

Case Study of an Employment and Training Program Serving Single Mothers with Low Income

Climb Wyoming

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Lead entity:

Climb Wyoming

Service area:

Six sites across Wyoming

Setting:

Rural

Focus population:

Single mothers eligible for TANF

Number of participants per year:

190 in the program

700 in pre-enrollment and post-program services

Initial year of operation:

1986

Introduction

Climb Wyoming (Climb) is a nonprofit organization founded in 1986 to help single mothers with low income achieve self-sufficiency through career training and placement. Climb serves six locations across the state. At each program site, Climb partners with (1) training providers to provide industry-specific career trainings, which differ across sites and over time; (2) community-based organizations to provide wraparound support services and life skills education; (3) mental health providers to provide individual and group counseling; and (4) employers to offer subsidized jobs, intended to become permanent.

Each site serves two or three cohorts of participants per year, with a maximum of 12 participants in each cohort. The program consists of six to eight weeks of job training, followed by job matching and a six- to eight-week fully-subsidized job placement—with mental health, support services, and life skills education provided throughout. Climb often works extensively with applicants to remove barriers

before program participation and continues to support participants after they leave the program.

This case study includes the following sections: [Where Climb Operates](#); [Who Climb Serves](#); [What Services Climb Provides](#); [How Climb is Organized, Staffed, and Funded](#); [How Climb Uses Data to Monitor Program Outcomes](#); and [Promising Practices, Remaining Challenges, and Future Plans](#).

About this report

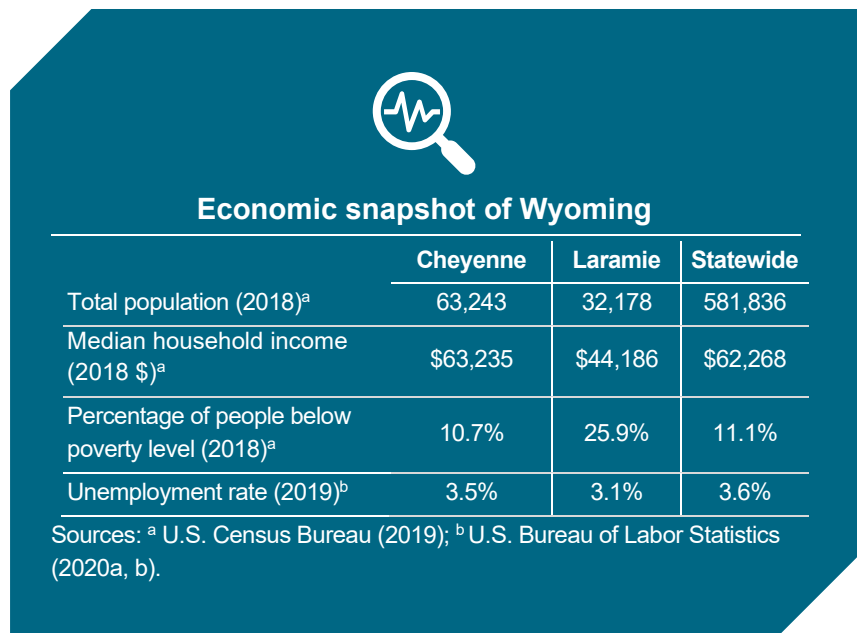
This case study (OPRE Report # 2021-70) is part of a series of nine comprehensive case studies that showcase innovative approaches for supporting the employment of low-income individuals and families, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families recipients. Each case study highlights key components of implementation, including their linkages to wraparound supports, to expand the knowledge base of these programs. The programs featured in the series represent a diverse range of service strategies, geographies and community contexts, focus populations, and service environments. The case studies are sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in collaboration with the Office of Family Assistance, both within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Where Climb operates

Climb was founded in 1986 and initially served only Cheyenne. After receiving additional federal and state funding through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in 2003, Climb expanded to six locations across the state serving 13 of Wyoming’s 23 counties. Sites now include Cheyenne, Casper, Gillette, Laramie, and the Sweetwater and Teton areas. These sites were chosen based on poverty level, workforce opportunities, and community buy-in for Climb. To better understand Climb implementation at the local level, the case study team visited program sites in Cheyenne and Laramie.

At the time of the site visit in March 2020, program staff reported that the state’s economy was strong, with an unemployment rate of 3.7 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020c).¹ Wyoming’s largest industries include resource extraction and mining, health care, tourism and hospitality, construction, wholesale trade and transportation, and retail (Wyoming Department of Workforce Services, Research & Planning 2019). Major industries vary across the sites Climb serves, which influences the training Climb provides in each site. For example, in Laramie, the University of Wyoming is a major employer, and Climb Laramie often offers trainings for office careers typically available at the university.

In 2018, 11.1 percent of Wyoming residents lived below the federal poverty level. Rates are much higher in some areas, and Climb program and partner staff noted that some families face significant barriers to self-sufficiency. The most prevalent barriers across all Climb sites noted by program and community partner staff were lack of employment and training opportunities, child care, and transportation. Climb staff reported spending a significant amount of their time working with applicants before program entry to address barriers such as child care and transportation. Program and partner staff also noted that accessing and maintaining TANF benefits in Wyoming is challenging for families due to program requirements. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2020), 6 of every 100 families with children in poverty in Wyoming received TANF in 2017–2018, one of the lowest TANF-to-poverty ratios in the nation.



¹ Unemployment data presented here do not reflect shifts in the economy that have occurred since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. See box on page 20 for more information about changes to the economy and how Climb responded to the pandemic.



Poverty and family composition in Wyoming (2018)

Number of families with children: 63,457

Number of female headed households with children: 11,781

Percentage of families with children living in poverty: 11.6%

Percentage of people in female headed households with children living in poverty: 33.5%

Percentage of people in female headed households with children under 5 years old living in poverty: 41.8%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2019)

In the communities where Climb operates, other employment and training services are typically limited to state workforce development agencies. Climb staff noted that these agencies are most able to help those ready for immediate employment, and private training programs, such as truck driving schools, that typically charge for their services. Climb staff noted that although most locations have a community college with a range of educational offerings, some communities have only satellite locations with fewer offerings or services.

Affordable child care options for families with low income are limited in Wyoming. Child care subsidies are available from the state child care agency, including for Climb participants during training, but Climb and partner staff reported that the subsidies are not enough to cover the full cost of child care. Head Start and Early Head Start programs are available for families with low income but often have waiting lists and do not operate a full day, and families must find other child care for part of the day. Across the

state, few child care providers operate nontraditional hours (past 6:00 p.m.), which is a significant barrier for Climb participants and graduates who work nontraditional hours in industries like truck driving and healthcare.

According to program and partner staff, public transportation in the state is also limited. Climb participants often need help accessing and maintaining reliable vehicles for long-distance commutes to Climb offices or employment. Transportation resources are available through TANF, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training (E&T) program, local charitable organizations, or other local resources. However, these resources are often insufficient or are difficult to access.

Who Climb serves

Climb serves single mothers who are eligible for Wyoming's TANF program (earning no more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level) and, per staff's assessment, be unlikely to receive adequate help by a referral to another community agency. Participants do not have to receive TANF or other forms of public assistance to enroll in the program.



