



City of Ferndale

POVERTY TASK FORCE REPORT

MEETING DATE: Dec. 4th, 2019

SUBJECT: Poverty Obstacles to Employment

DATE: 11/27/19

FROM: Riley Sweeney, Communications Officer

PRESENTATION BY: Riley Sweeney

SYNOPSIS: Here is an overview of the issues and resources relating to obstacles for employment for those experiencing poverty.

STAFF NOTES: If not having a home is the primary cause of homelessness, then not having a job is the primary cause of poverty. Similar to hunger, it is straightforward problem with lots of challenging factors buried beneath. In this extremely brief and general overview, I will touch on several of those factors however there is one that I am not exploring: Laziness or disinterest in holding a job.

The reason why is simple. This is a not real problem. This is often brought up in political discussions or antidotal evidence, but the facts are clear – for those facing poverty, they do whatever they can to get out of poverty. There may be health obstacles, mental or physical, that may hinder the ability to work, but the desire is never in question. It is brought up to place the blame on those in poverty and distract from the systemic problems that face our community and has no place in serious discussions about how to solve these issues.

With that addressed, let's dive in.

BACKGROUND:

Place of Residence/Address



For those without a permanent or reliable address, gaining or retaining employment can be difficult. Almost all job applications ask for a permanent address and leaving it blank can raise red flags. An address is required for background checks, for a W-4 so you can get paid and of course, where to send your paycheck.

While a PO Box can resolve some of these problems, it is not a fix-all. Similarly, while a service provider or relative can serve as a mailstop, getting regular and timely mail picked up can be a challenge.

Showers/Hygiene/Laundry/Clothing



For those without reliable access to bathrooms or laundry facilities, getting presentable for work can be a significant challenge to getting and more importantly, retaining employment. Some job sites include shower facilities and even laundry facilities but

those are few and far between. It is one of the reasons why when a laundromat closes, it can have a big impact on local employment.

Getting ready for the workplace can also be a barrier for those without funds to purchase quality shoes, or work appropriate attire.

Transportation



Do you have reliable transportation? That is a question at the bottom of most job applications now and gets to the heart of a real challenge in Ferndale where we lack frequent public transit. If you do not own a car, or your car frequently breaks down, you are going to struggle to get to your place of employment.

Mental and Physical Health



The obvious element to this is a workplace injury can drastically impact your ability to be hired and for many workers – independent contractors, tradespeople and those working under the table – one injury could change their entire financial situation.

Add to that less visible challenges – ongoing health issues that can flare up suddenly or mental health challenges that impact work performance. It can be hard to provide good customer service if you are in the middle of a manic episode and employers can be less forgiving for these issues than physical impairment.

Criminal History



For those looking to get their life back on track, criminal history can be a major barrier, although not as much as it was before. In 2018, Washington State became one of the first states in the nation to “Ban the Box” which prohibits employers from inquiring about a job candidate’s criminal history before that individual has been deemed qualified for a desired position. They are not forbidden from using it in consideration later in the process. While it is removed as an immediate barrier, it still can be a major impediment, especially for communities of color who struggle with the systemic disproportional impact of policing.

Childcare



With the average cost of childcare exceeding that of a college tuition on a per-day basis, many of those living in poverty simply cannot afford to work. What little funds they could make are quickly devoured by rising childcare costs. For those able to work out a solution with family members or unlicensed providers, they can be at the whims of cancellations, or in worst cases, abuse and neglect.

In Whatcom County, a major childcare provider was facing financial challenges and was considering closing down which the City estimated would impact 800 employees at local businesses.