Creating Better Jobs: How Worker-Centered, Low-Wage Intermediaries Impact Job Quality in Greater Boston’s Labor Market

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**Introduction**

Economic restructuring brought about by global competition, technological change and deregulation has put a new emphasis on labor market intermediation as a way to speed up the matching of supply and demand and help labor markets adjust. Workforce development policy and funding has applied this concept to the low-wage labor market by encouraging the creation of workforce intermediaries. However, intermediaries in the low-wage labor market may have worker-centered social missions that extend beyond goals of economic efficiency. One social goal is to improve the conditions of low-wage work and create good jobs. However, little is known about how worker-centered, low-wage intermediaries impact job quality. Using Greater Boston as an example, we present our preliminary findings from interviews with unions, worker centers and workforce development agencies. We focus on the types of strategies these organizations use to influence job quality and the challenges they face in creating substantive change in the workplace to ultimately advance and improve conditions for workers.

A significant proportion of the job growth in Massachusetts is occurring in the low-wage labor market. Labor force growth is keeping up with these jobs and that growth is entirely reliant in new immigrants. In terms of the organizations interviewed, the sectors of the low-wage labor market addressed in this paper include child care, building services, painting, construction labor, automotive service and repair, paraprofessionals and support staff in health care, food services and hospitality. We focus on the low-wage jobs, not the low-wage workers, so that we can emphasize structural problems in our economy that lead to stagnant wages, limited opportunities and increasing inequality.

Workforce development policy is intended to improve the state’s stock of human capital by improving access to both entry-level and skilled positions. This increased stock in human capital is expected to lead to “high level job creation and increased competitiveness (Sum, et al 2006, p.2).” These initiatives in Massachusetts, as well as elsewhere, are based on a pro-business orientation towards competition with heavy emphasis on skills training. We find a skills training focus within the field of workforce development is necessary, but insufficient. Therefore, we argue that the protection of
workers’ rights and the inclusion of worker voice on the job is the best known strategy for driving the creation of good jobs.

We define worker-centered organizations as organizations with anti-poverty or economic and social justice missions. We focused our analysis to include unions, worker centers, non-profits involved in the workforce development system and adult basic education providers. Research on new labor market institutions and new intermediaries has indicated that finding proper boundaries to talk about these different organizations is challenging. It may be inappropriate to try to classify such an array of different organizations together because their origins, goals and scope of services can be very different. These organizations gravitate towards different strategies. Those strategies can be influenced by origin, funding sources, membership type and sector. However, it is suggested that the forces that enable or disable their activities have similar origins and institutional contexts (Benner, 2003; Carré and Joshi, 2000).

For organizations that combine social values with economic goals, improving job quality includes improving wages and benefits, but also contains other facets as well. Improvements to jobs can also be made by increasing access to information on the job, increasing information about employers, structuring career ladders, and improving access to opportunities. Other strategies might include changing management attitude about freedom of association at work, improving voice and leadership on the job through worker education, and establishing methods of flexibility and mobility that create jobs within communities of workers (not in isolation). Finally, family-friendly policies help support workers in their job and improve quality of life (Carré and Joshi, 2000; Osterman, et al., 2001).

The lack of strong federal policy enforcement in employment means that the consequences of low-wage jobs are often handled by these kinds of organizations at a local or immediate level. There are three main dynamics in the low-wage labor market that interfere with improving job quality. One is that total costs of product and services include a high proportion of labor costs. Keeping prices low often results from keeping wages and benefits low. Secondly, barriers to entry in the low-wage labor market are low. A single employer cannot capture the returns to training and upgrading a mobile or transitory workforce. And lastly, many workplaces are small – either because they are
small employers or because large firms create a chain of small establishments – and difficult to organize (Carré and Joshi, 2000).

