



An Evaluation of a Workforce Development Program for Domestic Violence Survivors

Interim Results from the Economic Empowerment Program in New York City

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Over the past 10 years, Sanctuary for Families (SFF), one of the largest victim service providers in New York City, has implemented a workforce development program called the Economic Empowerment Program (EEP) that exclusively works with domestic violence (DV) survivors. It is unique among workforce development programs in that instead of focusing on rapid placements in lower-wage jobs with minimal opportunities for career advancement, it aspires to help survivors be more competitive in better-paying job markets.

Evidence shows that any workforce development program that focuses on people with multiple barriers to employment requires intensive services (Eyster and Nightingale 2017). For survivors of violence, these barriers may include limited skills, gaps in their education and work histories, housing instability, and mental health and substance use needs. In addition, workforce development programming should be adjusted to address survivors' safety concerns and other consequences of abuse and gradually prepare them to achieve long-term economic stability.

Standards in the workforce development industry, however, are usually set by funders and policymakers, who often prioritize immediate outcomes such as quick mastery of skills and job placements, despite emerging evidence that focusing on strictly defined immediate outcomes does not align with the needs of vulnerable people (Weigensberg et al. 2012). Relying on quick results may lead to unintended consequences and inadvertently encourage workforce development programs to

prioritize less vulnerable, more motivated, and more job-ready clients. It may also partially explain the dearth of workforce development programs across the United States that exclusively work with DV survivors.

About the Career Readiness Training Program

The Career Readiness Training Program (CRTP) is a four-month curriculum housed under the broader EEP at SFF. It is one of SFF's most established programs. The goal of the program is to help New York City's economically marginalized families overcome barriers to financial independence, such as chronic unemployment exacerbated by abuse, structural discrimination, the stigma of poverty, limited opportunities for education, and shelter system dependence. By participating in the CRTP, survivors, who are often concerned for their safety and that of their children, have an opportunity to regain financial control and get a fresh start.

The CRTP's only formal eligibility requirement is that a client must be a DV survivor. Regarding initial screening, we learned from interviews and observations that program staff also pay attention to survivors' educational attainment. Participants are administered a test of their high-school-level knowledge before starting the program, and their results are used to place them in one of three groups based on their literacy levels (in ascending order of literacy, these are Prep Group [Group A], Group B, and Group C). Though the CRTP serves survivors with various educational backgrounds, the majority of clients have at least a high school diploma. Clients' demographic and educational backgrounds are discussed in greater detail below.

Over the past 10 years, CRTP leadership has put tremendous effort into improving the program by adjusting its components to reflect what resonates most with clients and, most importantly, lifting up and supporting many survivors. The intensive, structured job training program is offered in spring and fall cycles and has the following two modules:

- The 10-session Career Readiness Workshop (CRW), conducted over two to three weeks, aims to teach, refresh, and improve fundamentals of career development to help participants establish and advance their careers and secure a living wage.
- The 13-week Office Operations Workshop (OOW) is a more intense curriculum covering various topics. It provides 200 hours of advanced office technology training, as well as instruction on literacy, writing, math, business communication, and job search skills.

These two modules are required for CRTP clients. Occupational training and internships are made available to clients but are not required. After completing the program, participants can stay engaged with the broader EEP, which offers additional supports including job placement, mental health support groups, and peer connections. The CRTP is offered at three levels for clients with different levels of literacy, which is assessed before they start classes. In addition to its core components, CRTP clients can take advantage of supplemental referrals and support from a suite of services offered by SFF as well as other providers in New York City.

