ISIS CAREER PATHWAYS PROGRAM PROFILE:

Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County Health Careers for All Program

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ISIS
INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING SELF-SUFFICIENCY

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Introduction

A substantial gap exists between the skills of the labor force and the needs of employers in many high-growth industries, including health care, technology, and manufacturing. This gap results in unemployment while well-paying jobs go unfilled. At the same time, many low-skilled adults persist in low-wage work with little opportunity for advancement.[1] Career pathways programs aim to address the economy's vital need for skilled workers while offering low-wage workers the opportunity to obtain education and training and advance into the middle class.

To achieve their goals, career pathways programs offer low-skilled adults well-articulated training and employment steps targeted to locally in-demand jobs combined with promising instructional approaches and supportive services. Policy makers and practitioners show great interest in career pathways programs as education and training approaches for low-skilled individuals. Along these lines, the *Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS)* study is using an experimental design to assess the effectiveness of nine career pathway programs across the country (See **Box 1**).

An experimental evaluation design assigns individuals eligible for a program via lottery to a treatment group that can participate in the program or a control group that cannot participate but can access other services in the community. Because the assignment process is random, there are no systematic differences between the treatment and control groups at the time they enter the study. Thus, any differences detected during the follow-up period can be attributed to the program. Random assignment is considered the gold standard of program evaluation.

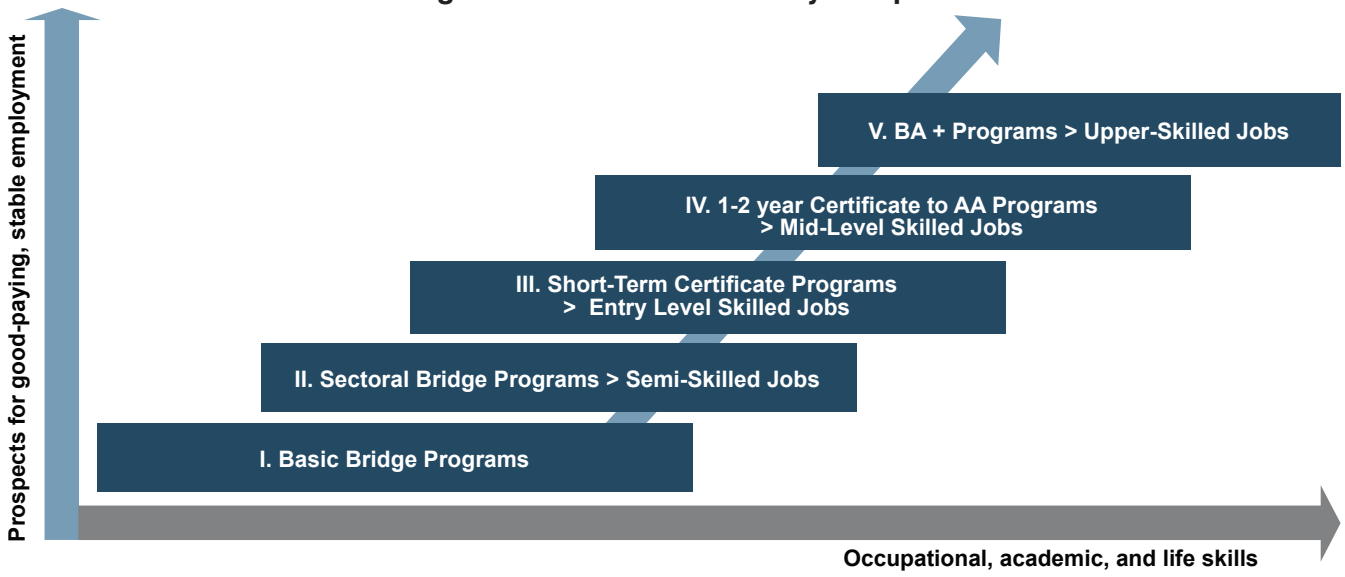
This profile is an overview of *Health Careers for All (HCA)*, designed and operated by the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County (WDC) in Seattle, Washington.[2] HCA supports training for participants through two mechanisms: individual training accounts (ITA) to use at local training providers and the funding of classes specifically designed for HCA participants at local community colleges. Designated case managers ("navigators") assist HCA participants in identifying and enrolling in appropriate training programs and provide assistance with support services, job search, and employment retention by helping participants navigate the education, workforce, and social service systems.