Eligibility requirements for Climb

- Single mother with children in the home or working toward reunification
- Eligible for Wyoming's TANF program (earning no more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level)
- Legally authorized to work

Potential participants reach Climb through referrals from community partners, self-referrals based on word of mouth, recommendations from past Climb graduates, or awareness from Climb’s Facebook page, website, or advertising. According to Climb staff, common barriers that motivate applicants to apply include working in unstable low-wage jobs; unhealthy relationships or experiences with domestic violence; health issues, including substance use disorders; and unreliable child care, housing, and transportation.

Each program site serves two or three cohorts per year, with a maximum of 12 participants in each cohort. Individuals may only participate in a cohort once. Climb staff work with applicants in advance of a cohort, often for several months, to help them stabilize their housing, child care, transportation, and mental health supports in order to set them up for success in the program. Those not accepted initially into the program can continue to work with Climb to reduce barriers and, potentially, enroll in a later cohort.

Each year across all six sites, Climb enrolls about 190 mothers. It also works with about 400 applicants who are not yet enrolled, and about 300 graduates receiving post-program supports. Climb tends to work with mothers experiencing deep poverty. At the time of application, Climb families have an average income of 30 percent of the federal poverty level (the federal poverty level was \$21,720 for a family of three in 2020). About 10 percent of Climb participants receive cash assistance through TANF, and 40 to 60 percent receive SNAP. Table 1 shows other demographic characteristics of Climb participants.

Participant perspective

“I’d been aware of the program for a few years and I was pretty intrigued by it. I...recently saw a sign that they were offering [training] for pipefitting and CDL, and just the thought of trade work was pretty awesome to me because I just didn’t feel I was at the time of my life to return to college and I knew that there was just really good job opportunities as well as advancement opportunities. It’s something that I could get right to work doing and making the kind of money I needed to make to support my kids.... I just wanted to be able to provide a sustainable life for the kids and I wanted to be able to be independent and not have to rely on other people or toxic people that may have been in our lives before. Then on top of that, just the whole thought of being around all these other super cool single moms.”

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of all Climb participants from 1986 through 2020 at application, statewide

Demographics	Climb participants
Age	
16–20	11%
21–30	45%
31–40	31%
41 and older	13%
Race and ethnicity	
White	75%
Hispanic/Latina	17%
American Indian/Alaska Native	4%
Black	3%
Other	1%
Education	
Less than a high school diploma or GED	20%

Demographics	Climb participants
High school diploma or GED	59%
Any postsecondary education	21%
Average annual income	\$5,136.00
Average family size	3

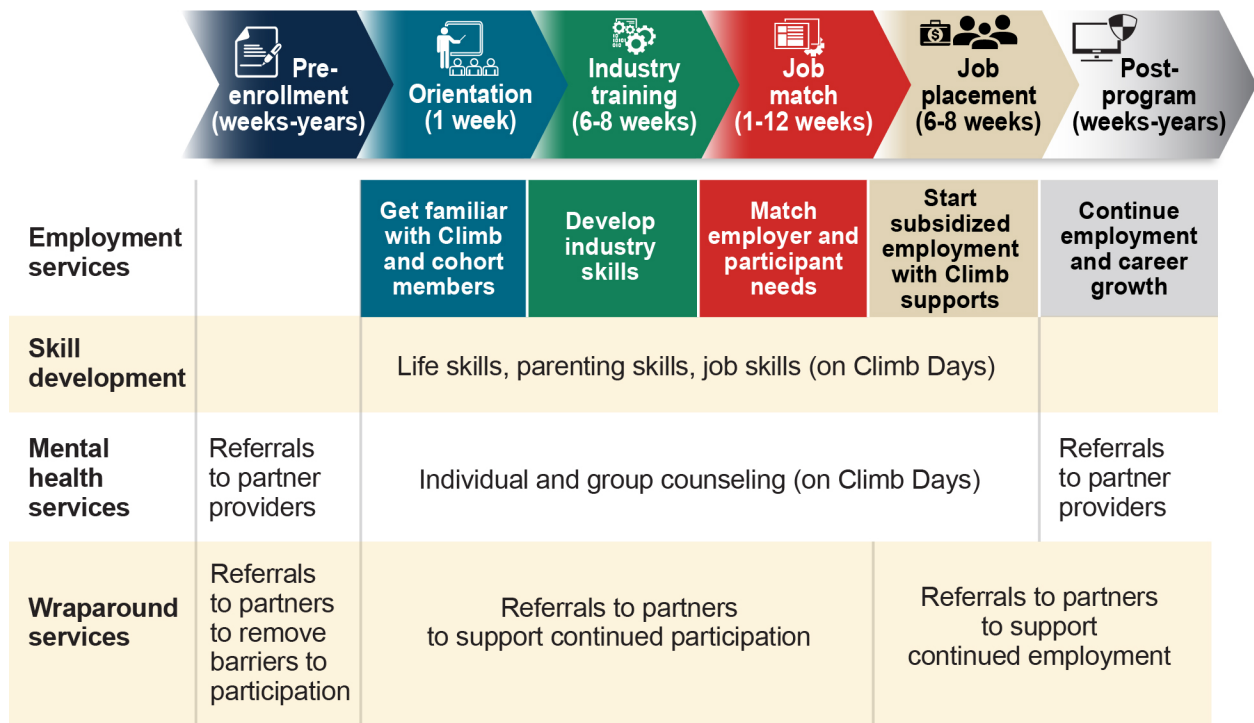
Source: Climb program estimates shared with the case study team.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. N = 2,479 participants.

What services Climb provides

Each of the six Climb sites is staffed by a site team that offers the same program structure across sites. The program consists of six to eight weeks of industry training, followed by matching participants to a subsidized job, and then six to eight weeks of work in the subsidized job (Figure 1). Each Wednesday throughout the program, participants attend “Climb Days” that focus on life skills education and mental health services, including individual and group counseling. Small sites offer the program to two cohorts per year and have fewer staff members, while large sites offer the program to three cohorts per year and have more staff members.

Figure 1. Climb program phases



Source: Information provided to the case study team by Climb staff.



Key program practices

- Support in reducing pre-enrollment barriers
- Guaranteed full-time employment in an in-demand industry, following tailored career training and a subsidized job placement
- Support of participants' mental health
- A psychologically informed environment that guides conflict management and communication practices

Climb's approach to services

Climb's approach to working with participants is characterized by providing a psychologically-informed environment through operating principles that guide conflict management and communications and consider the psychological and emotional needs of Climb participants. Climb also guarantees a full-time job upon program completion.

