



THRIVE!

Helping Older San Diegans Get Good Jobs
through an Industry Sector Approach

Executive Summary

March 27, 2012

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Finally, we would like to thank the 44 mature job-seekers who described their experiences, often difficult, in seeking employment in a challenging labor market. It is for you and others like you that we continue to pursue the development of effective, sector-focused approaches to meeting older worker and employer needs.

About the Insight Center

The Insight Center is a national research, consulting, and legal organization that develops and promotes innovative solutions to help people and communities become, and remain, economically secure. Since 2007, the Insight Center has been convening aging leaders to better understand the barriers that low-income elders of color and women face in reaching economic security. Supported by a strong and diverse network, we seed innovative program and policy ideas to help older adults reach economic stability. The Insight Center was also among the first proponents of sector-based workforce development and has over a decade of experience developing the research methodology for sector initiatives, designing sector-specific workforce systems, and assisting sector initiatives' start-up, implementation, and sustainability. In 1999, the Insight Center launched the National Network of Sector Partners (NNSP), a national association dedicated to promoting and supporting industry sector-based workforce initiatives.

Executive Summary

Older Workers Are Struggling

Older workers around the country are struggling. Job-seekers 55 and older have more difficulty than their younger peers in finding jobs and are more likely to experience long-term unemployment. Those who do find new jobs are more likely to work involuntarily part-time and to accept significantly lower earnings. As a result, older adults nationwide are suffering economically, cutting back on necessary expenditures, forgoing medical treatments, accumulating debt, and depleting savings. They are also doing all they can to survive a challenging labor market and stay in or reenter the workforce.

“We want jobs that we can be proud of that don’t pay minimum wage, and whatever you can do, the magic that you can weave to get us in there, that is what we are here for.”

— *Mature job-seeker*

The situation for older workers in San Diego, California is no better. The unemployment rate (10.3% in 2010) for workers 55 to 64 in San Diego County has risen faster than for nearly all other groups, even as the cost of living has gone up significantly. Those not yet eligible for Medicare and Social Security need employment income and health insurance now; and even those 65 and older who do receive income supports and health coverage often fall short of meeting their basic needs. The bottom line: fewer and fewer seniors in San Diego are making ends meet.

Older Workers Are Needed

Meanwhile, mature workers bring a wealth of experience and skills to the labor market, and possess qualities employers often seek: reliability, good judgment, strong inter-personal skills, critical thinking, and excellent communication skills. In San Diego, as elsewhere, older workers are the fastest-growing segment of the workforce, a trend that will only accelerate as the overall population continues to age. Because younger workers are too few to replace them, and because mature workers have skills and knowledge that businesses and industries cannot easily replace or afford to lose, these older adults will increasingly be needed in the workforce. If the labor participation rate of older workers is not increased, labor shortages will result, with consequences for business competitiveness and economic growth. Especially for growing industries, employing and retaining older workers is increasingly a business imperative.

“A sustainable and growing economy will not be possible in the talent-poor future without a strong and vibrant labor market that includes older workers and other groups that are currently under-represented in today’s workforce.”

— *The New Agenda for an Older Workforce, Manpower, Inc.*

Moreover, even during times of high unemployment and overall labor surplus, industries need skilled, capable workers in order to thrive. Businesses often experience a mismatch between the qualifications of available workers and the changing demands of critical jobs. They expect not only occupation-specific skills but also dependability and willingness to work hard, ability to communicate and work well with customers and co-workers, and ability to solve problems and exercise good judgment. Older adults, with extensive work and life histories, often bring these assets to the job – and can be trained for industry and job-specific skills they lack.

The Challenge: Connecting Older Workers with Good Jobs

The world of work includes many aspects, including self-employment, volunteerism, continuing education, and intermittent or part-time employment. However, economically insecure older adults in focus groups told us that what they most wanted was steady jobs that offered stability, benefits, and adequate income to meet their pressing financial needs. Older workers face a range of challenges to obtaining well-paid jobs with benefits. They may need to update skills to transition to different sectors of the economy or may lack recent experience and comfort with the job search process. They may also face employer misperceptions that older workers are more costly or less productive than younger workers. Low-income older adults especially may also need supports such as housing or transportation assistance, access to affordable healthcare, and help managing personal finances in order to complete training and find and maintain a job.

