

2025

WORKFORCE SURVEY REPORT



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Overview

Understanding Workforce Barriers Through Community Insight

In 2025, Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida launched a comprehensive community survey to better understand the employment challenges faced by working-age adults in Central Florida. The target audience was job seekers who were unemployed or dissatisfied with their current employment due to low wages, lack of benefits or opportunities for advancement that keep them from achieving financial stability. While traditional labor data provides unemployment rates, it often lacks depth needed to explain the root causes of joblessness or job dissatisfaction or to inform targeted solutions. The goal was to uncover the specific obstacles these individuals encounter when attempting to secure quality employment.

Connecting with Job Seekers

For the purpose of this survey, “job seekers” refers to individuals who have experienced underemployment or unemployment within the past six months. These community members often face significant barriers to stable employment and economic mobility.

Second Harvest collaborated with trusted local partners—including schools, food pantries, and community centers—to distribute the survey to residents in three counties: Orange, Osceola, and Seminole. In all, 220 responses were received.

Workforce Training and Its Role in Economic Mobility

The insights gathered through this survey highlight not only the barriers job seekers face, but also the critical role of workforce training programs to help individuals build the skills needed to secure stable employment and advance in their careers. These programs often include hands-on learning, classroom instruction, and industry-recognized certifications that align participants with real job opportunities. A key component of the survey focused on understanding why existing workforce development efforts may fall short in addressing the needs of those they aim to serve—and what adjustments could make them more accessible, relevant, and effective in helping job seekers achieve economic mobility.

Community Workforce Insights

Understanding the Challenges Facing Job Seekers

Through this survey, Second Harvest sought to go beyond the numbers. Job seekers were asked to share the real-world obstacles that hinder their ability to find and sustain employment. These included a wide range of factors such as lack of access to reliable transportation, limited affordable childcare, gaps in work history, insufficient job training, and other barriers.

By capturing these insights directly from community members, Second Harvest is able to build a more comprehensive and compassionate understanding of what it truly means to be unemployed or underemployed—and how workforce programs can be better tailored to meet their needs.

“**The jobs I’m applying for are stating I’m not qualified or need more experience in the field. Yet I am trying to get into the field to gain the experience so it’s a frustrating round about.**”

Job Seeker from Orange County”



Employment Status at a Glance

The survey asked job seekers to select the option that most accurately reflected their employment situation:



I am currently looking for work or on a lay off

36% of respondents are unemployed but actively seeking employment or have been temporarily laid off and are awaiting recall.



I work part-time or have temporary work (less than 30 hours per week)

30% of respondents are employed in part-time roles or short-term/seasonal jobs, which may offer limited stability and fewer benefits.



I work full-time (30 hours or more per week)

24% of respondents reported stable employment, typically with consistent schedules and income.