Services are provided in a psychologically informed environment intended to support participant growth. Climb staff adhere to a set of operating principles to guide their interactions with applicants, participants, and one another. The operating principles include being authentic, being

self-aware, communicating clearly, being fearless in conflict, suspending judgment, and experiencing productive discomfort (for example, acknowledging and learning from mistakes or uncomfortable situations). In working by these principles, staff seek to create a psychologically informed environment – that is, a safe space with supportive staff relationships to facilitate participant growth and change (Haigh et al. 2012). Climb staff are trained to consider the psychological and emotional needs of Climb participants at each phase of the program and during each interaction and seek to create an environment where participants can safely practice effective communication, conflict management, and executive functioning skills such as self-decision-making and goal-setting. Staff receive training on understanding the types of trauma that participants may have experienced and how that trauma affects a participant's executive functioning skills (see the section "How Climb is organized, staffed, and funded" for more information on staff training). Climb staff work with partners to ensure they also understand the psychological needs of Climb participants so they can tailor services to those needs. Climb structures program services to prioritize participants' individual goals, capacity, and needs, not program requirements.

Climb guarantees full-time employment after industry training and subsidized job placement.

Climb assures all participants full-time employment if they complete the program. Climb staff in each site identify industries or occupations with openings that pay a high wage and offer benefits, are of high interest to applicants, or both, and select one industry to focus on for each program. They contract for job training for that industry or occupation, then place participants into those occupations with local employers. Climb offers to fully subsidize all placements initially, and employers agree to keep participants on permanently unless there are irreconcilable problems.

How participants access Climb services

Potential Climb participants are recruited to the program through multiple channels and are assessed for their readiness to participate through an application process. Site staff may help applicants address pre-enrollment barriers to program participation before selecting a cohort of participants. Selected cohort members participate in an orientation and then begin other program services.

Outreach and recruitment efforts reach potential applicants through multiple methods. According to Climb staff, outreach and recruitment are important program components because low-income single mothers often live in isolation. Climb sites seek referrals from local organizations and advertise through local channels to recruit applicants for each cohort. Main referral sources include state TANF and SNAP offices, health providers, and local nonprofit organizations. According to program staff, Climb leverages potential applicants' existing relationships with partner organizations and facilitates warm hand-offs from partners to Climb. For example, the TANF and SNAP applications in locations where Climb operates include a section for those interested in Climb. TANF and SNAP staff tear that section off and share it with Climb staff to follow up with the applicant. Climb does not have strict referral criteria and prefers that partners refer any potentially eligible mothers for Climb staff to assess themselves. Climb also places advertisements on Facebook, solicits inquiries on its website, places flyers throughout the community, and purchases advertising on local radio. Sites typically advertise for a specific cohort about two months prior to program start. Potential applicants recruited through partners or self-referrals are invited to an information session to learn about the program. Those still interested after the information session sign up for a three-hour, in-person application appointment.

Application process assesses applicants' readiness to participate in the program. Climb staff assess each applicant individually and, as a site team, select up to 12 applicants to enroll in each cohort. In application appointments, applicants meet with multiple Climb staff to assess their eligibility, barriers, and readiness for the program. To assess eligibility, staff document proof of income, check on whether children are in the home or on the status of custody issues, and ensure applicants have personal identification documents eventually needed for employment, such as Social Security cards and licenses. During the application appointment, each staff person conducts an interview and assessment, such as on mental health status or past work experience and employment interests, that aligns with the staff person's particular area of expertise as a way to assess barriers and readiness for the program.

Applicants may receive pre-enrollment barrier reduction services. Barriers to participation for applicants may include transportation, housing, child care, and mental health. If barriers can be addressed quickly, Climb staff work with applicants to address them before the program begins. If not, Climb staff continue to work with applicants to prepare for a future cohort. Each site maintains a database that includes women it has helped pre-enroll but were not selected. This way, sites can later contact those women to gauge whether they are still interested in participating and provide pre-enrollment services.

Climb staff select small cohorts of individuals ready to participate in the program. Site teams use the information gathered during application meetings to select up to 12 applicants based on their consensus as



Psychologically informed environment

Climb seeks to create a psychologically informed environment by using operating principles with participants, beginning at application. Operating principles include such concepts as being authentic, being self-aware, communicating clearly, being fearless in conflict, suspending judgment, and experiencing productive discomfort. During the application process, this might include having difficult conversations about personal hygiene or dress, naming barriers and reaching out to partners to address them together, discussing goals, and having an open discussion about whether the program is the right fit at the right time for the applicant.

to who is most in need and ready to participate in the program, with 2 alternates in case someone is unable to participate. Those most in need are defined as those who meet the program’s eligibility criteria and could not be sufficiently helped by another community resource (such as the local workforce services agency). Readiness to participate in the program is determined individually and can be demonstrated by successfully addressing barriers to participation or showing a strong commitment to the program.

Although the site teams make the ultimate selection decisions, Climb staff described making the decision in partnership with applicants. Staff have open conversations with applicants whom they do not select to help them realize the program is not the right fit at the time. According to one staff member, “It’s not no, but not now.”



Recent career trainings offered by Climb

- Professional and medical office careers
- Commercial driving (CDL)
- Pipefitting
- Welding
- Heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC)
- Certified nursing assistant (CNA)

Climb staff reported challenges filling their cohorts with applicants they feel are ready to participate in the program. In most sites there are more applicants than available slots; however, staff noted it is a challenge to determine which applicants are ready to participate. In some sites, staff struggle to reach those mothers who could benefit from the program and recruit enough applicants to fill their cohorts. Those sites often have fewer than the maximum of 12 participants in each cohort. In large sites that operate three cohorts per year, the time between one cohort ending and another beginning is very short, which can impede recruiting applicants ready to participate in the next cohort.

Cohort members get to know the program and each other during orientation. Participants accepted into a cohort begin with a one-week orientation. Staff introduce the program schedule, discuss policies and procedures, and set expectations. Staff members also conduct individual assessments with participants, covering additional topics to

those addressed during application, such as learning style, executive function skills, and mental health. Cohort members participate in activities to get to know one another, such as a “kid share” in which participants make posters about their families and share with the other cohort members.

Employment services

Climb’s employment services consist of career training, life and job skill development, and job placement.

Career training is tailored to the needs of participants and local employers in each site. Climb contracts with local training providers in each site to provide training in in-demand industries or occupations. Climb sites select one training program for each cohort based on the demand for that occupation in their service area and the interests of program applicants. Dedicated staff in each site research local economic conditions; assess current job postings; and contact local employers, chambers of commerce, and economic development agencies to determine in-demand industries or occupations. Staff work to create a match between employer needs and the jobs that applicants are interested in. For example, in one site, potential applicants were interested in office positions and local employers were

looking for reliable office staff. Climb staff researched the field and worked with a local trainer to develop a soft-skills training emphasizing basic office skills and conflict resolution that apply widely to a variety of well-paying jobs. Training planning ranges from a couple of months to two years. Sites typically finalize the training and begin advertising for applicants about two months prior to the start of the cohort.

Climb staff work closely with contracted training providers to create training content that is appropriate for the needs, circumstances, and employment goals of Climb's focus population. Staff noted this often entails working with trainers to tweak existing training content to be delivered at a different pace and with a different focus, such as prioritizing skills needed for employment rather than general knowledge. For example, most Climb sites work with trainers or faculty members from local community colleges, and one staff member noted, "If we just relied on the college, they would do a college-level [training]." A college-level training would not align with the needs of Climb's participants who do not have prior experience with postsecondary education and would be less conducive to participants learning new skills. In addition, staff work with trainers to make individual accommodations for participants. For example, one staff member described a participant who struggled with reading, and Climb worked with the trainer to provide audio-learning materials.