The EEP's several funding streams have enabled it to grow and to provide DV survivors more opportunities to participate by offering the program in fall and spring cycles. Until 2018, the EEP was offered at SFF's headquarters in Manhattan and served approximately 100 to 120 participants a year. In 2018, SFF received a separate stream of funding from the District Attorney of New York County through the Criminal Justice Investment Initiative, enabling it to begin offering the EEP in the Manhattan Family Justice Center, a critical location where SFF and other victim service providers offer services to more than 10,000 survivors a year who seek supports including counseling and assistance during crisis. Expanding to this new location has enabled SFF to reach more survivors, some of whom may not otherwise have reached out to SFF directly for support. Our evaluation of the CRTP focused on both locations, which during our evaluation period served a total of 86 clients—44 who started in fall 2019 and 42 in spring 2020. The sessions occurred in person in fall 2019, but all services became remote in spring 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In March 2020, New York City became the US epicenter of the pandemic. Infections, hospitalizations, and deaths rapidly escalated in the first few months, prompting a full shutdown of nonessential businesses and stay-at-home orders. Because of the lack of knowledge about the virus, many at SFF initially expected these restrictions to last only a few weeks (as did many in New York City and around the world). It quickly became clear that the restrictions were going to remain in place longer and that program modifications were necessary. The SFF team acted quickly and transitioned to remote operations within a week to ensure they could continue providing their critical services to clients at a precarious time for DV survivors. CRTP leadership and staff personally delivered laptops to all clients, ensured they had reliable Wi-Fi, and began holding all classes remotely via Google Classroom. The evaluation team maintained regular remote communication with SFF and CRTP staff throughout this transition and made evaluation activities virtual, as described below.

About CRTP Clients

During the evaluation period, the CRTP served 86 clients. Enrollment was lower than expected in both cohorts, particularly during the onset of the pandemic in New York City. Most CRTP clients who were part of this evaluation in the fall 2019 and spring 2020 cohorts were **women of color in their early thirties, and 70 percent of clients identified as heterosexual**. Most clients identified as Black or African American (40 percent) or Latinx (28 percent). The thirteen clients who chose to self-describe were all people of color, and their answers included African, West Indian, and biracial. Although 86 percent had completed high school and 20 percent had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, the majority of respondents (83 percent) were not employed when they started the CRTP.

According to SFF staff and the program materials provided to Urban, the profile of our client sample is closely aligned with that of clients who participated in the CRTP in previous years. Most EEP clients are women of color, and 40 percent are immigrants. These two groups are [shown](#) to experience DV more often and to face more barriers than their peers (YWCA n.d.). The economic opportunities offered through the EEP are particularly important in light of disparities and inequities that its women participants experience.

About the CRTP Evaluation

The Urban Institute and John Jay College of Criminal Justice were selected to evaluate the CRTP through a competitive solicitation. The evaluation focuses on CRTP clients and their experiences in the program's fall 2019 and spring 2020 cohorts. In this interim brief, we focus on the short-term outcomes shown in table 1 and analyze and compare results of surveys that clients completed before starting the program (i.e., W1 at baseline) and four months after completing the program (i.e., W2). A final report will include findings from a one-year follow-up survey and assess CRTP participants' outcomes in the context of the broader EEP. We have frequently engaged with clients directly through multiple data collection activities (box 1) and maintained ongoing communication with SFF and CRTP staff and other program stakeholders to better understand the context the program operates in.

To assess clients' progress, we approached the development of interim and long-term outcomes with the mindset of setting **realistic measures that reflect not only clients' skill attainment and job readiness but also their safety, life circumstances, and other factors that influence their ability to obtain and maintain employment**. In consultation with SFF staff, we developed a logic model with 10 short-term outcomes, 4 of which concern whether clients build a foundation for finding better-paying jobs (for instance, whether they advance their skills) and 6 of which concern the removal of social and psychological barriers that hinder survivors from succeeding on the job (for instance, whether they improve their self-esteem, or whether their perceptions of safety improve).

BOX 1

Data Collection Activities and Methodology

From fall 2019 through summer 2020, we engaged in the following activities for this evaluation:

- **Observations.** In fall 2019, we observed the fall 2019 cohort's orientation and conducted 18 observations of the CRW and OOW sessions. In spring 2020, we observed the spring 2020 cohort's orientation and conducted 8 observations of CRW and OOW sessions once they transitioned to remote classes because of the pandemic.
- **Semistructured interviews with program stakeholders.** From summer 2019 through summer 2020, we conducted over 20 in-person and virtual interviews with CRTP stakeholders including program leadership, staff, and facilitators, and partner agencies that support CRTP clients.
- **Focus groups with clients.** In fall 2019, we held an in-person focus group discussion with 10 total clients from groups with higher literacy levels, and in spring 2020, we held a virtual focus group discussion with 6 clients from Prep Group.
- **Logic model development.** In November and December 2019, we developed a logic model with SFF and CRTP staff.
- **Programmatic data analysis.** In April and October 2020, we received client-level programmatic data from the SFF Data, Evaluation and Impact team on the 70 clients (out of the total of 86) who consented to their case files being shared with Urban. Administrative records are maintained by SFF's Data, Impact and Evaluation team. We use these data for outcomes 1 through 3. In our analysis of outcome 1 ("demonstrate gains in office technology"), we focus on the 58 clients (or 83 percent of the clients for whom case files were shared) who completed the program and whose

