Inspiration Corporation is grateful for the support of the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation that provided a grant to conduct this research.

Staff at All Chicago were instrumental in approving access to people for interviews and providing the necessary contact information, including Karen Kowal, Kim Schmitt, Sharan Subramaniyan and Adam Czernikowski. The project would not have been possible without building on the ongoing work of the Chicago Jobs Council to contact all people with an interest in employment services, especially Marlen Perez. Numerous people reviewed the draft survey instrument and offered improvements, including Carrie Thomas, Angela Morrison and Marlen Perez at the Chicago Jobs Council; Melissa Young at Heartland Alliance; staff at All Chicago; and workforce development staff at Inspiration Corporation.

The surveys, data analysis, and report writing were completed by Taylor Divine and Anna Sobon. Taylor Divine served at Inspiration Corporation as a VISTA Summer Associate. During the rest of the year she is a preschool teacher in the suburbs of Chicago. Anna Sobon worked on the project for a summer internship. She is a graduate student completing her Master of Social Work degree at Loyola University Chicago and aims to continue working to improve the lives of those experiencing homelessness throughout her career in social services.

The opinions, conclusions and recommendations included in this report are those of Inspiration Corporation and do not imply the endorsement of any of the parties that assisted in implementing this project.
ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

All Chicago:
A nonprofit organization that staffs the Continuum of Care and manages the city-wide database of people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness and the services they receive. All Chicago also administers emergency financial assistance, builds community partnerships in a response to end homelessness, and conducts data analysis, training, and research, in the field.

CES: Coordinated Entry System
The process of identifying, assessing, matching, and tracking people using homeless services in Chicago.

CES Assessment:
The questionnaire that is completed to determine people’s eligibility for HUD-funded homeless services and provides appropriate matches to services. It includes contact information, demographic information, housing situation and possible diversion opportunities, disability information, and interest in employment.

CoC: Continuum of Care
The Continuum of Care is a membership organization that works to prevent and end homelessness in Chicago. Mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the CoC “strategizes and plans a coordinated, comprehensive approach to providing housing and services for people experiencing homelessness.”

HUD: United States Department of Housing and Urban Development

Literal Homelessness:
The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recognizes four categories of eligibility for homeless services, two of which apply to this study and will be referred to as “literally homeless.” The conditions describe where people spend the night, and in the assessment process the information is gathered about where people spent the prior night:

- A person staying in a place not meant for habitation (such as in parks, on public transportation, under highway overpasses, etc.)
- A person staying in an emergency shelter

One List:
The list of names of people currently accessing any aspect of Chicago’s homelessness system. People who enter the system through an emergency shelter or through receiving supportive services may be on the One List but may not have completed a CES Assessment.

VI: Vulnerability Index
Each person who completes the CES Assessment is assigned a VI score based on the level of risk related to their homelessness. The VI score is determined from calculations that take into account people’s age, family status, length of homelessness, and disabilities.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background
There are many circumstances that lead people to experience homelessness. Some people face long-standing or complex issues that need extensive support, and are at high risk of suffering severe hardship, dangerous health outcomes or even death as a result of homelessness. Others are homeless due to short-term disruptions and face far fewer barriers to stabilizing their housing.

For the latter group, some find themselves without stable housing because they lose a job, or cannot find work that pays enough for them to afford housing. However, little has been known about the employment prospects for people engaged with homeless services in Chicago. To address that knowledge gap, this study was conducted, with a grant from the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, to obtain detailed information related to employment for a sample of people experiencing homelessness in the city.

Without the resources to do a survey of the entire list of people in the homeless information system, Inspiration Corporation consulted with other service providers and advocates to determine what subgroup should be selected for this study. As a result of those discussions, the study was limited to adults at least 25 years old who had been determined to have low levels of need. These would be people least likely to receive housing services and most likely to be able to gain income from working. The goal of the project was to interview 100 people and provide the first detailed look at this population’s demographics, past work experience, education levels, skill sets, and potential barriers to employment.

Design
Inspiration Corporation worked with All Chicago and the Continuum of Care, the organizations that maintain information on people experiencing homelessness in Chicago, to identify people for the survey. People who complete assessments for homeless services indicate if they are interested in working and accessing employment services. In coordination with the Chicago Jobs Council who has been contacting people interested in services, this research project contacted a subset of those individuals who met the survey criteria above and had phone numbers. Interviews were conducted between March and July, 2018.

Inspiration Corporation developed a detailed 76-question survey that included both quantitative and qualitative responses. The survey was administered by two temporary program staff members by phone. In all, 91 people completed interviews.

At the end of each interview, the researchers provided referrals to services relevant to respondents’ interests when asked to do so. All people interviewed were offered a $25 Target electronic gift card that would be emailed to them (51 people received gift cards in total).

Key Findings
- 77% of respondents had a work history of five years or more.
- 74% of respondents had worked within the previous 12 months.
- 72% of respondents had a high school diploma or higher with 50% reporting at least some college experience. The majority of respondents reported they have access to a computer or smart phone, have an email account they use regularly, and have the skills to find a job posting and complete a job application online.
While many individuals reported solid work experience, education, and ability to look for work, a significant minority faced a variety of obstacles.

- 18% had been unemployed for more than two years
- 28% lacked a high school credential
- 38% had a felony conviction
- 36% reported a disability or health condition that limited the type of work they could do
- 37% said they had difficulty finding transportation to get to job interviews

- 30% reported that they were not currently conducting an active job search. The most common reason given was that they were doing temporary or gig work to make money, and that interfered with looking for better opportunities.

The most notable reported barriers to employment by this population were: lack of transportation, lack of stable housing, mental health concerns, and criminal backgrounds.

- 35% had previously engaged or were currently engaged with some type of workforce service.

