ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

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Baltimore Health Corps Initiative—A Transitional Jobs Program to Improve Public Health and Employment Outcomes During COVID-19

In April 2020, the Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED), the Baltimore City Health Department, and other partners in Baltimore united in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The pandemic brought about two challenges: a sudden loss of jobs and the need to stop the pandemic's spread. The city's unemployment rate more than doubled between March and April 2020 due to the pandemic, increasing from 4.9 to 11.6 percent. At the same time, COVID-19 cases in the city were beginning to surge with increasing evidence to suggest that communities of color were at greater risk for getting sick and dying from COVID-19 (Millet et al. 2020). Recognizing the gravity of the situation, city officials acted fast.

With support from 23 funders, city officials from MOED, the Health Department, and others designed the Baltimore Health Corps (BHC), a transitional jobs program for unemployed and underemployed city residents. By providing unemployed residents with temporary paid jobs as contact tracers and care coordinators, the BHC aimed to address both challenges—joblessness and pandemic. BHC staff also received career navigation and support connecting to permanent employment from MOED, as well as behavioral health and legal services. With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Administration for Children and Families, and the Office of Family Assistance's Project IMPROVE, Mathematica teamed up with MOED to support the effort. Using Learn, Innovate, Improve (see Three Phases of Learn, Innovate, Improve, this page), Mathematica's evidence-driven framework and process for change, MOED, in partnership with Mathematica (called the "MOED-Mathematica partnership"), defined a science-informed model to help BHC employees successfully transition to the regular labor market once their paid position ends. This brief highlights the experiences of the MOED-Mathematica partnership during the Learn and

Three phases of Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²)

LI² typically begins with unpacking the motivation for change and assessing a program's readiness for change (**Learn**). The Learn phase is generally followed by innovation to specify the core components of the proposed change, drawing on the best available research and science (**Innovate**). During this phase, the researchers and practitioners co-develop road maps for change that articulate the activities programs will undertake and the results they expect. Then, programs often try out the innovation on a small scale and collect and analyze feedback to determine what is working well and what is not (**Improve**). These small-scale pilots often result in changes to improve and strengthen the implementation of the innovation. ◢

Innovate phases—when we defined the challenge to tackle and developed solutions. A subsequent brief after the initiative ends in September 2021 will capture the experiences throughout the initiative, lessons, and successes, including the Improve phase findings.

MAYOR'S OFFICE OF EMPLOYMENT DEVELOPMENT

Mathematica
Progress Together

BHC timeline

2020	2021
JUN JUL AUG SEP OCT NOV DEC	JAN FEB MAR APR MAY JUN JUL AUG SEP

Baltimore City Health Department and Mayor's Office of Employment Development in the city of Baltimore announced BHC Initiative

Wage-paid jobs end for final cohort of BHC employees

MOED began serving BHC employees

BHC officially ends; those still looking for work continue to have access to MOED services

MOED supervisor and career navigators hired and trained

BHC employees hired and trained as contact tracers and care coordinators for COVID-19

BHC = Baltimore Health Corps; MOED = Mayor's Office of Employment Development.

Components of BHC

Working in with the Health Department and other key partners, MOED defined three primary components to address the public health crisis and engage people in meaningful work.

/ **Paid jobs as COVID-19 contact tracers and care coordinators.** BHC created paid positions as contact tracers and care coordinators for Baltimore residents. City leaders prioritized hiring people living in the neighborhoods most vulnerable to the virus and job loss. They also chose these hiring priorities to find staff (called "BHC employees") who could quickly build trust with those affected by COVID-19, help slow the spread of the virus, and connect residents to resources needed for quarantine. The Health Department and HealthCare Access Maryland hired 303 people out of more than 5,000 applications. Initially, most BHC positions were designed to last eight months, starting and ending on a staggered basis. As of the publication of this brief, all positions have been extended through September 2021. BHC tracers earn $16.83 per hour, equivalent to a salary of $35,000 per year, as well as a health insurance stipend.

