

Assessing the Resident Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency Program of the Housing Authority of the City of Austin

Year Three Process Analysis Report

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	i
Acknowledgments	ii
Executive Summary	iii
Introduction.....	1
Research Parameters.....	1
Key Questions	1
Timeframes.....	2
Organization of the Report	2
ROSS Program Design and Delivery	3
Overview.....	3
ROSS Operations.....	5
Client Flow	5
ROSS Specialists	8
ROSS Participation Incentives.....	10
Outcomes	11
Observations and Recommendations	12
Observations.....	12
ROSS Program Design	12
Target Population	13
Outcomes	15
Partnerships.....	15
ROSS Specialists	16
Information Management	18
ROSS Participant Incentives.....	18
ROSS Program Forms.....	18
Potential Adjustments	20
Final Comments.....	23
References.....	24
Appendix A: ROSS Program Goals.....	25
Appendix B: Performance Expectations	27

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. HACA Resident ROSS Enrollments & Elderly by Property: August 2013	9
Table 2. HACA Resident ROSS & FSS Enrollments by Property: August 2013.....	14
Table 3. Selective Wage Structure within HACA.....	17

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Ray Marshall Center at the LBJ School of Public Affairs conducted an assessment of the Resident Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency (ROSS) Program for the Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA). The purpose of the ROSS Program is to advance economic and housing self-sufficiency for residents who are willing and able to benefit from participation in activities and services that enhance their workforce viability, promote income growth, and reduce dependence on public assistance. HACA operates the ROSS Program at its family public housing sites distributed throughout the city.

HACA has been operating the ROSS Program with a 2009 ROSS Service Coordinators Program grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and leveraged funding from HACA and its service delivery partners. As the ROSS Service Coordinators grant approached the end of a three-year funding cycle, HACA contracted with the Ray Marshall Center to assess the program's current operational policies and practices. The research approach combined extensive document review and guided in-depth interviews with HACA and key partner staff. The Ray Marshall Center combined observations from these efforts with its knowledge and experience in the area of workforce development and program operations to prepare this report. The research time frame spanned January through August, 2013.

With guidance from HACA, the Center examined several areas of interest, including client flow, services, partnerships, and outcomes, as well as forms and procedures for client intake, initial assessment, case management, and program performance measurement. Additionally, the Ray Marshall Center assessed the occupational credentials, responsibilities, and wages of the Service Coordinators based on HACA concerns about high turnover. Lastly, HACA asked the Center to offer observations and recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the ROSS Program. This report presents the results of that investigation.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Client Flow

Client Flow in the ROSS Program exhibits elements of well-structured and effective practices, as well as practices that maybe improved upon.

Outreach is continuously conducted at housing admissions, through posters and flyers, at community events, through partners, and in person by ROSS Specialists and other Housing and Community Development personnel. Residents have multiple opportunities to learn about the services and potential benefits from participation.

Intake is conducted on-site at the housing community ROSS office by appointment or walk-in basis. The itinerant ROSS specialists afford easy access to residents who choose to enroll in services.

Assessment and Service Planning are presently limited to self-identified needs or aspirations of the client identified during intake. Residents select service or enrichment areas (conforming to the resources available in the ROSS Program) found on the backside of the intake form. Aligned with one or more of the “Goal Charts”, this serves as a very basic service plan. There is no formal assessment using a recognized instrument and metrics, as are common in standardized occupational and aptitude assessments.

Referral is based on the self-selected activities of the resident. There is little to no sequencing of activities. Clients choose which activity, where, and when they will begin to participate. Reportedly, these are often based on convenience of time and location, as well as considerations such as the availability of childcare and transportation.

Case Management in the ROSS Program is “light touch” and focused primarily upon service coordination that helps residents start down a path to self-sufficiency. By design, ROSS client contact occurs quarterly at minimum, although staff report much more frequent contact with a small share of participants. Motivated residents who are advancing along that path are encouraged to enroll in HACA’s Family Self-Sufficiency Program (FSS).

Program Exit is in practice flexible, largely because of the open and voluntary nature of the program, and barriers to participation faced by residents.

Performance Management

Performance Management, until very recently, had been tracked using the Workforce Development & ROSS Goal Tracker. This database contained information on participant referrals/enrollments and completions. ROSS Specialists had direct control over client identifiers and referral data, but they did not have access to accurate real-time data for program management regarding attendance, progress, and completion data. In June, 2013 HACA began rolling out Tracking at a Glance (TAAG), a new client and performance management database, which promises to be a much more effective program and performance management tool. Additionally, TAAG reportedly contains formal assessment capacities, not formerly available to ROSS Specialists.

ROSS Specialists

The ROSS Specialist provides referral services; plans, implements, and monitors activities; documents program processes; and records program results. Within these task categories, there are practically an unlimited number of various subtasks that can be variably characterized as regular/ongoing, seasonal, scheduled, and ad hoc as circumstances arise. (The ROSS Specialist job description identifies at least thirty performance expectations.) The extensive list of duties dilutes the potential for more intensive client contacts with residents who are more willing and able to benefit from available resources that support self-sufficiency.

HACA might consider streamlining the ROSS Specialist’s workload, and reviewing compensation. Improvements in these areas may support tenure for entry-level workers, program service continuity, and better outcomes through stronger client-worker relationships. Factors in this review may include:

- Taking into consideration that a comparable wage range for similar positions as those held by ROSS Specialists begins near the current \$28,847 and moves toward a wage of around \$36,000 or higher based on education, experience and responsibilities.
- Developing a career path for new hires, as well as seasoned employees, to improve retention and strengthen operational capacity.
- Providing tuition reimbursement to employees so that they can obtain additional education and certification in their field.
- Structuring more time for ROSS Specialists to develop and maintain partnerships with outside agencies and direct interface with their service delivery staff.
- Removing the requirement for two visits annually to elders in the community.
- Directing ROSS Specialists to encourage and refer residents to providers with known success rates.
- Replacing the multiple Goal Charts with a common ROSS Program Service Plan.

ROSS Participation Incentives

ROSS participants earn incentives upon successful completion of the requisite number and type of activities contained in their chosen “Goal Chart”. As structured, these incentives do not appear to be effective drivers of participation. According to ROSS Tracker data for the period September 2011 through August 2012, only 32 of 327 participants during the year completed a module and qualified for any type of incentive.

HACA might revisit the structure of the incentives package to increase their effectiveness and alignment with more intensive case management practices. Incentives could be awarded for:

- **Completion of a set number of relevant hours of participation and completion of three or more standard, yet short term activities similar to the combinations available under most current modules.** Tentatively, HACA may set a standard of 60 hours minimum attendance and completion for qualification.
- **Incremental advances in academic achievement, prospectively two-year increments from a baseline in adult basic literacy through GED.** Instead of withholding a \$500 incentive until GED attainment, incremental incentives of \$50 might encourage persistence and gains.

- **Employment entry and retention at 30-, 60-, and 90-day milestones.** Incentives for retention foster good work habits, additional work experience, and continuous earnings.

ROSS Program Design

A fundamental challenge of the ROSS Program is to meaningfully engage more eligible residents in the program’s offerings that increase their capacity for self-sufficiency. The share of eligible residents at HACA sites participating in ROSS activities varies widely, ranging from a high of 30 percent in Georgian Manor to a low of 3 percent in Goodrich Place. Overall, only 16 percent of eligible residents are participating.