At the time of the surveys, 60% of the respondents met HUD’s definition of homelessness, but due to their low levels of need, are unlikely to receive housing assistance.

**Recommendations**

**Additional research and data collection**

1. Conduct a detailed employment survey for other groups of people in the homeless information system.
2. Conduct a longitudinal study of individuals with low need levels to see how they fare over time.
3. Collect more detailed employment-related information as a standard part of the homeless services assessment process.
4. Collect more detailed income-related information, separate from employment (such as receipt of and eligibility for public benefits), as a standard part of the homeless services assessment process.
5. Monitor the ability of Rapid Re-Housing programs to connect participants to employment and the long-term impact on housing stability.
6. Conduct further research to understand the potential benefits of expanded homelessness prevention services and emergency financial supports.

**Programs and services**

1. Create a system of employment or income “navigators,” parallel to the concept of housing navigators.
2. Make direct support, especially transportation assistance, available to job seekers beyond what is attached to training programs.
3. Restructure skill training programs to include schedules that fit around work, and provide paid training or stipends.

**Public policy**

1. Develop policies to make public transportation more affordable for people experiencing homelessness and other unemployed job seekers.
2. Develop policies in Illinois that limit how far back employers can look into job applicants’ criminal background.
3. Expand all areas of support for unstably housed people who do not meet the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s narrow definition of homelessness.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

There are many circumstances that lead people to experience homelessness. Some people face long-standing or complex issues that need extensive support, and are at high risk of suffering severe hardship, dangerous health outcomes or even death as a result of homelessness. Others are homeless due to short-term disruptions and face far fewer barriers to stabilizing their housing.

For the latter group, some find themselves without stable housing because they lose a job, or cannot find work that pays enough for them to afford housing. However, little has been known about the employment prospects for people engaged with homeless services in Chicago. To address that knowledge gap, this study was conducted to obtain detailed information related to employment for a sample of people experiencing homelessness in the city.

Information about people who are using or seeking homeless services in Chicago is maintained in a centralized database managed by the Chicago Continuum of Care (CoC). The CoC is a membership organization that works to prevent and end homelessness in Chicago. According to the CoC website, it is “mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)” and the CoC “strategizes and plans a coordinated, comprehensive approach to providing housing and services for people experiencing homelessness.” The CoC is housed and staffed at All Chicago, a nonprofit organization that also provides emergency assistance, and training and research.

The CoC oversees a Coordinated Entry System (CES) to identify people, assess their current circumstances, prioritize their level of need, match them to available services, and track their outcomes. As people access the service system, those who are living in places not meant for human habitation or are staying in emergency shelters are included in a list of people who are homeless, referred to as the One List. The CES intake assessment for people on the One List primarily covers background information and housing status, but it does ask if people would like to explore a way to increase their income through work, and if so, if they want to be connected to employment services. No other data is collected specific to their employment history or assets. To understand who might be able to use employment as a way to overcome homelessness, and what services they might need to help them, much more information is needed. Inspiration Corporation undertook this study to obtain that information for a small sample of people on the One List, to provide the first detailed look at this population’s demographics, past work experience, education levels, skill sets, and potential barriers to employment.

Without the resources to do a comprehensive survey of the entire list of people in the CES system, Inspiration Corporation engaged in conversations with service providers and advocates to determine what subgroup should be selected for a study. As a result of those discussions, Inspiration Corporation decided to look at the group of adults 25 years old or older who had been ranked in the CES system as having the lowest levels of need. The reasoning for selecting this group was three-fold:

First, because housing services are prioritized for people with the greatest levels of need, this low-barrier group is unlikely to receive housing services, and most will not qualify for long-term, subsidized housing. They might have a better chance of connecting to employment or education services that could help them gain income so they wouldn’t need assistance from the homeless services system.

Second, people with fewer barriers would be more likely to succeed at becoming employed, and earning enough so they could secure their own housing. Workforce development programs currently available might be able to assist them in attaining that goal.
Finally, the needs of youth 18 to 24 are quite different from those of adults, and the services available in both the housing and employment fields are also different. The adult population was selected because it makes up a larger portion of the homeless population.

With a grant from the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, Inspiration Corporation undertook this project with a goal of interviewing a sample of 100 people in the CES system with the lowest levels of need. The following sections of this report describe the research objectives and methodology and summarize some of the key findings from the project.

1.2 Objectives

The objectives of this research were:

- To better understand the demographics, past work experience, education levels, skill sets, and barriers of adults 25 and older experiencing homelessness in Chicago with low Vulnerability Index (VI) scores who were interested in increasing their income through work.
- To identify what programs and services would best assist this group of people in entering or re-entering the workforce.
2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Questions
There were several research questions to be answered by this study. In each case, the study was limited to obtaining the information about adults over 25 with low VI scores who were interested in increasing their income through work.

1. What are the demographics of this group of people?
2. What is their past work experience?
3. What are their education levels?
4. What are their work-related skillsets?
5. What is their current job search readiness?
6. What are their potential barriers to employment?

2.2 Research Design
The questions for the survey were developed from several sources. These included:

1. Intake assessments and enrollment forms for Inspiration Corporation’s employment programs, including its current Foodservice Training program and prior Employment Preparation Training program. These tools included questions about people’s work experience, education, skills, goals, strengths and barriers to employment.
2. A draft employment readiness assessment tool using the framework of the Praed Foundation’s widely-used Adult Need and Strength Assessment. ANSA instruments are intended to be used in a collaborative process between participants and service providers, so many of the questions and their rating scale could not be adapted to a research survey use. However, several questions relating to individuals’ readiness for undertaking a successful job search were integrated into the survey.
3. An employment assessment developed for the Chicago Housing Authority’s FamilyWorks program that included questions related to possible barriers to employment and general skill levels.