Training lasts six to eight weeks and takes place at the main training provider's location. Participants attend four days per week, for eight or nine hours per day. They receive a \$25 gift card incentive for each day of punctual attendance. A Climb staff member is at the training location each morning to check attendance, provide the incentives, and help participants with any urgent barriers to participation such as child care interruptions or transportation issues. Staff also debrief with the trainer each day about participants' progress, whether anyone needs extra support, and any participant strengths and challenges that could inform job placements. Midway through the training period, the trainer formally evaluates each participant on topics such as time and attendance, professional dress, and job skills gained during training. This enables participants to receive feedback and experience receiving a professional evaluation.

Graduate perspective

"We met every morning [on Climb Days] and went around the circle and said how we were feeling for the day and if there was anything that was just right off the top of our head, stressing us out or that we had to do. [You] just throw it out there first thing in the morning, and then you have all these awesome people that are brainstorming ideas or giving you advice or reassuring you, and that was definitely helpful".

Participants receive life and job skill development services once a week. Sites host a weekly Climb Day throughout the program at the Climb office. These days focus on skill development and mental health (discussed in the next section). Table 2 presents an example schedule for a Climb Day. Climb Days are discussion oriented, interactive, and based on the program's principles of a psychologically informed, therapeutic environment. Working in cohorts, participants are encouraged to build social capital and relationships to support one another, such as offering rides or child care recommendations. Climb staff help participants prioritize and structure this peer support. Participants receive a \$25 gift card incentive for each Climb Day they arrive to on time and attend in full. Climb staff believe this positive reinforcement helps participants develop executive functioning skills and prepare to be successful at work.

Climb primarily brings in contracted or volunteer facilitators and instructors to provide skill development activities, such as life skills instruction and parenting skills development. Climb staff directly provide job

skills workshops on topics such as conflict resolution, time management, accepting feedback, interviewing skills, completing a sample job application, and resume preparation. Climb staff may also invite wraparound service providers to Climb Days, such as a professional attire resource or a partner who provides free eyeglasses to participants. Toward the end of the training period, Climb arranges a mock interview day with local employers.

Table 2. Example Climb Day schedule

Time	Activity
9:00 a.m.	Morning meeting
9:15 a.m.	Introduction to local resources
9:30 a.m.	Parenting class
11:00 a.m.	Hidden rules of professional dress
12:00 p.m.	Lunch
1:00 p.m.	Group therapy
2:30 p.m.	Break
2:45 p.m.	Interview preparation (As needed, participant appointments with a wraparound service provider)
4:30 p.m.	Wrap-up meeting

Source: Information provided to the case study team by Climb staff.

After completing career training, participants are matched with a job placement. Climb staff identify potential job placements through close connections with employers, research into current job openings, and connections with Climb graduates who are now in a position to hire Climb participants. Staff work with participants to find an appropriate match by considering factors such as participant interests, strengths and challenges identified during training, child care availability, physical skills or limitations, employer requirements, and expected wages and benefits.

Once Climb and the participant settle on a potential match, staff send the participant’s resume to the employer, schedule an interview, and help the participant research the employer and the position. The participant attends the interview. This process repeats until all participants receive job placements. The time to find a placement ranges from several weeks to three months. Staff noted participants find it frustrating when it takes several months to find a job placement, but Climb staff stressed the importance of finding the right fit rather than the first job available.

Employer perspective

“Only two [Climb] moms haven’t worked out. [We have a] better batting average with Climb than with non-Climb employees.”

Participants then begin the subsidized job placement. During this six- to eight-week period, employers allow participants to attend weekly Climb Days. The employers also commit to discussing any performance issues that arise with Climb and the participant, rather than immediately terminating the participant. During

the placement, participants receive support from Climb staff and feedback from their employers about their performance. Employers conduct two formal performance reviews during this period, covering topics such as professionalism, attendance, and job skills. The in-person performance reviews include the

participant and a Climb staff member. Climb staff facilitate communication between the participants and the employer, including reviewing performance reviews.

After the subsidized employment period ends, participants are expected to continue in their employment placement full time. The only exceptions are in cases where the participant, Climb staff, and employer mutually agree the job is not the right fit for the participant. In this case, Climb staff work with participants to identify new unsubsidized employment opportunities.

Mental health services

Individual and group counseling are required components of the Climb program. During Climb Days, each participant receives individual or group counseling from a contracted, licensed mental health provider. For individual counseling, participants are pulled out of a Climb Day activity for a 50-minute session every other Climb Day. Site staff, including the mental health provider, determine which activity to pull each participant from on a weekly basis based on their strengths and challenges. All participants join in group counseling together with their cohort for 90 minutes each week.

Both individual and group counseling focus on addressing emotional and psychological patterns that get in the way of participant success in work. For example, if a participant discusses an interpersonal conflict, the counselor will help the participant process the conflict and discuss how the participant might handle a similar conflict in a job setting. Group counseling helps participants process their reactions to the program and build communication skills. According to staff, the Climb program can be quite stressful for participants who have been out of school for a long time or may be putting their children in child care services for the first time. Group counseling provides an outlet to identify new feelings and behaviors, practice different ways of responding to stress, and discussing how participants might manage similar stresses in a workplace.



Supporting participants' mental health

Individual and group therapy support participants throughout the program, with a focus on addressing unique barriers that can get in the way of success in the workplace and reacting differently to stress, conflict, and trauma.



Guaranteed full-time employment

All participants who graduate from the Climb program are assured full-time employment in an in-demand industry. Climb staff work with local employers to find the right job match for each participant's interests, strengths, and challenges. Climb offers to fully subsidize participant's wages for the first six to eight weeks, and employers work through any performance issues with the participant and Climb staff.

As needed, mental health providers refer participants to other providers in the community for more intensive mental health services or for other needs, such as substance use or domestic violence. The provider and participant contact any referral partners together, so that Climb staff can support participants to get their needs met, and the mental health provider may accompany the participant to a first appointment. Mental health providers are also in close contact with other Climb staff. Although the providers follow standard confidentiality practices, they do share information with staff that is relevant to the participant's success in the program. Participants are made aware of this

communication from the start of the program cohort and sign disclosure forms describing Climb's policies.

Wraparound services

Climb refers applicants and participants to community partners for wraparound services, such as child care, transportation, and housing assistance. Within each program site, Climb has developed informal relationships with a range of organizations to provide these services. Referrals include food pantries, housing and homelessness organizations, legal aid, community health clinics, county social service agencies, domestic violence organizations, local charitable organizations, and state TANF and SNAP offices, among others. When referring participants to community partners, staff include participants as active partners in the conversation. They place the initial call together, practice communication skills before the participant places a call, or accompany participants to appointments. Staff view this engagement with partners as an opportunity for participants to practice communication, conflict, and executive functioning skills within a supportive environment and build those skills for the future when they are no longer engaged with Climb.



