

Jobs to Careers

*Transforming the Front Lines
of Health Care*

Practice Brief

Part of a series of reports
and practice briefs on
advancing and rewarding
the skill and career
development of workers
providing care and
services on the front
lines of our health
and health care
systems



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SSTAR Excels

*Investing in a Work-Based Learning
Approach to Professional Development*

By Kimberly R. Rogers and Stacey Wagner



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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs to Careers

*Transforming the Front Lines
of Health Care*

Jobs to Careers explores new ways to help frontline health care workers get the skills they need to provide quality care and build sustainable careers. It helps health care providers improve the quality of patient care and health services by building the skills and careers of their frontline employees.

Through *Jobs to Careers*, health care employers build strong partnerships with education institutions and other organizations to change the way frontline employees are trained, rewarded, and advanced. Career paths are developed and made readily available to frontline employees. Employer and education partners make systematic changes that respond to the needs of working adults and that improve access to and success in skill-building programs.

A hallmark of *Jobs to Careers* is work-based learning: frontline employees master occupational and academic skills in the course of completing their job tasks and fulfilling their day-to-day responsibilities. While working full time, frontline employees enter college and earn academic credit for workplace training. Other learning approaches in *Jobs to Careers* include technology-enabled, experience-based, and traditional worksite and off-site learning.

To realize the unique *Jobs to Careers* approach to learning, employers and educators implement systems changes, such as:

- *At the workplace:* Developing new job positions and responsibilities; deeply involving supervisors in employee training and career development; and offering paid release time, pre-paid tuition assistance, job coaching, and mentoring.

- *At the educational institution:* Providing college credit for work-based learning, prior learning, and entry-level health care credentials; offering accelerated and part-time degree and certificate programs; contextualizing college preparatory math and English courses to health care concepts and job tasks; and appointing professional staff from health care employers to be adjunct college faculty.

Jobs to Careers moves everyone forward to a healthier future. Frontline employees receive rewards for building skills and expanding knowledge necessary for their current jobs and qualifying them to advance to new positions. Employers build and retain talented and committed employees while bolstering a workplace culture that supports professional development, mentorship, and collaboration across the entire health care team. And health care consumers receive high-quality care and services, delivered by a high-quality workforce.

Jobs to Careers is a \$15.8 million initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Hitachi Foundation, with additional support from the U.S. Department of Labor. Jobs for the Future manages the initiative. Seventeen partnerships representing hospitals, community health centers, long-term care, and behavioral health received multiyear *Jobs to Careers* grants.

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Executive Summary

Jobs to Careers, a national initiative funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Hitachi Foundation, and the U.S. Department of Labor, supports partnerships of employers, educational providers, and other organizations to promote skill development and career advancement opportunities for frontline workers in health care. Participation in *Jobs to Careers* has helped many of the initiative's 17 sites fill shortages of qualified staff.

Before *Jobs to Careers*, Stanley Street Treatment and Resources (SSTAR), a nonprofit behavioral and mental health agency with facilities in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, faced challenges in supporting staff aspirations and meeting client needs, despite a reputation for delivering high-quality programs and services. Through its three years as a participant in *Jobs to Careers*, the agency increased its number of certified addiction counselors, enabling more patients to be treated. As its frontline workers moved through the *Jobs to Careers* program and earned certifications in addictions counseling, the agency became a more competitive business: costs went down while revenue and service quality rose. SSTAR also attracted new talent and improved its record of retaining valued employees.

Work-based learning, a core component of how *Jobs to Careers* upgrades the skills of frontline workers, enabled SSTAR employees to exceed their personal educational expectations, even as it provided a financial return on the agency's training investment. Before *Jobs to Careers*, employees had wanted to perform better at their jobs, earn higher credentials, and make more money, but they were unclear

about which educational pathways to pursue and hesitant about returning to school—some after many years in the workforce. To make learning more accessible, SSTAR provided a competency-based curriculum at the worksite, online, and through a local community college. This created a zone of comfort in which employees could learn on the job—in a context relevant to their day-to-day activities—and gain immediate expert feedback from their supervisors.

SSTAR's experience in *Jobs to Careers* illustrates how patient care can be boosted through cutting-edge professional development. The *Jobs to Careers* work-based learning model enabled SSTAR to increase employees' earnings and decrease the client-counselor ratio, both indicators of improved quality.

SSTAR's experience in work-based learning may be a model for other addictions treatment facilities as they move toward serving clients through research-informed strategies and innovations proven in practice. Work-based learning can aid in the adoption of new techniques in the addictions field as well as other health care areas and give immediate relevance to ongoing research by incorporating new ideas in how treatment is delivered at the worksite.