A draft of the survey instrument was reviewed by several individuals outside of Inspiration Corporation with experience in employment services for low income adults and knowledge of the CES assessment process.

The survey used to collect data was designed to obtain both qualitative and quantitative information to answer the research questions. Some questions had “yes” or “no” answers, some asked respondents to rate themselves or choose from a list of options, and some were open-ended questions. The survey was administered in English, and the data was collected by two temporary program staff by phone, with the exception of one face-to-face interview. The survey is included in Appendix 1.

The Chicago Jobs Council had been receiving a list of people each week who completed an assessment and were interested in employment services, in order to contact them and provide them with referrals to services. To avoid contacting people twice, the researchers for this study replaced CJC in making the calls to people who had low levels of need, were 25 years old or older, and who had phone numbers. CJC continued to reach out to the remaining people on the list.

The interviewers had a current list of more than 40 workforce development resources to offer survey participants who wanted referrals to services, based on specific needs they identified. The resources included the American Job Centers around the city, education and vocational resources at the City
Colleges, and a number of nonprofit organizations that run workforce programs. The researchers contacted all of the resource organizations before including them on the list to be sure information was current, and that organizations were responsive to service inquiries.

At the beginning of each contact, people were informed that they were being called because they had expressed an interest in employment services when they completed their CES assessment. They were asked if they would participate in a voluntary survey that would identify the types of services that could help them, having no impact on their housing services, and that all results would be anonymous. They were also told that at the end of the interview the researcher would provide referrals for services they indicated they were interested in during the call.

People were also informed that they could receive a $25 electronic gift card from Target for completing the interview if they provided an email address. Target gift cards were selected based on the store's accessibility in many parts of the city, and its offering of emailed cards. The researchers sought cards that could be distributed through texts as they would be available to more people but only found options that eventually needed to be accessed through email or a website to use them.

In the course of the first few interviews, based on respondent’s hesitations, the researchers added a comment reinforcing that none of their information would be shared with any employers. This encouraged people to speak more honestly about their possible barriers to successful employment and why they left their last jobs.

At the end of the interviews, referrals to services were made that corresponded to the respondents’ areas of interest. In most cases, the information was emailed to respondents after completion of the interviews. In a small number of cases, it was provided by phone before ending the call. Whether people wanted referral resources or not, the interviewers told everyone who provided an email address that they would send them an email to confirm the address and would await a response before sending a gift card. This process was established so that gift cards would not be sent to the wrong email addresses or inactive accounts. When the person responded to the email to ensure it was correct, they were then sent the gift card. Inspiration Corporation received no undeliverable messages for the gift cards that were sent.

2.3 Sample

People to contact for this study came from the CoC’s One List. This means that they were either living in a place not meant for human habitation or staying in an emergency shelter when they completed their CES assessment. HUD uses the term “literal” homelessness to refer to people in these living situations. The CES assessment is used to determine the severity of people’s level of need. Based on information provided in the assessment questions, each individual is assigned a “Vulnerability Index” (VI) score. High scores indicate the greatest level of need. The VI scores were used to select people for this study, selecting those with low VI scores. Single individuals with a VI score of 0 to 2 and family heads of household with VI scores of 0 to 5.5 were included as the low VI population (high scores for the most vulnerable can be 20 or higher).

All Chicago provided lists of names of individuals on the One List who completed assessments between March 21, 2018 and July 27, 2018 and who expressed an interest in increasing their income through work. Since the research began in June, the initial list included people who had been assessed from the March date up to the start of the project. Thereafter, lists were provided weekly of newly assessed
people. The researchers received a total of 1,777 names. Of those 1,777 people who were interested in employment, 980 had a low VI score. From there the sample size was narrowed to individuals who were 25 or older and had provided a phone number. This totalled 727 individuals.

The researchers noticed that the number of people assessed per month expressing an interest in employment declined during the last two months of the study, perhaps due to fewer people entering the homeless system when the weather was more temperate. The numbers from March were omitted from the review of monthly trends since the list only included people for the final ten days of the month. Moreover, the number of people with low VI scores fell even faster, reducing their representation among those assessed from 65% in May to 35% in July.
The researchers were able to call 466 of the 727 individuals who met the full criteria people between June 22, 2018 and July 30, 2018. Of the 466 people called, 91 people were interviewed, resulting in a response rate of 19.5%. The sample was not randomly selected, and the individuals who were called had the option not to participate. After the survey, 51 of the 91 responded by email to confirm their email address and received a Target gift card.

2.4 Limitations

The biggest constraint on the study was that the survey was written in English and could only be administered to participants in English. However, only one person contacted said they were not comfortable doing the interview in English. Aside from one in-person interview that occurred because a respondent was on site at the interviewers’ office, the only way to conduct the interview was by phone. This disqualified those who did not have a phone number from participating. Several people who were called also expressed that they would rather complete the survey online and asked for it to be emailed to them. When those who had a phone number were reached, they were often in places with multiple distractions, such as in grocery stores, doctor’s offices, job interviews, and public transportation. These distractions often made it difficult for people to complete the survey, with many people expressing that they were unable to complete it at that time but would be available at a later date.
3. RESULTS

3.1 Overview

Another limitation was the small sample size (91 individuals) and the lack of statistical reliability of the data. The interviews conducted were only with people who were assessed between March and July of 2018. It is unknown if this data is representative of this entire population or if it will be consistent in the future.

This section reports on highlights of the results from the survey, focusing on the questions that had quantifiable responses. The survey was designed to have the most close-ended responses possible to facilitate quantifiable analysis of the data. Open-ended questions, such as the type of job people were looking for, were used when responses would be too varied to allow for pre-selected response options. The researchers looked for patterns in open-ended questions after completing the surveys, to see if there were consistent groups of answers to report on. In most cases, answers did not fall into useful patterns. For close-ended questions, respondents sometimes provided more qualitative information along with the categorized response. When possible, the researchers captured these responses. The results reference those responses where patterns emerged in that information, even though the number of responses is not available.