Pre-enrollment barrier reduction support

Climb staff often provide significant barrier reduction support to applicants to maximize their chance of success once accepted into a cohort. Staff support participants as they communicate and advocate for themselves with community partners, rather than advocating on their behalf.

Climb offers wraparound services before, during, and after the program:

- **Pre-enrollment.** Climb engages with applicants well before program enrollment to reduce barriers to participation through referrals to wraparound supports. Even when applicants are not initially selected, Climb staff continue to work with them to reduce barriers. Climb staff reported that it was not uncommon to work with applicants for several months or even years before enrolling them in a program cohort. This pre-program engagement enables staff to get to know applicants, develop relationships with them, and address major barriers that could prevent them from being successful in the program.
- **During program participation.** Once participants begin the program, staff regularly check in (for example, during Climb Days and each morning before training) to assess participants' needs for additional wraparound services. Staff provide referrals to community partners as needed.
- **Post-graduation.** Climb staff are available to assist program graduates if new needs arise. In the case of a mental health crisis, the mental health provider is available to stabilize the graduate and then connect her to an ongoing resource. Other Climb staff assist graduates with issues related to career growth, such as navigating raises or promotions and accessing continuing education. Each site also hosts a monthly graduate lunch, during which graduates connect with one another and with program staff, celebrate successes, share issues and troubleshoot together, and share information about job openings.

How Climb is organized, staffed, and funded

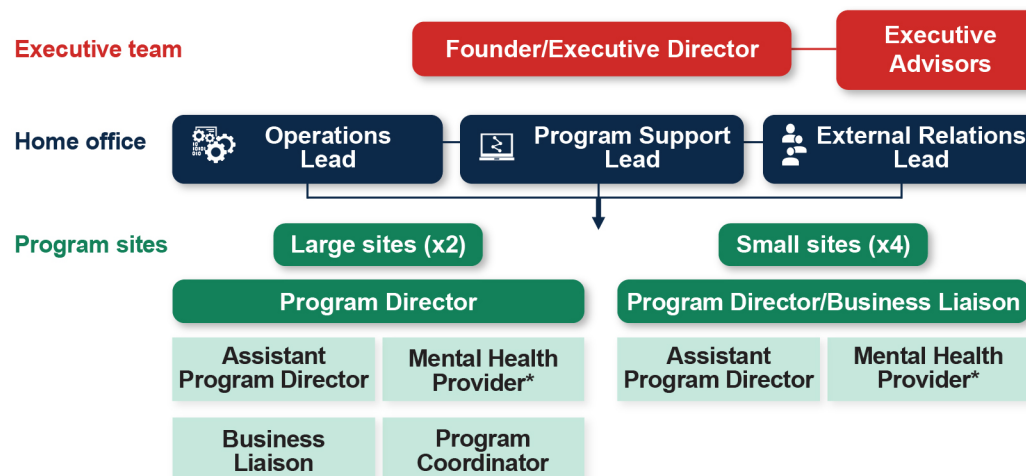
Climb has about 40 staff members organized into three units that support program services or expand Climb’s work by sharing its expertise to help other programs improve their services. Climb is primarily supported by TANF funds administered through the Wyoming Department of Family Services (DFS).

Organizational structure and staffing

Climb staff are organized into three distinct units, each with its own purpose and goals: (1) the executive team, which leads the organization; (2) the home office, which supports the program sites; and (3) the six program sites, which deliver services (Figure 2).

- 1. Executive team.** The executive team leads the organization and reports to its board of directors. It includes the founder/executive director and executive advisors who share Climb’s expertise with programs within and outside of Wyoming (for more detail, see the “Future plans” section below).
- 2. Home office.** The home office supports the program sites. A leadership team leads program operations, program support, and external relations teams and reports to the executive director. Program operations include program finances, human resources, information technology, and data systems. Program support includes supporting the operating principles, promoting consistency and efficiency across program sites, and overseeing staff training. External relations include marketing, communications, and fundraising. Home office staff are stationed throughout the state, either at program sites or working from home. According to Climb staff, specializing home office staff in distinct roles allows site teams to focus on providing direct services to participants rather than on fundraising or other operational concerns.

Figure 2. Climb Wyoming organizational chart



Source: Information provided to the case study team by Climb staff.

*Contracted staff.



Operating principles in staff hiring

Climb staff use the program's operating principles when interviewing new staff. Climb looks to hire staff who are able to respond well to the operating principles, including receiving and responding to feedback, experiencing productive discomfort, being self-aware, communicating

3. Program site staff. Site staff interact directly with participants. All sites have a program director, assistant program director, and contracted mental health provider. In addition, large sites have a business liaison and program coordinator. The program director is responsible for implementing site-specific strategy, the operating principles, and high-level employer relations. In small sites, the program director also serves as the business liaison. The assistant program director coordinates Climb Days, works with skill development training partners, leads recruitment efforts, and connects applicants and participants to wraparound services. The mental health provider delivers individual and group counseling. The business liaison coordinates trainings and works closely with employers to facilitate job placements. The program coordinator provides office and fiscal support, such as tracking attendance and handling participant incentives.

Staff hiring emphasizes fit with the organization and its operating principles. Applicants go through two or three interviews in the hiring process, some of which involve role-plays and helping the applicant to understand Climb's operating principles. Interviewers apply the operating principles and give immediate feedback to assess the applicant's response. For example, an interviewer may tell applicants they appear nervous and are talking fast to assess how applicants receive that feedback and respond. Climb staff noted they often recruit people with a previous connection to Climb (for example, past participants or staff at partner organizations) and awareness of its services. They typically recruit through word of mouth but also post positions publicly through social media and job hiring websites. Climb hires staff from a variety of backgrounds, not just those with direct service experience. The primary qualities Climb looks for are comfort with the operating principles, nonjudgment, interest in learning, self-awareness, being a team player, and strong organizational skills. Climb staff noted turnover in staff positions is low, which they attributed to the interview process in making sure the applicant is the right fit for the job.

Climb has a formal training system that guides onboarding for new staff. Although the system is formalized through training meetings and a training calendar, staff stressed that it is individualized for the needs, background, and learning style of each new staff person. Home office staff and site staff who have the same role as the new staff person provide trainings. The system starts with a planning meeting with the new staff member and all the staff who will provide training and continues with weekly "training landing meetings" in which staff discuss how training is going and any future training needs. Trainings often take place remotely due to



Training topics for Climb staff

- Psychologically informed environment and creating safety
- Poverty and trauma
- Motivational interviewing and active listening
- Confidentiality
- Group facilitation
- Climb model
- Role-specific trainings



Operating principles in staff training

During training for new staff, Climb incorporates the operating principles by making trainings interactive in order to build the self-awareness and confidence of new staff. Climb uses a color-coded system to describe where employees are and their progression. In the yellow phase, new staff ask “what” questions (for example, What is orientation week?); in the green phase, staff ask “how” questions (for example, How do we provide orientation?); and in the blue phase, staff ask “why” questions (for example, Why do we provide orientation?).

the distances between sites, but trainers may travel to provide in-person training.