From a policy perspective, we are interested in two types of analysis. First, to understand what policies help support worker-centered, low-wage intermediaries create change in the low-wage labor market. Unions hold a particular set of unique characteristics to make this happen in terms of improving employment conditions and ensuring that the benefits of economic growth are redistributed to workers. There are new innovations and various forms of organizing, coalition building and linkages across different types of organizations which need to be better understood (Benner, 2003; Osterman, et al, 2001).

The second policy perspective is to understand the ways in which these organizations are able to inform, advocate and achieve policy change at the local level. Local action does two important things. It documents the problems workers face in the labor market and on the job and it helps in sharing information. Linkages between unions and other community groups are important in the construction of new institutions that govern work and employment relations. These linkages provide political leverage and reach a diverse workforce. City level ordinances like living wage campaigns, fair-wage campaigns, right-to-organize, and counting education towards work requirements in welfare are all local results because of coalition building across different types of organizations (Carré and Joshi, 2000; Freeman, et al, 2005; Osterman, et al, 2001).

Below, we provide a description of the methodology and the organizations that have participated. We focus on four key approaches for impacting the quality of jobs: skills training, worker education, employer engagement and policy advocacy. We conclude with an initial recommendation for policies that strengthen collective action.

Methodology

We used a review of research, scan of websites and key informants to devise a list of worker-centered organizations that operate to any extent as intermediaries in the low-wage labor market in the greater-Boston area. We defined an organization as being “worker-centered” if it has a mission that promotes worker rights, capacity building, leadership development, and/or that sets anti-poverty goals and program objectives that
include worker advancement. To date, we have identified 25 such organizations in the Boston area and have completed a short survey and at least one interview with ten of them. We plan to conduct interviews with most of the remaining organizations over the next couple of months.

A representative from each participating organization completed a short survey designed to collect standardized information about the organizations’ mission, size, programs, and funding sources. In addition, at least one director and/or program manager from each organization participated in a 90 minute interview. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format designed to gather information about specific training and education programs within the organization, the way in which these programs engage or involve employers, and how the organization and its programs have impacted job quality in the local labor market.

We chose to use the data collection tools of surveys and interviews because we believe that any policy prescriptions derived from this research needs to be grounded in the participants’ viewpoints. Furthermore, the feasibility and appropriateness of policy recommendations needs to then be tested out by the stakeholders themselves.

Worker-Centered, Low-Wage Intermediaries

We focused on four types of organizations: (1) non-profit workforce development agencies, (2) adult basic education providers, (3) community based organizations with established “worker centers,” and (4) labor unions. While these groups are generally distinct, they can overlap. Due to the wide range of organizations in terms of their size and complexity, we found it useful to focus on one or two training and/or education programs within each organization. Targeting specific programs within each organization allowed us to explore how programmatic initiatives are embedded into the larger organizational context and highlighting alternative models and philosophies that extend well beyond a pure ”worker development” concept for creating good jobs. Below is a summary of the organizations that have participated to date, including a brief description of each organization, its program(s) of interest, and its origins, funding sources, and scope of services.
Non-Profit Workforce Development Agencies

Three non-profit agencies who operate as workforce intermediaries and run publicly funded sector-based training programs have participated in this study: the Asian American Civic Association, Action for Boston Community Development, and Jewish Vocational Services. The Asian American Civic Association (AACA) is a multi-service center that provides a range of services for immigrants, from English language classes to preparing tax returns and seeking fuel assistance. AACA started about 40 years ago as a political organization that worked for candidates that supported issues important to Asian communities. Since the 1980’s AACA has been involved in workforce development, and currently coordinates sector-based programs in building maintenance and automotive maintenance and repair. They receive most of their funding for these programs through SkillWorks, which combines both private and public sources. AACA’s Deputy Director participated in this research project.

Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) is an anti-poverty agency that has worked in Boston for more than 40 years providing social services, community development, education, health services, and childcare. Learning Works is ABCD’s workforce development center and among its many services are sector-based programs in childcare and building maintenance. Funding for these programs comes through welfare-to-work, WIA and the City of Boston. The Director of Learning Works from ABCD participated in this research project.

