

From helpless to heartening

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THERE'S AN emerging cure for dead-end jobs and unemployment. Instead of letting people languish in homelessness or despair, the National Fund for Workforce Solutions is making it clear that low-income and low-skilled workers can succeed with help from a committed team - employers, government, foundations, unions, colleges, and nonprofit organizations. The fund, a new, \$50 million initiative, is announcing 10 new grants in 10 cities and states at the National Press Club in Washington today. And it is holding up programs in and around Boston as innovative models.

When Toddy Anderson was homeless, she got help from a local team that included Partners HealthCare and the local nonprofit Project Hope. After participating in a Partners healthcare training program, Anderson got a job as a secretary at Massachusetts General Hospital. With a scholarship provided by One Family Inc., a local nonprofit that seeks to end family homelessness, she is now also a student at Bunker Hill Community College, aiming eventually to become a registered nurse. "I had to reinvent myself," the Dorchester resident said.

Behind her progress is SkillWorks, a five-year-old public-private partnership. Funded in part by the Boston Foundation and the City of Boston, SkillWorks has provided training for some 2,700 people who work in or would like to work in healthcare, janitorial services, and the automotive and hotel industries. Success rates vary depending on the program. But one-year job retention rates for people in pre-employment programs run from 63 to 88 percent. And retention rates for workers who received job-advancement training run from 67 to 97 percent. SkillWorks is one of the 10 grant recipients that will be announced today; it will get \$450,000 in seed money to plan its next phase.

"I think this is a highly replicable approach," says Matt Fishman, vice president of community health at Partners.

After receiving three years of SkillWorks funding and seeing how the program worked, Partners is taking the next step, funding its training program on its own, investing \$1 million a year.

Growing and replicating these programs are goals of the national fund, which is working with Jobs for the Future, a local nonprofit group that promotes workforce innovations. More programs would help more people gain modern job skills so that they can become respiratory therapists or auto mechanics - jobs that are unlikely to be outsourced. The approach has the support of the US Department of Labor, which is contributing \$500,000 to evaluate the program.

Tales of job success often emphasize individual achievement. But society needs to evolve as well: It needs more and better pipelines to help low-skilled and low-income workers become pillars of national prosperity. ■