

Resident and Workforce Perspectives: Employment-Related Barriers and Facilitators in Richmond's East End

Background

The **VCU Center on Society and Health** completed 15 one-on-one interviews with adult residents of the East End and 3 interviews with workforce professionals. The residents were recruited by reaching out directly to organizations with whom the center has worked, community members, and contacts from personal networks and prior engagement efforts. Residents across a wide range of ages participated: 40% were 18 to 25 years old, 27% were 26 to 40 years old, and 34% were 41 to 60 years old. All identified as Black, African American, or African, and 53% identified as female. The highest level of educational attainment for interviewees was as follows: less than high school (27%), high school diploma or GED (53%), some college or associate degree (20%). Most were employed full or part time, all earned less than \$40,000 a year, and they resided in 7 different East End communities.

Context

People see positive changes in the East End, such as new businesses, improvements to the built environment (lights, houses, roads, sidewalks), and more community resources (stores, playgrounds, donations). There is hope that these changes will bring jobs and make the community safer. However, people expressed concern about gentrification, increased competition for jobs, and safety. Respondents agreed that there is a *lack of good jobs* in the East End. Some did not see the new jobs going to local residents and indicated that lack of communication with residents is a barrier.

Finding Jobs

Informal means of finding jobs are quite common, including *word-of-mouth and going to establishments in person*.¹ Some felt there is an advantage to meeting face-to-face when asking about jobs. Internet-based searches are also common, including job listing sites (particularly Indeed and Google, but also Snag-a-Job and JobCase), and social media (particularly Instagram, but also Twitter, SnapChat, LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, Yubo and Facebook groups). Other means of finding jobs include job fairs, job boards and staffing/temp agencies. Residents suggested recruiting by posting jobs everywhere (including physical locations and online). Lack of access or skills for completing online job searches/applications can be a barrier to finding jobs.

While many individuals conduct job searches on their own, a variety of **job search and training services were mentioned**,

“Sometimes you may have to reach out and not just put something out on the internet but actually go out into the neighborhood. Go where they are and not just expect them to come where you are. Sometimes they don’t have access or the knowledge that you’re there.”

“I hope they can have a little building that the people can come into... and they put a sign up there. Say, hey, this is where you can come in and apply for a job.”

¹ Text in blue italic signifies a theme mentioned across multiple interviews.

including public programs (Office of Community Wealth Building, Neighborhood Resource Centers, the Virginia Employment Commission, the Mayor’s Youth Academy) and non-profit organizations ([Peter Paul Development Center](#), [Opportunity Alliance and Reentry \(OAR\)](#), [Rework](#), [YMCA of Greater Richmond](#), [Boys and Girls Club of Metro Richmond](#), and the [Goodwill of Central and Coastal VA](#). Some mentioned that places have closed down during the pandemic. Services that are helpful to find jobs include help creating *resumes*, *interviewing skills*, *job readiness classes*, *clothing*, help with online applications, and community job fairs.

Job training (especially on-the-job training) is highly valued. There is particular interest in training in *communication skills*, *computers*, *job-specific skills*, *time management*, customer service, job etiquette, soft skills, and job safety. Residents described *on-the-job training* as a way for people without prior experience to be successful in jobs and feel that hands-on and refresher training can help people maintain employment and advance. Training is needed that reflects the current and future work landscape.

The city’s [Office of Community Wealth Building](#) is supporting youth entrepreneurship, workforce navigators, training sessions, and workforce partnerships including the Community College workforce alliance and the United Way Workforce Partnership team. Others in workforce include the Community Action Network, University of Richmond, VCU, and ChildSavers.

Barriers to Employment

Common barriers to employment include *transportation*, *childcare*, *background checks*, *jobs that don’t provide adequate benefits*, *lack of computer skills*, *lack of educational credentials or job experience*, lack of access to WiFi, email or cell phone, stress, and feeling unsafe.

- **Employment for people with past criminal convictions** was one of the problems most frequently mentioned barriers. There was a common theme that employers should provide opportunities for people with criminal offenses.

“People with felonies ... They are trying to change but aren’t giving the opportunity. They need a chance to show the other side of them.”

- **Transportation** is one of the most common barriers. Many East End residents do not have cars and rely on buses or ride sharing. Bus

Job Training

“Sometimes you can get jobs and they just throw you out there and you don’t know what you’re supposed to do.”