The ROSS Program design can serve large numbers of residents with limited services, as well as smaller numbers of residents more intensively. More intensive case management, formal occupational and aptitude assessments, and concentration on outcomes (over process) could strengthen outcomes for those committed to employment and attaining self-sufficiency. To move in this direction, the ROSS Program could:

- **Reinforce its function as a “ramp up” mechanism to the Family Self-Sufficiency Program and track progression from ROSS to FSS.** Residents could address education and training deficits under ROSS, and upon employment entry, migrate to FSS to fully benefit from the program’s escrow account.
- **“Triage” ROSS participants into service levels, based on resident interests, needs, motivation, and other factors.** Currently, ROSS Specialists have large caseloads within which small shares are truly “active.” Residents who are interested in enrichment and incidental participation in partner programs and service could be assigned to a “developmental” status under which they continue to receive basic service coordination services. An “advanced” group composed of those who appear to be committed to goals of economic and housing self-sufficiency, would receive more intensive case management and services oriented toward these goals.

Partnerships

One of the major strengths of the ROSS Program is its continuum of services appropriate to many client needs and status with partners across the City of Austin. Nevertheless, there is opportunity to increase referrals to leading edge providers, improve interagency communication, and strengthen completions, as well as outcomes. Stronger emphasis on employment entry and steadily increased earnings, prospectively along a career pathway, could better position participants to advance toward self-sufficiency. HACA might consider strengthening relations with providers who are actively:

- Introducing the concept of college readiness into their ABE programs.
- Promoting concept of career pathways in growth sectors and industries for entry-level workers
- Encouraging accelerated preparation that combines contextualized occupational and academic instruction in the same classroom.

The ROSS Program may benefit from taking advantage of new education and training options, as well as emerging service trends. To do so, the ROSS Program might:

- Link with the Good Careers Academy at Goodwill as an emerging asset with on site training opportunities that may be available to ROSS participants. ROSS Coordinators might review referral patterns from ROSS Specialists to assure that all are taking full advantage of the contracted and ancillary services available through Goodwill Industries of Central Texas.
- Improve connections with WorkSource Solutions offices so that clients can experience the mainstream employment and training system.
- Encourage ABE partners to adopt contextualized, adult education curricula that may accelerate achievement alongside occupational readiness.
- Explore possibilities of directing residents to the Math Emporium at the former Highland Mall as a beneficial service option.

ROSS Program Forms

The ROSS forms adequately serve their basic program purposes, but HACA might consider the following modifications.

The *ROSS Entry form*, the one-page document completed at intake, might additionally capture:

- Barriers to participation and employment
- Special needs of children
- Child status in terms of enrollment in Head Start/Early Head Start or other early childhood interventions

Residents might also be screened for more intensive case management by indicating whether they are interested in a program option that prepares them for employment entry and a career path that will help them to become economically self-sufficient and independent of public housing assistance (or wording to this effect).

The *ROSS Goal Charts*, retained as currently used, could benefit from an “Expected Completion Date” to inject basic accountability into the plan. Additionally:

- Adult Basics and GED Goal Charts might also include academic progress metrics, possibly in two-year grade-level increments to monitor and verify progress.
- The Postsecondary Goal Chart might specifically include the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form completion, and a field could be entered for College Readiness Activities.
- The Employment Goal Chart might benefit from placement wage and wage increase information, as well as the availability of benefits.

- The Financial Management Goal Chart could include an Individual Development Account indicator or other asset-building indicator for programs like the Attorney General Child Support Divisions' "Child Support Savings for College" (CS4C).
- The Parent Leadership Chart might include an activity related to child support enforcement information workshops conducted by the Texas Office of the Attorney General.
- The YES Leadership and YES to College Forms might contain College Readiness and FAFSA as well.

FINAL COMMENTS

Through its ROSS Specialists, the ROSS Program gives public housing residents ready access to an expansive array of activities and services that not only empower and enrich the lives of residents, but also serve as significant early steps towards self-sufficiency. The barriers and challenges faced by some public housing residents may preclude successful attainment of economic independence. The current program operations and service coordination appropriately serve their enrichment and limited participatory needs and aspirations. For those with stronger commitment to economic self-sufficiency and housing independent of public assistance, ROSS should continue to refer clients to its Family Self-Sufficiency program, but could also inject a stronger sense of accountability for accomplishments, and strengthen ROSS Program outcomes. From entry forward, the latter group is expected to migrate to FSS and eventually meet their goals. Reordering and streamlining the work expectations of ROSS Specialists permits deeper client engagement in support of this process.

INTRODUCTION

The Ray Marshall Center at the LBJ School of Public Affairs conducted an assessment of the Resident Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency (ROSS) Program for the Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA). HACA operates the ROSS Program at its family public housing sites distributed throughout the city. The purpose of the ROSS Program is to advance economic and housing self-sufficiency for residents that are willing and able to benefit from participation in activities and services that enhance their workforce viability, promote income growth, and reduce dependence on public assistance. ROSS Specialists are responsible for on-site, direct delivery of ROSS Program services.

The ROSS Program has been operating largely under a 2009 ROSS Service Coordinators Program grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the period September 1, 2010 through August 31, 2013. As ROSS approached the end of a three-year funding cycle, HACA contracted with the Ray Marshall Center to assess the program's current operational policies and practices. With guidance from HACA, the Center examined several areas of interest, including client flow, services, partnerships, and outcomes, as well as forms and procedures for client intake, initial assessment, case management, and program performance measurement. Additionally, the Ray Marshall Center assessed the occupational credentials, responsibilities, and wages of the Service Coordinators based on HACA concerns about high turnover. Lastly, HACA asked the Center to offer observations and recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the ROSS Program. This document presents the results of that investigation.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The research addressed key research questions and used basic process analysis methodology.

Key Questions

The evaluation addressed key questions regarding:

Design: Do the program design and operations align well with the grant objectives?

Target Population: What opportunities and challenges are present to serve the target population? How might they be advanced or minimized?

Outcomes: To what extent and how do current program activities and services support expected outcomes?

Partnerships: Is the services delivery partnership array sufficient to meeting program expectations? Are there identifiable opportunities or constraints to more effective collaboration?

Ross Specialists: Are the job descriptions and tasks aligned with functional requirements of service delivery staff? How is effort allocated?

Information Management: Are current information management procedures and forms capturing reliable data to support effective client case management, program management, and performance management?

Incentives: To what extent do incentives motivate residents to succeed and/or complete their contracted objectives? How might they be modified or adjusted to help residents succeed?

The process analysis included several components, namely:

- Obtaining and reviewing available program planning, policy, and technical guidance documentation as available to comprehend program design
- Reviewing program and performance management data to observe program operations and outcomes
- Conducting site visits and guided conversations with ROSS and related staff of primary collaborators to establish actual and potential program practices
- Probing service delivery practices and patterns, including client intake, referral and retention to deepen operational insights
- Reviewing ROSS Program forms (e.g., entry form, needs assessment tools, goal charts, exit forms)
- Reviewing the ROSS Service Coordinator position in terms of job description and compensation to improve retention, program continuity, and efficiency
- Preparing the Final Report

Timeframes

Document collection and review began in January 2013. Fieldwork and analysis occurred June through August 2013.

Organization of the Report

The following section presents the basic design and delivery features of the ROSS Program. The final section contains analytic observations based on the research and potential program adjustments for HACA consideration that may improve ROSS Program efficiency and effectiveness in the future.

ROSS PROGRAM DESIGN AND DELIVERY

OVERVIEW

The ROSS Program at HACA sites facilitates resident access to and enrollment in a wide array of workforce and human services. Participation, which is voluntary, may be limited to a single event (e.g., a financial literacy workshop), ongoing education or training (e.g., GED classes) or a series of activities and services clustered within a specific goal or service module (e.g., Parent Leadership). The anticipated outcome of participation ranges from more immediate personal enrichment and incremental capacity building to enhanced livelihood prospects regarding work and income through job readiness, education, and training services. Through the former residents may improve their quality of life, despite personal barriers or circumstances that may limit their ability to attain economic independence. Resident empowerment activities might include involvement in Resident Councils, special events/fairs, health and wellness workshops, and other actions. Those willing and able to pursue education and workforce development activities have the potential to acquire knowledge and skills that put them on a path to economic and housing self-sufficiency.