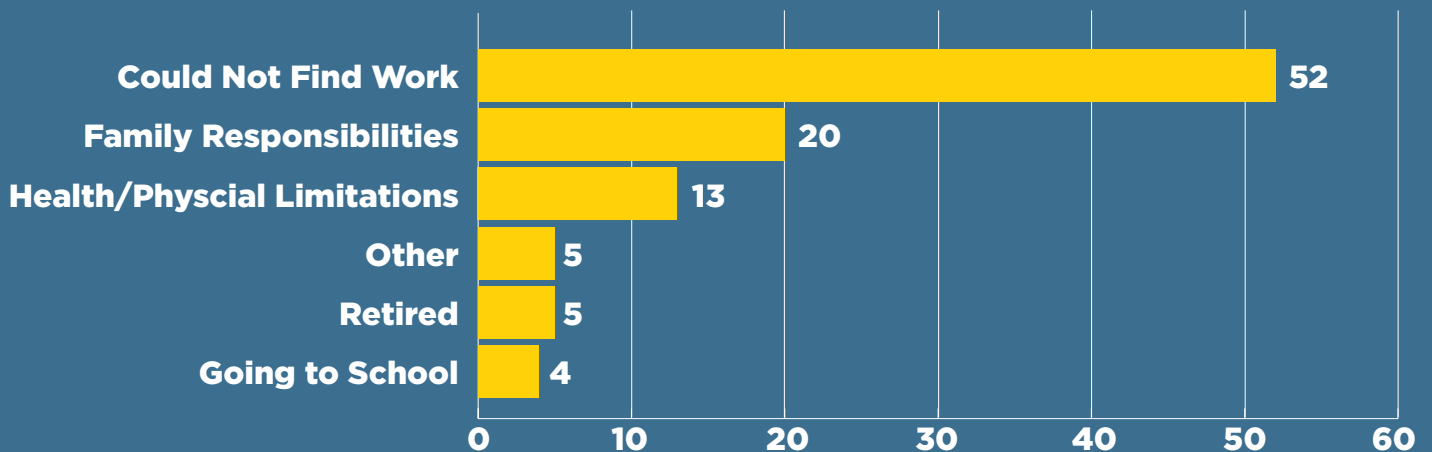
Did not work or search for work

10% of respondents are not employed and are not actively looking for work due to personal, health or other reasons.

Real-World Obstacles That Hinder Employment

One intent of the survey was to gain deeper insight into the primary obstacles preventing these job seekers from securing stable, fulfilling employment. Respondents were asked to select the single, most significant reason for their current employment status from a provided list of options.

Obstacles to Employment



The most commonly cited reason was the inability to find work—despite actively searching and applying for jobs. In fact, **52% of job seekers indicated that they had been seeking employment** but had not been able to secure a position. This underscores a critical disconnect in the local labor market: many individuals are ready and willing to work, yet struggle to find opportunities that match their skills, experience, or circumstances.

Beyond this, several other challenges emerged. Approximately 20% of job seekers cited family responsibilities—such as caring for children or elderly relatives—as their main barrier. These individuals often require flexible work arrangements, which are not always available or accessible. Additionally, 13% of respondents identified personal health issues as a significant factor limiting their ability to engage in the workforce.

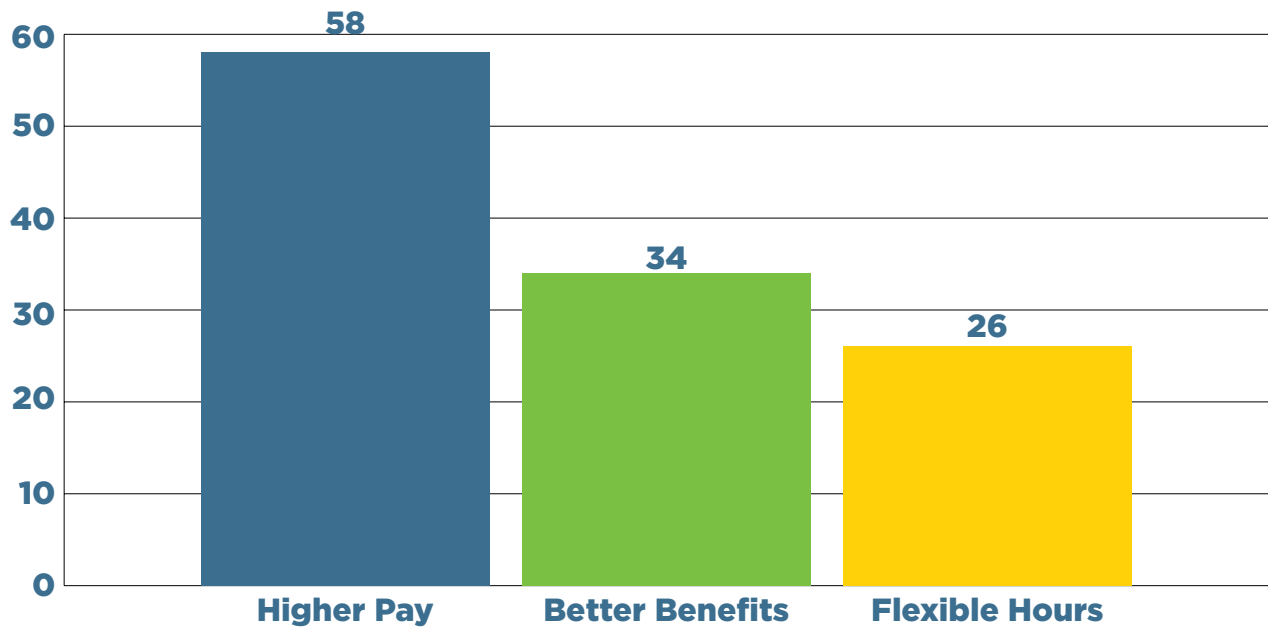
Together, these responses shed light on the complex and intersecting challenges that prevent willing individuals from securing quality employment—challenges that go far beyond a lack of motivation or readiness.