Introduction



Through *Jobs to Careers*, SSTAR increased the number of qualified and credentialed addictions treatment professionals on its staff.

Founded in 1977, Stanley Street Treatment and Resources (SSTAR) provides a wide range of mental health, primary health, and substance abuse treatment services to clients throughout Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts.

A nonprofit specializing in primary care and substance abuse treatment, SSTAR gained a reputation for high-quality programs and services that offer support and hope to those in need. It was the first agency in Massachusetts to establish an inpatient substance-abuse detoxification unit and the first to open a walk-in clinic for HIV testing. SSTAR also was the first facility in southeastern Massachusetts to detoxify pregnant addicts. In 1995, Rhode Island selected SSTAR to provide detoxification services for all of its uninsured residents. In 2006, Rhode Island selected SSTAR to manage acute psychiatric services for all uninsured residents; in this capacity, the agency introduced the new dual-diagnosis level of care at its North Kingstown facility.

Despite this record, SSTAR faced two challenges in recent years:

- *Supporting staff aspirations:* SSTAR employees wanted to perform their jobs better. When surveyed, they reported that they wanted to earn higher credentials, which would also increase their salaries. However, they were unclear about which educational pathways to pursue and hesitant about going back to school after being out for so long.
- *Meeting client needs:* SSTAR had too few credentialed staff to serve an increasing number of clients. Many new clients had to join a long waiting list to get counseling services.

In response, SSTAR sought approaches to frontline staff development that could improve client management. SSTAR Chief Operating Officer Patricia Emsellem viewed the agency's frontline workers as an underutilized resource. "We had a group of frontline workers who were effective at engaging clients and demonstrated commitment to the field and the organization," said Emsellem. "It made good business sense to tap that resource and grow our own [skilled staff]."

Neither COO Emsellem nor Chief Executive Officer Nancy Paull were fans of traditional classroom-based training, however. In their view, it had little relevance to SSTAR's business challenges and was too static to be valuable in the rapidly changing and specialized world of addictions treatment. Emsellem expressed dismay with former training methods and felt that a staff member's lack of progress was indicative of a lack of motivation.

SSTAR applied to participate in *Jobs to Careers* because of the potential for engaging frontline workers in an innovative work-based learning approach. "With work-based learning, there is tremendous potential if we offer [our employees] what they need in the form in which they need it. Then we have the outcomes we desire," said Emsellem. This was as true for engaging SSTAR's staff in training as it has always been for engaging clients in addictions treatment.

Frontline Workers and Work-Based Learning

In seeking to prepare frontline workers for higher-level, better-paying positions, SSTAR was taking on a significant task. Frontline health care workers often receive limited formal and informal training—learning from peers and trial and error—which may compromise service and care delivery. Their jobs often lack clear standards and competencies, with limited focus by supervisors on employees' skill development and advancement. These factors, combined with low pay and workers' perceptions that their contributions to the workplace are unrecognized, are associated with high turnover, increased costs, and compromised quality.

These are precisely the sorts of issues that *Jobs to Careers* was designed to address. The project at SSTAR is one of 17 nationwide that bring work-based learning to hospitals, community health clinics, nursing homes, and behavioral health facilities. *Jobs to Careers* is a \$15.8 million national initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, in collaboration with The Hitachi Foundation and the U.S. Department of Labor.

All *Jobs to Careers* grantees are developing models that build learning into the job, while providing workers with access to career paths and college credit. In *Jobs to Careers*, work-based learning has these essential elements:

- The program is “learner centered.” Employees and the people responsible for facilitating their learning co-create the learning plan and process.
- Employers and their education partners co-develop and co-facilitate curricula.
- The learning process is embedded in the work process.

For more information on work-based learning, see *A Primer for Work-Based Learning: How to Make a Job the Basis for a College Education Jobs to Careers*, by Randall Wilson, with Kristina Cowan, Ed Phippen, and Rebecca Starr (Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future, 2008).

Identifying Workforce Needs

When it received its *Jobs to Careers* grant, SSTAR embarked on a three-year effort to increase the number of qualified and credentialed addictions treatment professionals on its staff. Beginning in 2006, funds supported the creation of work-based learning pathways that would enhance the skills and knowledge of incumbent workers and provide them with advancement opportunities.