The ROSS Specialists are the lynchpins to this process. The ROSS Specialists provide “light touch” or basic case management services to *all* residents who seek to meet their immediate needs and aspirations through referrals to activities and services of their choice. The program design situates the ROSS Specialist at the “hub” tied to the “spokes” of program areas developed by HACA. These program areas, collectively known as Priority One Programs include:

Youth Services

- A/B Honor Roll and Perfect School Attendance
- AISD Outreach Efforts
- Partnerships
- Scholarships
- Outreach

Self-Sufficiency, Economic Development, and Adult Education Initiatives

- Family Self-Sufficiency Program
- ROSS Program
- Partnerships
- Supportive Services – Childcare and Transportation
- Asset Building – Homeownership and Financial Literacy
- GED Classes

- Outreach

Health, Wellness, and Safety

- Health and Safety Fairs
- AROW (Apartment Residents on Watch)
- Referrals to Events and Services

Outreach Senior Social Services

- Elderly/Disabled Home Visits
- Referrals to Events and Services
- Monthly Social Events

HUD awarded the ROSS Service Coordinators grant to the HACA Citywide Advisory Board (CAWB), which contracted with HACA as the service provider. The three-year grant for slightly under \$700,000 began on September 1, 2010. The ROSS grant solely and explicitly funds Service Coordinator salaries, training, and administrative costs. The grant does not fund workforce, supportive, or any other services.¹ The grant also enables ROSS Specialists to maintain, strengthen, and develop strategic partnerships with a continuum of public and private local workforce and human services providers. The ROSS grant has a minimum 25 percent local match requirement.² Leveraged funding for direct services from community partners and non-federal contributions by HACA are used for the match.

Service Coordinators/ROSS Specialists connect public housing residents with workforce development and supportive services available with community-based providers. Program offerings cover a wide range of activities and services including adult basic education/GED preparation, life skills classes, job readiness and job search assistance, job training, financial literacy classes, parenting classes, and health and wellness classes. Residents can obtain income tax/EITC assistance, childcare, and transportation support services, among others. Among the youth service options, the Youth Educational Success (YES) Program offers educational enrichment activities, mentoring, and tutoring, as well as college transition assistance. ROSS Specialists are required to conduct scholarship outreach to resident youth to encourage and support postsecondary enrollment.³ Additionally, ROSS Specialists participate in annual events such as Blue Santa, Turkey Run, National Night Out, MLK Day celebrations, and others.

¹ As stated in the grant proposal aligned with NOFA parameters, "Funding will be utilized for the approved salaries, training and program administration expenses, but will not directly pay for support services to residents." (Documentation provided by HACA.)

² HACA committed \$180,000 in match for the grant period.

³ According to a spreadsheet provided by HACA, the Resident Scholarship 2012-2013 awarded \$35,000 in funds to 31 HACA graduating high school seniors, youth already enrolled in college, and adult residents of HACA seeking to further their education.

Principal collaborators for adult services include Goodwill Industries of Central Texas, Austin Community College's Adult Education Division, the Ascend Center for Learning, and the Skillpoint Alliance, among others. HACA has a performance-based contract with Goodwill Industries of Central Texas to provide case management, job readiness, and placement services to ROSS participants. Two itinerant Goodwill Placement Specialists serve ROSS participants at HACA sites, providing case management from intake through job placement and retention. All other partnerships with service providers are on a no-fee basis.

Staffing configurations under the grant have fluctuated over time, largely due to fairly constant turnover among ROSS Specialists. Shares of staff working part-time on the ROSS Program, as well as full-time Service Coordinators can be funded. Currently, the grant funds are distributed across four ROSS Specialist positions and part of supervisory (ROSS Coordinator) costs. The "active" caseload—defined as residents meeting at least once quarterly with the ROSS Specialists—is approximately 220-240 at any point in time. ROSS Specialists have a target caseload of 40 adults and 10 youth, but actual caseload size is more in the 60-80 person range. There has reportedly been little change in the caseload composition; some have been "active" since program start-up, but may not have been continuously enrolled in any service or activity. The open entry/exit and responsive nature of the program to resident choice foster long-term association with the program by residents. Additionally, ROSS activities satisfy HACA's community service requirement (8 hours per month) for public housing residents.

ROSS OPERATIONS

ROSS Program operations and the client flow related to recruiting, enrolling, referring and monitoring HACA residents who seek services are straightforward.

Client Flow

Outreach is conducted at housing admissions, through posters and flyers, at community events, through partners, and face to face by ROSS Specialists and other Housing and Community Development personnel. Housing management commonly make direct referrals to ROSS for residents with deficits in their community service requirement. In practice, outreach to the resident population is constant.

Intake is conducted on-site at the housing community ROSS office by appointment or walk-in basis. The ROSS Specialists and the resident complete a one-page entry form for youth or adult residents that obtains basic client contact information, employment status, education achievement, current enrollment information, and household composition. Additionally, the form contains a confidentiality agreement, an agreement to meet with the ROSS Specialist at least four times during the following 12 months, recognition of the voluntary nature of the commitment, and the resident adult's or youth guardian's signature indicating commitment to participation in the HACA ROSS Program.

Assessment in ROSS is limited to self-identified needs or aspirations of the client. The reverse side of the intake form contains a list of potential client needs that conforms to the resources available in the ROSS Program. Residents select those service or enrichment areas in which they desire to participate. The ROSS Specialist guides the resident to commit to one of the nine modules or goal regimes that the resident might complete that is related to their interests. The ROSS Program goals, each of which has a Goal Chart that functions similarly to a “soft “service plan and is linked to participation and completion incentives, are:

- Goal 1 Adult Basics
- Goal 2 GED Attainment
- Goal 3 Post-Secondary Education
- Goal 4 Employment
- Goal 5 Financial Management
- Goal 6 Parent Leadership
- Goal 7 Homeownership
- Goal 8-YES Leadership
- Goal 9 - YES to College

Each Goal Chart contains numerous activities, several of which are common across modules. Participants who finish a specified number of activities in a specific module qualify for incentives. (Appendix A contains the list of activities in each Goal Chart and the number of activities completed to qualify for the associated incentive.)

Referral is based on the self-selected activities of the resident. There is little to no sequencing of activities. Clients choose which activity, where, and when they will begin to participate. Reportedly, these are often based on convenience of access (both time and location), as well as ancillary considerations such as the availability of childcare and transportation. The Goal Chart records the partner program referral and the referral date, as well as the completion date.

In practice, there is variability in the ROSS Specialist’s involvement at this point. Service Coordinators may contact the partner entity, informing them of the referral, or provide the client the information to follow-up on their own. Similarly, there is variation in the methods of detecting whether the resident actually enrolls and participates in the selected activity or service. Participation might be recorded through direct partner-provided confirmation or by documentation presented to the ROSS Specialist by the participant. With the former, the confirmation may come directly from the provider to the ROSS Specialist, or indirectly through a Program Coordinator or Outreach Specialist who has direct contact with the provider. In most cases, the provider is uncertain whether an individual is a HACA resident, let alone a Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program or ROSS

participant.⁴ HACA staff at times deduce status by reviewing residential addresses of participants on the provider's active roster.