“Many are not flexible with my children’s school schedule or they are, and don’t pay enough.”

Job Seeker from Orange County



The Search for Quality Employment



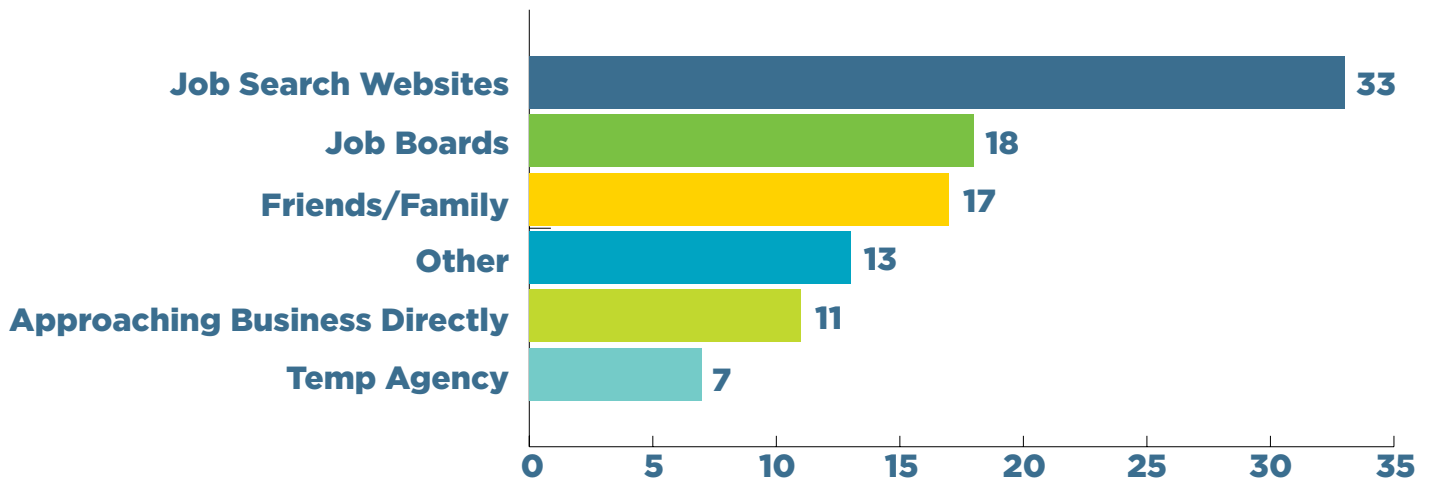
To better understand what's driving employees to search for new positions, Second Harvest compared local survey results with national data. Local job seekers shared a clear aspiration for their job search: to secure quality employment that offers competitive wages, access to benefits, and opportunities for long-term growth and advancement. Many job seekers are seeking to build stable careers—not just hold jobs.

Nationally, according to a study by Indeed and The Harris Poll, 58% of job seekers cited higher pay as their primary reason for looking elsewhere. Additionally, 34% indicated that better benefits were a key motivator, and 26% expressed a desire for more flexible hours. Together, these insights reveal a clear disconnect between what workers need and what many current jobs are offering.

Open to Work

Focusing specifically on survey respondents who cannot find work, the data shows that these job seekers are making concerted efforts to secure employment. Many are actively applying for jobs, leveraging online platforms such as LinkedIn, visiting businesses to inquire about openings, and exploring temporary opportunities.

Where Job Seekers Look for Employment



Despite these efforts, securing employment remains a significant challenge. For many, their job searches have not led to meaningful employment, as **77% of job seekers are currently looking for new positions.**

Examining both their employment goals and the obstacles they face, provides valuable insight into the structural barriers affecting workforce participation—and where advocacy and support are most needed.