This profile first explains discusses the career pathways framework used in the ISIS evaluation, which provides a common approach for explaining and assessing career pathways programs. It then describes WDC's model and how it fits within the career pathways framework.[3]

The ISIS Career Pathways Framework

The career pathways approach presupposes that postsecondary education and training should be organized as a series of manageable steps leading to successively better credentials and employment opportunities in growing occupations. Each step is designed to prepare participants for the next level of employment and education and also provide a credential with labor market value. To effectively engage, retain, and facilitate learning, programs integrate four core elements: (1) comprehensive assessment, (2) promising approaches to basic and occupational skills, (3) academic and nonacademic supports, and (4) strategies for connecting participants to employers. Individual programs vary in terms of emphasis placed on each core component, although all are comprehensive in nature in order to address the learning and life challenges facing adult participants. Career

Figure 1: The Career Pathways Steps



pathways programs typically include partnerships with multiple providers, including community-based organizations, community and technical colleges, human services and workforce agencies, and employers and their representatives.

Although steps in career pathways programs vary with their target populations, focal occupations, and service strategies, the broad training and employment levels shown in **Figure 1** provide a basis for classifying programs.

The first two steps (I and II) represent "on ramp" programs designed to prepare low-skilled participants for college-level training and lower-skilled jobs with a career focus. The next two steps (III and IV) provide college-level training for "middle skills" employment—jobs requiring some college but less than a bachelor's degree (e.g., an associate's degree or shorter certificate program). The final step (V) includes interventions to promote completion of a bachelor's degree and more advanced credentials. Career pathways are designed to allow entries, exits, and re-entries at each stage—depending on skill levels and prior training, employment prospects, and changing personal situations. Programs vary in terms of entry and exit points as well as steps incorporated.

The WDC's Health Careers for All Program

The Health Careers for All (HCA) program model emphasizes serving individuals who have long-term health care career goals. Navigators conduct **formal and informal assessments** of applicants to screen for interest in a health career and likelihood of success in the program. Navigators then **guide participants through all phases of the program**, starting with training selection. Participants receive **training funding** in accordance with their needs and goals. HCA provides **supportive services** as needed, and after training, navigators and the HCA job developer provide **assistance in obtaining employmen**t, including outreach to employers and one-on-one job readiness support. Additionally, navigators maintain an ongoing relationship with participants post-training to support a **return to training** for more advanced credentials and skill development.

Program Goals, Target Population, and Structure

- The WDC developed HCA with the twin goals of meeting the expanding health care labor needs of Seattle-King County employers and addressing the training, employment, and career advancement needs of low-income residents. Funded by an Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Health Profession Opportunity Grant (HPOG), HCA helps low-income individuals gain access to health care training opportunities, provides support to encourage completion, assists with finding employment, and encourages participants to return for more advanced training.

- The WDC subcontracts with TRAC Associates, a for-profit community-based organization that provides employment services in the greater Seattle area, to recruit and enroll participants and to provide navigation services. TRAC navigators work at sites throughout the county (including welfare offices, One-Stop Career Centers, and colleges) to recruit participants, assess individuals for program eligibility, manage program enrollment, support career exploration and planning, determine individual barriers to success and needed support, provide navigation services, and help participants find employment after training.

> *"Low-income individuals in King County face a variety of barriers to employment. In some cases they may have low English proficiency or a lack of foundational skills because they have been out of school for a long time. We also see immigrants and refugees who have health care training from their home country that doesn't transfer to the U.S. system."*
>
> *– Workforce Development Council*

- The two main HCA target populations are Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and individuals with incomes less than 175 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) for family size. HCA also developed relationships with city and county housing authorities. (HCA may serve a limited number of individuals with incomes greater than 175 percent FPL if they face other barriers to employment. To date, the majority in this group are entry-level incumbent workers, who are part of an HCA effort to increase opportunities for individuals by combining entry-level work in the health care field with training for career and wage advancement.) Participants are not required to have a high school diploma or GED.
- HCA enrolls participants at a variety of skill levels. The health care training is divided into three categories: foundational training, entry-level training, and more advanced training. Foundational training creates a bridge to entry-level health care training by teaching basic skills in the context of health care occupations. Entry-level training is short term and accessible to students with no prior higher education experience (examples include Certified Nursing Assistant and phlebotomy). More advanced training leads to employer-recognized credentials for occupations such as Licensed Practical Nurse and may require completion of prerequisites.