Case Management in the ROSS Program is basic or "light touch", meaning that the ROSS Specialist is not required to be deeply involved in the progression of participants through services, but rather is tasked to "coordinate" services. The minimal contact expectation between client and case manager is once quarterly. Nevertheless, ROSS Specialists indicate that some clients regularly maintain contact and inform the coordinator of their progress or challenges. Reportedly, a few maintain contact even after they may have advanced to the FSS program. The ROSS Specialists are committed to providing continuing assistance, as able, to help these active participants achieve their goals.

ROSS Specialists keep records of various client contacts on file on a printed Contact Record form. Additional forms record Supportive Services and Employment. Case notes are prepared as needed and various supporting documents including copies of sign-in sheets, attendance records, etc., are kept on file as well.

Program Exit by design occurs in one of three manners:

1. Client completes a module, attains their goal, and opts not to begin another module. (Qualifies for incentive.)
2. Client completes an activity (within a module) and opts to withdraw at that time.
3. Client is non-compliant with plan, non-responsive to overtures for participation from the ROSS Specialists, or chooses to withdraw from the program.

The ROSS Program has a specific exit form dealing with each scenario. In any case, the resident is welcome to rejoin the voluntary program at a later date, if they so choose. The ROSS Program conceives that an individual should complete a module in 18 months, which serves as a reasonable metric of successful case management, given the challenges of many residents. In practice, the exit process for the program is more fluid and open. Some have reportedly been "active" since program start-up, but may not have been continuously enrolled in any service or activity.

ROSS Specialists may be hesitant to close cases because of the intermittent capacity of some residents to participate, given the barriers that they face with personal life and family circumstances. The caseworkers are committed to making every opportunity to participate available to the residents of their assigned communities. They want to see them take "initial steps" to capacity-building whenever they can. Clearing inactive cases has also been constrained by staff turnover. New hires are unsure of the true status of many individuals on the caseload that they inherit.

⁴ FSS is another HUD program operated by HACA that aims to assist employed residents attain income and housing self-sufficiency.

Performance Management had been maintained in the Workforce Development & ROSS Goal Tracker database. This system collected gross data, but had limitations. For example, referrals were melded with enrollments and actual client status could not be determined. The information system did track completions (based on client, provider, or ROSS administrative verification) as well as the number of activities pursued within each goal cluster and the number of the modules actually completed.

In June, 2013 HACA rolled out Tracking at a Glance (TAAG), a new client and performance management database. This system promises to be more useful for tracking referrals, enrollments, and completions for program and performance management.

ROSS Specialists

The ROSS Specialist job description states preferred qualifications and the range of responsibilities assigned to the position. The preferred applicant should have a bachelor's degree in an appropriate discipline and two years experience with public or private social services agencies or an equivalent combination of education and experience.

The ROSS Specialist provides case management and referral services and retains responsibility for planning, implementing and monitoring activities, as well as documenting and reporting program results. Within these task categories, there are a practically unlimited number of various subtasks that can be variably characterized as regular/ongoing, seasonal, scheduled, and ad hoc as circumstances arise.

The ROSS Specialist job description identifies at least thirty performance expectations.⁵ (See Appendix B) Many of these involve standard client service requirements of case management and service coordination. Other responsibilities expand responsibility beyond these roles. The ROSS Specialists also must:

- Provide assistance to residents in establishing and maintaining Resident Councils.
- Attend Resident Council meetings and Citywide Advisory Board meetings.
- Develop and maintain external resource partnerships.
- Conduct and report on resident need surveys.
- Develop and maintain new resident handbooks, flyers and brochures at all assigned properties to ensure they are timely and relevant.
- Conduct and document twice-annual home visits to all elderly residents.
- Assist the Public Housing Manager and Assistant Manager with special projects and initiatives when applicable.

⁵ HACA provided job descriptions of service delivery positions and wages in the Housing and Community Development division to the Ray Marshall Center from which these tasks and subsequent wage information have been extracted.

ROSS Specialists conduct these various tasks and responsibilities at multiple housing sites. Client services (intake, referrals, appointments, and records/data management) are high priority. It appears that staff allocate effort to these many other tasks as able and necessary.

Table 1. HACA Resident ROSS Enrollments & Elderly by Property: August 2013

Property	# of Elderly	# of Eligible ROSS	# of Active ROSS	% of Active ROSS
Community 1				
B.T.W.	9	203	25	12%
Rosewood	25	133	13	10%
<i>subtotals</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>336</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>11%</i>
Community 2				
Chalmers	37	130	25	19%
Santa Rita	6	114	23	20%
<i>subtotals</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>244</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>20%</i>
Community 3				
Coronado Hills	0	44	11	25%
Georgian Manor	17	86	26	30%
Northgate	10	80	10	13%
Thurmond Heights	24	142	17	12%
<i>subtotals</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>352</i>	<i>64</i>	<i>18%</i>
Community 4				
Bouldin	38	158	15	9%
Goodrich	6	37	1	3%
Manchaca II	3	32	6	19%
Manchaca Village	8	34	6	18%
Meadowbrook	2	159	42	26%
Shadow Bend	13	44	8	18%
<i>subtotals</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>464</i>	<i>78</i>	<i>17%</i>
Totals	198	1396	228	16%

Data provided by HACA, August 2013.

The fundamental challenge of the ROSS Program is to meaningfully engage eligible residents in the program's offerings that increase their capacity for self-sufficiency. As Table One indicates, the share of eligible residents at HACA sites actually participating in ROSS activities varies widely, ranging from a high of 30 percent in Georgian Manor to a low of 3 percent in Goodrich Place. Overall, only 16 percent of eligible residents are participating. Also, the number of elderly residents who are targeted for limited services varies considerably, placing unequal workloads on ROSS Specialists at the different sites. Numerically, Meadowbrook is by far the most engaged site.

ROSS Participation Incentives

ROSS participants earn incentives upon successful completion of requisite number and type of activities in each module as identified in the Goal Chart.⁶ Participation incentives in the program design included:

- Module 1(Adult Basics) – Day-planner or organizer (no more than \$50 value)
- Module 2 (GED Attainment) - \$500 check incentive
- Module 3(Post Secondary Education) – Messenger bag or traditional backpack (no more than \$50 value)
- Module 4 (Employment) – \$50 voucher for workplace attire or similar expense related to workplace readiness
- Module 5 (Financial Management) – \$50 HEB gift card
- Module 6 (Parent Leadership) – \$50 gift card to choice of HEB, Wal-Mart, or ROSS
- Module 7 (Homeownership) – \$100 gift card to choice of HEB, Wal-Mart, or ROSS
- Module 8 (YES Leadership) – College savings plan or summer camp scholarship

In practice, according to a Program Coordinator, the \$50 gift cards to Walmart or HEB are awarded across modules, except for the \$500 GED incentive. These incentives do not appear to be the main drivers of participation. According to ROSS Tracker data for the period September 2011 through August 2012, only 32 of 327 participants during the year completed a module and qualified for any type of incentive. None completed the Adult Basics sequence or Homeownership. Six obtained a GED. Three completed a Postsecondary Education program. Four each completed Financial Management and YES leadership training. One completed Parent leadership training. Fourteen entered employment.

⁶ ROSS Managers work with HACA's Community Partners to eliminate duplication of incentives.

Outcomes

Annual reports to HUD indicate that HACA is achieving all of its HUD performance expectations, with the exception of homeownership. Output and outcome performance standards are established in a program logic model required by HUD for the ROSS grant. Output targets for activities and service enrollments in the partner resources array correlate with recognized needs or problems faced by the resident population. Outcomes reflect incremental gains along a path to self-sufficiency across the services such as job readiness, training, employment entry, retention, adult education (ESL/GED/ABE), financial services and youth services, and other measures aligned with program services. That the homeownership opportunities (outcome) lags is not a surprising given the economy, its slow recovery, its disproportionate negative effects on low-income and minority populations, the tightening of credit and lending standards, and the high price of housing in the City of Austin.