Existing workforce systems, under-resourced and, in a time of high unemployment, overburdened, are often unable to understand or offer services tailored to meet the particular needs of older workers. They are also often not strongly connected to or coordinated with the other services and service providers assisting older adults. Fortunately, groups around the country have begun to experiment with new ways of meeting the unique needs of the aging workforce. The U.S. Department of Labor, for example, has provided funding to 10 partnerships around the country to improve services for older workers. In San Diego, the Mature Workers Coalition – a consortium of experts on older adult and employment issues who come together to further the interests of mature workers – has met since 2006 to develop new strategies to help older adults gain employment.

“The scope and nature of the problems experienced by older workers suggest the need for robust employment and training programs and services that focus on the needs of older, unemployed workers.”

— Older and Out of Work: Trends in Older Worker Displacement, *The Sloan Center on Aging & Work*

A Sector-Based Approach

Rigorous research has demonstrated that regional, industry-focused workforce partnerships, or “sector initiatives,” are highly effective at increasing the earnings of low-income people. Sector initiatives work because they inquire deeply into the needs of both specific target populations and specific industries. Sector initiatives involve employers as partners and design programs that provide participants the industry and job-specific skills required to offer employers what they most value: highly-qualified employees. Equally important, by providing occupational and basic skills training coupled with holistic case management services and supports, a sector approach enables low-income and vulnerable populations to find – and keep – jobs that lead to economic security.

For more than a decade a national consensus has grown about the effectiveness of the sector approach. A seminal, multi-year, random-assignment study conducted by Public/Private Ventures showed that participants in sector-focused programs were more likely to work and earned significantly more than randomly-selected control group members with similar characteristics. Sector initiative participants also worked more consistently and were more likely to work in jobs with higher wages that offered benefits. Until now, however, the sector approach has not been widely applied to helping older adults.

Research Findings

Through a grant from the Gary and Mary West Foundation and with guidance from an Advisory Board that built on the existing Mature Workers Coalition, the Insight Center has conducted extensive research to serve as a basis for developing a pilot mature worker sector project. The research has led to designing a program to help older workers enter occupations in the healthcare sector and included:

- **Analysis of the regional economy and labor market**, which identified healthcare as a growing sector with a range of accessible and self-sufficiency wage-paying occupations
- **Focus groups with older job-seekers**, which identified broad interest in healthcare occupations and flagged potential challenges that must be addressed
- **Employer interviews**, which highlighted strong interest in hiring mature workers and suggested home care provider and patient access representative as target occupations
- **Scan of support services** available to older adults in San Diego, including financial services, legal services, housing services, health services, benefits access, transportation and nutrition assistance
- **National scan of mature worker initiatives**, which identified best practices in supporting employment of older workers as well as highlighting a dearth of sector-focused training partnerships tailored to meet older adults' particular needs.

According to a national best practices scan conducted by the Insight Center, effective mature worker initiatives:

- Connect mature workers to career pathways in high-demand, high-wage jobs
- Offer training and support services customized to meet the needs of mature workers
- Provide opportunities, such as internships, for employers to experience the value of older workers
- Include peer networking and comprehensive, holistic support
- Promote changes in the workforce system, employer practices, and policy to support the inclusion of mature workers

The Insight Center is now working with local partners to build on this research and apply it to the development of a new program model to help older San Diego residents obtain employment and reach economic security, while also improving the aging and workforce development systems to better meet the specific needs of older adults from here on out. What follows is a summary of the research findings and specific recommendations for designing new programs.

San Diego's Mature Workers

U.S. Census data shows that San Diegans are growing older: people 55 and over comprise almost one in four residents (nearly 23% of the population, or roughly 680,000 people) in San Diego County, with the fastest growth occurring among older adults age 55 to 64. The population is also growing more diverse. San Diego is now majority-minority, with most population growth occurring among Latinos and Asian/Pacific Islanders.