Jewish Vocational Services (JVS) has provided workforce development services to Boston residents for more than 60 years. In 2000, JVS launched the Center for Careers and Life Long Learning (CALL) to increase emphasis on longer term solutions in employment and career advancement. Their activities include both sector-based initiatives and employer specific workplace training. They receive both state and federal funding for their categorical programs under CALL. We interviewed the Vice President of CALL for the project.

Adult Basic Education Providers

We have interviewed one organization focused on the provision of adult basic education. World Education, Inc. is an international non-profit which in Massachusetts
provides a number of services to community based organizations that range from technical assistance to capacity building. Using mostly public funding, they coordinate the System for Adult Basic Education Support (SABES) in Massachusetts, as well as providing support to a number of workforce development programs. They target their services to community based organizations that work with disadvantaged workers and workers in the low-wage labor market. The Workforce Development Coordinator participated in this study. While we have identified a number of technical and vocational schools and community colleges that would fit into this category, to date we have not completed interviews with them.

Community Based Worker Centers

Three community-based organizations which house worker centers have participated in this study: the Brazilian Immigrant Center, Centro Presente, and the Massachusetts Coalition of Occupational Safety and Health. All three use private grants and membership fees to provide worker education, advice and assistance concerning employment law and workplace problems, and organizing. The Brazilian Immigrant Center (BIC) was founded 12 years ago to focus on workers’ rights, and it has continued to assist in filing claims with the State Attorney General, to negotiate the reimbursement of wages for individual workers, and to work with unions around specific issues within the Brazilian community. We interviewed three of the organizers at the BIC.

Centro Presente began as a community organization serving the needs of Salvadoran refugees in 1981. Since then, their work has expanded across Latino communities, and two years ago they formally launched a worker center. Centro Presente is currently providing leadership and organizing classes, assistance with claims processing, as well as organizing. The Associate Director and a post-graduate fellow intern participated in this study.

Unlike the BIC and Centro Presente, the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH) grew out of the labor movement as collaboration between health and safety activists and local labor unions. In addition to providing health and safety training in the workplace and supporting union organizing,
MassCOSH has started a worker center for immigrant workers organizing for change in their workplaces. The Executive Director participated in this study.

**Labor Unions**

Three labor unions have participated in the study to date. Two of the unions are affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). 1199SEIU Healthcare Workers United East represents 11,000 healthcare workers in Massachusetts, and is part of 1199SEIU, a large union representing 275,000 members in New York, Washington DC, Maryland, and Massachusetts. 1199SEIU’s associated Employment, Training and Job Security Program operates a family of funds, including the Training and Upgrading Fund (TUF), a labor-management partnership in Massachusetts. In addition to employer contributions, TUF receives grants to support workplace training programs. The TUF Director participated in this study.

SEIU Local 615 represents 17,000 workers in property services in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Hampshire. SEIU Local 615 runs an associated non-profit, the Voice and Future Fund, which allows the union to combine private and public grants for a wide range of worker education initiatives that are tightly linked to the union’s organizing efforts. The Director of the Voice and Future Fund participated in this study.

The third union that has participated is the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) District Council 35. IUPAT District Council 35 represents 4,000 painters, glassworkers and other members in allied trades in Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. They operate an employer funded, joint labor-management apprenticeship and training program for painters, tapers, and glaziers. The Director of Political and Public Relations participated in this study.

**Approaches to Impacting the Quality of Jobs**

Each participating organization was asked to identify the types of programs and activities they have developed that might improve the quality of jobs for their members or the workers they seek to serve. Table 1 indicates the programs and approaches that each organization identified.
Table 1: Programs and approaches used to impact jobs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Type</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>ABE</th>
<th>ESOL</th>
<th>Job Search/Match</th>
<th>Skills Training</th>
<th>Organizing</th>
<th>Work Search/Match</th>
<th>Employer Engagement</th>
<th>Labor-Management</th>
<th>Political Action</th>
<th>Legal Services</th>
<th>Public Policy</th>
<th>Partnerships</th>
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<td>Non-profit workforce development agencies</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ABCD: Learning Works</td>
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<td>JVS: CALL</td>
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Below we explore how these organizations use (1) skills training, (2) worker education, (3) employer engagement, and (4) policy advocacy to improve working conditions and the quality of jobs. In addition, we discuss the policy barriers the participants have reported encountering while advancing these efforts.