Career Pathways Components

HCA begins with **assessment** of applicants to determine their eligibility and "fit" with the health care profession. The program funds **occupational training** through Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) or purchased cohorts at community colleges. **Academic and non-academic supports** include advising and counseling, and supportive services. Finally, HCA **provides linkages to employment**.

Comprehensive Assessment

During the eligibility determination process, HCA navigators conduct informal interviews with individuals to assess whether training in a health profession is a good fit with the individual's interests and skills, and to determine short- and longer-term training and employment goals. Navigators also identify potential barriers to training completion and employment. During these interviews, navigators document and verify income and authorization to work.

Navigators also ask participants to complete labor market and employer research forms as a way to focus career interests and identify an appropriate training program, as well as to test participants' engagement and fit for HCA. The labor market research includes a detailed look at a particular occupation in the local labor market, including starting salary and wage growth, opportunities for advancement, and expected qualifications. Navigators provide participants with links to online resources to assist them in completing this form. For the employer research form, participants have a brief discussion with a local employer to learn about job requirements, work environments, and growth opportunities typically associated with the occupation.

HCA navigators administer the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) assessment to establish baseline academic skills in math and reading and determine if the individual is a fit for HCA. Although there is no minimum score required to be eligible for HCA, navigators typically further assess individuals who score below the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Level 4 threshold to determine their appropriateness for the program and likely ability to benefit from HCA services. Navigators typically direct participants with lower assessment scores who are otherwise a good fit for the program to foundational level training. In addition to HCA assessments, schools may require participants to take the COMPASS exam as part of the training program entry requirements.

Basic and Occupational Skills Training

The WDC emphasizes three primary health career pathways for HCA: nursing (e.g., Nursing Assistant, Licensed Practical Nurse, Registered Nurse), medical office and business (e.g., Medical Office Clerk, Medical Coding/Billing), and medical lab (e.g., Medical Lab Technician). HCA participants can enroll in training programs within these pathways at local colleges and training providers. These pathways are emphasized because there are opportunities in the local labor market, but training is not limited to occupations in these pathways, and HCA participants have also pursued training in other clinical and technical areas.

> *"Not only is admission into nursing programs very competitive in King County, but participants who want to move into this higher-level training must also complete extensive prerequisites before they are even qualified to apply. Our nursing cohort bundles these prerequisites with Associates Degree Nursing training and enables a motivated participant to further their education in a class designed specifically for HCA students."*
>
> *– Workforce Development Council*

In addition to identifying different career pathways, individuals start at different training levels as described above, depending on their skills and education: foundational, entry level, and advanced level. Entry-level and advanced-level training prepare participants for specific occupations in the health care field. For those with low-level basic skills and little positive academic experience, foundational

training provides an introduction to the health care field by incorporating career exploration and planning with basic skills instruction contextualized to health care occupations.

HCA offers two health care training funding options: participants can receive an Individual Training Account (ITA) to fund training at the community college, technical college, or proprietary school of their choice, or they can enroll in a cohort funded and designed by HCA in partnership with a local community college. For participants using an ITA, navigators provide recommendations and guide participants toward programs that align with their interests and circumstances. The HCA model promotes "informed customer choice." The navigators provide information and encourage participants to research their training options, but the ultimate decision about which health care program to select rests with the individual.

HCA does not develop or provide input into the design of curricula or instructional methods of programs funded by ITAs. HCA does work with community colleges to customize the instructional delivery approach and tailor support services to the standard curriculum for cohort classes. HCA funds cohorts in fields for which there are limited training options in the community or highly competitive admissions, with the intention of creating easier access for program participants. Cohorts range in skill level from health care bridge training at the foundational level to Registered Nurse training at the advanced level. Some of the cohorts bundle prerequisite courses with the health care training. For example, a recent Associate's Degree in Nursing (ADN) cohort included all required program prerequisites, allowing qualified HCA participants to move through the prerequisites in a structured way and with additional support. While HCA students have to pass the same prerequisites as other students and meet the standard admissions criteria for the ADN program, the cohort reserves seats for HCA students and allows them to bypass the competitive application process that could otherwise serve as a barrier to enrollment.