Trainings cover established content developed by Climb, but the format is interactive and encourages new staff to ask questions in order to build their self-awareness and confidence. Trainings include foundational topics such as the psychologically informed environment, creating safety for participants, poverty, trauma, motivational interviewing, confidentiality, active listening, group facilitation, and the Climb model. There are also role-specific trainings. For example, trainings for new mental health providers include how counseling at Climb focuses on success in work, as opposed to counseling provided elsewhere that might have a different focus. Climb holds annual staff retreats that include trainings based on staff needs, often provided by external training providers. Regular communication within and across sites (discussed below) also provides a venue for ongoing training.

Staff communication and supervision are also guided by Climb’s operating principles. According to staff, communication among staff is open and direct, nonjudgmental, and interactive, and addresses conflict

directly. To support this, Climb offers two types of staff meetings: (1) content meetings, which follow a set agenda and focus on items such as program planning or training topics and (2) processing meetings, which have no set agenda and during which staff name and address any interpersonal conflict. These may be separate meetings entirely or covered within a single meeting. Staff have weekly individual meetings with their supervisor, though these meetings might be less frequent for more experienced staff. Staff have regular evaluations, called collaborative support plans, after six months on the job and then annually. According to program staff, evaluations are a time to process feedback that has been shared throughout the year and to celebrate staff successes.

For program sites, the home office facilitates regular, role-specific communication across sites. Weekly peer calls for each program site role (for example, program directors) enable staff to check in with one another, share emerging trends and lessons learned, consult on specific cases, and receive ongoing training. Each site also has a weekly three-hour staff meeting. During a cohort, staff discuss each participant during this meeting and how best to move her forward. All staff, including the mental health provider, may share what they know about the participant to inform service planning. Outside of active cohorts, these meetings focus on program planning. Table 3 summarizes communication activities.

Table 3. Staff communication activities

Activity	Involved staff	Frequency	Purpose
Individual supervision meetings	All home office and site staff and their supervisor	Weekly	Supervise staff and share feedback
Collaborative support plans	All home office and site staff and their supervisor	After six months on the job, then annually	Process feedback that has been shared throughout the year and to celebrate staff successes
Home office staff meetings	Home office staff	As needed	Discuss meeting content (for example, program planning or training) and process any interpersonal conflict
Cross-site peer calls	Site staff in each role (for example, program directors), facilitated by home office staff	Weekly	Share lessons learned across sites, case consults, and ongoing training
Site staff meetings	Local site staff	Weekly	Discuss meeting content (that is, program planning and participant progress) and process any interpersonal conflict

Source: Information provided to the case study team by Climb staff.

Key partners and their roles

Each Climb program site works with training providers, employers, and community-based organizations that provide referrals, wraparound services, and life skills education.

Contracted providers deliver tailored career trainings. Climb contracts with various types of entities to conduct training. Providers vary by site and by the type of industry or occupational training being provided and can include local community college staff, large employers, trade and labor unions, private individuals with relevant expertise, and private training providers, such as local truck driving schools. For each training, Climb staff create formal agreements or memoranda of understanding with training providers that specify the compensation for their time, including classroom and preparation time.

Employers help Climb staff determine in-demand industries and hire Climb graduates. Employers discuss their employment needs with Climb staff, which contributes to training planning, and hire Climb graduates. Over time, Climb staff reported developing strong partnerships with employers who value the supports Climb provides to graduates and are willing to accommodate participants attending Climb Days during the beginning of their subsidized employment. Staff engage with new employer partners by sharing program materials and information about upcoming trainings, reaching out about new job postings, and gathering information about employers' needs and values in order to create trainings that meet employer needs and find job placements for participants. For example, one program site worked with a union partner for a year to develop a training that met the union's requirements and to create a pathway for Climb graduates to move from training into the union's apprenticeship program.

According to program staff, once employers work with a few Climb cohorts, they tend to continue to work closely with Climb, hire Climb graduates, advocate for Climb, and introduce Climb staff to other employers in their industry. Many employers now reach out to Climb directly when they have open positions. In addition, some Climb graduates are now in leadership positions at local employers and reach out to Climb to fill vacant positions. Although program staff noted that they have developed strong relationships with employers over time, setting and maintaining expectations with new employers can be a challenge and not all employers continue to engage with Climb. Climb staff do not typically make

formal agreements with employers to accept Climb graduates at the start of a cohort, but rely on informal relationships and ongoing discussions about available job openings, until an employer accepts a participant into a job placement, at which point the employer signs a formal contract.

Community-based partners support Climb participants.

Community-based organizations play multiple roles, including referring applicants to Climb, providing wraparound services to Climb applicants and participants, and providing life skills education during cohorts. Climb sites typically have strong, informal relationships with community-based partners. According to program staff, community partners in Climb locations tend to know each other and communicate directly so as to avoid duplicating services, which contributes to long-standing relationships. Partners provide warm referrals to each other, such as escorting applicants to Climb or vice versa and speaking to each other's participants about their services. Life skills education partners are contracted providers or volunteers who work closely with Climb staff to tailor education content for Climb participants.

State-level partners support program participation for TANF and SNAP recipients. Climb has a formal partnership with DFS, which administers TANF and SNAP and is Climb's primary funder. Climb communicates directly with DFS to confirm receipt of SNAP or TANF to certify Climb eligibility and to help participants maintain their benefits. For Climb participants who receive TANF or SNAP, Climb counts as their approved work activity. Once applicants are enrolled in Climb, they receive a common approval letter that takes the place of regular work activity reporting for the duration of the program and qualifies them for state child care assistance. Climb and DFS leadership regularly communicate about program operations, outcomes, and finances, and Climb and DFS have conducted joint research about the Climb program.

Program funding

Since its inception, Climb has been supported primarily by federal and state funds, but Climb leadership reported that the sources of those funds have changed over time. Climb started in 1986 with a grant from the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services to the founder/executive director and her mother, who were both psychologists. They created the program with an emphasis on psychological services, job training, and working with employers. In 2003, Wyoming received an infusion of federal TANF dollars. The state then awarded \$5 million to Climb to expand its services. With this funding, Climb expanded to six sites statewide and shifted from serving teenage mothers to single mothers eligible for TANF. In 2014, Climb started to diversify its funding base to include foundation and corporate grants, individual donations, and SNAP E&T funds. In 2015, state partners connected Climb staff with SNAP E&T regional and state funders. Climb received a small amount of SNAP E&T funding and over time grew its partnership with SNAP, becoming one of two organizations to be written into the state SNAP E&T plan and receive funding.



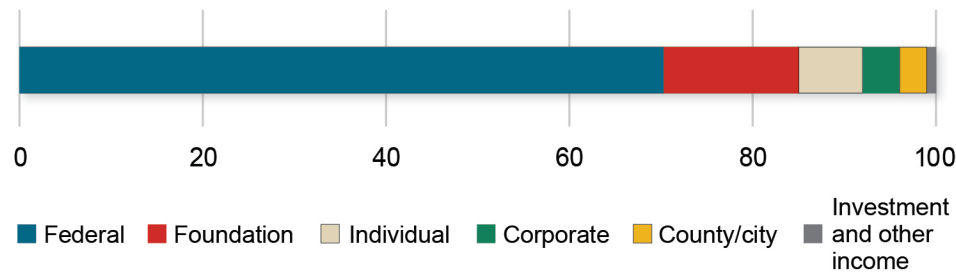
Climb's connection to TANF

Climb's primary funding source is a competitive grant from the state TANF agency. Although applicants need to be eligible for TANF to be accepted into a cohort, they do not actually have to receive TANF to participate. About 10 percent of Climb participants receive TANF, according to program leadership. Participation in Climb is an approved activity that satisfies the work participation requirements of Wyoming's TANF program.