Observing referrals and completion by activity in the ROSS Goal Tracker, it is clear that persistence and exits vary significantly by activity. For example, longer-term commitments like ABE/GED are not likely to be completed, compared to short-term commitments like a financial literacy workshop. Thirty-seven individuals were referred to Financial Literacy and 35 completed. Both Southwest Keys and Foundation Communities provide this in the service array. The workshop provided by Southwest Keys, delivered on-site, last only two hours. Foundation Communities “Money Management”, held off-site, requires attendance at three two-hour classes over a three-week period.

Completing a GED is significantly more challenging. Most residents who aspire to a GED are functioning at basic levels in one or more of the metrics (i.e., math, reading, or writing at the 8th grade equivalent or less), indicating the need for significant gains to prepare for GED testing.⁷ Sequencing of classes presents challenges, as students may have to change times, location, and instructors as they learn. Although many adult education classes are offered on site, these classes are grade- and subject matter-specific. For example, the current class at Thurmond Heights may teach intermediate low-level reading skills. Once a student completes that class, he or she may have to go to a different site to continue at the next level. It is common knowledge in the workforce development arena that the more stops in the service regime, the more likely a lower income participant is to lose interest or face barriers and become unable to attend and complete services. It is noteworthy that the ACC report for June 2013 indicates that 10 HACA residents received ABE/GED/ESL instruction at HACA sites, and 18 did so at non-HACA sites. The majority of participants at HACA sites are non-residents.

⁷ Insights and qualifying data provided by Ignacio Parra, TANF Coordinator, Adult Education Division at Austin Community College, the primary on-site provider of ABE/ESL/GED classes on HACA sites and elsewhere.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OBSERVATIONS

Based on an understanding of program design and operations from document and data review, site visits, conversations with HACA and primary provider staff, and experience with workforce development programs, this section presents analytic observations and induced suggestions for ROSS Program adjustments that may improve program services and outcomes.

ROSS Program Design

The ROSS Program design can serve large numbers of residents with limited services, as well as smaller numbers of residents more intensively. Current program operations are better aligned with the former than the latter. The program design aligns well with the grant objective of providing opportunities for all residents to enhance their “self-sufficiency” through participation in self-selected activities and services. According to ROSS Specialists, even limited participation produces incremental positive outcomes in terms of self-confidence, enrichment, and individual capacity-building. To the extent that ROSS functions as an initial “stepping stone”, many individuals benefit from the services array. Current program design and operations appear less likely to consistently provide the level of individual support necessary to move notable numbers of residents towards economic and housing self-sufficiency.

HACA’s focus under the grant is service coordination and strategic partnerships. According to HACA:

“The purpose of the Housing Authority of the City of Austin’s (HACA) ROSS Service Coordinators grant program is to retain staffing necessary to provide service coordination to residents, and to maintain and grow long-standing and new community partnerships that link individuals and families to self-sufficiency support services in a timely manner.” (HACA Grant Application)

HACA has developed strong community partnerships with providers and services of education, workforce development, and enrichment activities and services. ROSS is structured to have an available service option that meets many needs or interests of adults, elders, and youth and abets some degree of empowerment. The program challenge in terms of the broader ROSS purpose of self-sufficiency is to connect larger numbers of capable and motivated residents with services that directly support progress in that direction. However, given the needs and challenges of the resident population, the multiple tasks and responsibilities of the ROSS Specialists, and service delivery practices (e.g., “light touch” case management, lack of in-depth client assessment, and open entry/exit policy),

the program's capacity to move significant numbers of the residents down that path is reduced. Alternatively, more intensive case management, formal assessments, and concentration on outcomes (over process) have produced results in other programs. The ROSS Program could introduce or reinforce these features within the present design and implementation processes.⁸

To facilitate economic and housing self-sufficiency, ROSS could reinforce its function as a "ramp up" mechanism to the Family Self-Sufficiency program. Employment is central to FSS. Enrollment, persistence, and completion of activities are central to workforce preparation and ROSS could better support these by doing more intensive case management. A comprehensive service plan sequencing education, training, and job readiness resulting in workforce preparedness and employment entry would reinforce program transition. Additionally, the more education and training received under ROSS, the better the prospects for optimizing FSS benefits. FSS allows up to a 5-year commitment during which a share of rent increase due to earnings is placed in an escrow account for future housing, education, or career options. As one ROSS Coordinator pointed out, the more employment preparation that a resident receives under ROSS, the greater potential for extended earnings from work during FSS to grow the escrow.

The ROSS Program does not currently track migration to FSS. Table Two indicates that the number of ROSS and the number of FSS participants is about equal in several properties (Booker T. Washington, Rosewood, Thurmond Heights, and Northgate) and very much tilted to larger numbers of ROSS participants compared to the number of FSS participants in almost every other property. Perhaps the continuous presence over recent years of Goodwill's Workforce Development Services at Booker T. Washington (adjacent to Rosewood) and the colocation of the FSS Coordinator at that site has supported stronger employment entry rates. It would follow that more residents would qualify and potentially benefit from FSS. The relationship between the two program enrollment patterns merits further research.

Target Population

The ROSS Program challenge to consistently engage public housing residents, while mitigating barriers and increasing successful participation in services. Within the target group, ROSS serves a cross section of public housing residents that spans those that are elderly and not likely to be active in the workforce,⁹ those that face significant or manageable barriers to work, and those that are fully able, as well as future workforce entrants through youth services. The program has the ability to mitigate some barriers (child care, transportation), supply the opportunity to prepare for work and earnings, and encourage participation in the voluntary program. There are those participants who benefit

⁸ The recently introduced Tracking at a Glance software for program management reportedly provides capacity to conduct extensive formal assessments.

⁹ The elderly are unlikely to be enrolled in ROSS, but ROSS Specialists nonetheless may refer elderly to activities or services they deem helpful.

from enrichment and capacity building activities, and those who are more willing and able to work. Resident motivation is required for success in either case. The program might benefit by “triaging” participants according to their interests, needs, and personal aspirations and to maximize outcomes, whether they be enrichment activities or incremental advances towards economic and housing self-sufficiency.

Table 2. HACA Resident ROSS & FSS Enrollments by Property: August 2013

Property	# of units	# of Residents	# FSS Members	# of Active ROSS
Community 1				
B.T.W.	216	228	26	25
Rosewood	124	267	13	13
<i>subtotals</i>	<i>340</i>	<i>495</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>38</i>
Community 2				
Chalmers	158	181	9	25
Santa Rita	97	130	10	23
<i>subtotals</i>	<i>255</i>	<i>311</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>48</i>
Community 3				
Coronado Hills	48	84	4	11
Georgian	94	110	12	26
Northgate	50	97	9	10
Thurmond	144	175	19	17
<i>subtotals</i>	<i>336</i>	<i>466</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>64</i>
Community 4				
Bouldin	144	196	7	15
Goodrich	40	44	2	1
Manchaca II	33	40	3	6
Manchaca Village	33	45	1	6
Meadowbrook	160	198	10	42
Shadow Bend	50	60	4	8
<i>subtotals</i>	<i>460</i>	<i>583</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>78</i>
Totals	1391	1855	129	228

Outcomes

As mentioned earlier, HACA had already surpassed almost all of its performance expectations by December 2012. Home ownership related outputs and outcomes are the only measures not likely to be achieved. Stronger emphasis on employment entry and steadily increased earnings, prospectively along a career pathway, could better position participants to partake in these activities.