**Using Skills Training Programs to Improve Job Quality**

A mainstay of most workforce development programs is skills training. These programs include English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Adult Basic Education (ABE), and industry specific skills development (e.g., computer skills,
culinary skills, automotive repair skills, etc.). Programs such as these are traditionally intended to improve an individual’s skill level so that she/he will be better able to compete for jobs. Indeed, this emphasis on the development of individual workers is seen in the evaluation of such programs which generally focuses on individual outcomes. For example, skills training is evaluated on whether or not a worker’s improved English language skills or completion of a GED has improves their wages and chances for advancement. Nearly all the organizations we interviewed provide some mixture of ABE, ESOL, and/or skills training. The long-term goal is moving workers out of the low-wage labor market. Yet, the participating organizations have designed, funded and integrated skills programs into their organizations’ missions in order to improve job quality for entry-level and incumbent workers.

Organizations recognize that advancement through skills training, ABE and ESOL takes a long time. Workforce development programming increasingly relies on sector-based initiatives that create career pathways through skills training and employer partnerships and improves jobs by increasing opportunities. For example, ABCD Learning Works not only provides skills training for entry-level child care workers, but they also assist in upgrading and certifying those workers for teacher positions. Their child care training program, which started with JTPA funding, has worked with at least 100 employers in placing more than 400 workers. Today, the child care training program is now placing entry level workers under teachers who were Learning Works graduates themselves, demonstrating advancement opportunity.

The Training and Upgrading Fund through 1199SEIU concretely improves the benefits available under collective bargaining agreements through tuition reimbursement and access to educational programs. TUF pools employer contributions, serves as a vehicle for the fair distribution of those benefits across members and seeks to contribute to industry-wide learning. TUF’s workplace committees may be making a difference in organizational culture, management attitude and internal labor markets that effect their workers.

The Voice and Future Fund headed a Building Services Career Path project. The project was a labor-management partnership designed to improve human resource practices in building services. Building maintenance was identified as an obvious career
link between building cleaning and the skilled trades. AACA was consulted and provided skills training for building maintenance. While the most notable impact that the project had on job quality was through improved job information for workers, the project also highlighted a number of barriers that workforce development projects encounter in trying to impact the low-wage job market. The first difficulty comes in the structure of the industry. Indeed, building owners can contract their building services with other employers, creating a web of several sub-contractors as well as unions. While building cleaning and skilled trades are highly unionized in the Boston area, building maintenance is not. Partial union coverage across the industry means that wages for building maintenance may not advance in proportional steps with the career path.

The workforce development field now recognizes sector-based career ladder and skills training initiatives as best practices. When skills training is accompanied by career ladders, there are clearer opportunities for workers to move up (and out of low-wage work). Organizations recognize that these projects take a long time to set up. Workers and employers need to view the benefits across a long-term time horizon. Further, in the absence of a collective bargaining agreement, jobs still stay at the bottom of the ladder.

Using Worker Education to Improve Job Quality

Worker education is a primary strategy that organizations use as a catalyst for change. Worker education is distinct from skills training in that it is political in nature with the goal of empowering workers to advocate for themselves and improve conditions in the workplace. While worker education may encompass skills training, ESOL or ABE programs, it always includes education on workers’ rights; union, workplace, and community organizing; and leadership development. For many of the organizations that we interviewed, worker education is the fundamental tool used for improving worker voice on the job and for encouraging individual and collective action to improve jobs. Indeed, worker education provides a foundation for organizing, legal and political action, public awareness, community involvement, and public policy advocacy activities.