At the same time, the unemployment rate for those 55-64 remains high. At 10.3% in 2010, the unemployment rate for this group was higher than the overall rate and increasing faster than for any other

age group (besides those 24 and younger). And yet, while joblessness continues, the cost of living has risen sharply in San Diego over the last several years, requiring more income just to make ends meet. In fact, 42% of all residents 65 and older – 75% of older Latinos and 63% of older African-Americans – do not have income adequate to cover their most basic expenses (as defined by the Elder Economic Security Standard Index).

Needs, Interests, and Assets of Mature Workers

In three different focus groups involving 44 San Diego job-seekers 55 and older, we found that older adults were eager to work and felt they had considerable assets to offer employers, including: reliability, interpersonal skills, good judgment, maturity, and extensive work experience.

Despite these attributes, older job-seekers in these focus groups had difficulty finding a job. With a median length of unemployment of two years, participants cited a range of barriers to employment. Challenges included: lack of industry-specific knowledge, credentials, and experience;

“As an aging adult, I have a library of knowledge to offer.”

— *Mature job-seeker*

age discrimination; and difficulty getting an opportunity to demonstrate their value to employers. At the same time, focus group participants were all eager for short-term skills training and employment-related services that would likely land them a decent job. How much they earned was, to many, less important than assurance that the training would actually lead to a job that brought with it a sense of job security.

Older adults expressed a range of reasons for wanting to work beyond financial needs and health benefits. They had a strong desire to use their skills and knowledge, to be productive members of society and, notably, to make a difference. Foremost in the reasons cited, however, was the conviction that they still have important assets to contribute to the workforce.

Older job-seekers expressed desire for support services to help them complete training and obtain

“I’m sure everyone here would be open to healthcare if they were open to us.”

— *Mature job-seeker*

employment. Among the services most important to them were: peer support, health services, housing services, financial services, and transportation assistance. Finally, older adults in these focus groups expressed a strong interest in working in healthcare, particularly in clerical and care-giving positions, but also cited difficulties in transitioning into these kinds of jobs from other industries.

Why Health Care?

Health Care and Social Assistance is one of the largest and fastest-growing employment sectors in San Diego County. According to labor market statistics, this sector is expected to grow by 7%, netting over 10,000 new jobs, between 2011 and 2014. The healthcare sector provides a wide array of fast growing occupations, many of which pay self-sufficiency level wages and are accessible to elderly and low-income populations. In particular, positions providing in-home care or performing clerical and customer service tasks in healthcare settings are both accessible (defined as requiring less than an associate’s degree or moderate-term on-the-job training) and projected to grow. (See below for more data on accessible, growing occupations in San Diego’s healthcare sector.)

Accessible Occupations in Healthcare San Diego County, 2011-2014

| Description | 2011 Jobs | 2014 Jobs | Change | % Change | 2011 Median Hourly Earnings |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------|-------------|-----------------------------------|
| Medical secretaries | 8,486 | 9,251 | 765 | 9% | \$15.91 |
| Nursing aides, orderlies, and attendants | 8,288 | 9,010 | 722 | 9% | \$11.94 |
| Medical assistants | 6,747 | 7,466 | 719 | 11% | \$14.78 |
| Home health aides | 5,158 | 5,786 | 628 | 12% | \$10.31 |
| Personal and home care aides | 4,722 | 5,184 | 462 | 10% | \$9.50 |
| Licensed practical and vocational nurses | 3,928 | 4,269 | 341 | 9% | \$22.61 |
| Office clerks, general | 2,868 | 3,069 | 201 | 7% | \$13.92 |
| Receptionists and information clerks | 2,790 | 2,944 | 154 | 6% | \$13.24 |
| Billing and posting clerks and machine operators | 1,720 | 1,845 | 125 | 7% | \$17.04 |

Source: EMSI Complete Employment 2011.4

Interviews with human resources leaders from nine San Diego healthcare employers confirmed growth projections. Home care agencies projected particularly rapid growth; one projected her staff to double in size in the next three years, as it had in the previous 2½ years. Hospital and community clinics projected more steady growth, driven by rising demand for healthcare services as the population ages and the Affordable Care Act (“healthcare reform”) is implemented. According to projections cited by one employer, up to 300,000 more people in San Diego County will need healthcare services when final provisions of the Act go into effect in 2014, likely requiring significant expansion of the healthcare workforce.