“

“[I am a] train conductor with Brightline, currently looking at SunRail careers. Also enrolled with Kissimmee City Hall for job openings.”

Job Seeker from Osceola County

”



Most Sought-After Jobs

Survey participants were asked about the types of roles they are actively pursuing. The chart below represents of jobs and industries survey respondents applied for within the last six months.



Job seekers reported difficulty getting hired, even for entry-level positions that align with their existing skills and experience. These individuals are applying for roles that could serve as stepping stones into the workforce.

Many survey respondents shared frustrations with the hiring process itself, describing it as unresponsive, unclear, and discouraging. When they encounter complex application systems and delayed communication, many job seekers feel overwhelmed and overlooked.



Earning vs. Living

The Financial Disconnect Facing Job Seekers

The survey revealed that many job seekers are actively seeking jobs in sectors such as warehouse operations, food service, customer service, retail, housekeeping, and construction. While these roles are among the most accessible, they often fail to provide wages that meet the basic cost of living in Central Florida. This concern is heightened by the fact that **79% of surveyed households are supporting between two and four individuals**, further compounding the financial pressure.

According to the MIT Living Wage Calculator, a single adult living in Orlando needs to earn approximately \$48,692 annually to cover essential living expenses. For families, the threshold is even higher—a single adult with one child requires \$80,537 per year, while a household with two working adults and two children would need each adult to earn \$54,412 annually. In contrast, Florida’s minimum wage yields just \$27,040 per year, falling drastically short of what is needed to sustain a basic standard of living.

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“Jobs are simply asking for more and giving less, making it hard to afford basic living necessities.”

Job Seeker from Orange County

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According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Occupational Outlook Handbook, annual wages for the jobs most commonly pursued by local job seekers range from \$29,710 in food service to \$44,310 in construction. These earnings fall short of what is needed to support an individual—let alone a family—in today’s economy.

This persistent gap between wages and the actual cost of living highlights a critical need for access to quality jobs—positions that offer livable wages, essential benefits, and opportunities for career advancement.

Facing Dead Ends

Stuck in the Search

Across the Central Florida community, job seekers are struggling to find roles that reflect their skills, passions, and long-term goals. Many survey respondents shared frustrations with the hiring process itself, describing it as unresponsive, unclear, and discouraging. This cycle not only affects individuals but also limits the pool of motivated, qualified candidates available to employers.

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“I tried to be a security officer once; they told me my starting wage would be \$14/hr. Instead they offered me \$12/hr. They are only calling me to work on Sunday.”

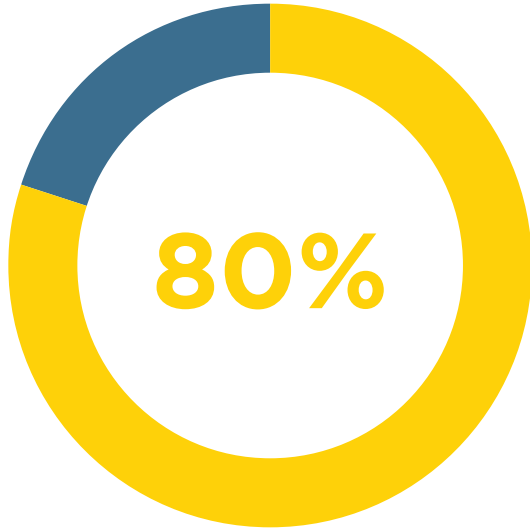
Job Seeker from Orange County

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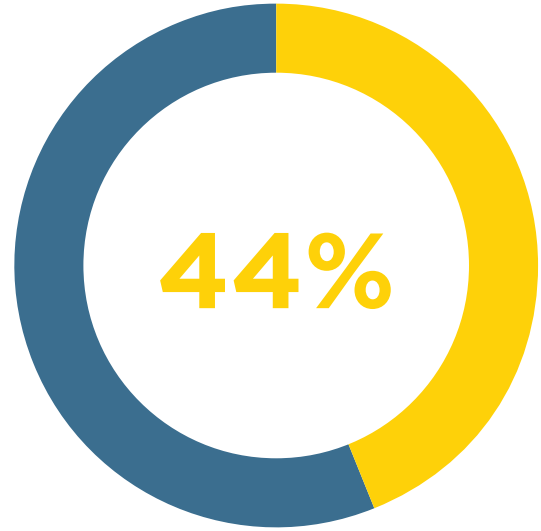
Today’s job market presents significant challenges for those pursuing meaningful work. From complex application systems to delayed communication, many job seekers feel overwhelmed and overlooked. In addition, many survey respondents shared frustrations with the hiring process itself, describing it as unresponsive, unclear, and discouraging.