Workforce development agencies rely more on employer engagement strategies than explicit worker education. They do incorporate basic worker’s rights into their training curriculum, address accommodation issues for people with disabilities, and deal
on a case-by-case basis with employer violations. Of note, AACA uses a career coach model for workers they place on jobs. The career coach follows up with the worker, knows what the working conditions are like, and can help coach workers in communicating with supervisors around issues like pay raises.

All the worker centers in this study -- BIC, Centro Presente and MassCOSH -- have designed worker education programs around improving voice and leadership not just for individual advocacy but also to develop support networks and organizing strategies in non-unionized environments. Worker centers are often faced with numerous individual claims for wage, hour and discrimination violations which occur in non-unionized workplaces. All three worker centers are expanding their work beyond individual claims advocacy and are devising targeted strategies for systematic change. For example, BIC is combining worker education with public awareness in a new feature length film. The film uses theater actors from the Brazilian community and addresses both domestic violence and sexual harassment in the workplace. Recently, BIC has helped file several individual claims regarding sexual harassment, but the film can help raise awareness about the social problem and hopefully lead to broader action in the community to protect vulnerable workers.

Unions use worker education for both internal and external organizing that strengthens workers’ activism skills. SEIU 615’s Voice and Future Fund provides an excellent example of how such programs can improve job quality. The building cleaning industry is characterized by low-wages, isolated workers, part-time jobs, and an employment structure that does not provide clear and meaningful advancement opportunities. To address these challenges, SEIU 615 has decided to focus all the member education services provided through The Voice and Future Fund on the primary goal of connecting members within and across their communities. For example, the schedule of classes is often split between in-class work and weeks of collective action. In this way, the Voice and Future Fund’s worker education programs are consciously designed to contribute to the union’s broader organizing goals.

Worker education helps improve job quality in the low-wage labor market by improving worker voice and the ability to advocate for change. Building strategy and collective action requires an organizational base that can bring workers together. Not
surprisingly, unions and membership-based organizations do this the best. Worker education is not absent in the workforce development agencies, but it is used selectively as to not conflict with employer engagement.

Using Employer Engagement to Improve Job Quality

The participating organizations described different strategies for engaging or interacting with employers to influence workplace conditions and improve jobs. These different strategies depended both on the type of organization and the low-wage sector they operate in. The publicly funded workforce development programs were more likely to treat employers as customers (whose workforce needs they seek to serve) and build relationships with them over time. This approach is used because meeting the employer’s service needs provides these organizations leverage for accessing the workplace, identifying good jobs in the economy, and assisting workers in advancing their careers. In addition, to meet their goals and to satisfy funding and mission requirements, these organizations often seek out “responsible” employers who are interested in a diverse workforce, are willing to pay somewhat higher wages, and are more supportive of their local communities.

Service providers like AACA and JVS gain access to worksites by providing workplace needs analysis and bringing educational programs on site for employers. JVS increasingly tailors its training to specific employers, which provides more leverage to improve job quality. For example, JVS has been successfully providing literacy programs in the health care field by first pitching the project as a “pilot.” One successful example at a major Boston hospital continues to provide training for a 100 people a year. The program is paid for by the employer with department supervisors having direct control over the training budget, allowing them to take ownership of the benefits. JVS stays involved as both an advisor to the program and as the provider of instructors.

AACA has employers on their advisory board who help design curriculum and recruit and screen program participants. This involvement improves the job match process for employers and ensures participants jobs upon completing the program. AACA also uses a memorandum of understanding with its employers who are involved in its workforce development programs. The MOU is both an educational tool and a
contract. For example, AACA seeks out jobs that pay at least a living wage (currently, $11.95 for the City of Boston). Although employers won’t always allow the MOU to stipulate wage levels, it has been an opportunity to educate employers about the living wage and what it means.