SSTAR recruited staff members working as inpatient counselors and milieu therapists who delivered a type of therapy centered on providing clients with a safe environment that is rich with social opportunities. SSTAR also recruited non-clinical staff, including medical receptionists, drivers, clerks, and housekeepers. The staff members (mostly white and female) had varying educational backgrounds, ranging from no high school



SSTAR supervisors help frontline workers apply what they learn in class to their jobs.

diploma to a Master's degree. The average age was 36, and their average wage upon entering the program was \$11.22 per hour.

SSTAR focused its efforts on preparing frontline workers to pass the state exam for the certified addiction counselor (CAC) position and eventually continue their education to become clinicians. According to Emsellem, "What we really need are Master's-level, independently licensed clinicians, in addition to CACs, to work in our outpatient clinic, which is a long-term prospect. We hope the CACs will become these people. I think it's going to happen."

SSTAR established what it called a "change team" and charged it with reducing the dual diagnosis unit's (DDU) "AMA rate"—the percentage of clients who leave treatment "against medical advice." A DDU is a detoxification unit for people who have significant psychiatric disorders and substance abuse problems. The change team identified the skills and competencies associated with effective group facilitation and the knowledge content areas for DDU counselors. The team members also surveyed

clients about the effectiveness of group therapy leaders and asked group leaders what skills might help them do their jobs better. In addition, the team identified frontline workers from the DDU and other inpatient units and asked them about their career goals, assessed their educational needs based on those goals, and suggested appropriate educational programs.

The potential benefits of professional development in the DDU seemed clear because staff were the least credentialed and experienced at SSTAR. Also, the DDU's addictions counselors needed to become certified in order to perform more skilled work and earn higher wages. SSTAR focused on helping interested DDU staff earn certification for group facilitation, addictions counseling, or both.

"What we've learned about addiction treatment applies in the workplace," says Emsellem. "Reducing access barriers, enhancing motivation, and a client-centered approach are what works. It is interesting to me how closely this parallels the change model we use for treatment."

Work-Based Learning at SSTAR

To enhance employees' skills, SSTAR revamped its training model. The new model incorporated competency-based curricula and mentor training, with academic credit awarded for prior learning. The model employed a "blended learning approach": classes taught online, at the worksite, and at local colleges.

SSTAR engaged two education providers to offer training, certification, and educational pathways for the work-based learning participants: Bristol Community College and the Trundy Institute of Addiction Counseling.

The Trundy Institute developed and delivered a 270-hour, six-month program to prepare workers for the CAC exam. Workers completed a curriculum on techniques in substance abuse counseling, assessment and treatment planning, psychopharmacology, and ethics. The program incorporated:

- Classroom education at the worksite that allowed for reflection and peer learning;
- Journal writing and case study development;
- Learning teams to support individuals; and

- Ongoing interaction with supervisors that included competency assessment.

Meanwhile, BCC developed a four-credit course on facilitating group therapy sessions. This course, offered at SSTAR and online by BCC faculty and clinical supervisors, focused on improving the job performance of frontline workers running these sessions. In developing the course, BCC and SSTAR representatives surveyed clients and entry-level workers to gather feedback on their current knowledge and skills as well as the qualities that make for effective group facilitation. As a result, BCC course included specific training in group dynamics and group process, along with the theoretical framework.

Additionally, BCC developed modules to address specific needs for inpatient psycho-education groups dealing with depression, relapse prevention, and other issues. The class was co-taught onsite and online by BCC faculty and worksite supervisors. Eight SSTAR staff became adjunct college faculty. Supervisors also provided mentorship and coaching to frontline workers participating in the program. This provided an explicit return on SSTAR's investment because it strengthened the agency's ability to prepare certified clinicians to work at SSTAR.

SSTAR supervisors supported workers through the training. Supervisors attended each of the group-skills classes and helped frontline workers apply what they learned in class to their jobs.

In addition, the courses were designed with working adults in mind. They covered real-time challenges faced by the employees, and writing assignments helped them link what they learned in the classroom to their job duties. The online component enabled participants to do coursework and access online discussions at their own convenience. For many frontline workers who are single parents and/or juggling two or more jobs, the ability to learn at one's own convenience can make the difference between persisting in a program and quitting.

Although most *Jobs to Careers* funding came from the national funders of the initiative, the local Workforce Investment Board (WIB) funded one cohort of the initial coursework through the Trundy Institute. *Jobs to Careers* supported logistics, recertification, supervision, program development, and the group-skills course. The initiative also made it possible for SSTAR to have one employee serve as a participant coach. He focused on helping students overcome barriers to applying for exams.