For employers, this presents a critical opportunity: by creating more transparent and responsive hiring practices, businesses can tap into a wealth of underutilized talent right in their own communities—people who are eager to contribute, grow, and succeed when given the chance.





Hiring Managers Admit to Ghosting Candidates



Job Seekers Identify Not Hearing Back as a “Top Challenge”

Missed Connection

Understanding the Gaps Between Job Seekers & Employers

A common frustrating issue is “ghosting”—when employers abruptly stop communicating with candidates during the hiring process. According to a 2024 survey by Resume Genius, 80% of hiring managers admitted to ghosting applicants, often due to uncertainty about candidate fit or being overwhelmed by application volume.

This lack of responsiveness has a significant impact on job seekers. In the same survey, 44% of applicants identified not hearing back from employers as one of the most challenging aspects of their job search.

Lengthy hiring timelines further compound the issue. Data from Greenhouse shows that the average hiring process now takes 46 days, while 40% of job seekers expect to receive an offer within 30 days.

This mismatch between employer timelines and candidate expectations can lead to discouragement, confusion, and a growing sense of instability among job seekers navigating an already difficult market.

“I strive to apply to big employers like the hospitals and mental health facilities. I apply for positions only requiring a high school diploma and I never get called back for an interview or I do not get hired after my interview.”

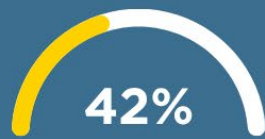
Job Seeker from Orange County

Limitations to Workforce Participation

Many individuals face challenges in finding and maintaining employment due to factors such as financial strain, skill gaps and other personal circumstances. To better understand these concerns and identify ways to offer support, survey participants were asked to share the biggest barriers they face when it comes to employment.



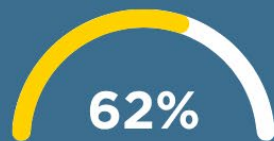
45%
Say that there are not many available job openings



42%
Say that English language proficiency is preventing them from obtaining work



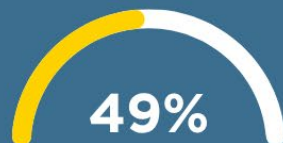
56%
Say that jobs available are not paying enough to afford basic necessities



62%
Say that jobs are not hiring people with their citizenship status



46%
Say that jobs do not pay enough for them to take care of family



49%
Say that jobs do not hire people with their criminal history

“Many jobs do not pay enough for a single person to survive without a roommate.”

Job Seeker from Orange County

“Background checks are a huge obstacle.”

Job Seeker from Orange County

“Wages for someone with background are not enough to maintain bills, food, etc.”

Job Seeker from Seminole County

“It’s hard to find employment in my field.”

Job Seeker from Seminole County



Recognizing the Full Spectrum of Employment Barriers

The survey results shed light on some of the biggest challenges many job seekers in the community are facing. More than half of respondents (56%) shared that local jobs don't pay enough to cover basic living expenses. Additionally, **46% agree that jobs do not pay enough for them to take care of their family responsibilities.** This shows that even when jobs are available, they often don't provide the financial security people need to support themselves and their families.

A lack of job availability was also a concern, with **45% of respondents agreeing that there simply aren't enough employment opportunities** in the area—highlighting the importance of companies upskilling current employees to open up entry-level positions for those seeking to join the workforce.

Flexibility in work schedules came up as another key issue, with 44% of respondents saying that rigid hours are a barrier to employment. More flexible jobs could help people balance work with personal and family responsibilities.

These insights show that while many in the community are ready and willing to work, they need better support and opportunities to do so. When the whole community works together—educators, employers, and training providers—solutions can be created that allow everyone to thrive.