The conversations with respondents yielded descriptive responses that left the researchers with strong impressions but were not measurable within the realm of this study. Where those seemed important to understanding how the needs of this group of people could best be met, they are included in the Discussion section of this report.

The summary data for all of the survey questions is included in Appendix 2. Inspiration Corporation will also make the anonymous data set available to anyone who wants to do further analysis, such as comparisons of responses across varying demographic groups of the respondents.

3.2 Demographics

Inspiration Corporation received some demographic information from the CES assessments, including age, gender, race, ethnicity, income, and income sources. The assessment data and the additional survey responses provided a basic demographic profile of the respondents.
Twenty people reported having a disability; of those, five were receiving disability benefits. The survey question did not seek to find out if the disability was officially diagnosed or just self-reported.

When individuals in the group of names provided for this study were assessed for the CES process, all of them met the HUD guidelines for literal homelessness. The researchers for this project asked again about people’s housing status on the day the employment interview was conducted. Figure 3.2.7 shows that 60% of the respondents still reported being literally homeless, but 40% reported no longer having a living environment that qualified as literally homeless. It is unclear if their living environments actually changed from when they completed their CES assessments, or if they simply gave a different answer than in the CES assessment. Many people also move quickly between living situations when they lack stable housing, so they might have responded differently if they had been contacted on a different day.
3.3 Work Experience

A majority of respondents indicated significant work experience and job stability. Three-quarters of the respondents had a total work history of more than 5 years, and three-quarters had worked within the last 12 months. Sixty-nine percent reported that their last job had been a permanent position, two-thirds reported it had been full time, and half had been on their last job more than one year. There was also a sizable minority of responses that suggested a greater degree of job instability. Nearly half had been on their last job less than one year, one-third had worked only part-time, and one-quarter had been out of work more than one year.
CUMULATIVE WORK HISTORY

- More than 5 years: 4%
- 3 - 5 years: 8%
- 1 - 2 years: 10%
- Less than 1 year: 16%
- Never worked: 77%

TIME SINCE LAST JOB

- Within the last 6 months: 18%
- Within the last 12 months: 32%
- Currently Employed: 40%
- More than 2 years ago: 8%
- More than 5 years ago: 8%
- More than 1 year ago: 8%

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

- Permanent: 69%
- Temporary: 22%
- Seasonal: 6%
- Self-employed: 3%

FULL-TIME OR PART-TIME WORK

- Full-time: 68%
- Part-time: 32%

*Figure 3.3.1 – Distribution of respondents’ lifetime work history*

*Figure 3.3.2 – Distribution of time since last job*

*Figure 3.3.3 – Percentage of respondents who worked in each employment status on last job*

*Figure 3.3.4 – Percentage of respondents who worked full-time or part-time at most recent job*
The median hourly wage on respondents’ last jobs was $12 an hour. This is an indication that while many people had stable work histories, most were not working in high skilled positions. Figure 3.3.6 shows the distribution of hourly earnings. Eight individuals reported earnings as a weekly or annual amount. Since the number of hours worked was not known, those are not included in these wage summaries. The full range of responses is included in Appendix 2.

The main reason cited for the most recent job ending was quitting, meaning that the individual left the job by choice. When asked why the respondents quit their jobs, responses varied. Common responses were lost housing, lack of transportation, illness (mental and physical), and/or relocation. No one cited job dissatisfaction or disinterest as a sole reason. The full list of reasons is in Appendix 2.
3.4 Education

Fifty percent of respondents reported having at least some college experience. On the other end of the educational spectrum, 28% lacked a high school diploma or GED.

![Educational Credentials Chart]

*Figure 3.4.1 – Percentage of the highest level of education reported by respondents*

Forty-two percent had experience in a vocational training or certification program. Note that responding “yes” to having experience in a vocational certification or training did not necessarily equate with completing the program. Of the 37 people who had specific vocational training or certification, 31 had worked in their trained field. The full list of reported trainings and certifications is in Appendix 2.

![Vocational Certifications or Trainings Chart]

*Figure 3.4.2 – Percentage of respondents with vocational certifications or training*

![Worked in Trained Field Chart]

*Figure 3.4.3 – Number of those with training who worked in trained field*
3.5 Skillsets

Survey respondents reported strong competencies in the areas of reading and math. Of the few who felt their reading or math levels were low, most were open to taking classes to improve their skills.

Most people reported some degree of computer skills as well, with only 11% saying they had “no computer skills.” Seventy-seven percent reported they had some skills or strong skills, and the remaining 12% reported advanced or specialized skills.
While many people had computer skills, 48% replied that they were nevertheless interested in taking computer classes. However it should be noted that an unrecorded portion of people expressed that the classes they wanted to take were not basic job readiness skills but rather training in specific software or industry related programs. Ten people reported that they were currently attending or have attended computer classes, including two of the people who classified themselves as having “no skills.”

Three-quarters of respondents said they had prior experience in the field in which they were seeking employment. Seven people said they were looking for “anything,” and were excluded from calculating this experience data point.

While people indicated they were looking for work in fields they had already worked in, many were also interested in training for new fields. Seventy-eight percent of respondents said they would want to train for a new field, including 75% of those who were looking for work in a field they already had experience in. Responses indicating interest in training opportunities included: wanting to work in a field more accommodating to their physical needs (such as a warehouse worker wanting I.T. training); scheduling needs (such as a night shift janitor wanting to be trained as an electrician); or having an interest either outside or related to what they have personal or professional experience in (such as a CNA wanting Pharmacy Tech training or an airport translator wanting training in social services). The most requested fields to be trained in were healthcare, information technology, commercial driving, skilled trades, administration, counselling/social services, and automotive mechanics. Sixteen people stated they wanted training in “anything.”

