

The Abell Report

What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about

Published as a community service by The Abell Foundation

ABELL SALUTES: New Song Urban Ministries; Expanding facilities, and increasing responsiveness

New Song Urban Ministries covers a 15-square-block area in an economically depressed community in West Baltimore known as Sandtown. New Song's headquarters are located in a row house at the corner of Gilmore and Presstman Streets, and serve as an umbrella for a variety of programs: New Song Community Center, Sandtown Habitat For Humanity, New Song Community Learning Center, New Song Family Health Services, EDEN Jobs, and New Song Arts and Media—offering rehabilitation, education, job

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*Currently the Center
houses kindergarten
through eighth grade
but will expand to
include ninth through
twelfth grades.*
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continued on page 6

Reverse Commuter Programs: Are Workers And Employers Get- ting Good Mileage From Them?

*Van Services Linking Inner City Residents to
Suburban Jobs Don't Make the Connection Every Day*

• • •

*Unpredictable Service, Unprepared Workforce
Combine to Limit Programs' Success*

Introduction

The distance between an entry-level job and a prospective entry-level worker is measured in more than miles. A would-be worker's age, education level, background of trouble with the law or with addictive substances, and family experiences with employment may reflect a need for support and training for the job search, as well as the job itself. When such an employee from the city is newly hired for a position in the suburbs, where demand for service-sector employees is booming, he or she is likely to need more than just "a seat on the bus" to stay on the road to success. But that seat on the bus is still very important, and some Baltimore City residents would not be able to find or accept a job in the counties without it.

Job growth in the Baltimore region's suburbs, particularly in service positions that tend to be filled by new job market entrants and low-skilled workers, has been outstripping Baltimore City's job growth for years. The boom areas for

entry-level employment in food services, retail, warehouse, and similar work environments are not, for the most part, where many people available for this work make their homes. Scholars of geography and urban planning refer to this phenomenon as "spatial mismatch," but under any name, it's a familiar trend that shows no signs of abating.

Spatial mismatch is not a new discovery, and transportation strategies linking city dwellers with suburban workplaces are not a new response. Baltimore, like other regions, has tried some of these strategies, known collectively as "reverse commuting." The most common of these approaches is the use of van services to bring city dwellers to and from jobs at locations that are served poorly or not at all by the region's mass transit system. Starting in 1997, a handful of programs have combined transportation services with other types of pre-employment and employment support to Baltimore City's job market entrants with the goal of placing them in worthwhile

continued on page 2

continued from page 1

suburban jobs they can retain.

The Abell Foundation asked researchers from the University of Maryland’s Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering to study the successes and limits of local programs. Professor M. William Sermons and research assistant Erin Morrow, together with Alissa Gardenhire of Harvard University, collaborated on the study, “Effectiveness and Sustainability of Reverse Commuting As An Access to Jobs Strategy.” It is summarized in this issue of *The Abell Report*. The report reveals:

1. Transportation alone cannot close all the gaps that separate many city residents from suburban job options. Work readiness issues must be tackled, especially with chronically under- or unemployed people, before a transportation program can succeed at providing employers with dependable employees, and employees with a long-term chance at work and advancement.

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2. Reverse commuting should be targeted at jobs worth commuting to: those that offer living wage, benefits, and a schedule consistent and reasonable enough not to cause havoc with workers’ child care arrangements and family responsibilities.
3. Transportation services themselves can also cause havoc in workers’ lives if they are undependable or too lengthy. Van trips that are ahead of or behind schedule, that skip stops, or that are skipped entirely, have been

cited by employers, caseworkers, and employees themselves as reasons the employees could not retain their suburban jobs.

4. Wages for similar work are comparable in Baltimore City and its suburbs, meaning that the extra time and dollar costs of longer commutes are not typically covered by greater earnings in the distant suburban jobs.

Scope of the Report

The study encompassed a review of the two largest and most comprehensive Baltimore City-based programs. The Career Caravan of Empower Baltimore Management Corporation (EBMC) links the West Baltimore empowerment zone’s work force with suburban job opportunities, chiefly in Howard County. Bridges to Work, a project of the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition (HEBCAC), which also received funding from EBMC, targets jobs for residents of its neighborhoods in the BWI Airport area in northern Anne Arundel County.

continued on page 3

**Table 1: Full and Part-Time Jobs by Place of Work
(Baltimore PMSA)**

County	1993 FT/PT Jobs	1998 FT/PT Jobs	% Change 93-98
Baltimore Region	1,346,146	1,464,968	8.8%
Anne Arundel County	246,980	275,267	11.5%
Baltimore County	387,425	433,880	12.0%
Carroll County	54,295	64,440	18.6%
Harford County	76,916	88,992	15.7%
Howard County	113,415	147,786	30.3%
Baltimore City	467,115	454,643	-2.7%