As of 2020, Climb’s annual budget is \$5 million. On average, services cost \$15,716 per participant (Climb Wyoming 2019). Climb’s primary funding source is TANF funding awarded through competitive grants by DFS. Other funding sources include SNAP E&T, corporate and foundation grants, individual giving, and city or county funding (Figure 3). Climb and DFS staff reported that TANF funding is flexible and covers all program activities except fundraising. It is a program grant that is not tied to individual participants or their activities, but rather broadly funds the Climb program. SNAP E&T funding is tied to the number of SNAP recipients Climb serves and covers allowable activities, such as job training and administrative costs. Climb leadership prioritizes flexible funding sources to support the organizations, and in turn, Climb staff reported not feeling constrained by reporting requirements or other onerous restrictions related to funding.

Funding sustainability is one of Climb’s main challenges, according to program staff. Despite funding challenges, staff reported that funding levels have been sufficient to maintain current programming. Climb leadership would like to expand to new site locations but reported that current funding is insufficient to support expansion. Staff described some federal and grant funding sources as unpredictable particularly sources that require annual applications, which makes staff uncertain about expanding and sustaining new program sites.

Figure 3. Climb funding sources



Source: Climb Wyoming 2019.

How Climb uses data to monitor program outcomes

Climb has served a total of 2,479 moms, with 4,508 children, across all program sites through 2019. In the past year, Climb started tracking candidates served pre-program, totaling 1,100 families. To monitor the success of the program as a whole and for individual participants, Climb staff track and analyze data regularly. Climb’s data collection efforts include:

- 1. Service receipt data.** Climb staff use an electronic Salesforce customer relation management system to document all staff–participant interactions and record services and supports provided. All Climb staff have access to the system to facilitate information sharing among staff and ensure that any staff member can serve any participant while being apprised of that participant’s needs and history with the program.
- 2. Reporting data.** Climb aggregates information about all current participants on a regular basis for reporting purposes. Each Climb site produces a monthly Program Outcome Report by using information from site staff captured in Salesforce. The monthly report provides measures of participation in training and Climb Days, when and where participants are placed in jobs, and their current wages. Climb home office staff use the Program Outcome Report to monitor the status of each site’s cohorts, identify program successes and challenges, and inform their required reporting to DFS.

3. Outcome data. Climb staff track both short- and long-term participant outcomes, such as program graduation rates, employment rates, wage increases and maintenance, receipt of public assistance, and receipt of health insurance. Climb summarizes this information in its annual progress report (Table 4). In addition, Climb staff use the information to inform its program design, including the Climb Day services and training offerings (Climb Wyoming 2019). Climb staff track participant outcomes 3, 6, 9, and 12 months after each graduate transitions from the program into full-time employment, and staff of the University of Wyoming Survey and Analysis Center (WYSAC) administer follow-up phone, email, and text surveys to all graduates at 15, 18, 21, and 24 months after their completion dates. Climb first contracted with WYSAC to track long-term participant outcomes after the program’s statewide expansion in 2004.

Climb has worked with other partners to estimate cost savings to the state that might be related to the Climb program. For example, using a pre-post analysis of data provided by DFS, Climb staff estimated that the program saves Wyoming approximately \$871,464 annually from decreased SNAP use among program graduates (Climb Wyoming 2019). However, this pre-post analysis does not allow one to infer that participation in Climb caused reduction in food stamp use as, even without the program, participants might have improved over the same period. The Wyoming Department of Health conducted a pre-post assessment of Medicaid enrollment and expenditures of Climb graduates and compared those findings to a statewide benchmark group of Medicaid enrollees. According to information shared with the case study team, from 2010 to 2017, Climb graduates were enrolled in Medicaid at or below rates of the benchmark group. Graduates at all Climb sites had lower Medicaid expenditures post-program than they did pre-program, and in most sites, those post-program expenditures fell below the average costs measured in the statewide benchmark group. However, this comparative pre-post analysis does not allow one to infer that participation in Climb caused reduction in Medicaid expenditures. It is possible that there are differences between Climb graduates and other Medicaid enrollees that this analysis does not account for.

Table 4. Selected outcome measures for 2015-2019 (all sites combined)

Measure	Outcome
Percentage of participants who graduated from the program	94%
Percentage of graduates who were employed at program end	91%
Average monthly wages	
At application	\$1,151
3 months post-program	\$2,327
2 years post-program	\$2,436
Average total annual earnings of graduates	
At application	\$729,757
At program end	\$2,728,780
Change in percentage of graduates receiving public health insurance (2 years post-program)	-45%
Change in percentage of graduates receiving private health insurance (2 years post-program)	+194%
Change in food stamp use by SNAP participants (2 years post-program)	-87%

Source: Climb Wyoming 2019 and information provided to the case study team by Climb staff.

Note: N = 643 participants.

How Climb Wyoming adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic

Wyoming experienced relatively few COVID-19 cases as of June 2020, recording 257 cases per 100,000 residents while the national average was 821 cases per 100,000 residents.^{a,b} Nonetheless, the pandemic negatively impacted the state's economy, with the unemployment rate spiking to 9.6 percent in April 2020. By June 2020, it had dropped to 6.8 percent.^c To respond to the needs of participants and increased demand for services, and to follow state public health orders, Climb did the following:

- **Transitioned to virtual service delivery.** Climb shifted Climb Days to the Zoom video conference platform. Climb provided computers and Internet access to participants, and staff helped participants use technology to engage in activities and meet program expectations. To accommodate participants who were now caring for children at home, Climb Days took place in two- to three-hour blocks a couple of days a week, rather than on one full day. Climb staff planned these sessions in advance to focus on the most important activities and use tools like breakout rooms to make the sessions interactive. Individual counseling with the mental health provider continued, but group counseling was modified due to concerns about the safety and comfort of participants. Industry trainings that were in progress in spring 2020 concluded virtually or in person with safety precautions, depending on local public health restrictions. As of July 2020, Climb sites planned to provide career training virtually to new participant cohorts and were considering modifications such as a more flexible structure, shorter training sessions over a longer period of time, and open exit for participants who find a job on their own.
- **Adjusted job placements and trainings in response to economic conditions.** For participants who were in training during spring 2020, Climb pursued job placements in the relevant industry, though few positions were available and the process took longer as a result. If participants needed a job sooner to support their families, Climb staff helped participants use their social networks to find immediate employment rather than wait for a job opening with higher wages and benefits in a relevant industry. For participants who were already in job placements, Climb staff helped them negotiate with their employer to allow them to work from home or extend their placement. Going forward through the rest of 2020, Climb expected that new trainings would focus on work readiness skills or industries with sustained demand, such as computer skills.
- **Increased focus on wraparound supports.** Climb responded to an increase in basic needs by helping applicants who were not enrolled in a cohort, and may never join one, with wraparound supports. Climb staff have helped applicants with referrals to wraparound supports and supported applicants preparing for and finding immediate jobs to fit their current situation. Climb staff worked with the Wyoming Department of Family Services to help applicants apply virtually for SNAP and TANF benefits.
- **Shared best practices across sites.** Each Climb site had the flexibility to develop its own innovations in response to local conditions and public health restrictions, with input from the home office if needed. Climb increased the frequency of email communication, all-staff meetings, and peer-to-peer calls to facilitate best practice sharing, such as using breakout sessions in Zoom and splitting sessions into smaller blocks of time.

