

**Essay**

# Older Women Need More from the Workforce Development System

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*"I have been working 37 years. I have never collected a dime on unemployment. So now I say, 'Wow, you are 58 and now you are going to unemployment and you are going to school.' Like I said, 37 years of work and now BANG, you don't have a job. It is very weird, and I don't know what to do with myself."*

—Rosa, 58 years old, NJ

I met Rosa, a 58-year-old woman, when I spent 6 months undercover as an unemployed worker in an American Job Center. Rosa's story is not unique. During the recession, older women found themselves—often for the first time in their lives—among the ranks of the unemployed. And as our economy recovers, many are still struggling to find jobs. Older women have the highest rates of long-term unemployment in our labor market. On average, unemployed women who are 55 to 64 years old remain jobless for about 1 year, and unemployed women 65 and over are typically without a job for nearly 15 months. And in these important working years—those right before retirement—the situation is often crisis level for them.

When older women walk through the doors of an American Job Center, they often learn that services

are not targeted for them. Some of this stems from the policy framework that has led our current public workforce system to embrace a "work first" model. This means that job placement—regardless of the quality of that job—often takes precedence over education, retraining, or even career pathways opportunities. Not surprisingly, the jobs workers are connected to via the Centers tend to be low-wage, entry-level work. This presents challenges to older workers who may be further along in their career cycles. For instance, in a job search seminar that I attended, a client who had spent many years as a pharmaceutical manager was instructed to go to Michael's craft stores to apply for a job because her hobby was needlework and that employer was hiring.

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The public workforce “work first” mindset also led to a misunderstanding of how older workers would use the workforce system for reemployment. For instance, some of the older women I met when I was under cover in the Job Center noted that frontline workers would tell them (particularly if they had college degrees) that they should be able to just get back out there and find jobs. Even though workers may have degrees and years of experience, their skills may not always match the current labor market demands. Closely related is the challenge of just how different the job search process was years ago when they may have been actively searching for work. When older workers applied for their previous jobs, often there were not online applications, LinkedIn, and other social media.

The workforce development system needs to better serve older women. One intervention for older women is providing access to skills training that can prepare them for growing high-wage jobs such as advanced manufacturing, information technology, transportation, logistics, and other fields. For many older women, the jobs they once held were often in traditionally female fields—such as home health care, office, retail, and hospitality. These jobs tend not to offer incomes that will allow women to be economically secure, and when they lose these jobs they sometimes find themselves with very little savings. Incorporating opportunities for lifelong learning tied to certificate and degree programs in growing high-wage occupations (some of which may be nontraditional for women) is a route to economic security. However, to be effective, workforce development practices must be developed with a gender and age lens. Creative approaches need to take into account the reality of older women’s working lives, for instance: educating women about possibilities in nontraditional jobs, identifying the transferable skills women have that can help them in that work, awarding credit for prior learning and work experience, streamlining training so that it can be completed quickly, and educating employers about the value of older workers. Tied to the success of these types of initiatives is the need for intensive professional development for frontline workers in the Centers to help them better serve older workers, and especially older women. This will ensure that the frontline workers can facilitate the process of career exploration; understand and counsel toward appropriate career and career ladders for those later in life; identify possible skills training and/or education; and provide job search, assessment, and case management assistance to older women workers.

The recession taught us that years of dedicated work experience did not shelter individuals from being laid off, nor did it increase their chances of finding success via the American Job Centers. In fact, all too often, age and tenure in a job actually tended to work against a client. The workforce system must take a holistic approach—addressing the challenges older clients have and providing new opportunities for them, along with educating both the frontline workers in the Centers and potential employers about the value of older workers and ways to best serve them.

One thing that was obvious from my research was that the challenges older workers faced seemed to spark an incredible emotional response both from clients and Center staff. Workers in the Job Centers often have a kinship to older workers and great sympathy for their experiences, particularly as they remained on the job search for many months. Perhaps it was out of concern for the older worker’s future or lack of confidence in the American Dream and social contract that did not seem to be fulfilled for older workers, or the obvious injustice of those who are desperate late in life. Perhaps it reflects a broader economic anxiety that we all have about our retirement. Whatever spurred it, it highlights the need for targeted workforce development policy and programs that will ensure older women will have opportunities to return to the labor market in ways that offer them needed economic security in the years before retirement.

*The views expressed by the author are meant to encourage debate and discussion; they do not necessarily represent official policies of AARP.*

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Essay 4, June 2015

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