Source: MDP Web Page: Data extracts prepared by the Maryland Department of Planning, Planning Data Services, from U.S. BEA, June 2000

The Abell Report published bi-monthly by The Abell Foundation
111 S. Calvert Street, 23rd Floor, Baltimore, Maryland 21202-6174 • (410) 547-1300 • Fax (410) 539-6579
Abell Reports on the Web: <http://www.abell.org/publications>

Baltimore's Geography of Work

From 1993 to 1998, the number of jobs grew in each of Baltimore City's surrounding counties, but fell in the city itself. Suburban job growth ranged from 11.5 percent in Anne Arundel County to 30.3 percent in Howard County during the same period that the number of jobs in Baltimore City fell by 2.7 percent (see Table 1).

The Programs

Bridges to Work is the provider of transportation and related counseling, placement, and job readiness services to its clients. Career Caravan's clients are provided some of the same non-transportation services in addition to their rides, but the job readiness and hiring support comes not from the transportation program itself, but from four of the village centers in the West Baltimore Empowerment Zone.

Funding for the transportation costs of these programs is available from a variety of sources with one feature in common: they are not automatically renewable, so even a wildly successful program has no guarantee of continued support. In fact, federal funding for Bridges to Work has expired, and HEBCAC has decided to discontinue its operations. However, another East Baltimore community organization is planning to take over the operations of the van service. Nationwide, there are three sources of support for reverse commuting programs: the Transportation Equity Act, known as TEA-21; the Welfare-to-Work initiative, and the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, the time-limited successor to the old AFDC program. Locally, additional support has come from The Abell Foundation, EBMC, and the Baltimore City Department of Social Services (DSS) in support of its clients' transition

from welfare to work, and the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Experiences and Feedback

The study's authors convened or attended focus group sessions with participants in both of these major programs. In one, employers were asked open-ended questions about what they felt were the strengths, weaknesses and rewards of hiring inner-city residents who relied on reverse commuting vans. They were assured anonymity for themselves and their companies in the report, in order to encourage candid discussion. Another session elicited feedback from ride users' caseworkers, who help them with their job searches and initial ride arrangements, and are often called on to assist with scheduling and travel emergencies. Caseworkers from DSS continue to assist individuals and their families who are no longer eligible for cash assistance through TANF if supportive services appear necessary for a complete transition to work and self-sufficient living.

Unfortunately, as both focus group members made clear, in the Career Caravan program, transportation irregularities are frequent. Yellow Transportation, Inc. is the provider of Career Caravan's van services and personnel. A project team led by the Howard County Department of Planning and Zoning coordinates the van service program. The program's administrators told the authors that they chose a

third-party vendor to furnish the vans and drivers, rather than administer their own van program and hire drivers from the neighborhood, at least in part from fear that drivers who were neighbors and friends might favor certain commuters, holding the van too long at a stop, for example, or changing the route to accommodate a friend. Riders, employers, and caseworkers all sounded similar notes of frustration with Yellow's service. Employers were left as many as six workers short on occasion. Vans could be an hour or more late, or they might not appear at all. Some employers reported occasions when tardy employees "blamed the van" when the fault was their own; most agreed that the service problems were real in most or all cases, not just an employee's excuse.

Caseworkers and employers also agreed that late or skipped return trips pose an even greater problem. Uncertainty about when, how and if a worker will get home leads to anxiety and frustration about childcare arrangements. Stranded in a county where everything except their workplace and the neighboring buildings is unfamiliar to them, they may not be able to pay for a cab ride. They may not even be able to summon a ride from a friend if they can't access a phone or give directions. Sometimes, after a call to a caseworker or the intervention of a supervisor, a cab ride can be arranged – but the fare is an extra cost to the program or the employer, no matter who decided it was necessary. Even with these extra, unbudgeted measures, some employees who are otherwise succeeding at their jobs have quit, because they judged the risks of stranding themselves or their children, or running up unmanageable expenses, too great for their circumstances.

The terms of Career Caravan's relationship with Yellow are not described in the study, so it is unclear whether changes in the current contract terms could be

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made that would improve timely performance. Incentives, penalties, driver training and trip documentation provisions are among the tools that might result in better service delivery. Further, it is unclear whether or not the project team's coordination of the program contributed to the van's service performance. EBMC has approved funding for Career Caravan for an additional year. The project team is negotiating a new contract with Yellow Transportation, Inc. and will be guided by clearer incentives and priorities. The team is also exploring partnerships with other transportation service providers.

Although some service quality problems were also mentioned by participants in the Bridges to Work program, they were less numerous, and the reported consequences were not as severe as the multiple-hour waiting times, dispatcher misinformation, and resignations from jobs mentioned by Career Caravan stakeholders. Bridges to Work owns its vans and hires its drivers from the East Baltimore empowerment zone, but the service is managed by Yellow Transportation.