“On-the-job training would be good for a lot of people. You’ve had people that have had some bumps in the road. Some still learning how to read. Some didn’t finish school. Some are still in school trying to get a GED. Then you have those who have graduated high school, but have had some bumps in the road with some health issues.”

“I would like to do this to better myself, so now I am taking some online classes and trainings to better myself. My job offers this opportunity. Targeted trainings might be helpful as well.”

“You have to show them and let them get in there and let them do it [Hands-on training] with you, so that will make them good at it.”

“We are preparing young people for the workforce behind them, not the workforce in front of them.”

transportation is time consuming, buses do not connect all areas or correspond to work schedules, and ride sharing requires coordinated schedules. Nonetheless, many people commute for access to better jobs.

- **Job requirements**, such as specific levels of education and experience, are seen as major barriers to employment. East End residents would like access to more opportunities that they can excel at based on their ability and willingness to learn, rather than educational attainment. *On-the-job and hands-on training* are highly valued.

Other barriers to employment include lack of resources (IDs, driver’s license, internet connection), loss of benefits, disability, vaccination status, coordinating with kids’ school schedules, stereotypes about lower income East End residents, discrimination on the job, and apprehension about working due to COVID-19.

Factors that facilitate getting jobs include having more jobs available, help with transportation and availability of jobs on a bus line, and employers providing training for people who don’t have prior experience.

Characteristics of Highly Valued Jobs

- ◆ **Good leadership.**

“The people have no problem clocking in knowing that their boss got their back.”

“Good leadership is like if I have a leader who is professional and patient and is there to help and lead everyone.”

- ◆ **Good communication with employees**, including listening and interacting with them.

- ◆ **Respect, care, and understanding from managers.**

Employers should be open-minded and provide a welcoming environment. People want to *feel that they matter* to their employers and want to enjoy a good work environment where there is trust and that is free from discrimination. Employers should be able to relate to people of different backgrounds, as well as be understanding of the circumstances people face (transportation difficulties, sick children).

“If someone works for you and they feel like you don’t care, they are not going to come back.”

“Respect plays a big role in the community. Respect shows good characteristics. It shows that you are a good person.”

- ◆ **A good work/life balance** that may include flexible hours.

- ◆ **Good pay, benefits, and opportunities for**

advancement. East End residents want to earn a living wage (most of the participants that were interviewed said at least \$15-\$20 an hour to start), receive training to advance, and be acknowledged for good work. Desired benefits include paid time off, transportation, childcare and after school programs, health care, and flexible hours.

- ◆ **Working on site** most or some of the time is generally preferred to working at home. Barriers to working at home include *distractions, lack of social interaction, technology limitations including internet access, lack of computer skills required for home-based jobs*, training in Microsoft applications (Word, PowerPoint, Excel),

being “too comfortable,” noise, childcare, time management, space and proper computer equipment, and lack of hands-on training. One benefit to working in the community is to serve as role model to youth.

A Good Employer for the East End

- ◆ Is **community-oriented**, providing a service that the community needs and wants. It is a business that sticks with its promises, offers jobs for youth, helps children, thinks about what the community needs as a whole, and gives back to the community.
- ◆ **Builds relationships and trust** through communications (reaching out and providing information), holding community events, and asking people what they need.

“You got a lot of sons and daughters wanting to take care of their families. We’re losing our kids by this stuff. A good pay wage would be very nice to start off, versus them going out in the street to take care of their families.”

“I like that when they’re having events going on to promote job fairs and events for children, they have somebody to come around and put the fliers in the doors so that the residents and tenants can know exactly what’s going on.”

- ◆ **Increases opportunity** in the East End, providing reliable jobs, training, and benefits so that people can build a career from entry-level positions or try something new, provides opportunities for people with a history of criminal convictions, and recruits based on potential rather than background (non-judgmental).
- ◆ **Takes needs into account**, such as resources for parents, providing a convenient location and/or transportation, older and younger workers, and offering services such as a computer lab, education programs, or a gym.

“The difference is between a place where people make money and a career where people can be invested in and grow in their roles.”

What Changes Would Residents and Professionals Like to See?

- ◆ **More opportunities for a career and to learn trades**
- ◆ **Better job/career opportunities in the East End and ability to work close to home**
- ◆ **Training opportunities and on-the-job training**
- ◆ **Better access to transportation, childcare, and early childhood education**
- ◆ **Better corporate/community relations and greater synergy and communication among organizations**

“As long as it’s a good job, I’m ready to get into it and leave my mark on it.”

“...understand there is not a one size fits all experience for all the community.”