A full list of the types of work people said they were searching for and the training programs they requested can be found in Appendix 2. An unrecorded number of people expressed sentiments that finding or participating in training programs was not a priority at the time of taking the survey, but they did want to receive information about them anyway.
3.6 Job Search Experiences

Respondents were asked about their access to computers and skills for conducting a job search. The majority of people reported high levels of self-sufficiency regarding accessing and using computers in their job searches. Seventy-eight percent of survey takers said they had access to a computer, meaning they owned a computer or smart phone and/or utilized a public library or resource center computer lab. Ninety-one percent had an email address that they reported using regularly and stated that they felt they had the skills needed to do an online job search. Conducting a job search would be much more difficult for the 22% without access to a computer or the 9% who said they did not have adequate skills.

![Computer Access](image1)

**Figure 3.6.1 – Percentage of respondents with access to a computer or smartphone**

![Regular Use of Email Account](image2)

**Figure 3.6.2 – Percentage of respondents who use email regularly**

![Online Job Search Skills](image3)

**Figure 3.6.3 – Percentage of respondents who feel they have the skills to do an online job search**
The survey also asked people about other aspects of conducting a job search. Sixty-three percent had a current resume, and 92% said they were very or somewhat comfortable conducting job interviews. Sixty percent had clothing appropriate for job interviews, and 63% said they had a way to get to job interviews.

Forty percent of respondents did not have professional clothing. Many respondents expressed that they did previously have professional clothing, but had nowhere to store it after they lost their housing.

Most of the 37% of respondents who reported they had no way to get to job interviews indicated that either they did not have access to a vehicle or they could not afford public transportation costs.
Sixty-nine percent of respondents said that they were currently doing an active job search, and had applied for an average of 11 jobs in the prior week. Figure 3.6.9 shows the distribution of the number of jobs applied for by those people who were conducting an active job search.

![Conducting an Active Job Search](image1)

![Number of Jobs Applied for Previous Week](image2)

When asked if they were using or had used any workforce services to get assistance, approximately 35% of respondents said yes. They named a variety of resources, from unemployment insurance offices to public workforce centers to nonprofit service providers. The list of services they mentioned is included in Appendix 2.

Despite the majority of people reporting that they had the skills and resources to conduct a job search, 29% stated that they were not actively looking for work and that they had applied for zero jobs in the past week. The top reason respondents gave for not searching was that they were currently working at temporary jobs or “gigs.” Other reasons included being involved in an education or training program, being preoccupied with trying to secure housing, and expressing feelings of being overwhelmed.

### 3.7 Potential Barriers to Employment

The survey included questions about issues that often create barriers to finding or keeping employment. The questions covered areas of criminal background, health, access to transportation, and family care requirements.

A noticeable barrier faced by respondents is a criminal background, specifically felony convictions. Thirty-eight percent of respondents had a felony conviction. Over half of the respondents with felony convictions said that their conviction was five or more years ago. Of the 35 respondents with felony convictions, 31 responded that they would like to receive assistance from a program that works with people who have criminal backgrounds.
Responses to questions about misdemeanors and arrest records are included in Appendix 2.

When asked to rate their overall health, only 9% rated themselves as fair or poor. However, 23% replied yes to the later question, “Are there any types of work you can’t do because of health conditions?” The most common conditions cited were asthma and back pain. Many of these respondents also had indicated they had a disability. In all, 36% had a disability, a limiting health condition, or both. The list of all conditions is included in Appendix 2.
Eighty-three percent of respondents said they did not have access to a reliable car that they could use every day. This would be a significant barrier to taking a job in the suburbs or certain parts of the city. Needing to rely on public transportation could also create long commute times depending on the location of the job. An unrecorded number of people stated that they wanted to work in a warehouse. Unfortunately many warehouse positions had moved to the Chicago suburbs and respondents had no way to commute there.

**ACCESS TO A RELIABLE CAR**

![Pie chart showing access to a reliable car]

*Figure 3.7.5 – Percentage of respondents with regular access to a reliable car*

Few respondents indicated that they currently had family care obligations that impeded their ability to work. The researchers did not have family size information from the CES assessment, so it is not known whether this is because respondents were primarily single adults. Future research could correlate family size information from the initial assessments with these findings to better understand the need for childcare among people experiencing homelessness who are looking for work. An unrecorded number of people said a sick family member was why they initially left their jobs, but the relative no longer needed care since they were now deceased.

Of respondents, 11% said they had children who would need care so that they could work. One person said they already had childcare but were searching for a better option than their current situation. All the respondents who said they had children requested assistance locating or paying for childcare. This included a parent who lacked summer/after school options for a 13-year old with special needs, which often prevented them from working. Only 7% of respondents said they have a family member needing care if they worked, and the majority of those people (four of the six) said they already knew how it would be provided.
Figure 3.7.6 – Percentage of respondents needing childcare in order to work

Figure 3.7.7 – Percentage of respondents needing other family care in order to work
4. DISCUSSION

Prospects for Employment

Looking at the overall responses, the survey discovered significant levels of work experience, education and self-reliance among the respondents. As highlighted previously, the data shows that a majority of this population have more than five years of work experience, some college education, and proficiency in technology.

The respondents were strong advocates for their own needs. Large numbers reported using email regularly, having access to computers or smartphones, and having the skills to conduct various aspects of a job search. The high rate of computer access also demonstrates their initiative, as most respondents did not have a personal computer of their own but knew of a public place they could go to access one. They recognized that they had something to contribute to the workforce, even if they were in low-skill positions; they had, on average, multiple years of experience in those jobs. Many respondents where in touch with their career aspirations as well, often expressing satisfaction for the field they were working in.