Citizenship and work authorization are often cited as a limitation in workforce discussions, and **62% of survey respondents agree that employers are not hiring individuals due to citizenship status**, such as Temporary Protected Status. Job seekers also reported that English language proficiency prevents access to job opportunities in some communities and industries.

Criminal history did not emerge as a widespread concern among respondents. However, those who did have a criminal background expressed difficulty finding work, pointing to the continued need for reintegration support and efforts to reduce stigma.

Workforce Training Creates Opportunities for Career Advancement

Workforce training programs play a powerful role in helping communities grow and thrive. By providing people with the skills they need, these programs open the door to long-term career success—not just short-term jobs.

According to The Harris Poll, some of the most common challenges to career advancement include a lack of certifications, limited formal education or training, and insufficient work experience. These factors often prevent individuals from qualifying for stable, higher-paying jobs.

Top Job Qualification Barriers

Indeed Survey with The Harris Poll, 2023

43% Lack of certifications needed for the job I want

41% Not enough formal education or professional training

37% Lack of work experiences

In neighborhoods across Central Florida, workforce programs help connect residents to good jobs that offer fair pay and real opportunities to grow. They are a vital resource for building stronger families, stable incomes, and a more hopeful future for all.

An overwhelming **75% of respondents agreed that training programs could help them find better job opportunities.** This indicates a strong interest and confidence in the potential of training to improve their employment prospects.

Many community members shared that gaining access to job training, certifications, or skill-building programs would increase their chances of securing higher-quality, more stable work. This feedback highlights the importance of expanding workforce training as a key strategy for promoting economic mobility and long-term success in our community.

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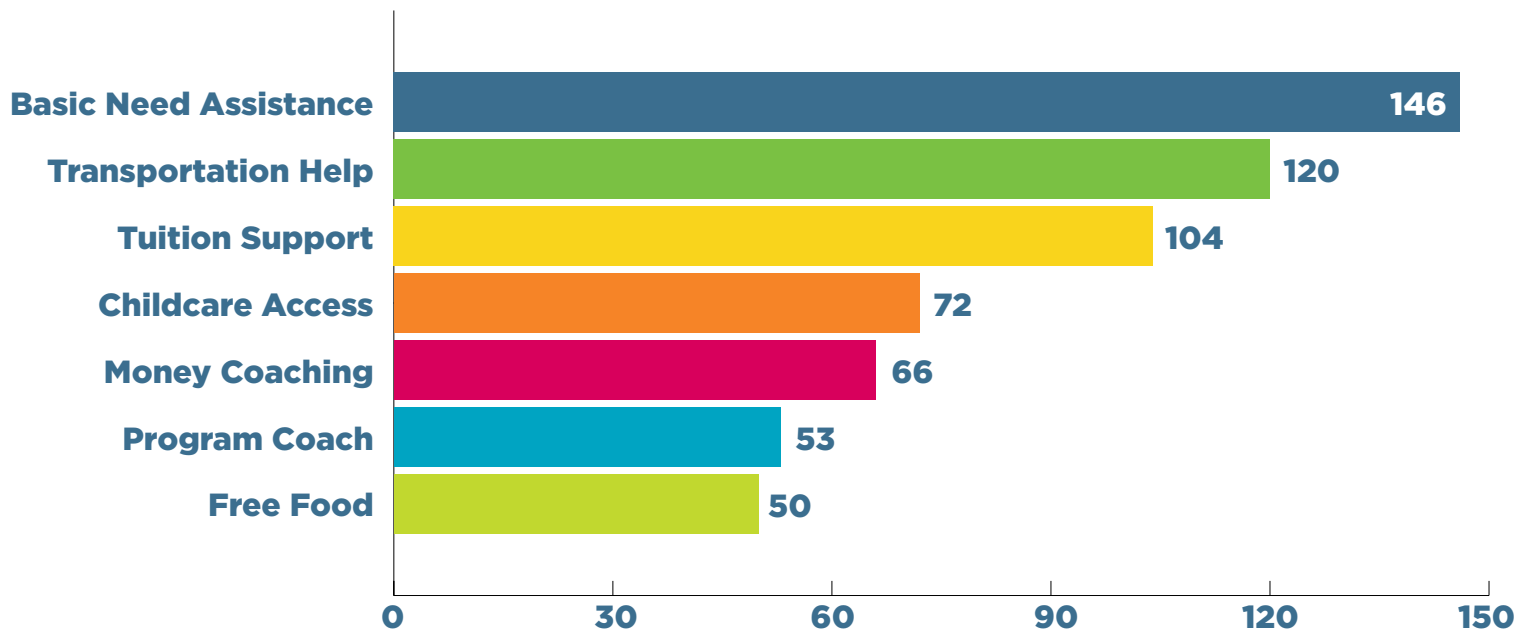
“Jobs in my field are hiring however more experience is required, I feel that I am being looked over due to my age.”

