

AARP Foundation: Back to Work 50+: Women’s Economic Stability Initiative

What is the community challenge?

By 2024, nearly one in four people in the labor force is projected to be age 55 or over. Long-term unemployment, which refers to people who have been looking for work for at least 27 weeks, was documented at about 33 percent for the 55+ age group in July 2017, about ten percentage points higher than for the labor force as a whole. Almost twice as many retired women as retired men currently live in poverty. Gender also is associated with differences in the services received from the workforce system and the outcomes achieved by those who exit from those services. Women workers are concentrated in sales, clerical, and administrative support jobs that lead to relatively low average earnings.

What is the promising solution?

AARP Foundation’s Back to Work 50+: Women’s Economic Stability Initiative (BTW 50+: WESI) aims to build the capacity of local education and training institutions in Florida, Alabama, Texas, and New Mexico to address the needs of older women workers (between 50 and 64 years of age) by helping them prepare for employment in high-growth sectors in their local economies. The program emphasizes individual choice of employment, confidence building through coach and peer group support, job search skills training, computer skills training, employer access, and short-term training. The goal is to prepare job candidates for stable employment at a living wage and opportunities for career advancement. While BTW 50+: WESI is open to everyone, the program specifically targets women workers who are older.

What was the purpose of evaluation?

The implementation evaluation of AARP Foundation’s BTW 50+: WESI by Social Policy Research Associates began in 2015 and finished reporting in 2019. Using a mixed-methods design, the evaluation of six subgrantees served multiple purposes: describing key program features, assessing the program’s fidelity to the prescribed model, understanding participant perspectives (such as satisfaction, attitudes, and behaviors), measuring how well the program worked for different groups of participants, and identifying implementation challenges and lessons learned during the program’s implementation period. The evaluation used several different data sources and data collection methods, including interviews with program staff and partners, observations of program activities, focus groups and surveys with job candidates, a fidelity assessment tool, and administrative data from AARP Foundation. The evaluation addresses research questions on: implementation experiences and features (such as *What challenges have the participating colleges encountered as they have implemented the BTW50+: WESI model?*); implementation variations (such as *What are the key features of the BTW50+: WESI program model as intended by AARP Foundation, and to what extent have subgrantees achieved fidelity to this model?*); and job candidate characteristics and perspectives (such as *How have BTW50+: WESI job candidates responded to the program?*).

Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: Back to Work 50+: Women’s Economic Stability Initiative

Sub-grantees: Austin Community College; Eastern Florida State College (transferred to Career Source Brevard); Jefferson State Community College; Miami Dade College; Santa Fe College; Santa Fe Community College

Intermediary: AARP Foundation

Focus Area(s): Economic Opportunity

Focus Population(s): Low-income, un- or underemployed women workers who are between 50 and 64 years old

Community(ies) Served: Austin (Texas); Cocoa, Miami, Gainesville (Florida); Birmingham (Alabama); Santa Fe (New Mexico)

What did the evaluation find?

As a grantee of CNCS' Social Innovation Fund, AARP Foundation engaged an independent evaluator to evaluate BTW 50+: WESI. Prior to this evaluation, the program had not undergone any implementation, outcome, or impact evaluation. AARP Foundation commissioned an implementation evaluation, which found the following:

1. BTW50+: WESI was implemented as intended in terms of the number and types of job candidates enrolled, as well as the design, delivery, and receipt of program services.
2. Subgrantees reported the following challenges: limitations in the types of jobs available in the local labor market, difficulty maintaining a stable staff given time-limited grant funding, difficulty tracking job candidate outcomes during the follow up period, and limited financial capacity to take over funding the program when the grant ended. Employer engagement was the most challenging component of the model for subgrantees to implement.
3. Job candidates who completed surveys and participated in focus groups gave high satisfaction ratings on core components of the BTW50+: WESI program. However, many job candidates felt that connections with employers needed to be stronger.

Notes on the evaluation

In addition to the implementation evaluation, AARP Foundation also planned an outcome and impact evaluation. Due to Congressional sunseting of SIF appropriations, the Foundation was only able to complete an implementation study prior to this sunseting. The impact evaluation report is expected to be released by AARP Foundation in late 2020.

How is AARP Foundation using the evaluation findings to improve? AARP Foundation has:

- Reduced the BACK TO WORK 50+ Coaching Program from six to three weeks to increase candidate retention.
- Set expectations that program partners develop relationships between community colleges and local workforce system providers to strengthen connections to employers and job leads.
- Suggested that program partners dedicate staff time for follow-up activities with job candidates after they complete the program.
- Encouraged program partners to create multigenerational teams because staff members representative of the target population, such as women ages 50 and older, having similar experiences and life transitions, contributed to trust development with job candidates.
- Searched for program "champions" from higher ranks of an institution's management to increase project visibility within the college and support the program's long-term sustainability.

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.

Evaluation At-a-Glance

Evaluation Design(s): Implementation evaluation

Study Population: Women workers ages 50 to 64 with low incomes, who were unemployed or underemployed and seeking full-time work

(Independent) Evaluator(s): Social Policy Research Associates

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence*: Preliminary

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

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.