These characteristics refute the common stereotype that people experiencing homelessness are unwilling to work. In fact, 16% of respondents were currently working, 70% of people were doing an active job search, and those doing an active job search applied for an average of 11 jobs per week. Even for those who said they hadn’t looked for work last week, the most common reason was that they were working a temporary job or “gig” or attending a training program.

Collectively, these are positive indicators that many people will be able to return to work.

Barriers to Stable Housing

However, finding a job will not necessarily provide stable housing. The median wage of people’s last jobs was only $12.00 an hour. One-third had only worked part-time on their last job; one in five was on a temporary job; and one-third had jobs that lasted less than six months. Together, these suggest that even if people are working, many will not earn enough to pay rent or have long-term employment that would let them maintain a stable home.

The low earning rates are especially troubling. The median wage of $12.00 an hour leaves someone unable to afford most housing in Chicago, even as a single person. If someone works 35 hours per week and spends the generally recommended 30% of his or her income for housing, he or she can afford $546 a month. Yet the fair market rent for a studio apartment in Chicago is $879, before counting utilities. The fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment, suitable for one adult and one child, is $1,180. That would require someone to pay nearly 65% of their income for rent. If people with low earning rates can find housing, these high rent burdens put them at great risk of future instability. The expenses of one medical emergency or other family crisis can leave them behind on their rent and facing the prospect of eviction. This points to the need for policies that expand the availability of affordable housing throughout the region.
Accessing Workforce Services for Immediate Needs

Some people interviewed for this study might become employed with assistance from workforce development services. However, the survey results pointed to potential challenges in getting people to participate in programs, and gaps or mismatches between people’s needs and the services that are available.

The first challenge was that people seemed to agree to receiving resource referrals with reluctance. According to the data, the numbers show that the majority of people said “yes” to receiving assistance, but the researchers reported that the feeling of the respondents was ambivalence rather than excitement or relief about finding help. The interviews did not solicit information about the causes for this hesitancy. One possible explanation is that people did not sense they had a great need for services, but were not going to decline a resource that might be useful. For example, 50 people said they were interested in receiving help with their resume and/or interviewing skills, even though 57 people reported already having a resume and 53 people said they were very comfortable doing job interviews. Likewise, 57 people said they would take a referral to receive job search assistance even though 63 reported they were already doing an active job search.

Another explanation may be that they wanted only the tangible benefits associated with programs, such as transportation assistance. Fifty-three people said they would participate in a two to four week job readiness training program if it was required for them to get help, but the interviewers did not sense that people were enthusiastic about the prospect. Approximately 35% of respondents were using or had used some kind of service. Their engagement with another program might have made referrals less necessary; or, lack of results from past programs might have discouraged further participation. Some people expressed feeling tired of being bounced around in the system and not receiving the help they needed.

One piece of information that would have shed more light on their interest in services was whether they followed up on the referrals and received assistance. Unfortunately, that information was not available within the scope of this project.

A second challenge is that the majority of workforce development services may not meet the near-term needs of people in this sample. For example, job readiness training programs typically cover basic employability and job search skills that this group appears to have already acquired. More advanced program content would need to be developed to help them move to a new level.

Third, the structure of how services are bundled may not serve the more experienced people in this sample. Resources for people’s immediate job search needs are seldom available without participating in programs that offer services not appropriate for this group of job seekers. For example, they desired help getting job leads, but programs that work with employers to find job openings usually limit the leads to people who have completed their training programs. Access to supportive services like interview clothes or transportation assistance are also limited to people who take a training program. It is not obvious that the more experienced people in this sample would benefit from short-term training, although they would clearly benefit from the job leads, clothes, and transportation.
It is important to acknowledge that even if the right assistance was available, there are larger economic forces that limit chances for employment that are outside of individuals’ control. These include the long-term decline in low-skilled work throughout the economy and the movement of many manufacturing and warehouse jobs out of the city. These factors could explain why some in this group remain unemployed. Designing responsive, broad economic policies that mitigate the impact of those systemic changes in the job market may be as important as designing effective services for individuals.

### Accessing Longer-term Workforce Services

People who wanted to pursue longer term employment goals also seemed to confront problems with accessing appropriate services. Seventy-eight percent responded that they were interested in training for a new field, separate from their search to find a job immediately. They could potentially benefit from skill training programs that could boost their earnings. Indeed, with the indicators of prior solid work performance, these individuals may be prime candidates to succeed in those programs. However, participating in most skill training programs would be difficult in their current situations. It was a common sentiment that meeting their basic needs of food, shelter, health care (mental and physical), and safety was a constant preoccupation and cause for overwhelming feelings of frustration, worthlessness, and isolation. Respondents communicated that they likely would not have much success in a long term investment like a training program in their present situation.

If they did stabilize their housing situation, it could still be difficult to participate in a full-time training program that lasts several months with no income to pay expenses during training. If they found work, it would be hard to attend a full-time training program. Paid or subsidized programs would offer a financial cushion so that participants’ basic needs could still be met while in training. Part-time training programs with evening or weekend schedules would allow people to work along with their training. There are few paid or subsidized training programs available, and few skill training programs outside the City Colleges system are available part-time or on weekends.

The majority of those who said they wanted to train for a new field said they were willing to train in any area. This means that existing training fields might meet their needs if the logistics could be adapted to deal with the barriers described above. It also suggests that some career exploration and counseling would be valuable before people started training programs. This would allow them to evaluate their interests and aptitudes, and understand the specifics of various jobs and career tracks. Carefully selecting a career path is critical before starting training if people are going to complete their programs and work in their new industry with satisfaction.