Job Seeker from Orange County

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The Transition to Stable Employment

Support Job Seekers Need to Complete a Training Program



Job Seekers were asked what types of support would help them successfully complete a workforce training program. The most frequently identified need was financial assistance, with **the top three priorities being help with basic living expenses, transportation, and tuition support**. These findings make it clear that financial challenges are the primary barriers to completing training programs.

While other supports—such as childcare, access to a program coach, and free meals—were also noted as helpful, they were not as widely prioritized. Mental health services and health check-ups were selected the least, which may suggest these needs are perceived as less urgent compared to more immediate financial concerns.

Each program must assess the unique needs of its community to determine the types of support that will be most effective. Tailoring assistance to fit the local context is essential to ensuring participants have the resources they need to succeed. Overall, the data highlights that addressing financial and daily living needs could play a critical role in helping individuals complete job training and transition into stable employment.

Case Study

Culinary Training Program at Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida

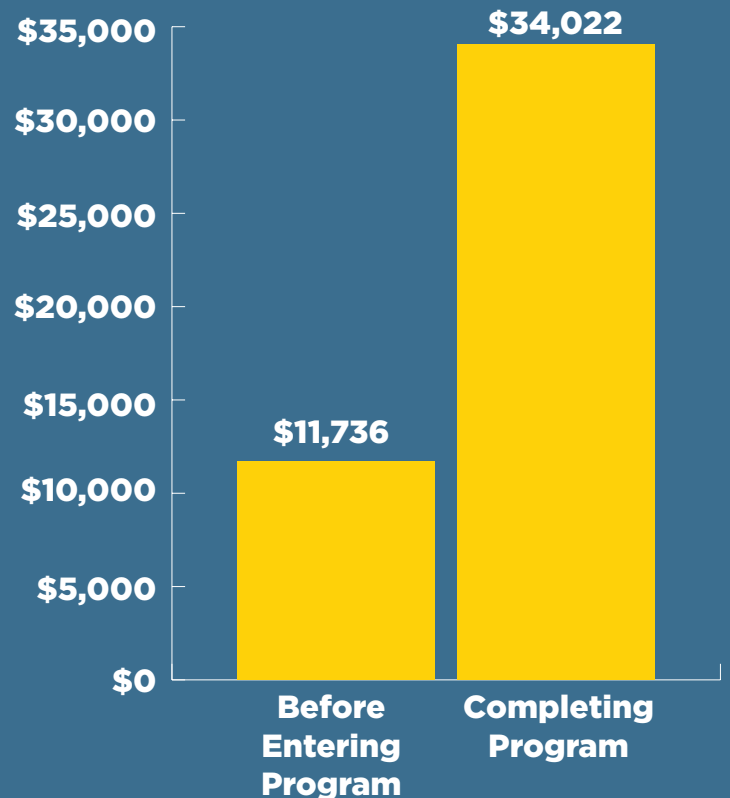
Second Harvest believes in the power of opportunity to change lives. Since 2013, its Culinary Training Program has offered adults facing barriers to employment with a chance to build valuable culinary and life skills. This hands-on program is made possible by the investment of funders and employer partners with the goal to open the door to full-time jobs in the food industry—and a fresh start.

The goal is to ensure every participant understands what it takes to succeed in the workplace and support them every step of the way. **On average, graduates of the program see their annual income increase by \$22,000**, showing just how life-changing the right training and support can be.