Academic and Nonacademic Supports

HCA participants receive financial assistance for health care training, advising and counseling, and supportive services. Because participants can use funding for more than one course, HCA also offers a career pathway.

- The WDC designed the program to ensure that navigators did not duplicate services that participants receive from other programs. Navigators leverage supportive services from existing channels (e.g., TANF) as much as possible to preserve resources and avoid adding another case manager for individuals who are, in many cases, already working with multiple case managers. For participants who do not have access to other sources, HCA provides supportive services. HCA also documents and addresses needs that may be unique to successful participation in health care training, such as requirements for immunizations, physicals, health insurance, and criminal background checks.

Financial assistance. The primary HCA support is tuition assistance either through an ITA or prepaid college cohort class. For participants receiving ITAs, navigators may also help leverage other funding sources, such as the Department of Social and Human Services (the TANF agency), Basic Food Employment and Training (BFET),[4] Workforce Investment Act (WIA), and Pell Grants. HCA provides tuition assistance of up to $1,000 per course. Participants who complete a training course and return to enroll in higher-level training

can receive another ITA of up to $1,000. Navigators can request added funds on a case-by-case basis, and HCA management will grant exceptions to the $1,000 cap if warranted. For participants enrolling in cohorts, all training costs (tuition, fees, books, and supplies) are covered by HCA via a direct contract between the WDC and the college providing the training.

Advising and counseling. Navigators provide individualized support to promote the successful completion of training and entry into employment in the health care field. Participants and navigators work together to select a training program and provider. Participants in a cohort will make arrangements to attend a particular course, with guidance from the navigator on enrollment procedures. Participants who enter HCA via a general recruitment process might have identified a track of interest or might need more support and guidance in finding a training program that is a good fit. Some may decide to join an upcoming cohort.

Once enrolled in training, participants' contact with navigators varies depending on individual needs and the length of training. Check-ins range from once a month to several times a week. In addition to discussing academic progress, navigators and participants discuss academic or nonacademic issues that may need to be addressed. Navigators then work with the participants to identify solutions using a mix of HCA and non-HCA (e.g., TANF) resources as appropriate.

The navigators also provide support in the job search and retention process. Some navigators work intensively with their participants, while others make referrals to the HCA job developer (see below). Once participants complete training, pass their certification exams, and are employed, navigators continue to check in with participants periodically to determine if there are any work-related issues and remind them additional training is possible.

Supportive services. HCA designates supportive services dollars to assist with training-related expenses and help remove barriers that may impede participants' success. Each navigator has $100 per participant in support service funds. In addition, navigators are allocated an additional $8,000 annually for additional support for participants and have discretion over who receives funding and what is covered. Examples of additional support that is typically funded include books and school supplies (for ITA users), uniforms, background checks, immunizations, certification fees, and transportation. Navigators have also provided funding for food, utility bills, and to test for learning disabilities.

Connecting Participants to Employers

HCA participants receive employment assistance from their navigators and the HCA job developer. Navigators vary in their approach to employment assistance. Some more experienced navigators have relationships with local employers and provide direct assistance with job search,

while others refer participants to the HCA job developer as they near completion of training. Navigators may review resumes, discuss interview etiquette, call employers to get job leads, and provide assistance in completing applications. For participants who do not have appropriate interview attire or need transportation to attend an interview, HCA provides assistance.

The job developer meets one on one with participants and provides customized assistance with interview skills, resume writing, and job leads. If participants have barriers to employment, the job developer may focus on working with the navigator to resolve these issues and provide more general guidance on life skills and appropriate workplace behaviors. If participants are ready to work, the job developer makes a direct referral to an employer for an interview. In addition to these job search methods, the job developer has created a LinkedIn group to connect current HCA participants, former participants, and employers in the local health care industry. The job developer also visits cohort classrooms to introduce himself and discuss the employment resources available through HCA.