### Entering and Exiting Homelessness

This research project did not explore why this population became homeless so quickly after losing what seemed to be recent, stable employment. While the survey asked why they lost their most recent job, there is no data correlating the lack of employment to their current living situation. Some respondents cited, for example, that their job loss was a result of homelessness rather than the other way around. Further research could potentially show the connections among low wage work, lack of savings, shortages of affordable housing, and homelessness. It is certainly possible that a stronger system of prevention and emergency assistance would benefit people with low VI scores and keep them from becoming homeless when they face temporary obstacles to working.
Understanding what happens over time to people experiencing homelessness who have low VI scores would provide important insights for designing programs and policies since they could end up on widely varying paths. As one example from the survey responses, it appears that 40% had managed to find a housing situation that moved them out of the HUD category of literal homelessness between the time they completed a CES assessment and the call from the researchers. For those whose housing did in fact improve, and if it led to stable housing over time, they were able to resolve their homelessness using their own resources. Without further research, it will not be known if they remain housed or return to the homeless services system.

A scenario for others who were still homeless at the time of the research interview might be that they find employment that helps them move out of homelessness. This might result in long-term stability for some; others might find themselves homeless again in the near future. There may be still others that are not able to improve their housing situation on their own at all. It is possible that over time their situations will worsen. They may begin to suffer from more acute needs, and if their homelessness persists, they may move toward chronic homelessness. Since there is no information available about people’s long-term outcomes, one of the recommendations from this study is to look at their employment and housing outcomes over an extended period of time.

**Barriers to Employment**

The discussion above has focused on the majority of respondents who appear to have valuable assets for returning to work in the near term. There was also a sizable minority of respondents who faced more significant barriers to getting a job of any type, let alone finding work that would pay adequately to allow them to afford stable housing. Thirty-six percent reported having a disability or health condition that limited their ability to work; 28% lacked a high school diploma or GED, a requirement for virtually all well-paying employment; and 38% had a felony conviction which can limit them from numerous employment opportunities.

Fifty-seven percent of the respondents were 40 years old or older. People in this group, especially the 32% that were 50 or older, might have fewer current skills and might face age discrimination in the workplace. Eighty-six percent were African-American, which might also be a barrier in the face of persistent workplace racial discrimination.

These potential obstacles may account for some people’s continued unemployment. Unfortunately, they are the same obstacles that often limit people’s success in workforce development programs. Their low VI status reduces their options for help from homeless services. Therefore, leaders in the homeless services and workforce development arenas, as well as policy advocates, will all have to pursue new strategies if people with these characteristics are going to find long-term opportunities for income and housing.
5. RECOMMENDATIONS

This research project was undertaken to create baseline information about one group of people who have accessed homeless services in Chicago. Having the data was the primary outcome for the work, since it had not been previously collected. The project did not have the resources to do a full analysis of the implications of the findings. Nevertheless, the researchers did form some ideas about how the needs of this population could be better addressed. Those reflections led to the following recommendations.

Additional Research and Date Collection

1. Conduct a detailed employment survey for other groups of people on the One List.

The results of this employment survey have provided important new information about one group of people on the One List for understanding their employment needs and opportunities, and for helping design appropriate programs and develop responsive systemic policies.

Since the population surveyed had the lowest VI scores on the One List, their characteristics and needs are not indicative of those of the remainder of people on the list. A similar sample survey should be conducted for additional sub-groups on the One List that might gain income through employment. This would include people with higher VI scores, and youth ages 18 to 24. Since people matched to rapid re-housing services need to take over their housing in the near-term if they are to remain housed, this group should be prioritized for subsequent research.

Among the low VI score group, there were some signs of the need to expand mental health services. Research with more vulnerable people should be sure to identify needs in this area, since they would, by definition, be likely to need more supports along these lines. In the interviews for this study, several respondents with low VI scores reported mental health concerns as being a major barrier for them. One person cited quitting their job due to depression, two people cited that there is work they cannot do because of depression or bipolar disorder, and six people cited that their barrier to employment was their mental wellbeing. Considering that Chicago recently closed numerous mental health clinics in some of its lowest-income neighborhoods, greater accessibility to mental health services could help this population regain stability in not only employment, but all aspects of their lives.

2. Conduct a longitudinal study of individuals with low VI scores.

Follow-up contacts with the sample group from this study made periodically throughout the next year would help to determine the respondents’ engagement with service providers, if any, and their long-term housing and employment outcomes.

The data found that many people in the low VI score group had significant experience and skills and other assets that should help them reconnect to work. Tracking them over time would reveal whether those strengths did indeed lead to stable employment, or if even with those strengths they were unable to overcome life circumstances, changes in the labor force, or the growing gap between wages and housing costs.

The longitudinal data would also show if there are people who enter the One List with low VI scores whose barriers increase over time because they cannot find stable housing and may even end up as chronically homeless. Understanding the patterns of that trajectory would be especially helpful in formulating policies about who to prioritize for housing services, and what prevention or emergency supports might interrupt a long-term decline.
3. **Collect more detailed employment-related information as a standard part of the CES assessment.**

Collecting basic information about work history, education, skills, and barriers would provide a starting point for connecting people to services to support their employment goals and maximize their chances of gaining employment income that can move them out of homelessness. It may not be possible to collect all of the data that was included in this research, but some baseline information should be added to the CES Assessment. Based on the experience of conducting the interviews used for this survey, a set of questions that could be asked in approximately ten minutes would provide significant information. An example of this streamlined set of questions is included in Appendix 3.

