framework

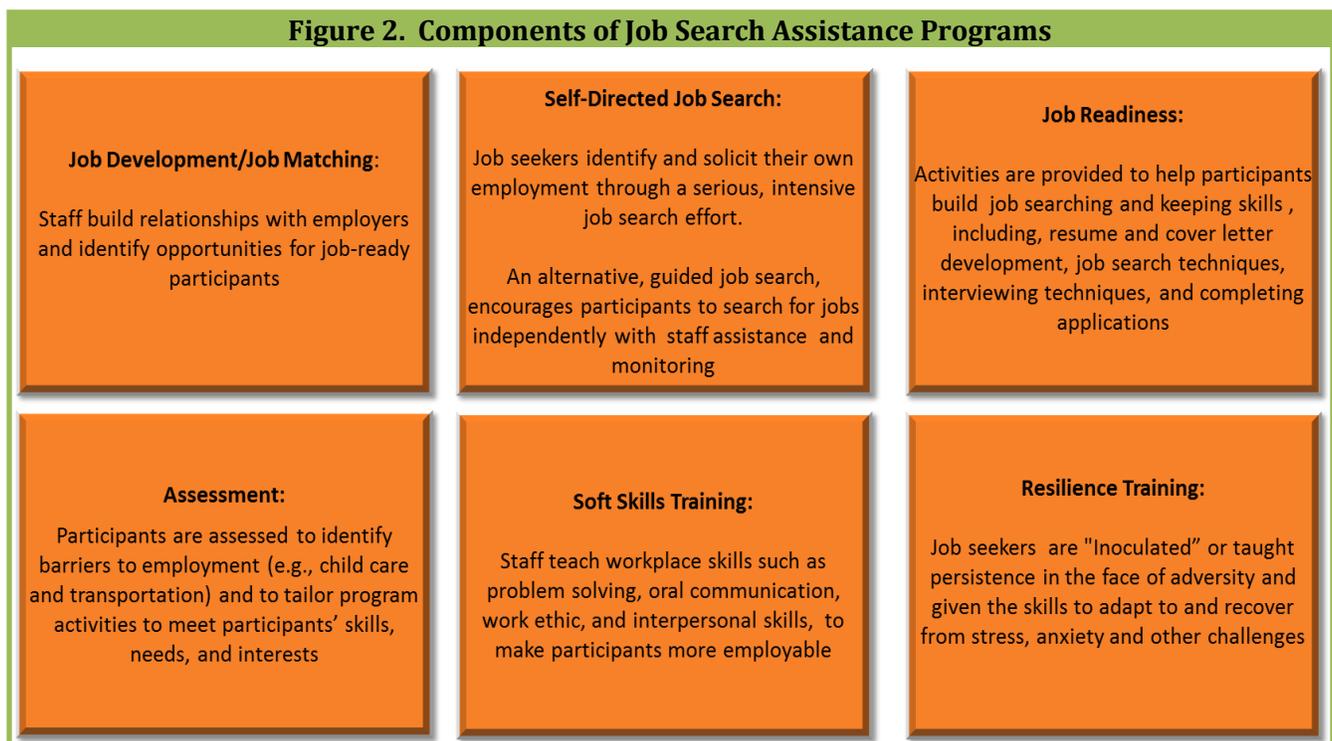


### ***Job Search Assistance Service Delivery***

JSA program activities, or components, can be grouped into four methods of service delivery:

- ❖ ***Self-directed activities***, such as consulting with job seekers' social networks, filling out job applications, using agency resource rooms;
- ❖ Facilitated ***group activities*** such as the group process in job club and classes in job search and soft skills;
- ❖ ***One-on-one meetings*** with JSA program staff, including counseling related to job search strategies (e.g., assessment of skills and goals, help using computer search tools and completing job applications), conveying job leads (from past experience or from job developers), and monitoring job search activities (checking job search logs and copies of job applications completed, contacting employers to verify activities); and
- ❖ ***Job development***, in which a staff person works with employers to identify (i.e., "develop") job openings, and matches job seekers to appropriate openings.

As displayed below, JSA consists of six specific components or activities that are delivered through these four, not mutually-exclusive methods (Figure 2).



JSA programs may also encourage participants to tap into their existing social networks, including friends, family, and employers. Other innovations include the use of online resources to identify job openings and social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.

### The Job Search Process

The “job search process,” or what job seekers do, can be conceptualized as having three basic steps as shown in in dark blue in Figure 3.



Two additional aspects of the job search process – shown in light blue in Figure 3 – are important: motivation and retention. Before and during the beginning the job search process, job seekers must be motivated to search for and find a job. Even with successful job search, job tenure may be short, particularly in low-wage jobs. The possibility of short job retention influences some programs to stress the importance of job search skills rather than only assisting in finding a job.

### Outputs and Outcomes of Job Search Assistance

JSA programs are intended to affect the two “outputs” of the job search process: job applications submitted and interviews conducted. In turn, these outputs are intended to affect three outcome areas:

- ❖ **Labor market outcomes** including employment, earnings, wages, and other aspects of the job (e.g., benefits, number and regularity of hours).
- ❖ **Program outcomes** including receipt of any TANF cash assistance, the amount of the benefit, and sanction status.
- ❖ Broader **well-being outcomes**, including total income, food security, living arrangements, family stability, child health, child behavior, and child academic achievement.

## MECHANISMS AFFECTING JOB SEARCH

Job search assistance programs may affect individuals’ job search through three distinct mechanisms – assistance, training, and enforcement. As described below, these mechanisms affect the job search process itself as well as JSA programs’ intermediate- and long-term goals.