Other Factors in Program Successes and Shortfalls

Many other aspects of the van and related job services were cited during focus group discussions of the positives and negatives of the program. Some of the significant ones are discussed below.

Job readiness:

A number of employers said that many employees were not motivated to come to work every day, to perform work tasks, or to persist with a job after a few days. Many employers reported a majority of the van commuters they hired through the program — as many as five out of every six — did not work out. One employer said that drugs were more of a problem than transportation. But employ-

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ers also reported being happy with the employees who stayed; one said he would be willing to pay a finder's fee for more employees like them, another said he encouraged his employees to recommend job openings to their friends and neighbors. Some employers thought that more effective job readiness services should be provided by the city-based programs, but one employer who recognized the need for more training instituted his own program and reported good results.

Employee lateness and absence were also a problem, sometimes when the van service was not at issue. One employer, who began in the Bridges to Work program by paying the entire weekly cost of \$37.50 per employee, found that employees regarded this service as "free" and didn't worry about making it to work on time every day. When he started splitting the cost with his commuting employees, their transportation investment of \$25 a week coincided with a substantial drop in lateness and absences.

Job-Worker Matches:

Comments in this area concerned the hiring process, which often began at a job fair sponsored by a village center, as well as the match of employees to work skills and environments. Job fairs were generally considered helpful by employers, who nevertheless recommended that they be shortened from day-long affairs (so supervisors and human resources staff would not need to spend a whole day away from

their workplaces) and broadened in scope so that more prospective employees would come through the doors. Some people who came to job fairs looking for work seemed unfamiliar with the steps in the process; they were not aware, for example, that follow-up interviews and background checks would be needed, or that job offers would not be made on the spot. Some needed time-consuming assistance filling out application forms. In matching employees to work environment, one employer saw several new hires leave in a short time because the work was physically hard and the employees were not physically strong enough for it.

Individuals' strengths and weaknesses:

Another point of agreement within and between the focus groups was that the vans deliver all kinds of workers: good and bad motivated and unmotivated, diligent and inattentive. Success, or lack of it, on the job could be enhanced or hindered by many factors, but despite very similar backgrounds and points of entry into the job market, reverse commuters are an eclectic group. Even the employers who said that fewer than half their new hires remained on the jobs expressed satisfaction about the workers who stayed and the positive personal habits, such as timeliness and readiness to learn, that they brought to their work.

Scheduling:

A restaurant or a hotel is the antithesis of a 9-to-5 business, and employee scheduling must serve these businesses' needs. Rotating or permanent weekend shifts, and "closing crews" who cannot be sent home until the last customer has been served and all cleanup completed — these are just two of the typical realities of service job schedules. Many of the employees in these van pools have commitments to meet with caseworkers, doctors, children's teachers, or other service providers, in

continued on page 5

**Table 2: 2000 Baltimore Area Wages for Selected Job Categories
Entry Wage (Mean)**

	All Service	Food Service	Housekeeping	Retail Sales
Baltimore City	\$6.46 (11.57)	\$5.80 (8.23)	\$6.67 (8.16)	\$6.39 (10.39)
Baltimore County	\$6.03 (9.27)	\$5.74 (7.77)	\$7.11 (8.39)	\$6.85 (10.19)
Mid County SDA (incl. Howard County)	\$5.80 (8.76)	\$5.74 (7.41)	\$6.11 (7.71)	\$6.51 (10.41)

Source: DLLR Web Page: Maryland DLLR, Office of Labor Market Analysis and Information, 2000 Occupational Wage Estimates.

addition to their full-time jobs. Successful van service designed for entry or re-entry-level service workers should take these factors into account when schedules are made; it's no small challenge to meet this jumble of needs for different businesses along the same route, or for a single business with fluctuating needs such as peak-season overtime. The authors of the study include in their recommendations a suggestion that low-density routes, those serving few workers or widely scattered workplaces, could be eliminated to improve the on-time performance and cost-per-rider of the service overall. Although ending low-density routes might improve program-wide performance and cost data (which is not included in the study), some employees would probably have to give up their jobs and some employers, especially those farthest from Baltimore City, would find themselves beyond the scope of the programs.

Effect of Wages on Retention:

The study's authors examine hourly entry-level wage data for the most commonly filled service jobs in the Baltimore region. Surprisingly, in two of four job categories, jobs in Baltimore City pay a modestly higher beginning wage than in Baltimore County or the "mid-

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county" area that includes Howard County. These findings are summarized above in Table 2.