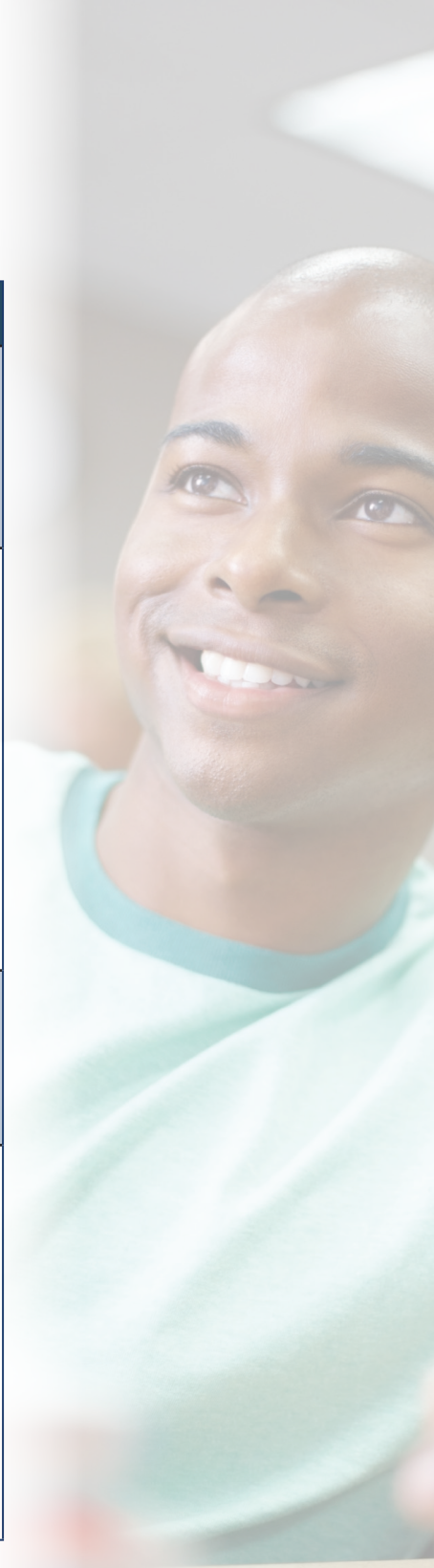
After job placement, navigators remain in contact with participants for an average of six months to support employment retention and discuss returning to training for more advanced credentials and further skill development. Participants can continue to access supportive services while enrolled or for the life of the grant (so long as they meet eligibility requirements) to help them retain employment.

Comparison to Other Offerings

In the absence of HCA, individuals might be able to access other training programs, depending on their eligibility for services. The two most likely alternate employment or training programs are funded by TANF and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). TANF serves a similar low-income population, and the TRAC navigators target TANF participants in their recruitment efforts. WIA provides similar financial assistance for occupational training, and referral sources that direct individuals interested in training to HCA are also likely to make referrals to WIA's One-Stop Career Centers, although not all of those in HCA's target population are eligible for intensive services or training. However, neither TANF nor WIA is likely to provide the same bundle of tuition assistance, guidance focused on education and employment in health care fields, supportive services, and employment support. Other organizations in the community, including Seattle Goodwill and the Seattle Jobs Initiative use navigators in various capacities, but HCA features longer-term engagement than these models. **Figure 2** below illustrates the different career pathways services available to HCA participants, as compared with participants in TANF and WIA-funded programs.

Figure 2: Comparison of Career Pathways Components Available to HCA Participants and those Available to Nonparticipants

Career Pathway Component	Health Careers for All	Standard Community Offerings
Assessment	• CASAS assessment of reading and math • Informal assessments of skills, motivation, barriers, and needs	• CASAS or Key Train assessment of reading and math • Informal assessments of skills, motivation, barriers, and needs
Curriculum	• ITA training program selected by participant • Cohort training uses curriculum integrating basic education and skills training • Can return for additional training	• *If eligible for intensive services or training:* Training program chosen by the participant and funded by an ITA subject to availability of WIA resources (and limited to training providers on the state's Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL)) • Limited funding for vocational training for TANF participants
Supports	• Financial support provided through ITAs • Career guidance and advising provided by navigators • A per-person budget for supportive services	• Limited supportive services from WIA • Supportive services from TANF
Employment Connections	• Intensive, individualized job search support • Customized job development matched to participants' training programs • Post-employment follow-up	• Job search assistance provided through WIA and Employment Security Department (TANF) • One-Stop Career Center self-directed resource room • Employment leads from One-Stop Career Center's business services team • WIA-supported on-the-job training (subject to resource availability)