Partnerships

The services delivery partnership array is one of the major strengths of the ROSS Program. ROSS exhibits a continuum of services with partners across the City of Austin. There are activities and services appropriate to many client needs and status. Nevertheless there are ready examples of weak referrals and interagency communication. GED services are a prominent example. Very qualified providers such as ACC and Ascend have many open slots. Moreover, neither is consistently aware of who in their classes are HACA residents or ROSS participants. Stronger connectivity and more consistent referral to and communication with current partners are possible and necessary for program improvement purposes. The ROSS Program will also benefit from connections with new partners and service prospects in areas of promising development in the workforce arena.

Whereas GED is essential to entry-level employment, most occupations that will lift a person out of poverty and public housing require some advanced education and credentialing. According to ACC, the majority of HACA residents in the adult education classes are functioning at below ninth grade levels. Such individuals have a good academic distance to traverse prior to obtaining a GED, let alone the readiness for postsecondary education and training needed for some form of credentialing. The road map should be drawn in ROSS for those who seem capable to move from adult education into college readiness and postsecondary enrollment at some future point.

ROSS HACA has yet to introduce the concept of college readiness into its discourse. This would be a timely and beneficial addition as Texas moves toward a single statewide college readiness placement exam. Improving the academic preparedness of residents intent on enrolling in Texas higher education through referrals to education partners that combine ABE/GED with college readiness standards would be a valuable asset to the ROSS Program. Too often students at the community college level—the level most accessible to public housing residents—squander the PELL Grant on developmental education rather than core courses, adversely affecting their chances of completing an associate degree program. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, statewide last year, 41 percent of students enrolled in Texas public higher education required some form of developmental education. Those entering higher education prepared to do college-level

work graduate at twice the rate of students that are placed in developmental courses.¹⁰ A stronger focus on college readiness would serve adults and youth.

The current narrative in workforce development for entry-level and marginal workers involves the concept of career pathways in growth sectors and industries. Accelerated preparation is supported by contextualized instruction that combines occupational and academic instruction in the same classroom. ACC has recently begun coordinating some of its adult education classes with career trainings in its Continuing Education division. Other community college districts across the state have similar grant-funded initiatives underway. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) has been committed to closer alignment of ABE and postsecondary education in order to improve the participation and success of lower skilled adults in postsecondary education and work training programs. Recent grants for implementing such an approach include ABE Innovation Grants (ABE-IG), the Developmental Education Demonstration Projects (DEDP), and the Intensive College Readiness Programs for Adult Education Students (IPAES). This pedagogical trend will likely gain strength as adult education programs are transferred from the Texas Education Agency to the Texas Workforce Commission this year.

ROSS Specialists

The ROSS Specialist job description states required qualifications and the range of responsibilities assigned to the position. The extensive list of duties dilutes the potential for more intensive client contacts with residents more willing and able to benefit from available resources that support self-sufficiency. The preferred applicant has a bachelor's degree in an appropriate discipline and two years experience with public or private social services agencies or an equivalent combination of education and experience. The wage posted for the position is \$13.67 per hour (\$2,368.85 per month or \$28,847.47 per year).

HACA has had difficulty retaining staff, a situation well recognized in the field among partners and staff. Much of the ROSS Program concerns building relationships, particularly with low-income housing residents who may face barriers to work. Turnover disrupts such development. Moreover, beyond the brief initial training period for this position, many of the skills and talents are developed on the job. There is a consensus in the field that one year is required to be up to speed.

Additionally, the Austin area is one of the most expensive places to live in Texas, and this wage alone does not sustain a reasonable livelihood. According to the Center for Public Policy Priorities' (CPPP) family budget calculator, to be self-sufficient in Austin, a family of three needs an annual income of \$44,124.¹¹ This is the equivalent of an hourly wage of \$22 or a monthly income of \$3,677. (To put this in perspective, this income level is 257% of the federal poverty standard for a single-parent family with two children, currently at \$17,170.)

¹⁰ <http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/index.cfm?objectid=233A17D9-F3D3-BFAD-D5A76CDD8AADD1E3>

¹¹ http://www.cppp.org/fbe/estimator_step1.php

If the employer provides health insurance, the self-sufficiency income decreases to \$35,611 (or an hourly wage of \$18).

Compensation for the ROSS Specialist position is equal to that of HACA Outreach Specialist and Housing Assistant Manager, and a little below that of a Lead Maintenance person; all are below a self-sufficiency wage for the Austin area. Higher authority positions fare somewhat better, but these wages may also be associated with sustainable livelihood challenges in the Austin region.

Table 3. Selective Wage Structure within HACA

ROSS Specialist	\$13.67/hour	\$2,368.85/month	\$28,847.47/year
Outreach/ROSS Specialist	\$13.67/hour	\$2,368.85/month	\$28,847.47/year
Assistant Manager	\$13.67/hour	\$2,368.85/month	\$28,847.47/year
Lead Maintenance	\$15.07/ hour	\$2,611.65/ month	\$31,339.85/ year
FSS Coordinator-Section 8	\$15.82/hour*	\$2,742.24/month	\$32,906.84/year
FSS Coordinator-Public housing	\$17.44/hour*	\$3,023.32/month	\$36,279.79/year
District Lead Maintenance	\$18.31/ hour	\$3,174.48/ month	\$38,093.78/year
Residential Manager	\$19.23/ hour	\$3,333.21/month	\$39,998.47/year
YES Manager	\$22.68/hour*	3,858.60/month	\$46,303.23/year

Wage rates provided by HACA. * Hourly estimates at 2080 hours per year by the Ray Marshall Center .

The American Association of Service Coordinators conducted a salary survey among its members in January, 2012 (AASC 2012). The largest share of respondents (34.1%) maintained caseloads in the 51-100 range, served only one property (64.2%), and worked with the elderly and disabled (74.0%). Only small shares served three or more properties (13.7%); worked for a Housing Authority (12.1%); or held ROSS or FSS Coordinator positions (3.7%). Across all respondents, only a small portion earned less than \$27,000 annually (6.4%) or between \$27,001 and \$30,000 annually (5.8%). The largest cluster resided in the combined \$33,001-\$51,000 salary ranges (79.4%). Recognizing that there are no exact

comparable data, the report crudely suggests that HACA ROSS Specialists are at the low end of the pay scale for similar positions in this occupational area.¹²

Information Management

Recent practice involved multiple methods of data collection for entry into the ROSS information management system. The Workforce Development & ROSS Goal Tracker database housed information on participant enrollments and completions through the spring of 2013. ROSS Specialist had direct control over client identifiers and referral data, but attendance, progress, and completion data travelled one of multiple possible routes. Other data may have come from participant, provider, or affiliated HACA personnel. ROSS Specialists did not have accurate real-time data to use as a means of program management.

ROSS Participant Incentives

ROSS participants earn incentives upon completion of each module.¹³ Reportedly, current incentives do not seem to drive successful program participation. They are attractive to residents inclined to participate in short-term services, but do little to support continuous growth and development through successive module completions. HACA might revisit the structure of the incentives package to increase effectiveness. As noted above, goal attainment as module completion has been limited, particularly in the GED module, which requires the most from participants in terms of time and effort, yet is essential to successful engagement of the labor market.

ROSS Program Forms

The ROSS forms adequately serve their basic program purposes, but exhibit a few shortcomings.