The **assistance mechanism** helps job seekers find jobs, both directly and by teaching the skills required for job search. Activities within the assistance mechanism include group training in job search skills (identifying job openings, preparing a resume, completing job applications, interview skills), one-on-one assistance with those skills, and group and one-on-one assistance with motivation to search for a job in the face of rejection.

*“There are jobs,  
but I can’t find  
them.”*

*“There are no jobs  
for which I’m  
qualified.”*

The **training mechanism** attempts to improve the employability of job seekers by increasing skills needed for specific employment opportunities (rather than related to the job search process itself). Activities that are included in the training mechanism include improving basic skills (e.g., reading, math, writing,) and occupational skills training (e.g., welding, typing). Less intensive versions of the training mechanism involve short-term, group, and one-on-one training in soft skills: consistent and punctual arrival at the worksite; following instructions carefully and completely; and getting along with supervisors, coworkers, and customers. Note, while training may help job seekers, JSA is usually defined to exclude all but the lowest intensity training.

The enforcement mechanism attempts to encourage the jobless to search more intensively and sincerely, and then to accept job offers even if they are not “good jobs.” Those who do not do so risk having their benefits cut or eliminated through a sanction. Activities under the enforcement mechanism include requiring participants to keep job search logs and monitoring those logs, verifying job seeker contacts with employers, following up on reasons for rejecting job offers, and reducing or terminating assistance for those who do not comply with JSA program requirements.

*“There are jobs, but I want to keep looking [or not look that intensively].”*

In identifying an appropriate strategy, it is important to consider the cause of joblessness and whether the strategy addresses it appropriately. For example, if there are limited or few jobs that match the job seeker’s skills, then coercing the job seeker to search more intensively is unlikely to be a successful strategy. Conversely, if there are jobs, but the individual is reluctant to accept the jobs that are available, then providing job search skills is unlikely to be a successful strategy.

## JSA PROGRAMS – TWO CHARACTERIZATIONS

Although not a homogeneous group, disadvantaged workers – including TANF recipients – have usually faced a difficult job market, due in large part to their relatively weak job skills. For those with better hard and soft work skills, it is easier to find and keep jobs. Those with better skills, therefore, either stay off of TANF or only receive assistance for short periods of time. Weaker initial skills, often combined with early job market difficulty, can lead to a cycle of low work experience, leading to a failure to develop hard skills on the job, as well as the soft skills required to keep jobs. When jobs are offered to disadvantaged workers, pay tends to be low, benefits few, job security limited, and work hours varying and undesirable.<sup>iii, iv</sup>

JSA programs have the potential to (partially) address these issues. Whether JSA programs help TANF recipients find initial jobs promptly, find better jobs, or find new jobs when existing jobs end, there is the potential to break this cycle of weak initial skills leading to less work experience leading to failure to gain hard and soft skills and build social networks. The elements of the JSA framework could be combined in many ways. For example, the assistance mechanism could focus on quick employment or on finding better jobs – as could the enforcement mechanism. Many JSA programs combine different elements and pursue multiple goals. Below we present two stylized approaches that may help program planners clarify their priorities.

1. ***Assistance and Training*** – This approach focuses on all three steps to getting a job: identifying job openings, converting job openings into job offers, and deciding which job offers to accept. This approach seeks to address barriers to employment through short-term programs conveying information (e.g., about local labor markets) and skills (e.g., role playing or soft skills training), group processes (e.g., job club), and limited one-on-one counseling—without any explicit inducement to search more intensively. Using this approach, some observers speculate that JSA services might be more effective if they addressed individuals’ strengths, preferences and interests, focusing on finding a good match where workers will be likely to succeed and find interest and satisfaction. Others speculate that most jobs available to TANF recipients offer little interest and satisfaction, so that the goal should be to help TANF recipients to find and keep some job. Searching for more interesting and satisfying jobs will be appropriate once the job seeker has more job experience and has thereby accumulated more hard and soft skills; and, as important, has achieved independence from income support. These observers emphasize that job search need not and should not end after a first job is begun.

2. **Enforcement** – This approach follows from the assumption that some job is available, relatively quickly, for many job seekers. Since “good” jobs are unlikely to be available to low-skilled job seekers, under this paradigm it is neither worthwhile from the job-seeker’s perspective, nor a good use of public resources, to allow low-skilled job seekers time on public assistance seek one. This paradigm also suggests that any job is the best route to a better job. Through working, even at a low-paying job, workers develop hard and soft skills, build social networks, and signal their employability, which will make them more attractive to other employers, leading to higher wages. However, research evidence suggests that while JSA increases employment, the net increase in experience is small, so that any effect of JSA on long-term earnings through increased experience is also small.

Under this narrative, JSA programs should be designed primarily, not to provide job search skills, but instead to induce more intensive search and accept more job offers. Therefore, this approach emphasizes the requirement to participate in job search, and consequences for failure to do so. In TANF, such consequences are called “sanctions,” meaning loss of some or all of the TANF benefit for not complying with program requirements. This enforcement narrative is sometimes in tension with the assistance narrative which may emphasize building rapport with the job seeker.

## CONCLUSION

Job search assistance programs are influenced by a variety of factors, including specific policies and the relative importance the state puts on assistance versus enforcement; local labor market conditions; and individual job seekers’ traits, abilities, and interests. JSA programs do, however, operate under the common goal of moving job seekers into employment. Within that goal, there is variation in the mix of and way in which services are delivered as well as the overarching philosophies guiding the program.

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- <sup>i</sup> Klerman, Jacob et al. *Job Search Assistance Programs – A Review of the Literature*. OPRE Report #2012-39, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
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- <sup>iii</sup> Edin, Kathryn and Laura Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997.
- <sup>iv</sup> Ehrenreich, Barbara, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001.