/ **Training.** BHC created training opportunities for employees and applicants. For example, to strengthen the candidacy of applicants who might not otherwise have been considered, BHC offered Community Health Worker (CHW) certification training, with a focus on contract tracing, through the Baltimore Alliance for Careers in Healthcare. New BHC hires received additional CHW training as part of their onboarding at the Health Department or HealthCare Access Maryland.

/ **Employment services.** As the city's workforce agency, MOED assumed primary responsibility for preparing BHC employees for jobs in the regular labor market once the paid job ended. They hired a supervisor and five career navigators to support BHC employees. The MOED team provides all services remotely. The BHC also offered all employees group and individual support services to improve well-being and to mitigate possible barriers to further employment. Catholic Charities of Baltimore provided behavioral health services that covered anxiety, grief, and other topics. Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service provided civil legal services, on issues such as expungement, consumer debt, and taxes.
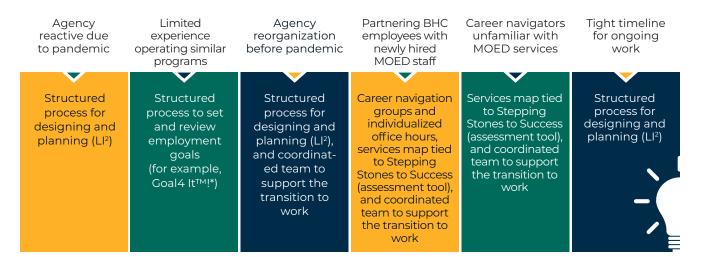
Learn phase—Understanding MOED and BHC needs

A central feature of LI[2] is the use of evidence to drive decision making. The Mathematica team gathered and summarized existing evidence on transitional jobs programs, held a series of human-centered design sessions to gather data from BHC program leaders and staff, and surveyed BHC employees to tailor services to meet their needs.

In the Learn phase, Mathematica walked MOED through a series of human-centered design sessions facilitated virtually. Sessions included the MOED leadership team, program analysts, and direct service staff. Mathematica also interviewed staff and surveyed BHC employees to gather background data on staff and BHC employee needs and interests. Table 1 captures the main findings from the Learn phase and solutions the MOED-Mathematica partnership developed during the Improve phase.

Table 1. Challenges identified during the Learn phase and Innovate phase solutions

Agency reactive due to pandemic	Limited experience operating similar programs	Agency reorganization before pandemic	Partnering BHC employees with newly hired MOED staff	Career navigators unfamiliar with MOED services	Tight timeline for ongoing work
Structured process for designing and planning (LI[2])	Structured process to set and review employment goals (for example, Goal4 It™!*)	Structured process for designing and planning (LI[2]), and coordinated team to support the transition to work	Career navigation groups and individualized office hours, services map tied to Stepping Stones to Success (assessment tool), and coordinated team to support the transition to work	Services map tied to Stepping Stones to Success (assessment tool), and coordinated team to support the transition to work	Structured process for designing and planning (LI[2])

BHC = Baltimore Health Corps; LI[2] = Learn, Innovate, Improve; MOED = Mayor's Office of Employment Development.
*Goal4 It! is a science-informed coaching model that helps people tap into their inner motivation and pursue goals that are meaningful to them.

Improve phase solutions—Core elements of employment services

Transitional jobs programs—wage-paid jobs with employment supports—can be an effective strategy to rapidly connect people to the labor market. However, these programs have historically produced mixed results among Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and workforce program customers. In particular, there is limited evidence that transitional jobs programs can help these participants move to the regular labor market once

the transitional job ends, keep nonsubsidized jobs, and build their earnings over time (Barden et al 2018; Bloom 2010).

Based on findings from the Learn phase and existing evidence, the MOED-Mathematica partnership entered the Innovate phase with a goal of defining services that were doable and would improve employment outcomes for BHC employees beyond the wage-paid job. Together, we designed and implemented a science-informed approach. These are the core elements of the approach:

Coordinated team to support the transition to work. Just before the pandemic, MOED went through a reorganization that disrupted their service flow and redefined existing positions. To best support BHC employees, MOED needed to coordinate across three positions:

- **Career development facilitators.** These staff prepare BHC employees for work by helping them improve their resume, identify potential jobs of interest, and connect with short-term training and other services available at MOED.