As the table shows, the entry-level wage differences across local jurisdictions do not exceed \$1 per hour (\$40 per week). Nevertheless, it appears that at both the beginning and the midpoint (table figures in parentheses are mean average hourly rates for all workers in each category) of the earnings scale, the wage differences among jurisdictions would not cover the extra costs a Baltimore City resident would incur making the longer commute to the counties – whether by mass transit, van service, or personal auto. On the contrary, the mean hourly wage for all house-keeping workers in Howard County is

\$0.45 an hour (\$18 per week) less than it is in the city; a retail worker at the midpoint of the wage scale makes a negligible \$.02 an hour more in Howard County than in the city. For employees who may need to shoulder the real costs of commuting to the suburbs in the future, the return on his or her investment in an arduous commute is often not there. And for jobs that don't pay more than \$10.41 an hour (\$416.40 per week), the highest average county wage in any service category, transportation costs (based on the Bridges to Work rate) would approach 10 percent of those modest earnings.

Study Summary and Conclusions

Achieving reverse commuting success is difficult. These programs are designed to serve people whose employment prospects are limited by lack of skills, experience, and/or acculturation to work. The jobs to which they are most likely to lead, though low-paying and low-skill, can involve unusual hours, schedules that change frequently and on short notice, overtime on demand, and other challenges to a worker with children back in the city, no car, perhaps not even a telephone. Anxiety about working at locations far from home in an unfamiliar

continued on page 6

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area is obviously heightened when one cannot be sure when or if there will be a ride home. Finally, the cost of a van service is hard to control when the jobs being served are scattered among suburban locations, even if the workers all live in the same neighborhood and can be picked up at one or two stops on the home end of their commute.

Career Caravan is achieving a modest level of success. This program met its first-year service targets; demand remains high among West Baltimore residents and Howard County employers. Wages are low, but not below regional averages for comparable work (mostly in food service, hotels, and warehouses). But many participants are earning more because reverse commuting gives them access to a full-time job as opposed to a part-time job, or no job at all, near where they live.

Service quality must be improved. All stakeholders – employers, workers, and caseworkers – criticized the haphazard track record of Career Caravan’s van service. Regardless of whether the problem is rooted in poorly trained or supervised drivers, poor scheduling, an unreliable fleet, or the vendor’s lack of incentive to meet its contractual goals, the consequence too often is that people who want to keep working decide that it is too risky to keep their distant suburban jobs. Someone who’s just beginning to make \$6 or \$7 an hour after months or years of unemployment, who may be paying \$20 a week or more as his share of van service costs, would be hard pressed to set aside \$30 for an emergency cab ride home, especially if the “emergency” can be expected to repeat itself. The study’s authors also suggest solutions like limiting the times that vans run and concentrating their stops at a few closely-spaced suburban destination. This has some potential to improve timeliness, reliability and the occupancy rate of the vans, but at the cost of lower ambitions for both the

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applicant pool and the employers, very few of which are 9-to-5 establishments.

The programs should be more selective about the jobs that reverse commuters are encouraged to seek. The Career Caravan and Bridges to Work programs have very little control over which jobs they include; it is also not clear that they would consider excluding any category of jobs to be in the best interests of their clients. In fact, low-wage jobs without benefits that involve two to four hours a day of commuting time often do not compensate employees sufficiently for them to continue on the job over the long term, defined in the study as six months to a year. Sudden medical or child-care complications can skew the equation even more harshly against a low-income reverse commuter.

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***The full text of the
Reverse Commuter report
is available on the
Abell Foundation’s website at
www.abell.org.***

or

***Write to:
The Abell Foundation
111 S. Calvert Street, 23 Floor
Baltimore, MD 21202***

ABELL SALUTES:

Continued from page 1

training and housing. Now, in response to the needs of the community, the ministries have expanded their capability with the completion of a \$5.4 million community center at 1530 Presstman Street.

New Song Center, three stories tall and blending into the architecture of the brick row house neighborhood, is a 30,000-square facility, and offers a 350 seat auditorium, ten class rooms for the academy, parents’ resource room, school store, greenhouse, gymnasium, performance stage, an outdoor courtyard, and a science room with a wall of aquariums and terrariums for keeping fish, hamsters, and snakes to study. Future plans include the development of a college placement office, a home economics kitchen, evening recreational activities for children and adults, including adult education classes and the doubling of enrollment at the academy from 100 to 200 students. Currently the Center houses kindergarten through eighth grades but will expand to include ninth through twelfth grades.

This complex of human services is the 15-year accomplishment of Alan and Susan Tibbels and Rev. Mark Gornik, working in partnership with the community to “effect social justice.” “We wanted to love God,” Susan Tibbels says. “and love our neighbors as ourselves.” With that credo, in 1986, the Tibbels sold their rancher in leafy-green Columbia, and with their two daughters, joined the Rev. Gornik in a move to West Baltimore. In the context of this extraordinary commitment, the development programs that define New Song have taken root in Sandtown, and are growing in size and ability to remain responsive.

The Abell Foundation salutes New Song Urban Ministries for the work it has been doing and the expansion of that work made possible by the construction and opening of its new community center.