Summary

HCA aims to increase participants' self-sufficiency by helping them access and complete training programs in the health care field, secure employment, and return to training for more advanced credentials and skill development. HCA's career pathways components include:

- Financial assistance to support training in health care programs, both through ITAs and community college cohorts.
- Guidance and other navigation services to help participants make decisions about appropriate courses that will help lead them to a career in the health professions. Additional training opportunities are available to participants, andnavigators encourage participants to return and enroll in more advanced training.
- Supportive services to help participants overcome barriers to educational and employment success.
- Assistance obtaining post-training employment, including resume development and interview preparation, and outreach to employers.

For more information about WDC, go to http://www.seakingwdc.org/

Notes

1. Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018*. Georgetown Public Policy Institute, Retrieved from http://cew.georgetown.edu/jobs2018/.

2. The WDC operates the HCA program under a "Health Profession Opportunity Grant" (HPOG) from the Office of Family Assistance in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The evaluation of HCA through ISIS is funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in ACF.

3. For more information on the ISIS framework, see www.projectisis.org/isis-documents: Fein, David J. (2012). *Career Pathways as a Framework for Program Design and Evaluation: A Working Paper From the Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) Project.* OPRE Report # 2012-30, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

4. The Washington State Basic Food Employment and Training program provides job search, job search training, self-directed job search, educational services, skills training, and other employment opportunities to Basic Food (SNAP) recipients who are not participating in the TANF work program.

Box 1: Overview of the ISIS Evaluation

The Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) evaluation, a 10-year effort funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and led by Abt Associates Inc., is a random assignment evaluation of nine promising career pathways programs that aim to improve employment and self-sufficiency outcomes for low-income, low-skilled individuals. The goal is to produce methodologically rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of career pathways approaches that will address issues of interest to federal, state, and local policy makers and practitioners and have significant influence on policy and practice. ISIS will include implementation, impact, and cost-benefit studies. Key study questions include

- What is the impact of each program on higher levels and quicker achievement of certificates and degrees? On earnings?
- What are the impacts of each program on individual and family well-being?
- Do impacts vary by subgroups, and, if so, which characteristics are associated with larger or smaller effects?

ISIS was launched in late 2007 and began with intensive outreach to solicit the views of policy makers, program operators, researchers, and advocates on promising program areas to test, resulting in a focus on the career pathways approach. The evaluation team then recruited strong career pathways programs into the study. Random assignment began in November 2011 and will conclude in September 2014.

The nine ISIS Partner Sites are: Instituto del Progreso Latino, Des Moines Area Community College, Madison Area Technical College, Pima Community College, San Diego Workforce Partnership, Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement, the Washington I-BEST program at Bellingham Technical College and Whatcom Community College, Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, and Year Up. An important partner in the study is the Open Society Foundations (OSF), which provided resources for many of the programs in the ISIS evaluation to expand their scale to meet the requirements of the evaluation, to enhance services in specific areas, or both. Support was also provided to specific sites by the Joyce Foundation and Kresge Foundation, and three ISIS sites (Pima Community College, San Diego Workforce Partnership, Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County) are recipients of Health Profession Opportunity Grants awarded by ACF. Data collection activities include two rounds of implementation research visits, two follow-up surveys with individuals in the study, and acquisition of site-specific and national administrative records on education and employment-related outcomes. The evaluation team will produce a series of reports including: program profiles for each of the ISIS partner sites, site-specific implementation reports documenting the operation of the program, and site-specific impact reports examining the effect of the program on education, employment, and other related outcomes, including a cost-benefit analysis.

The ISIS team includes:

Primary Evaluation Sponsor

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/index.html

Other Project Sponsors

Foundations and federal agencies that have provided generous grants to support ISIS programs include:

The Open Society Foundations' Special Fund for Poverty Alleviation www.soros.org

The Joyce Foundation www.joycefdn.org

The Kresge Foundation www.kresge.org

Meadows Foundation www.mfi.org.

Hearst Foundation www.hearstfdn.org

Health Professions Opportunity Grants, Administration for Children and Families hhttp://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/programs/hpog

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