records were available. In our analysis of outcome 2 (“improve literacy and quantitative skills including reading, math, and language”), we focus on the 41 clients (or 59 percent of clients for whom case files were shared) who completed the program and whose postprogram Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) scores were shared with Urban. In our analysis of outcome 3 (“demonstrate knowledge and skills at high school level”), we report on 63 clients (or 90 percent of clients for whom case files were shared) who completed the program and whose records were available.

- **Longitudinal client surveys.** From fall 2019 through fall 2020, we administered two waves (W1 and W2) of client surveys. W1 provided a pre-CRTP baseline ($n = 86$, 100 percent response rate), and W2 was administered to clients four months after completing the program ($n = 75$) for two cohorts). We are collecting W3 surveys administered to clients one year after completion, the results of which will be included in the final report. For outcomes 4 through 10, we rely primarily on longitudinal client surveys, though we also use observations, stakeholder interviews, and notes taken during the focus groups to substantiate survey findings.
- **Semistructured interviews with a comparison group.** We are planning to conduct and analyze 10 semistructured interviews with clients who receive services from SFF but are not participating in the CRTP to compare their experiences with those of CRTP clients. Findings will be included in the final report.

Preliminary Findings and Discussion

In our evaluation of the CRTP, we have seen that the program helps survivors address multiple barriers to short- and long-term economic security and that it is well received by clients. On 6 of our 10 outcomes, the majority of clients completing the program made progress. Although the findings are mixed for 4 outcomes, the overwhelmingly positive results from data collected from various sources indicate that the CRTP is effective at meeting most of its stated objectives and providing the necessary skills and support to its clients who experience multiple barriers.

Table 1 includes a summary of early findings. We caution readers to avoid drawing conclusions from the findings in this brief for the following reasons:

- Our data collection activities and analyses are ongoing. We are still conducting and analyzing interviews with comparison group clients and administering our third survey wave. After all data collection activities are concluded and results analyzed, we will present the findings in a final report expected to be released by the end of summer 2022.
- Some survey questions received too few responses to yield statistically significant results, preventing us from estimating how generalizable these findings are to all CRTP clients.
- Our evaluation coincided with the onset of the pandemic, which not only prompted the CRTP to fully shift to virtual classes and operations but exacerbated barriers for survivors who were already coping with difficult life circumstances and stress. The pandemic also had a widespread impact on the job market and financial stability.

TABLE 1

Progress Toward 10 Short-Term Outcomes among CRTP Clients in the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 Cohorts

Outcome	Progress ^a	Summary of preliminary findings
1. Demonstrate gains in office technology.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The majority of clients attained Microsoft Office Suite certification. More than two-thirds of clients who completed the program obtained certifications in Word, Excel, and PowerPoint; one-third obtained additional certifications in advanced Excel and QuickBooks. ■ Multiple factors helped clients obtain these certifications, but two stand out: (1) active participation from clients (for instance, many students actively participated, asked many questions, affirmed one another and the facilitators, and made comments such as “I want to learn; now I know how to do PowerPoints”), and (2) the facilitators’ experience and dedication.
2. Improve literacy and quantitative skills including reading, math, and language.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The evaluation team consulted with SFF and determined that progress on this outcome would be defined as an increase of 1.5 grade levels or more on the Test of Adult Basic Education. Postprogram scores improved for 61 percent of clients in English (by 3 grade levels on average), for 71 percent in math (by 2 grade levels on average), and for 27 percent in reading (by nearly 3 grade levels on average). Reading scores changed for so few clients because 51 percent of clients scored at the 12th grade level before starting the program. Clients who score high before the program on a particular subject are not required to take the TABE test for that subject after completing the program. ■ The limitation: postprogram TABE scores in all three categories were available for only 59 percent of clients. Clients without postprogram TABE scores were omitted from our analysis, but their initial TABE scores were comparable to those of clients who completed the CRTP.
3. Demonstrate knowledge and skills at high school level.	Some/ inconclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To track clients’ progress toward this outcome, we analyzed clients’ GED attainment. ■ Sixty-three clients (90 percent of clients for whom case file data were available) completed high school before starting the CRTP. ■ Of the seven clients without a GED, six disengaged with services for various reasons and one did not obtain a GED.
4. Improve professional development skills and career readiness knowledge.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Of the 66 CRTP clients who completed the three-week CRW and responded to the survey, over 80 percent agreed or strongly agreed that (1) they understood the difference between career readiness and job readiness, (2) the CRW increased their confidence in writing their résumés, (3) the CRW had helped or would help them get jobs, and (4) they now knew what employers looked for in job candidates. ■ Clients were especially engaged when they were learning practical skills and were able to practice in class. They seemed to lose interest when too much time was spent on a non-skill development topic. ■ Facilitators routinely used positive and inspirational messaging.
5. Improve self-esteem.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To measure clients’ perceptions of self-esteem pre- and postprogram, we used, at SFF’s suggestion, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, which is widely used in social science research. ■ The evaluators coded the responses to assign numerical values to survey responses that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree and found that the difference between baseline (Wave 1) and Wave 2 was positive and statistically significant. ■ These preliminary results are promising. Though research shows that lower self-esteem is common among domestic violence survivors, and that improving this outcome may take longer than others (Orava, McLeod, and Sharpe 1996; Rakovec-Felser 2014), CRTP clients who responded to the survey showed improvement in self-esteem four months after completing the program.