Beyond training, Second Harvest follows the example of The Cara Collective, a national leader in workforce development, to build strong, long-term partnerships with employers. Instead of one-time, transactional interactions—where communication only happens when someone needs something—this approach focuses on trust, open communication, and mutual support. The results are stronger job matches, successful placement and job retention and a network that lifts up the whole community.

These connections allow for lasting impact, giving job seekers not just a job, but a pathway to a brighter future.

Average Annual Income of Program Participant



80% of participants see the program through to completion

90% of graduates secure employment after completing the program

“It’s not a job; it’s a career. I want to continue to work hard, be humble, and be a provider for my family. I know the sky is the limit.”

Second Harvest Culinary Graduate

Impact Story

Taking a Chance on Yourself Can Change Everything

After spending three years at home with her son, Angeline was ready to return to work but lacked experience and skills. Her Head Start social worker introduced her to Second Harvest's Culinary Training Program, a free course that helps adults facing employment barriers gain both culinary and life skills training.

"I discovered a passion of mine," Angeline recalls, adding, "Through food, you can do so much for people; you can serve people in so many ways."

Angeline received hands-on kitchen training and valuable life skills lessons. She learned about stress management, financial literacy, budgeting and goal planning.

After graduating, Angeline did not secure the job she was hoping for. However, remembering what she had learned, she persevered and secured an internship with a different employer.

"Even though I didn't get the job I thought I wanted, I ended up in a better place," she said.

Today, Angeline works as a pastry cook at a resort in Central Florida where she creates memorable desserts, including a beloved gingerbread display during the holidays. Thanks to this opportunity, she and her family are enjoying financial stability for the first time in their life.



Looking Ahead

A Stronger Workforce Through Community Collaboration

No single organization can create community-wide impact alone. The strength of workforce training efforts lies in the power of partnerships. Community and employer partners can support these efforts in multiple ways:

- **Model #1** – Good Employers: Offer stable, flexible, and quality job opportunities that welcome and support program graduates.
- **Model #2** – Ecosystem Partners: Help connect individuals to workforce training programs through outreach, referrals, and wraparound services.
- **Model #3** – In-House Skill Builders: Provide direct training and skill-building programs that prepare individuals for meaningful employment.
- **Model #4** – Ecosystem Collaborators: Strengthen the workforce development ecosystem by coordinating efforts, sharing data and best practices, and supporting the infrastructure that helps programs thrive.

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“I came in with absolutely no skills, and they taught me, and now I’m doing everything I wanted to do in the kitchen.”

Second Harvest Culinary Graduate

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When each partner plays their role, the result is a more inclusive and effective workforce system— one that fills gaps, lifts barriers, and ensures that no one is left behind.

Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida follows Model #3: In-House Skill Builder. This model is centered on equipping individuals with hands-on, job-ready skills, right in their own community. By preparing participants for sustainable careers, Second Harvest opens the doors for job seekers to grow, earn and support their families.

Here are some examples of how different organizations can help transform workforce training across Central Florida:

- **Employers** – Become a Good Employer by hiring graduates and offering supportive, high-quality jobs.
- **Community Organizations** – Collaborate with Training Providers, like Second Harvest, as Ecosystem Partners or Collaborators to connect job seekers with life-changing opportunities.
- **Training Providers** – Expand in-house skill-building efforts to meet growing community needs.
- **Supporters & Funders** – Invest in programs that create long-term impact.

These collaborative efforts not only support individual success but also create stronger, more resilient communities.

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AdvoKit written by Cara Collective

Feeding America Economic Mobility Partnership Model

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A sincere thank you to the community partners who supported the distribution of the survey and helped us reach job seekers across Central Florida. Special thanks to:

- Orange County Head Start
- The Jobs Partnership
- RISE Employment & Training Program
- CareerSource Central Florida
- YMCA Oviedo
- HOPE Helps

Your collaboration and commitment to serving our community made this effort possible.

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Finally, a big thank you to Sophia Burgos, Community Analytics and Insights Spring Intern. Your hard work, thoughtfulness, and determination were instrumental in telling the stories of our job seekers and gathering the insights that shaped this report.

Together, you have helped shine a light on the realities and opportunities facing our community—and we are stronger because of it.

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