

Why Did Some IIF Families Not Follow up on Education and Employment Referrals?

As part of the IIF Evaluation the ethnographer interviewed 18 individuals who were referred for education and/or employment services but did not pursue this opportunity. A summary of each of the IIF participants' reasons for not connecting to the IIF education/ employment system partners follows. Their different reasons shed light on the complex set of issues that influence whether an IIF participant is ready or interested in pursuing education or employment. The comments also underscore the importance of creating from the onset a compelling case for why education/ employment referral services may be beneficial to pursue, given and in light of the unique circumstances of families. These comments underscore that, for some families, engagement in employment services may take a long time and may for a small group be more effective if initiated at a home-based or community-based location. This would help the IIF employment/education staff establish trust with the participant and gain a more in depth understanding of the participant's life, concerns, strengths and potential self-interest for involvement. For many families engagement in education and employment will be a long process before individuals are ready or fully perceive these opportunities as something they want to embrace. For some these resources may not be realistic until other issues are addressed. In some cases, participants may not need or want these resources as they have the skills to independently seek work.

Participant comments were documented in shorthand and woven into the stories below. The personal information about participants, included in parentheses, contains information that the participants regarded as important to know about them in order to understand their life choices regarding engaging in an education and employment program.

Each of the participants was interviewed at two different intervals, approximately four months apart. Their comments reflect the status of their follow up on employment referrals as of the second interview.

Participant 1. (45 year old man previously employed in warehouse jobs, laid off, recently used up unemployment benefits, high school graduate, responded to over 50 job announcements in the year prior to enrolling in IIF and "only had 6 bites, all of which fizzled.")

At the time of the second interview this man was scheduled for a second interview with a large bulk retail store for a warehouse assistant supervisor job. He had independently found the job on Craig's List, because in his words, "I know how to look for and apply for jobs." He felt that he had a good chance to be hired but knew there were still 6 other people being considered for the position.

Participant 2 (35 year old female, worked on and off over the past three years in restaurants as a hostess, was receiving TANF, had trouble filling out on line applications, 10th grade education, very limited computer skills, submitted two self-described "basically illegible" applications in the year prior to enrolling in IIF and did not hear back from these employers)

Every time I think about what is important – my children, ages, 4, 3, and 1, and the word consistency come to mind. I think that I should be with them until they are in school. I have already made them change homes, and do without so many things. I know if I worked I could buy them more things but is that security or is having me around? I just want to talk to someone about jobs – not be in a job program. The time away from my family makes no sense for a job program when I know I can just get a low wage job anyway. Maybe if I could study for my GED at home that would be better. Maybe if I got a laptop I could do that."

Participant 3 (24 year old female, no job experience, except cocktail waitress for three months, 11th grade education, has 2 year daughter).

“The whole thing about going to school or work hinges on other changes in my life. If my boyfriend leaves I don’t want to be in the middle of school and have to quit because he is the babysitter. But I don’t want more time to lapse. I am on the fence.”

Participant 4 (20 year old single mother , intermittently worked home health care chore service jobs, had started and dropped out of a community college Certified Nursing Assistant training program before completing, high school graduate)

“I went to the job program and got a little help. I told them I don’t have real solid skills, but sometimes thought I might want to be a business major. I was told about college programs but they did not sound too interesting. Then I thought – all I really want is some part-time work until my baby stops nursing. I dropped out at that point – I don’t think they are aware of part-time job opportunities.”

Participant 5 (49 year old man laid off from fisheries-related jobs, had work-related back injury, high school diploma)

“I need a career change. But the thought of that is so stressful. Thought my back might be getting better but that is not the way things are looking. I feel overwhelmed. I am applying for disability because of a back injury I got on a rig. If I don’t get it I will need to think about what things I can do that won’t mess up my back any more. I can’t stand the idea of a desk job.”

Participant 6 (25 year old married woman, described herself as developmentally delayed, and as being enrolled in special education classes in high school. She worked for a janitorial service for a few months for the three years prior to enrolling in IIF and had a 3 year old son. Her husband recently got a part-time short haul driver job – which she admitted “dampened my drive to get a job because now there was money coming in”).

“I never followed up with the employment program– it just seemed so far away from my life today. It would be good for my 3 year old daughter to see a working mom as she gets older. Maybe when she goes to first grade I can think about getting a job.”

Participant 7 (38 year old man with a felony history, high school graduate, two children, one of whom was removed from the home, and two other children soon returning, family life is chaotic).

“I have a string of problems and felonies. And my kids are like a revolving door – sometimes here, sometimes not. This is it for me – so I don’t know really why I did not access employment resources. Plain old school avoidance I guess. Also it is kind of tough to get too focused on work because my older son (15) is always in trouble and I have to go to his school to talk down the Principal at least once a week. Despite this, I know I am ready to dust pan my past and start over. Are there any employers willing to give someone like me a second chance”?