Benefits for Frontline Workers

Of considerable note in SSTAR's *Jobs to Careers* program was the confidence that staff gained in their ability to perform their jobs better and manage their educational advancement. SSTAR case manager and counselor Kathleen Dunne noted that the classes improved her understanding of client diagnoses: "We used examples that we would talk about on a weekly basis, brought

that back to work, and had clients that we put together with different diagnoses that we were learning about in the BCC class. If we didn't know what to do, we'd bring it to class."

Crystal Cote, supervisor of the intensive outpatient program, realized her dream of becoming a licensed counselor and inspired others to pursue theirs as well: "I never

thought I'd get licensed. I thought I could never pass that test. But I did it. And I encouraged everybody.”

At the start of *Jobs to Careers*, many participants feared reentering a classroom environment. “They'd be so afraid to speak up, to say it,” says BCC instructor Lisa Degaetano. “They would think people might laugh at them or think it's not the right thing to say.” But having courses taught at the worksite facilitated employees' reengagement in education and allowed them to learn in a setting more in tune with their work and lives.”

“Most of us have children and families and work,” said SSTAR participant Laura Hubbard. “I could come to work, come across the parking lot, and go to class here. That made it attainable.

The work-based learning component helped staff realize their untapped potential and changed the way they saw themselves. Participants began to think in terms of careers rather than jobs, which meant they moved toward earning additional credentials. “I was impressed with myself that I was doing all of this,” said participant Laura Washington. “I don't want to stop, you know? I'm in a Bachelor's program right now and I don't think that I would have done it if I didn't have that wonderful opportunity to go to school here, right at work.”

Moreover, 75 percent of the first cohort that passed the CAC exam went on to prepare for and pass the more rigorous national certification in alcohol and drug addiction counseling (CADAC) as well.

Work-based learning improved employees' course attendance, incidentally paralleling an adage in the addictions field: outcomes improve if you can get people to just show up. Sixteen employees passed the CAC exam to become state-certified addiction counselors. Twenty employees passed a more rigorous national test to become CADACs. In addition, 16 workers completed the group facilitation training. Employees received pay raises of \$1 per hour for acquiring CAC certification. Counselors who chose to work extra hours—a significant need, given SSTAR's shortage of certified counselors—earned a much higher hourly wage for overtime. SSTAR promoted five frontline workers to full-time counselor positions, where their earnings increased beyond the 3 percent norm for annual raises at the agency.

SSTAR staff who completed the CAC program also received 15 credits from Bristol Community College, and they could apply those toward the 60 hours required for an Associate's degree in human services. Students got credit for specific courses, not prior learning. This facilitates transfer to a four-year institution should employees choose to enroll in Bachelor's degree programs.

Benefits for SSTAR

By providing opportunities for talented, committed staff to attain credentials, earn more, and move up in their careers—to think of their work as a career—SSTAR's

culture changed for the better, according to its leaders.

This training helped SSTAR retain its incumbent employees who valued their

opportunities for upward mobility and increased wages. It also attracted new entrants into the field who noted SSTAR's culture of continuing education and advancement. Other prospective employees heard of SSTAR's supportive culture and inquired about employment. "We are a place that people want to come to work and grow their careers," said COO Patricia Emsellem. With SSTAR's reputation spreading by word of mouth, SSTAR has been able to significantly cut its spending on traditional ways to advertise job openings.

This new culture was supported and encouraged by its ultimate champion, CEO Nancy Paull. She felt that SSTAR was now better positioned to be flexible in adapting to the needs of clients and the conditions under which they were served. Moreover, staff understood more clearly their role in the organization's continued success.

SSTAR leadership recognized this enthusiasm as one of its most positive *Jobs to Careers* outcomes. According to Emsellem, supervisors believed that staff members "advocated more effectively for client treatment. Now that they have confidence, these people are more effective members of the treatment team. The clients benefit from this."

Training that these workers acquired through *Jobs to Careers* improved their ability to diagnose addictions and convince clients of their need for treatment. Newly trained staff were eligible to treat clients in the outpatient unit, which enabled SSTAR to serve more of them and generate additional revenue. Waiting lists for outpatient substance abuse treatment have essentially disappeared, enabling people to get rapid treatment, according to Emsellem. Average monthly admissions to outpatient services increased more than 40 percent from 2005 to 2010. SSTAR was able to launch an intensive outpatient program. This program has been a significant source of new revenue, rising more than 450 percent, from \$30,142 in FY2006 to \$136,540 in FY09. The figure dipped slightly in FY10 to \$120,750.