“Besides skill and knowledge, we want common sense and the ability to make good judgments, as well as good personal boundaries. The mature population can bring this. The elder worker is dynamite.”

— Home care employer

Home care agencies cited finding skilled caregivers as their overall primary challenge. Hospital and community clinic employers said that sifting through large applicant pools to identify high quality employees for entry-level positions posed their biggest challenge. For both groups of healthcare employers, the recruitment challenge isn’t just about generating *enough* applications – but also about generating the *right* ones.

Home care agencies found mature workers particularly valuable and employed a high percentage of them. Similarly, hospitals cited mature workers’ reliability, judgment, and interpersonal skills as excellent attributes, especially for positions involving customer service. Finally, employer interviews revealed a few home care employers and hospitals that not only provide good jobs for mature workers, but are also willing to partner in designing a customized training and job placement program for older adults.

In the end, labor market research and employer interviews suggested consideration of two potential immediate target occupations for mature workers:

- Home Care Aide
- Patient Access or Patient Services Representative

“I would like to see older workers throughout the organization. They add a different level of maturity among the ranks.”

— Hospital representative

It is important to note, however, that these occupations may not be right for *all* older adults. Home care, in particular, can be strenuous work that pays entry-level wages of between \$9 and \$11 an hour. While a \$9 an hour home care job may leave older adults still struggling, \$11 an hour is nearly enough to provide a single older adult economic security – according to the Elder Economic Security Standard Index (Elder Index) for San Diego – provided full-time hours are available. Because employment practices among home care agencies vary considerably, however, it will be particularly important to work closely with those home care employers who provide the highest quality jobs. It will also be useful to look for ways to support the career advancement of home care workers into related professions.

In the future, it may be useful for the project or individual partners to address other identified healthcare employer needs, such as an evening and weekend LVN program (for community clinic employees), phlebotomy training for medical assistants (to make them more marketable), EEG technicians (if enough of them are needed), clinical lab scientists and technicians (as existing employees begin to retire) and medical coders (to meet the new ICD-10 regimen).

Recommendations

Based on findings from demographic and labor market analysis, employer interviews, job-seeker focus groups, and a scan of national best practices in helping older job-seekers find good jobs, we recommend local leaders pursue the following activities to help older adults in San Diego find and keep jobs, while also meeting regional labor market needs.

Develop a mature worker sector initiative.

1. **Aging services providers, workforce development organizations, employers, and others in San Diego should continue to collaborate to develop a mature worker sector initiative.**

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of sector initiatives: regional, industry-focused partnerships that improve access to good jobs in ways that strengthen an industry’s workforce and increase the employment and earnings of low-income people. An important opportunity exists to leverage the power of this approach and to incorporate best practices from successful mature worker initiatives to help older adults in San Diego achieve economic security.

2. **The initiative should focus on the healthcare sector and two occupations within it:**

- **Home Care Aide**, to help home care agencies meet a pressing need for more and better-skilled caregivers; and
- **Patient Access or Patient Services Representative**, to help hospitals and clinics find high-quality candidates by delivering older workers trained to their specifications.

Healthcare employment continues to grow in San Diego and offers older workers a mix of accessible and high-quality jobs. Moreover, older job-seekers express interest in working in healthcare, and healthcare employers, particularly home care agencies, express interest in hiring

older workers. Home Care Aide is among the region's fastest-growing occupations, and hospitals and clinics identified Patient Access or Patient Services Representative as jobs for which older workers would be well-suited. Given the physicality of home care work and its relatively low pay, however, would-be caregivers should be carefully screened, both for desire to provide care and for the ability of home care jobs to meet their economic needs. While older adults in our focus groups expressed an interest in home care and asserted that they would be thrilled to get an \$11 per hour job, these jobs will certainly not be for everyone.