Participant 8 (23 year old single mother of two children under 5, dropped out of 12th grade just shy of a degree, has been on and off TANF twice, worked as a receptionist at a veterinary clinic, good computer skills).

My life goes in waves. On TANF, in training, in a job, lose a job, get pregnant and start over. My mom lived that way. If I don’t change stuff so will my sons. I want to finish my diploma and get some formal computer training because I know something more is in my future. I need to get it all figured out, TANF, training, childcare and see how I can time all this stuff to work for me. Would the employment program help me do all that? Didn’t quite seem that way.

Participant 9 (52 year old man, two teen sons, and a 4 year old disabled daughter, high school degree, construction experience, history of substance use)

I don't know about getting into the whole job thing. I recently got out of treatment and feel like my life just might get on track if I don't get into any trouble. In my work – construction - drinking is a pretty routine thing. I might not make it back there. And besides the jobs are few and far between. Don't know what lies ahead. We are scraping by on food stamps, my wife's child support when she gets it and my daughter's disability – I don't know about work.

Participant 10 (26 year old woman, with two children, 5 and 3, with two years cashier retail experience, GED)

This isn't a good time to go to an employment program. My oldest child will be in kindergarten next year and my youngest in Head Start and only will be in childcare part of the day. Maybe three years from now when they are both in school I will be able to do something though it would probably be good to start thinking about it.

Participant 11 (22 year old man, GED (in process), some experience working in a copy store, has a five month old, a wife who is experiencing severe post-partum depression and diabetes).

When I got the employment referral I forgot about it even though I got a couple of reminder calls. I asked if the employment staff could visit us because we just had an infant and because my wife was not feeling well – but heard that was not possible. I heard about all the papers I would have to fill out and that kind of sealed the deal. I put the employment stuff on the back burner. Maybe sometime soon. I would like to finish my GED too. I just have the math and science GED test left to take – though I took them a couple of years ago – will I need to take them over?

Participant 12 (29 year old single mother of 8 year old boy, 2 years of college but no certificate or degree, in arrears on financial aid repayment, worked as a VISTA volunteer for a year, bipolar, got fired from last job)

The employment services seemed like a good idea but I want to go back to school. I hate the whole financial aid thing because I already used mine up and am late on repaying what I owe. I feel like I am in a spiral where I will never get ahead because I can't get tuition assistance.

Participant 13 (39 year old woman, mother of 4 children, temporarily separated from her husband who is employed, she has been unemployed for 10 years, earlier worked at a car dealer greeting customers)

When I got referred to employment, I was like – sure thanks. But I pretty much knew I would not go. I feel like I am too old to enroll in training, and my confidence is in the tank. My teeth are a mess too. Who would hire me?

Participant 14 (32 year old single mother, 12 year old daughter, 2 years of college – not focused on a particular occupational area, most recently worked as a front office receptionist at an elementary school)

I am ready to focus on some kind of training, but need something that is fast and leads to a good job. I guess I need to know whether I can even make it all school. I am easily distracted – maybe I need counseling or something.

Participant 15 (47 year old man, wife is chronically ill, teenage sons doing well in school, has forklift and customer service certificate, does grounds keeping for local grounds keeping crews)

I can't even think straight sometimes between my wife's illness and trying to hold the kids together. When I was referred to employment my first thought was, maybe this will help me to start my own grounds keeping business. But then it seemed that it was a more mainstream kind of thing where other people decide what I want and though I appreciate their help – don't want that kind of help. I am interested in being self-employed.

Participant 16. (19 year old single woman with occasional boyfriend, and new baby, minimal job experience, though loved babysitting and working with children, received TANF, dropped out right before babysitting).

When I got referred to employment it made me happy but I was pregnant. I want to get an early childhood degree and hopefully work somewhere where the company sponsors childcare or at least school. Are they going to call me back or come talk to me sometime? I know I won't be doing this for a while but sometime. I would need a lot of help – clothes – childcare- transportation. I don't think anyone has that kind of help to offer.

Participant 17. (25 year old man with 2 toddlers, receiving TANF, 10th grade education, depression, learning disabilities including dyslexia)

I don't have any real career goals but should start thinking about education or employment. No way to go to an outside program with little kids. Better if someone wanted to come to my apartment. You know once I saw an advertisement about on line learning and wondered if I could do that. I am a homebody – maybe if I could do some work out of my house that would be best.

Participant 18 (41 year old woman who had some child support, and income from relatives, an AA Degree in Early Childhood Education, lived in Section 8 housing, had two teenage sons, one of whom was receiving social security income which would end when he was 18).

When my son turns 18 his benefits end and so pretty much does my income except the little child support I have if he stays in school but that is not looking promising. I am so used to being away from people except my family I don't know how I will adjust. I guess if I am being honest I never planned to follow up with the employment/education folks.