In addition, SSTAR trained frontline staff to lead a new family intervention program, Addiction Recovery in Supportive Environment. ARISE is based on Transitional Family Therapy's commitment to family competence and about loving and supporting the addicted individual without blame or shame. It is considered a National Institute on Drug Abuse "best practices" model. Twenty-four frontline employees at STARR completed a three-day training to become certified ARISE interventionists, which enabled them to facilitate non-threatening family interventions for individuals resisting treatment. The local WIB funded training for frontline workers to become interventionists for the ARISE program.

Over the last few years, as funding for ARISE has changed, frontline workers have been able to earn extra income for conducting interventions, while at other times they have had to donate their time so that families could engage in interventions free of charge. In either case, frontline workers obtained highly marketable skills and experience, which would enable them to establish their own side businesses as interventionists for hire.

For SSTAR, the ARISE program has provided another source of new patients. In the one year after instituting ARISE, SSTAR provided almost 100 family interventions. In almost 80 percent of the cases, the patient accessed immediate treatment, typically short-term detox. Even more striking, 55 percent of patients continued on to more intensive treatment, including inpatient and intensive outpatient care. The treatment rate is much higher than when individuals facing substance abuse come to SSTAR on their own, Emsellem said.

SSTAR also developed a new revenue stream as a direct result of its participation in the *Jobs to Careers* initiative. In 2009, SSTAR collaborated with a large provider of residential mental health on a winning bid for \$500,000 to serve three Massachusetts regions. Through the

project, SSTAR is training the partner's frontline employees—16 are expected to take the certified addictions counseling exam in December 2010. As a result of the partnership, SSTAR has generated a surplus of more than \$40,000 in its training budget. More important, the partnership has strengthened SSTAR's reputation as a regional expert in delivering addictions treatment services and training frontline

workers. The prestige may very well lead to additional projects, Emsellem said.

In fact in fall 2010, SSTAR received a \$5.6 million Community Resilience grant through the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to continue offering ARISE training while enhancing the agency's screenings, interventions, and referrals to treatment.

“ I see the potential for advancement is greater than I imagined,” says COO Patricia Emsellem. “I used to think some of these people were unmotivated. But if we provide the right type of training in the right way, they have even more potential. I'm excited about the agency's future, growth, and quality of service.”

Importance of Leadership

SSTAR's decision to participate in *Jobs to Careers* was part of the agency's approach to innovation and entrepreneurship.

The commitment of CEO Nancy Paull and COO Patricia Emsellem to provide a training solution that would work for SSTAR's specialized environment moved the organization forward when faced with several challenges.

SSTAR gained access to new revenue sources by reaching out to its local Workforce Investment Board, strengthening collaborations with Bristol Community College and the Trundy Institute as training

providers, and participating in ARISE and *Jobs to Careers*, among other steps. Evidence-based practices for improving its internal procedures and work-based learning helped SSTAR increase its ability to serve clients, its employees, and the community. “I see the potential for advancement is greater than I imagined,” says Emsellem. “I used to think some of these people were unmotivated. But if we provide the right type of training in the right way, they have even more potential. I'm excited about the agency's future, growth, and quality of service.”

Working Toward Sustainability

Jobs to Careers refined a general concept of work-based learning and applied it to directly benefit both employers and employees in a long-term, carefully designed approach to professional development for frontline workers. SSTAR demonstrated that training workers pays off. The next steps for *Jobs to Careers* involve convincing and

supporting other employers to adopt and institutionalize work-based learning so that more employees, colleges, and health care clients can reap similar benefits.

Lessons learned from *Jobs to Careers* can also be shared with the field of addictions treatment as it seeks evidence-based practices and other research-informed strategies.

Federal and state governments have invested money to train health care staff in these practices, but their broad adoption has been disappointingly slow.

SSTAR leadership was committed to continue integrating work-based learning into its organizational culture, and intended to continue internal evaluations after the conclusion of their participation in *Jobs to Careers*. This includes examining the completion rates of different cohorts in the program and identifying differences in approach and implementation that may have contributed to the variations in completion. SSTAR continued its progress in work-based learning after its *Jobs to Careers* grant expired

in September 2009. In addition to seeking additional local and federal grants, Nancy Paull reallocated the staff training funds that SSTAR had from its operating budget to emphasize work-based learning.

Other employers in the health sector—one of the fastest-growing industries in the United States—must implement practices similar to work-based learning in order to improve the cost-benefit ratio of their own staff training. They would do well to consider innovative training techniques that capitalize on their human resources to keep their businesses—and our nation—competitive.



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