Outcome	Progress ^a	Summary of preliminary findings
6. Improve self-efficacy.	Some/ inconclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To measure clients' perceptions of self-efficacy pre- and postprogram, we used, also at SFF's suggestion, the General Self-Efficacy Scale developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem, which is also widely used in social science research. In the postprogram survey responses, we found a positive trend showing slight improvements from baseline. These improvements were not statistically significant but only by a small margin. Facilitators provided information and discussed the importance of student motivation, willpower, and attitude. Facilitators also underscored the need to practice being efficient, organized, and responsive even when feeling overwhelmed.
7. Increase confidence in career outlook.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the postprogram survey, we asked clients ($n = 55$) to indicate "on a scale of 0 to 10, the extent to which they felt they received the help they needed to prepare for a career ... from SFF." Clients' answers ranged from 7 to 10, with 50 percent of clients selecting 10. These responses suggest that most clients felt they received the necessary support from SFF to prepare them for a career.
8. Improve capacity for financial self-sufficiency.	Some/ inconclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We used Likert scale responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree to measure their responses to 12 statements about their financial self-sufficiency, such as "I am confident that I can meet my goals for becoming financially secure," or "I could handle a major unexpected expense." The interim results are mixed. We found no effect on the overall scale. But the average means at baseline were also rather low, meaning that before starting the CRTP, most clients chose answers close to "disagree." Low means at baseline indicate that clients are particularly vulnerable financially before they start the CRTP. In addition, four months may not be enough time to gain confidence and become more motivated to work toward self-sufficiency. Finally, the pandemic may have also affected survivors' ability to feel financially self-sufficient.
9. Increase perceptions of safety.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To measure perceptions of safety, we used MOVERS, a validated assessment recommended for evaluations of programs. In the postprogram survey, we found slight increases in the differences in means for many statements. The difference in means across the whole scale was positive and statistically significant. Although the CRTP curriculum is not specifically designed to address client safety, interim results are promising. This is particularly important given some clients were surveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when survivors have struggled to feel safe.
10. Enhance connections to the community	Some or inconclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To measure perceptions of social connectedness in New York City and society as a whole, we used the adapted versions of the validated scales Social Connectedness in Mainstream Society and Social Connectedness in the Ethnic Community. Staff reported that addressing social isolation and improving clients' social connectedness are important short- and long-term objectives, particularly because many clients come from other countries or states and attempt to make New York City their home. As we found no effect, the differences in means between the baseline and postprogram surveys were not statistically significant. Four months may not be enough time for clients to start feeling more connected to the community. Living in a large and cosmopolitan city such as New York may also add unique constraints. We would caution about interpreting these interim results because the response rate to this question was low. We also suggest that SFF or any other domestic violence service consider developing a new outcome that measures clients' perceptions of building a community <i>within</i> a program, such as making meaningful connections with other clients, facilitators, and program leadership.

Source: Client surveys, focus groups, observations, administrative data, stakeholder interviews.