ABCD takes advantage of its unique position to improve job quality in the child care industry. In addition to running the child care training program, ABCD also runs many of the city’s Head Start programs. Therefore Learning Works has direct access to Head Start employers as well as having developed relationships with a hundred or so other employers. The internship program in child care which is run by Learning Works is established inside the Head Starts. Learning Works has assisted Head Starts in writing grants, designing professional development programs, and building internal promotions and pay increases.

Worker centers and labor unions, on the other hand, tend not to view the employer as a customer, partly because they have more leverage to influence the employers’ policies through collective bargaining and regulatory structures, and also because they must answer to their own members. MassCOSH is experimenting with mixing employer engagement with enforcement. MassCOSH has been involved in a safe shops program in the automotive repair industry. This initiative represents one of the few instances that MassCOSH is working in non-unionized workplaces. In this case, employers in automotive repair are not accountable to a union, but the employers are accountable to the Boston Public Health Commission. This provides MassCOSH with the leverage they need (as well as the regulatory support) for entering workplaces and educating workers on documenting exposures and improving working conditions.

Unions often work to engage with employers in non-adversarial ways. For example, 1199SEIU’s Training and Upgrading Fund is a labor management partnership that is based on relationship building and committee work structures that are beginning to improve internal hiring mechanisms and influence management culture. Additionally, as TUF is integrated into additional bargaining agreements the program’s security and financial feasibility will protect against often short-term time horizons used by employers and supervisors and allow the necessary long-term time horizons for workers to be enrolled in college and pursuing degrees in higher education while they work. One
challenge for TUF is that there is a high demand among its members for nursing school. Since not everyone can be a nurse, there is a need to develop alternative occupational pathways.

IUPAT District Council 35 has established direct hire agreements with housing authorities, public schools, and regional non-profit developers to create union jobs. These collaborations have made hiring union painters more affordable, increased the use of the apprenticeship program and increased hiring of local residents. Although the number of workers impacted is not large, the outcomes are significant. For example, Boston public schools have been contracting its painting projects to non-union contractors. Last year District Council 35 helped lead an initiative to get the City to hire union painters and, in return, the union hired local residents through the apprenticeship program. In addition to supporting a diverse workforce and benefiting the community, this effort concretely improved wages and benefits on those contracts. These types of initiatives are time intensive in setting up and negotiating. They are also project-specific, as with the Boston public schools example, there was no renewed commitment from the City this year.

Organizations that successfully engage employers can improve job quality at a certain level in the low-wage labor market. Meaning that these jobs are already covered under a bargaining agreement or the employer has set standards around wages and benefits that are acceptable for job placements in workforce development. In general, employer engagement is viewed as prohibitive when trying to organize or take legal action against a “bad” employer. One possible exception (and worth further exploration) is 1199SEIU’s leveraging of TUF as an organizing tool to bring new employers on board.

*Using Policy Advocacy to Improve Job Quality*

Part of the challenges faced by all the participating organizations is the lack of public policies, or enforcement of policies, that would support the efforts of workers to advocate for themselves in union as well as in non-union settings. In order to address this, most participating organizations reported engaging in policy advocacy to change public policies.
ABCD, JVS and AACA all described the challenges in linking public funding requirements, serving employer needs, and the realities of the workplace. They have been able to advocate for increased funding and improved funding designs to help tackle some of these issues. They have negotiated more meaningful and/or realistic outcomes with public funders, they meet with state legislators through the budgeting process, and they participate in professional association that advocate broadly in policy arenas.

The worker centers we interviewed reported on some recent local successes in changing public policies in order to improve information available to workers, worker voice, and/or solidarity in the workplace. One example is the recent agreement reached with the Attorney General’s office to provide information sheets and forms in Portuguese. The BIC has had to translate forms and information for its members. Through engagement with the Attorney General’s office an agreement has been reached with the state to begin providing translated materials this year and relieve BIC of that work. A further example is the work of a coalition, led by MassCOSH and involving the BIC, Centro Presente, IUPAT District Council 35 and Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS), among others, to introduce and get passed temporary worker legislation that improved safety information and standards for job assignments. Although this effort did not involve the creation of new laws -- temporary employers have always been obligated to provide appropriate safety information and gear -- this new legislation demonstrates reinforcement.