Establish partnerships and define roles.

3. **An organization or organizations should take responsibility for leading program design and implementation and for securing funds to launch and sustain the initiative.**

A few funders have already expressed interest in supporting this project, but a lead organization or organizations should pursue these opportunities further. Several leadership structures could emerge. For example, one lead organization may develop the home care component, while another pursues the patient services representative track. Alternatively, one organization could provide intensive case management services and participant tracking, while another leads employer outreach and occupational skills training development and implementation.

4. **Participating organizations should develop memoranda of understanding to formalize partnerships based on complementary expertise.**

Because no single organization has the expertise to meet the full range of older worker and employer needs, we recommend that the initiative formally establish partnerships, particularly between organizations that deeply understand the needs of older adults and organizations that understand the needs of industry and have expertise in developing industry-focused workforce development programs for disadvantaged workers. Key partner roles and capacities include:

- **Project management**, requiring capacity to raise and administer funds, facilitate partnerships, and track, evaluate, and manage projects to achieve intended outcomes;
- **Case management**, requiring understanding of older adults and resources available to meet their needs, as well as a holistic, person-centered approach to working with them;
- **Employer involvement**, requiring understanding of industry and credibility with industry representatives, including ability to engage with employer partners on their terms;
- **Development and delivery of training**, requiring capacity to customize both occupational and basic skills training for the healthcare sector and for older workers;
- **Job search assistance**, requiring familiarity with industry-specific job search processes and ability to provide contextualized instruction on job search skills;
- **Support services**, requiring relationships with a wide array of service providers and the ability to provide timely and responsive client support in partnership with others;
- **Outreach and referral**, requiring commitments to provide information about the program to appropriate participants and generally to assist with recruitment and screening; and
- **Funding**, including both financial and in-kind contributions.

Partnerships should be built around complementary areas of expertise and a shared commitment to meeting the needs of both job-seekers and employers. Memoranda of understanding should ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear and agreed upon from the outset.

5. **Organizations providing case management should have or develop partnerships with aging services and other human services providers.**

Helping mature workers gain employment and achieve economic stability depends on providing supports to address the range of needs that may arise, including for health services, housing services, financial services, and transportation assistance. It may be necessary to identify those services most accessible to and appropriate for older adults and to address service gaps, if any.

Meet the needs of mature job-seekers and employers.

6. **Services should target low-income job-seekers between the ages of 55 and 64.**

Focus groups in San Diego highlighted the precarious situation of unemployed adults between the ages of 55 and 64 who face particular challenges in the labor market but do not yet have access to public benefits such as Medicare and Social Security. These older adults have a pressing need for immediate employment-related income and health insurance, and are often eager for training; therefore, it was decided to target this particular effort on the 55-64 year old cohort, while still recognizing the significant (and distinct) needs of older adults 65+ on limited, fixed incomes.

7. **All participants should receive comprehensive, person-centered economic case management and job search assistance.**

To identify and develop plans to address barriers to employment, participants should receive up-front assessment, including benefits screening, with the goal of helping them achieve economic security (as measured by local indices like the Elder Index). Participants should also receive ongoing support to identify and address problems that arise in the program and early phases of employment, as well as intensive help in searching for and getting a job.

8. **Health care employers must be involved in all aspects of the program.**

Research has shown that employer involvement increases the effectiveness of workforce programs. Such participation ensures that training is aligned with job opportunities and deepens the investment of employers in hiring graduates. Employer involvement, from design to curriculum development to delivery to evaluation to sustainability, should be incorporated wherever possible.

