

# Evaluation Report Brief

## Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC): Bridges to Career Opportunities

### What is the community challenge?

Families with low incomes face significant barriers to achieving financial security and upward mobility. Workers in low-wage occupations, particularly workers with a secondary education or less, tend to remain in these occupations (e.g., Gabe, Abel, & Florida, 2018; Andersson, Holzer, & Lane, 2005). Evidence suggests this is partially due to gaps in their technical skills and basic skills. For example, three-quarters of low-wage workers have a high school diploma or equivalent but lack the relevant occupational skills and employer connections required to enter into a career pathway (Loprest, Acs, Ratcliffe, & Vinopal, 2009). Upward mobility for those who lack technical skills, high school credentials, or basic skills is even more limited.

### What is the promising solution?

The Bridges to Career Opportunities (Bridges) model is a multi-component intervention that assists adults who are underemployed or unemployed in advancing in a career and obtaining a living wage. Bridges has four components of services. The bridge component provides contextualized basic skills education, career planning, and occupational skills training. The other three components of Bridges services compose LISC's Financial Opportunity Center® (FOC) model, which bundles financial coaching and education, income support services, and employment services. The integrated bridge and FOC services—the Bridges model—is intended to assist adults with low incomes or low skills earn industry-recognized credentials that can enable them to obtain jobs in career pathways leading to financial stability and economic well-being.

### What was the purpose of evaluation?

The evaluation of Local Initiatives Support Corporation's (LISC) Bridges to Career Opportunities by Abt Associates began in 2016 and finished reporting in 2021. With an implementation study, as well as a quasi-experimental design (QED) with coarsened exact matching (CEM), LISC sought to assess, respectively, the fidelity of implementation, as well as the impact of LISC's Bridges program. The impact study examined whether the Bridges model, which integrates bridge services with FOC services, better prepares participants with low incomes to increase their employment prospects and financial stability than do FOC services alone. The implementation study included content analyses of data collected via staff interviews, site observations and telephone conferences. The QED addressed research questions on employment and financial well-being by comparing the outcomes of Bridges participants (the treatment group) with a matched group of FOC participants (the comparison group). The QED utilized administrative data to assess confirmatory outcomes related to Bridges participants' job status and credit scores, using linear regressions models. The evaluation's treatment and comparison groups included 1,133 Bridges participants and 1,217 FOC participants, respectively, who enrolled in those services during the period April 1, 2017 through December 31, 2018.

### What did the evaluation find?

As a grantee of the Social Innovation Fund, LISC engaged an independent evaluator to evaluate the Bridges to Career Opportunities program. The implementation evaluation found that treatment sites demonstrated high

#### Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: Bridges to Career Opportunities

Grantee: Local Initiatives Support Corporation's (LISC)

Focus Area: Economic Opportunity

Focus Population: Adults who are underemployed or unemployed

Communities Served: Greater Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky, Houston, Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, & Philadelphia

fidelity in implementing the Bridges model's four components: overall, sites implemented 94 percent of the activities across as intended, with little variation in the percentages of adherence for each component. The impact study found that participants enrolled in Bridges programs were 19 percentage points more likely to have a "job improvement" than were participants in FOC programs (56 percent versus 37 percent). However, the impact study also found that the participants were not more likely to have obtained or increased their credit scores after program entry relative to the comparison group.

## Notes on the evaluation

Findings for the credit score outcome were mixed. While there was no effect of the Bridges program on participants' *maximum* credit score, there was a significant negative effect for participants' *latest* credit score, which showed a significant improvement for the comparison group.

## How is LISC using the evaluation findings to improve?

The evaluation reported that subgrantees implemented the model with a high level of fidelity, indicating that community-based organizations have the capacity to implement career pathways programming. The findings further demonstrate that the Bridges to Career Opportunities model is a promising approach to improve employment outcomes for under-employed or un-employed adults. Since the sun-setting of the Social Innovation Fund, LISC expanded the Bridges model to additional subgrantees and intends to continue advancing this approach in the future.

The credit score findings also highlighted the value in integrating credit and financial capability programming into the Bridges model with the understanding that these outcomes take additional time to achieve, especially for participants who are spending a relatively longer amount of time in contextualized adult basic education and job training at the outset of program involvement (i.e. compared to those who may be entering full-time employment more immediately). To strengthen opportunities for participants to improve financial outcomes over time, LISC piloted a more intensive level of investment in and focus on post-placement coaching (also called "retention coaching") in a subset of Bridges sites. While ongoing engagement with coaches was always a component of the Bridges and FOC models, constraints on Bridges staff time often result in resources being concentrated with trainees and training graduates seeking their initial job. Retention coaches provide long-term financial coaching and career advancement services which allows LISC subgrantees a longer period to work with program participants on their job advancement goals and their overall financial health—particularly as workers' financial goals and needs change over time (e.g. as disposable income increases in such a way to better facilitate savings and credit building and as individuals become eligible for longer-term savings vehicles like employer-sponsored retirement plans). LISC will continue to assess the efficacy of retention coaching in moving Bridges participants' financial outcomes such as credit score and expand program enhancements like retention coaching as they scale and strengthen the Bridges work.

**Evaluation At-a-Glance**

**Evaluation Design(s):** Quasi-experimental design (QED) impact evaluation

**Study Population:** Low income Adults who are underemployed or unemployed and require contextualized basic skills education, career planning, and occupational skills training

**(Independent) Evaluator(s):** Abt Associates

**This Evaluation's Level of Evidence\*:** Moderate

\*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.

The content of this brief was drawn from the full evaluation report submitted to CNCS by the grantee/subgrantee. The section of the brief that discusses evaluation use includes contribution of the grantee/subgrantee. All original content from the report is attributable to its authors.

To access the full evaluation report and learn more about CNCS, please visit [nationalservice.gov/research](https://nationalservice.gov/research).

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the U.S. The SIF invests in three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.