MassCOSH has collaborated with businesses operating in the floor finishing industry around mandating safe alternatives to deadly chemicals. Most of these businesses are small family owned operations. Although some businesses worked on a voluntary basis to increase the use of safe alternatives, it did not solve competitive problems brought about by other businesses manufacturing and using the cheaper but deadly chemicals. By shepherding through mandatory legislation in the use of safe alternatives, competitive problems were resolved, all employers were on board and the benefits of change were distributed evenly across the industry.

In addition to the work of the worker centers, unions have worked to advance public policies. To date, most workforce development funding is awarded to employers, making labor management partnerships like TUF ineligible for such funds. Currently,
new language has been submitted into the state budgeting process to include labor management partnerships as eligible to bid for workforce development funds. Another example was provided by IUPAT District Council 35 who has participated in the Construction Reform Commission to develop stronger requirements in classifying independent contractors. They have also worked to push through new OSHA regulations that require workers on public projects to possess an OSHA certification card on the job site. These reforms lead to clearer definitions for enforcement and safe workplaces.

All of these efforts underscore the continued need for reinforcing basic standards and accountability in the employment relationships of low-wage workers. These simple tools allow for greater success in improving jobs. These policies provide levers to improve enforcement, provide a basis for legal action, increase the participation of these organizations in the policy making process, and improve information available to workers. Success of these efforts depends on the ability to use political power, strategic leverage and mobilizing support. The largest impacts on job quality occur across an industry or sector by setting rules for all employers to follow.

What policies for Worker-Centered, Low-Wage Intermediaries?

Through this research we have begun to explore the impact that worker-centered, low-wage intermediaries have had on improving the job quality of low-wage work in the greater Boston area. In particular, we have focused on the impact of four types of programs and initiatives: skills training, worker education, employer engagement, and policy advocacy. Because of the ways the participating organizations have integrated these programs into their missions, each was able to have some impact on job quality. However, not surprisingly, some impacts appear more sustainable than others.

Workforce development agencies know they cannot impact wages and benefits without a collective bargaining agreement. This is why they set minimum standards themselves and work to engage “responsible” employers that will meet them. Worker centers know mobilizing their membership for action is at least as important as assisting individual workers with wage and hour claims. And, unions know they create good jobs by organizing. Therefore, approaches to improving job quality which are backed by collective action have more force. Worker education programs and policy advocacy
initiatives were built upon the collective action of a group of workers and the supporting organization(s). For example, SEIU Local 615’s workers education programs have increased the union’s ability to demand better wages and benefits during collective bargaining. Similarly, the policy advocacy initiatives of BIC, Centro Presente, MassCOSH and IUPAT District Council 35 were successful due to the active involvement of members and collaboration across organizations. Furthermore, these improvements in job quality resulted in enforceable contracts and policies which set minimum standards for all employers.

Only after minimum employment standards are set, can skills training, employer engagement and labor-management partnerships are used to impact job quality. These improvements have very real consequences for the individual workers by establishing career ladders with built-in wage increases, improved health and safety practices on a worksite, and influencing change in management culture.

We need policies that strengthen collective action, without undermining efforts in strategic organizing and movement building. This can include increasing union involvement in workforce development and evaluating projects and funding based on their contribution to broader social and economic goals. Fundamentally, labor unions, worker advocates, service providers and community based organizations must all be better represented in the decision-making process in order to establish a new strategic direction for workforce development policies. Public policy can also be used to support a fair wage campaign, improve access to local industry information, help organizations make strategic links with each other and improve policy analysis in all the areas that affect low-wage employment.
References