- The ROSS Entry form, the one-page document completed at intake is conspicuously void of any information related to barriers to participation. There is no information for the ROSS Specialists to determine what supports a participant might need to be successful through ROSS. Similarly, for those with children, there is no indication of special needs the children may have. Additionally, for those with young children, the form might be revamped to elicit status in terms of enrollment in Head Start/Early Head Start or other early childhood interventions.¹⁴ The youth entry

¹² A common anecdotal narrative in the field concerns ROSS Specialists in other areas earning above \$60,000 per year.

¹³ ROSS Managers work with HACA's Community Partners to eliminate duplication of incentives.

¹⁴ The Ray Marshall Center strongly advocates a dual generation approach for low-income families. Research supports mutually reinforcing benefits of parents in education and training along career pathways and children in early childhood education. (King, et al., 2012). This emerging trend may be useful to HACA over

form has check boxes for college and college degrees, which seems irrelevant for participants less than 18 years of age. Residents might also be screened for more intensive case management by allowing them to indicate whether they are interested in registering to participate in a program option that prepares them for employment entry and a career path. This path will prepare them to become economically self-sufficient and independent of public housing assistance.

- The initial needs assessment tool is a misnomer. The backside of the ROSS entry form permits client self-selection of perceived needs or simple interests. There is no formal assessment using a recognized instrument and metrics, as are common in standardized occupational and aptitude assessments.
- The ROSS Goal Charts, aligned with Modules and incentives, are used to track referrals and completions with a unique Goal Chart for each goal. All forms could contain an “Expected Completion Date” to inject basic accountability into the plan. Additionally:
 - Adult Basics and GED Goal Charts might also include progress metrics, possibly in two-year increments, for all three subject areas. This would enable ROSS Specialists to verify progress.
 - The Postsecondary Goal Chart might specifically include the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form completion. Although this may be covered under “Scholarship Applications” for which there are specific performance targets for the ROSS YES Youth services, FAFSA is a key indicator of college-bound intent widely used in Central Texas. Incorporating this language ties the ROSS Program with mainstream activities at schools and ISDs.¹⁵ Additionally, a field should be entered for College Readiness Activities, since over 40 percent of postsecondary enrolments required developmental education as noted above.
 - The Employment Goal Chart might benefit from placement wage and wage increase information, as well as the availability of benefits.
 - The Financial Management Goal Chart could include an Individual Development Account indicator. IDAs may be available for employed residents to initiate their asset-building practice. Additionally, programs like the Attorney General Child Support Divisions’ “Child Support Savings for College” (CS4C), which allows custodial parents to place “lump sum” child

the long-term, particularly regarding inter-generational residents, and capacity to eventually exit public assistance.

¹⁵ The Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce has been working with schools and school districts for years to encourage and facilitate FAFSA form submissions as part of the regional effort to increase postsecondary enrollments. Additionally, school-based events where parents are provided direct assistance completed the form are generally combined with voluntary income tax services. The tax services help filers secure their EITC as well, another outcome measure of the ROSS grant.

support payments into a matched Texas 529 college savings account for their child might be identified.

- The Parent Leadership Chart might include an activity related to child support enforcement information workshops conducted by the Texas Office of the Attorney General.
- The YES Leadership and YES to College Forms might contain College Readiness and FAFSA as well.
- Client notes containing copies of all individualized correspondence and documentation collected to determine eligibility or achievement of certain goals seem an open and responsive process, dependent on the needs and accomplishments of the participant. The Ray Marshall Center has no evaluative perspective on this practice.
- ROSS Exit Form is available in three versions of this one-page document: 1) exit without goal completion, but completion of some activity; 2) exit with goal completion; and 3) exit for non-participation or inability to contact. In any case, the resident is no longer enrolled in the HACA ROSS Program, but is welcome to come back in the future. The form might ask if the person intends to participate again in the future; the case could be held “in suspense,” and the ROSS Specialist might contact them at an appropriate time.

POTENTIAL ADJUSTMENTS

There are several prospective modifications to the ROSS Program design and implementation that HACA might consider. The underlying supposition to these suggestions is that the ROSS Program is dualistic in that participants can be successfully engaged in empowerment and enrichment activities, as well as those that enhance their livelihood prospects in terms of wages and income. Since the larger purpose of ROSS is financial independence through the accumulation of the means to leave public housing and other supports, these recommendations bias the program in favor of workforce development actions. The role of enrichment is secondary to work preparedness for those motivated and able to exit public housing when ably equipped through education and training that strengthens labor force viability.

HACA ROSS Specialist. HACA might streamline the ROSS Specialist’s workload, and review wages and benefits. These actions for entry-level workers may support tenure, service continuity, and better outcomes through stronger client-worker relationships. Potential adjustments include:

- Reconsidering the requirement for two visits annually to elders in the community. There are currently some 198 elderly residing in the ROSS communities. Family Eldercare is a major provider of direct services to these individuals and these

caseworkers, as well as other personnel, can inform ROSS Specialists of any special needs for which the program might provide assistance. ROSS Specialists have a known presence in the community, interact with these residents at events, and are readily available to serve the elderly. The better part of a full workweek could be redirected annually to providing more in-depth case management and networking with effective primary providers.¹⁶

- Taking into account that a comparable wage range for similar positions as those held by ROSS Specialists begins near the current \$28,847 and extends to a wage of around \$36,000 or higher based on education, experience and tenure or longevity.
- Developing a career path for new hires, as well as seasoned employees, to strengthen operational capacity and the agency as a whole. Turnover and replacement hiring is costly both in terms of resources and program efficiency.
- Providing tuition reimbursement to employees so that they can obtain additional education and certification in their field. Optimal use should be made of the \$2,000 per year in training resources available per Service Coordinator under the ROSS grant.
- Structuring more time for ROSS Specialists to develop and maintain partnerships with outside agencies and direct interface with their service delivery staff. Direct communications is essential to more timely and accurate information on participant persistence and progress in partner programs.
- Directing ROSS Specialists to encourage and refer residents to providers with known success rates. Coordinators might better negotiate the gap between convenience and the benefits of stronger gains in labor force viability with participants.

Target Groups. HACA ROSS might “triage” ROSS participants into service levels, based on resident interests, needs, motivation, and other factors. Currently ROSS Specialists have large caseloads within which small shares are truly “active” in the sense that they are motivated, able, and willing to benefit from more consistent and intensive services. Residents who are interested in enrichment and incidental participation in partner programs and service could be assigned to a “developmental” status under which they continue to receive the “light touch” or basic case management services. An “advanced” group comprised of those tending more strongly towards goals of economic and housing self-sufficiency, would receive more intensive case management on a regular basis. Advanced participants would maintain direct contact (phone or in-person) with the ROSS Specialists on a regularly basis (at least once monthly)

¹⁶ The Ray Marshall Center estimates that each visit may take 20 minutes to contact and communicate per visit. With 198 residents and two visits, this is the equivalent of 132 hours total work effort across ROSS Specialists.

Goal Charts. Goal charts could be replaced with a single service plan used for all participants. Modifications could be made to improve current Goal Charts as depicted earlier in this report, but preferably they could simply be replaced by a universal service plan. Those interested in solely incremental participation (i.e., the proposed “developmental group”) could continue to choose those activities that they deem beneficial. The “advanced group” could be subject to more detailed and guided selection of optimally sequenced and useful services that are recognized steps towards self-sufficiency. Partial intent is to dovetail this progression with migration to the FSS program for continuous progress and capacity-building. A single service plan would additionally streamline the program and reduce paperwork.