Notes: CRTP = Career Readiness Training Program. CRW = Career Readiness Workshop. DV = domestic violence. MOVERS = Measurement of Victim Empowerment Related to Safety. OOW = Office Operations Workshop. SFF = Sanctuary for Families. TABE = Test of Adult Basic Education.

^a Yes = progress by majority of clients (majority is 60 percent or more of clients). Some/inconclusive = some progress for majority of clients or positive shifts for majority of clients but no statistically significant effect found in analyzing responses to client surveys (i.e., our analyses did not receive statistically significant results).

Findings on Program Modifications Made during the Pandemic

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a citywide shutdown and stay-at-home orders. Education providers and employers had to rapidly transition to remote work. Many businesses closed for extended periods, and some have closed permanently. The pandemic and restrictions particularly affected low-income communities and communities of color with loss of employment, health disparities, and high rates of hospitalizations and deaths. Many communities suffered housing and food insecurities owing to the loss of employment and opportunities to gain employment. Domestic violence survivors faced additional challenges as pending court cases were put on hold and visitation arrangements had to change because of pandemic restrictions. Sanctuary for Families clients have lost family members to COVID-19, lost employment, faced ongoing legal issues, and dealt with new visitation agreements.

Though some crisis services and shelter services have continued to be provided in person, SFF and the CRTP had to quickly transition to providing classes remotely. The CRTP was impacted by the pandemic in spring 2020 in the following ways:

- Many CRTP clients did not have access to personal computers. Program staff were able to advocate for and secure money to buy a laptop for each student. They also arranged to deliver them.
- In addition, CRTP staff helped the students obtain the necessary software and programs they would use during remote classes. The SFF IT department assisted in this process and troubleshooted issues that arose during Zoom classes.
- The students had different comfort levels with and experience using platforms like Zoom, and CRTP staff helped them learn to use these platforms. The evaluation team also observed the students helping each other when there were questions and issues with Zoom and other programs.
- The students attended a meeting each week where they provided each other additional emotional support to navigate the challenges of the pandemic.
- Program staff used Google Classroom for all class materials. The program used this platform intermittently before the pandemic but used it more regularly after the transition to remote learning.
- CRTP staff recognized it would be challenging to place students in internships and employment because of the pandemic and the loss of employment opportunities in New York City. Staff responded by reiterating the importance of their programming to ensure students would be as competitive as possible in the workforce.

Despite these challenges, clients' determination and facilitators' ability to support and engage clients enabled them to complete remote classes in most cases, and clients attained Microsoft Office Suite certifications by the end of the program at greater rates than any previous cohorts.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Based on the data we have collected and our preliminary analyses of the CRTP's interim outcomes, we have seen that the program's operations run smoothly, SFF leadership and staff are engaged with clients, and clients who complete the program can significantly improve on the majority of the 10 outcomes we analyzed. Moreover, through qualitative data collection, clients shared with evaluators that **the CRTP had enriched their lives, and the connections they made with facilitators and each other were very meaningful.**

We have noticed that most CRTP staff have a background in social work or a similar area and/or are highly skilled and experienced in working with DV survivors. In addition, SFF and CRTP leadership have expanded the program's funding streams, actively solicited clients' feedback with assistance from SFF's Data, Evaluation and Impact team, and adapted the program to better meet clients' needs. The CRTP is one of the few workforce development programs in the United States that is responsive to DV survivors. Notably, the program does not shy away from clients in crisis, and thanks to SFF's expansive resources, it can provide clients supports that include shelter placements and crisis counseling.

The evaluation team is completing the following data collection activities and will present analyses of them in a final report in summer 2022:

- The team will distribute W3 of the survey for program clients from the fall 2019 and spring 2020 cohorts one year after they have completed the program.
 - » To facilitate a better response rate, the evaluation team is conducting midyear check-ins with clients who took the baseline survey and is asking clients for updated contact information.
- The team will conduct semistructured interviews with 10 DV survivors selected as a comparison group in consultation with SFF and the Institute for State and Local Governance.
 - » The comparison group includes survivors who have received other services from SFF but have never been enrolled in the CRTP.
 - » The objective of the interviews is to compare whether and how the life circumstances of SFF clients who have not participated in the CRTP differ from those of CRTP clients, to learn how the pandemic has impacted them, and to learn about their ability to access domestic violence services or interventions remotely.

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