9. **The initiative should establish two employer advisory groups.**

Success in helping mature workers gain employment depends on understanding and meeting the needs of employers and older adults. Because the needs of home care agencies are so distinct from those of hospitals and clinics, we recommend convening two advisory groups, one focused on each employer type. A lead organization(s) should take responsibility for working with each group to:

- Aggregate input and needs of multiple employers;
- Engage new employer partners and deepen involvement of existing partners;
- Communicate progress and challenges; and
- Develop solutions to meet emerging employer needs.

10. Training should be tailored to meet the specific needs of older adults.

Training should include both computer and job search skills, which older job-seekers specifically identified as areas of need. Job search skills training should include use of the Internet and social networking to find jobs and in completing on-line applications. For older adults who have been out of the workforce for some time or for those transitioning from other industries, it will be important to provide contextualized training on workplace expectations in the healthcare field. Training design should take into account both the prior work experience of older adults and the likelihood that they have not recently participated in education and training. The pace and schedule of training may also need to be adjusted to meet the particular needs of older participants.

11. Training should be tailored to meet the specific needs of local health care employers.

Curriculum must be industry and occupation-specific and developed in close consultation with employers. Wherever possible, training should address commonly-observed skills gaps, so older adults have a competitive advantage in the hiring process. In addition, training should be delivered by instructors with industry expertise and should involve employer representatives, materials, and work-sites wherever possible.

12. Training should incorporate internships or other “try before you buy” approaches.

Because older job-seekers cited particular difficulty in “getting a foot in the door,” the program should include opportunities for participants to demonstrate their value to employers and to develop relationships with employees in a position to refer them for jobs.

Pursue systemic changes.

13. The San Diego Mature Worker Sector Project Advisory Board should continue to meet to work on systemic reforms and to help develop new programs for mature workers.

Around the country, aging services providers and workforce development organizations are rarely connected. San Diego is to be commended for its sustained, collaborative efforts to build interagency partnerships and develop solutions to increase the employment and economic security of older adults. The momentum of this group should be cultivated and built upon.

14. The project should pursue systems changes that will improve workforce and aging services, employer practices, and policies that support the employment of older adults.

We recommend that the project consciously work to identify and address structural barriers to meeting worker and employer needs. For example, efforts to protect Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) funding from further cuts and to help orient the program toward preparing older adults for competitive jobs may increase SCSEP’s impact. Changes in the public workforce system, such as including low-income older workers as a priority population or making it easier and less expensive to partner with the community college system for customized training, could benefit both program participants and numerous other older adults.

Similarly, given the low-pay and instability associated with some home care jobs, it will be important to work with home care employers dedicated to providing quality care *and* quality employment opportunities to pursue changes in public policy and industry practice that raise the wages of home care aides and improve job quality in other ways.

Finally, older job-seekers strongly feel that they face age discrimination in hiring. To learn more about employer perceptions of older workers and to promote the hiring of older adults, the project should pursue such strategies as employer dialogues, which involve frank, two-way conversations, grounded in research, between employers and experts on older adults. Alternatively, the project may pursue efforts to highlight the value of older workers and to recognize employers that are supportive of older workers, such as through public relations or media campaigns. These actions could begin to address age discrimination.

Conclusion

In the current economy, unemployed older workers and employers each face challenges. On the one hand, older job-seekers struggle to compete with younger applicants to gain or regain the employment needed for their economic security. On the other hand, employers continue to have difficulty finding qualified candidates for selected growth occupations and in identifying the most-qualified candidates among the flood of applicants for many open positions.

The research and recommendations presented here are the first step toward improving the employment prospects and economic security of older adults in San Diego, while also helping to address the needs of their potential employers. Although many older workers are struggling in the labor market, they are also increasingly needed as the entire workforce ages. As the demographics of San Diego, like the rest of country, continue to shift, the practices of employers, workforce development organizations, aging services providers, and others must adapt to recognize older workers as important assets and contributors to our economy. The partners engaged in THRIVE! clearly have the vision, capacity, expertise, commitment, passion, and wherewithal to do so.

For the full report (and citations) associated with this Executive Summary, go [here](#).

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