- **Career navigators.** These staff are similar to the existing career development facilitators at MOED, but hired specifically for the BHC. They work individually and in groups with the BHC employees and know them best. MOED also hired a supervisor for the career navigators.

- **Business services representatives.** When BHC employees are ready for work, the representatives will connect them with employers in fields in which they expressed interest. Representatives typically can place someone in work within two to four weeks.

The MOED-Mathematica partnership is developing a streamlined approach to coordination across these three roles in a timeline that is responsive to BHC employees as they exit the wage-paid job. The goal is for this work to inform a future staff coordination approach within MOED beyond the BHC initiative.

Career navigation groups and one-on-one office hours. Because career navigators have relatively high caseloads (roughly 50 to 60 BHC employees per career navigator), it is a challenge for them to maintain frequent and regular contact with BHC employees. In response, the MOED-Mathematica partnership created Networking and Individualized Career Exploration (NICE) groups, which are led by career navigators, meet virtually each week or biweekly, and include an average of 12 employees. Compared with a traditional one-on-one career navigation model in which customers meet individually with their assigned career navigator, this

group-based approach allows for more frequent interactions and creates peer-to-peer support. Each career navigator facilitates between four to six groups per week, depending on the number of employees assigned to their caseload. MOED supplements these groups with office hours where a BHC employee can sign up for one-on-one support.

Structured process to set and review employment goals (Goal4 It!™). The MOED-Mathematica partnership needed to quickly train career navigators on a core practice model that was easy to use and would create consistency across career navigators in how they provide services. Mathematica trained MOED supervisors and career navigators and other MOED staff on a science-informed coaching model called Goal4 It!™, designed to help BHC employees set and achieve their goals (see Goal4 It!™). The Mathematica team also provided ongoing coaching and technical support to career navigators who use this model during group and one-on-one sessions.

Services map tied to Stepping Stones to Success (assessment tool). One of the challenges noted during the Learn phase was the need to train the BHC career navigation supervisor and career navigators on all the services available at MOED. Drawing on behavioral science, the MOED-Mathematica partnership designed a way to make it easy for everyone. First, the partnership created a services map to catalogue MOED services available to BHC employees. We then linked these services to the assessment tool, Stepping Stones to Success, used as part of Goal4 It!™. BHC employees use the assessment tool to identify their own work and life goals (for example, finding a job, accessing technology, managing finances, or getting connected to additional education or training). Because the service map is linked directly to the assessment, career navigators can simply click a hyperlink in the assessment tool that lists the MOED services available in each work and life domain where BHC employees identify a goal.

Accomplishments and challenges to date

The following are a few of our key accomplishments and challenges to date.

Accomplishments

/ Unifying agency leaders and direct service staff toward a common goal of addressing a public health crisis and creating lasting employment opportunities for job seekers

/ Using an evidence-driven approach to set up BHC and engage BHC employees in employment services within three months

/ Cocreating innovative, science-informed practices and infrastructure that might be useful beyond the BHC initiative (for example, the NICE groups, services map, and the coordinated team approach)

/ Helping BHC employees identify and accomplish their personal and professional goals and get support from their career navigator and peers.

Ongoing challenges

/ Competing priorities and resource challenges that are heightened because of the pandemic (for example, uncertainty of timelines, exhaustion among staff, and lack of digital literacy and access to technology)

/ Quickly ramping up and ramping down the BHC initiative (that is, building and landing the plane while flying it)

/ Managing the complexity of the transition to work of BHC employees and coordination across different types of staff (for example, career navigators, career development facilitators, and business services representatives)

"I am extremely thankful for having you as my career navigator. I have obtained so much from our Goal4 It! group sessions. Having you as a navigator, coach and motivator has helped guide me in the path I should be taking to reach my personal and professional goals."

—*BHC employee to her career navigator*

Next steps

Although the MOED-Mathematica partnership has accomplished a lot since the program began, we still have more than five months remaining. Our hope is that we can help all BHC employees successfully transition to work in good jobs with opportunities for growth and advancement. We also hope to build evidence to inform future transitional jobs programs.

References

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