Sources: ^aUSA Facts (2020); ^bJohns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (2020); ^cU.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020c).

Promising practices, remaining challenges, and future plans

Promising practices. Climb and partner staff described several promising practices that they reported helped single mothers with low income achieve self-sufficiency through career training and placement:

- **Support in reducing pre-enrollment barriers.** Climb engages with applicants well in advance of initiating a new cohort to connect them to wraparound supports and reduce barriers to program participation and employment. Because cohorts accept a maximum of 12 participants and each

program site offers only two or three cohorts per year, Climb staff are selective about who they enroll. To determine whether to enroll an applicant, Climb staff assess the applicant's access to stable transportation, housing, and child care for the duration of the program; ensure the applicant either is not in crisis or is receiving treatment for substance use, domestic violence, or mental health needs; and ensure the applicant has or is in the process of obtaining identification and other documents required for employment. Even when applicants are not initially selected to enroll, Climb staff continue to work with them to reduce barriers for several months or years.

- **Guaranteed full-time employment in an in-demand industry, following tailored job training and subsidized job placement.** All participants who graduate from the Climb program are assured full-time employment in an in-demand industry or occupation. Climb staff identify industries with openings that pay a high wage and offer benefits or are of interest of applicants, and work closely with contracted training providers to provide training tailored to that industry and the needs of participants. Climb staff work closely with local employers to secure job placements for graduates that, after an initial subsidized and supportive period, lead to permanent positions, except in rare cases where the match is not a good fit. Climb staff keep their participant cohorts small in part to ensure that they are able to line up stable employment for each graduate.
- **Emphasis on supporting participants' mental health.** Climb's approach uses a psychologically informed environment, where staff consider the psychological and emotional needs of Climb participants at each phase of the program and during each interaction. Climb staff are trained to understand the types of trauma that participants may have experienced and how that trauma affects the brain—specifically, a participant's executive functioning skills. Climb participants regularly receive individual and group therapy throughout their involvement in the program, which Climb and partner staff see as a major factor contributing to positive program outcomes.
- **Create a psychologically informed environment.** Climb staff adhere to a set of operating principles to guide their interactions with one another and with participants. These principles drive the organization's culture and set expectations for how the program will be implemented. Staff approach services as a team, which helps them support each other and ensure that applicants and participants do not experience service silos or limits on what any staff member can help them with. Staff's utilization of Climb's operating principles creates a psychologically informed environment that allows participants to learn to effectively communicate and handle conflict in the workplace once they leave the program.

Remaining challenges. As Climb continues to provide innovative services to help participants move toward self-sufficiency, Climb staff reported four continuing challenges:

- **Maintaining sustainable program funding.** Although Climb would like to expand its services within Wyoming, it does not have the funding capacity to do so.

- **Emotionally taxing nature of the Climb model and its operating principles on staff.** Working so closely and openly with one another requires a large emotional investment and makes setting and maintaining professional boundaries with participants difficult. Maintaining boundaries is especially difficult in smaller communities where Climb staff might frequently encounter participants outside the program settings.
- **Responding to rapid economic or industry changes, particularly once a training is already underway.** Climb staff discussed a recent experience with a CDL training, during which the price of oil changed, thus reducing the demand for commercial drivers.
- **Engaging new partners.** This is particularly challenging when working with employers unfamiliar with Climb or who have negative views toward participants' need for mental health supports. Working with new employers is necessary to continue finding job placements for all participants.

Future plans. Climb's leadership and board have developed a strategy to share Climb's expertise with other entities. According to Climb leaders and program staff, they are taking what they have learned from years of practice and now have a model they believe other programs could benefit from. The executive team found new sources of funding for two types of expansion work, and at the time of the site visit, were in the midst of this work. The first is in assisting other programs outside of Wyoming with redesigning their services to adopt aspects of the Climb model, particularly a focus on guaranteeing full-time employment, rather than just reducing barriers to employment and leaving program participants to find jobs on their own. The second is in building the case management skills of other programs, such as child support case managers in the Wyoming Department of Workforce and Family Services.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Methodology

The State TANF Case Studies project seeks to expand the knowledge base of programs that help low-income individuals, including TANF recipients, prepare for and engage in work. The project is showcasing nine programs selected because of their different approaches to working with these individuals. Mathematica and its partner, MEF Associates, designed and conducted the study.

To select programs for case studies, the study team, in collaboration with the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), first identified approaches that showed promise in providing low-income individuals with employment-related services and linking them to wraparound supports, such as child care and transportation. These approaches might increase self-sufficiency directly by helping participants find employment or indirectly by providing supports and alleviating barriers to employment. The study team identified four approaches, or domains:

1. Wraparound supports
2. Full-family transitional housing and supports
3. Employment-based interventions
4. Collective impact and collaborative community initiatives

Within each domain, the study team then identified potential programs by searching key websites, holding discussions with stakeholders, and reviewing findings and lessons from ACF and other studies. The next step was to narrow the list of programs based on initial discussions with program leaders to learn more about their programs and gauge their interest in participating. The final set of case study programs was selected for diversity, in terms of geography and focus population. Case studies of these programs illustrate the diverse practices operating around the country to assist TANF recipients and low-income individuals in finding and maintaining employment. Their selection does not connote ACF's endorsement of the practices or strategies described.

For each program selected, two or three members of the project team conducted a site visit to document its implementation. For eight programs, team members conducted two- to three-day visits to an average of two locations per program. The visit to the ninth program was conducted virtually via video conferencing due to COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions. Each site visit consisted of semistructured interviews with administrators of the program, leaders of their partner agencies, and the staff providing direct services. The site visit teams interviewed, on average, 15 staff per program. During in-person visits, the teams also conducted in-depth interviews with an average of three participants per program and reviewed anonymized cases of an average of two participants per program. In addition, teams observed program activities, as appropriate.

For this case study, two members of the research team conducted a two-and-a-half-day site visit in March 2020 to the Climb offices in Cheyenne and Laramie, Wyoming. The team conducted semistructured interviews with 12 staff members from Climb and 7 staff from partner organizations. The team conducted in-depth interviews with two participants and reviewed anonymized case files for four Climb participants. The team also observed two activities during a Climb Day. The team conducted a follow-up telephone call in July 2020 with a program leader to learn about how Climb responded to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

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