Incentives. HACA might revamp incentives to promote better outcomes. Instead of linking incentives to module and goal completion, the ROSS Program could allocate incentives based on the personalized service plan. Incentives could be awarded for:

- **Completion of a set number of relevant hours of participation and completion of three or more standard, yet short term activities similar to the combinations available under most current modules.** This approach is not solely based on the number of activities as currently practiced. Tentatively, HACA may set a standard of 60 hours minimum attendance and completion for qualification.
- **Incremental advances in academic achievement, prospectively two-year increments from a baseline in adult basic literacy through GED.** Instead of withholding a \$500 incentive until GED attainment, incremental incentives of \$50 might encourage persistence and gains. Part of the program benefit articulated by ROSS Specialists is that the program provides a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence in residents. Staged financial rewards for the very important academic ingredient enhance those individual benefits, while increasing capacity and workforce viability. The largest share of the incentive payment would accrue to the participant at GED attainment. This also permits better data collection on academic achievement.
- **Employment entry and retention.** Instead of a \$50 award for clothing or work-related expenses, the ROSS Program might seek and obtain leveraged credit for workplace attire from its partner Goodwill at no cost. The current award could be modified to a \$50 gift card at 30, 60, and 90 day retention, another staged incentive pattern. Incentives for retention foster good work habits, additional work experience, and continuous earnings.

Since no one has earned the day-planner or organizer (no more than \$50 value) linked to Adult Basics, this incentive might be dropped in lieu of a \$50 gift card that allows residents to choose their purchase. The YES Leadership incentive (college savings plan or summer camp scholarship) might stay intact.

Partnerships. The partnership array is fairly comprehensive, but may benefit from strengthening relations and taking advantage of new education and training options, as well as emerging service trends. Among these, the ROSS Program might:

- Link with the Good Careers Academy at Goodwill as an emerging asset with on site training opportunities that may be available to ROSS participants. ROSS Specialists should recognize Goodwill's deep experience with persons who have multiple barriers and the value of the services they provide in the area. ROSS coordinators might review referral patterns from ROSS Specialists to assure that all are taking full advantage of the contracted and ancillary services available through Goodwill.
- Improve connections with WorkSource Solutions offices so that clients can experience the mainstream employment and training system.
- Seek and promote connections to contextualized, adult education curricula that may accelerate achievement alongside occupational readiness.
- Explore possibilities of directing residents to the Math Emporium at the former Highland Mall as a beneficial service option.

FINAL COMMENTS

The ROSS Program gives public housing residents easy access to an expansive array of activities and services that not only empower and enrich the lives of residents, but also serve as significant early steps towards self-sufficiency. The barriers and challenges faced by some public housing residents may preclude successful attainment of economic independence. The current program operations and service coordination appropriately serve their enrichment and limited participatory needs and aspirations. For those with stronger commitment to economic self-sufficiency and housing independent of public assistance, the ROSS program should continue as a gateway to its Family Self-Sufficiency program, but could also inject a stronger sense of accountability for accomplishments, and strengthen program outcomes. From entry forward, the latter group might be expected to migrate to FSS and eventually meet their goals. Reordering and streamlining the work expectations of ROSS Specialists permits deeper client engagement. HACA could be responsive to every opportunity to abet this process.

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APPENDIX A: ROSS PROGRAM GOALS

Goal 1 Basics

- (4 of 7 to complete)
- Adult Basic Education (ABE) Classes
- Adult literacy classes.
- Complete ESL classes (increased English proficiency)
- Employment skills assessment
- Job readiness classes
- Adult computer training classes
- Life skills classes

Goal 2 GED Attainment

- Complete Adult Basic Education classes
- Complete GED Preparation course
- Obtain GED

Goal 3 Post-Secondary Education

- (4 of 7 to complete)
- Life skills class
- Job readiness classes
- Employment skills assessment
- Complete 2 scholarship applications
- Finish a vocational certification training program
- Enroll in a degree plan for an Associate's or Bachelor's Degree
- Complete an Associate's or Bachelor's Degree

Goal 4 Employment

- (5 of 9 to complete)
- Life skills classes.
- Employment skills assessment
- Job readiness classes
- Adult computer classes
- Occupational therapy, sheltered workshop, or similar opportunity
- Obtain appropriate childcare
- Do a job search
- Start a new job
- Keep a job 3-6 months

Goal 5 Financial Management

- (4 of 6 to complete)
- Life skills classes
- Financial literacy classes
- Enter credit counseling

File federal income taxes
Homeownership pre-purchase counseling/training
Start searching for an affordable home

Goal 6 Parent Leadership

(3 of 4 to complete)
Life skills class
Parenting classes
Participate in Resident Council
Obtain appropriate childcare

Goal 7 Homeownership

(4 of 6 to complete)
Financial literacy classes
Enter credit counseling
File federal income taxes
Homeownership pre-purchase counseling
Start searching for an affordable home
Buy a house

Goal 8-YES Leadership

(5 of 9 to complete)
Participate in the YES incentive program at least three grading periods in an academic year
Participate in a tutoring program
Improve your GPA by .5 or more
Participate in a mentoring program (either as a mentor or as a mentee)
Complete a Youth technology (computer) class
Participate in a summer camp program
Participate in a summer youth employment program or find a (summer) job
Complete High School or GED
Take a college entrance exam

Goal 9 - YES to College

(5 of 9 to complete)
Participate in the YES incentive program at least two grading periods in an academic year
Participate in a mentoring program (either as a mentor or as a mentee)
Complete a technology (computer) class
Participate in a summer bridge program
Complete High School or GED
Apply for a scholarship
Take a college entrance exam
Complete application for financial aid (FAFSA)
Enroll into college or vocational program

APPENDIX B: PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS

Identified Performance Expectations of ROSS Specialists

1. Developing and implementing site-based activities supportive of resident transition to self-sufficiency
2. Developing and maintaining partnerships with outside agencies and leveraging resources that support residents' efforts to become self-sufficient
3. Tracking and assessing the self-sufficiency needs of residents at assigned communities, determining gaps and identifying appropriate resources services
4. Conducting resident surveys to receive input from residents on needed services and developing regular reports regarding results.
5. Conducting targeted outreach to increase resident participation in and awareness of relevant community programming.
6. Developing flyers and information packets for residents.
7. Developing and maintaining new resident handbooks, flyers and brochures at all assigned properties to ensure they are timely and relevant.
8. Providing information and referral services to residents.
9. Responding to referrals from Public Housing Managers and Assistant Managers.
10. Performing follow-up with residents.
11. Maintaining regular and sustained contacts with selected groups of residents, such as participants in education or training programs and children in youth education success and dropout prevention programs.
12. Conducting and documenting twice-annual home visits of all elderly residents.
13. Maintaining accurate reports and other documentation.
14. Recruiting youth and adult participants and maintaining a minimum caseload as required.
15. Performing intake and tracks residents' progress via a database system.
16. Providing assistance to residents in establishing and maintaining Resident Councils.
17. Attending Resident Council meetings and Citywide Advisory Board meetings.
18. Providing supervisor with pertinent information, concerns and comments from such meetings for proper follow-up.
19. Ensuring MOUs and required paperwork are up to date.
20. Preparing reports and documenting activities as required.
21. Performing data entry and tracking via spreadsheets and database.

22. Assisting in developing and monitoring budgets and preparing documentation to process for payment.
23. Preparing requisitions for all purchases in a timely manner.
24. Submitting outstanding receipts for proper reconciliation in a timely manner.
25. Ensuring all files, reports and paperwork are complete and all information is correct.
26. Performing general office tasks such as answering telephone and responding to inquiries and preparing written correspondence
27. Responding to residents, staff and the public's inquiries in a courteous manner, providing information and resolving complaints in an efficient, professional and timely manner.
28. Assisting the Public Housing Manager and Assistant Manager with special projects and initiatives when applicable.
29. Attending departmental and Authority-wide staff meetings as required.
30. Other duties as assigned.