4. **Collect more detailed income-related information, separate from employment, as a standard part of the CES assessment.**

The questions in this survey were designed to learn about people who had a good likelihood of increasing their income through employment. However, there are many people on the One List who may have barriers that will prevent earned income from being a primary source of support. Adding questions to the CES assessment would allow for referrals to services to help obtain or retain mainstream benefits. Those benefits can play an essential role in improving people’s housing situation.

5. **Monitor the ability of Rapid Re-Housing programs to connect participants to employment and the long-term impact on housing stability.**

The other main barrier to employment was lack of housing. With more immediate responsiveness and rehousing, this population may be likely to re-enter the workforce and stabilize more quickly. More research is necessary to determine the effectiveness of this intervention and its effects on increasing employment and reducing prolonged and chronic homelessness.

6. **Conduct further research to understand the potential benefits of expanded homelessness prevention services and emergency financial supports.**

As noted above, it seems that there were people contacted in this study who had had stable employment who became homeless very quickly after losing their jobs. This study did not attempt to examine the specific circumstances that led to homelessness for these people. It is certainly plausible that the combination of low wage work and escalating housing costs leave people with no margin of savings or other supports if they lose a job. However, if they are employable, having assistance to bridge a short period of unemployment without becoming homeless could accelerate their return to work and prevent a cascade of problems. Many respondents stated that they could focus on finding employment after they had found a stable place to sleep and shower. Currently, the amount of prevention resources is very limited and the criteria to qualify for them are extremely narrow. Expansion of existing resources and pilot programs to reach people before they become homeless could lower costs of services over time.
Programs and Services

7. Create a system of employment or income “navigators,” parallel to the concept of housing navigators.

If the CES assessment is expanded to include questions about employment and other income possibilities, people could be connected to appropriate services by trained individuals who understood their needs and were familiar with the various resources Chicago has to offer. This would expand the ability to connect individuals on the One List who are not chronically homeless or do not have the highest VI scores to services. Accelerated connections to programs could reduce the length of time they are homeless and support the many other improvements in life that income allows.

An important feature of a navigation system would be the ability to contact people as quickly as possible after being assessed. The researchers on this project noticed that it was more difficult to contact people who entered the One List several weeks prior to being called than those who entered the One List within a week of being called, which lends to the argument that this population needs to be contacted for services with immediacy in order to provide the maximum benefit.

8. Make direct support available to job seekers beyond what is attached to training programs.

Expanded access to transportation assistance, interview clothing and other tangible resources would facilitate people’s job searches and decrease the length of time it takes them to secure employment. Some employment programs provide direct support assistance to their participants, which is certainly necessary, but many of the people interviewed in this study are not in need of those other program services and are unlikely to enroll. Providing small amounts of direct support to people without being in a structured program is significantly cheaper than spending funds on training services that are not necessary.

9. Restructure skill training programs to include schedules that fit around work, and provide paid training or stipends.

People working in low-wage jobs face a high degree of economic instability and live with ongoing risks, including the risk of losing their housing. Higher skill levels in well-paying industries would be one of the surest ways of improving their financial situations. Most people who want to acquire those skills will need to do training while they are supporting themselves in the interim. This means they must either be combining work with training or education, or getting financial support for living expenses while they train. Skill training program schedules will need to become much more flexible to allow people to work at the same time. This includes offering numerous part-time programs that include evening and weekend classes. Alternatively, participants would need to be paid for their training time or receive living stipends.

To be sure investments in skill training lead to successful, long term outcomes for participants, career planning services should be expanded or created that can help people select careers that are appropriate for them. With many people in this research project saying they would train for “anything,” it seems that they will need some help selecting a field that is really a good fit. Before people select an industry, they should participate in services to determine their interests and aptitudes, and develop a clear understanding of the career pathways available, the details of the work required, and the availability of positions.
Public Policy

10. Develop policies to make public transportation more affordable for people experiencing homelessness and other unemployed job seekers.

While it is usually easy to find a nearby bus or train stop, the cost of public transportation makes it very challenging for people who are unemployed to afford to use the system for their job search. Chicago ranks at the highest end of cost of public transportation among major U.S. cities.³ Thirty-six percent of respondents said they had no way to get to job interviews, and 22% cited transportation as their barrier to employment. Aside from assistance linked to programs, public policies should be developed to provide free or sliding scale public transportation for people in need, particularly people who are homeless. With free or sliding scale public transportation costs, individuals with the assets identified in this survey project would not need to be enrolled in a program to have their transportation costs subsidized and could more easily regain economic stability through their own initiative.

11. Develop policies in Illinois that limit how far back employers can look into job applicants’ criminal background.

Advocacy to set a limit on the amount of time employers can look into a potential employee’s criminal background could improve many people’s chances of gaining employment. Of the people contacted for this survey with past felony convictions, the most recent conviction for 56% of them was five years ago or longer, and 29% were more than ten years ago.

Many states regulate that employers can only go back seven years into a potential employee’s criminal records, but Illinois has no limitations (laws allow exceptions for particular crimes and for particular kinds of employment, when the criminal record could be relevant to job performance.) If employers were limited in how far back they could look into someone’s criminal record, it would reduce this as a barrier to employment for some individuals in this population.

12. Expand all areas of support for unstably housed people who do not meet the HUD definition of literal homelessness.

The final recommendation is for more research, advocacy, services, and recognition for the invisible homeless population who are not eligible to enter the One List and receive long-term housing services. There is not much known about the specific demographics, needs, skills, etc. for this population. Some efforts recognize the concerns of people living in these unstable situations. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has programs that can serve them. Locally, advocacy groups like the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless have worked to expand services for this population. By most estimates, the number of people with no stable place to live but not living on the streets or using emergency shelters far outnumber the people in the official HUD count of homelessness. Efforts to preserve and expand affordable housing in Chicago should be responsive to the needs of all of the people affected by homelessness, regardless of the definition.