



# What Works Series

## Brief 1: Goals Matter!

### The Impact of Goal-Setting on Economic Mobility Outcomes

#### At a glance

What drives outcomes in human service programs? Does it matter how frequently we meet with participants? Or does it matter more what we do with meeting time—specifically, setting goals? Does the length of goal matter? We analyzed findings from EMPATH's programs to find answers you can use.

#### Goals drive outcomes, not meetings

While the number and length of goal set had meaningful impacts on outcomes, the number of meetings did not.

#### Goals drive the outcomes we care about

The more goals set, the more progress achieved. Each additional goal set was associated with gains in income for stably housed participants, and faster exits from shelter for participants in homeless shelter programs.



Each additional goal was associated with an increase in annual income of **\$303.48**



With each additional goal set per month, participants were able to **exit shelter 3.7 months earlier**

Additional goals also were associated with increases in overall self-sufficiency and improvements in mental health.



#### The length of goal matters

Each additional **long-term goal (over 6 months)** was associated with an increase in annual earned income of **\$1,337.64**

This is over 4x the increase in income for all goals in general.



## About EMPath

Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath) is a national non-profit that dramatically improves the lives of people struggling to make ends meet. Because creating economic opportunity is multifaceted, our approach is too. We offer a unique combination of direct service, learning exchange, and research and advocacy for what works. This “virtuous circle” allows each part of our work to inform what we know, do, and share with others to seed systemic change.

- Using our research-backed method for one-on-one support (Mobility Mentoring®), we work directly with people living in poverty to help them climb the economic ladder.
- We lead a network of human service organizations (the Economic Mobility Exchange, or [the Exchange](#)) to help them get better results and re-envision the systems that serve people experiencing poverty.
- We do research to inform our practice and advocate to take what works to scale.

### What Works Series

EMPath rigorously analyzes outcomes from our own programs—and those of our Exchange member organizations—to figure out what drives better outcomes. We started the What Works

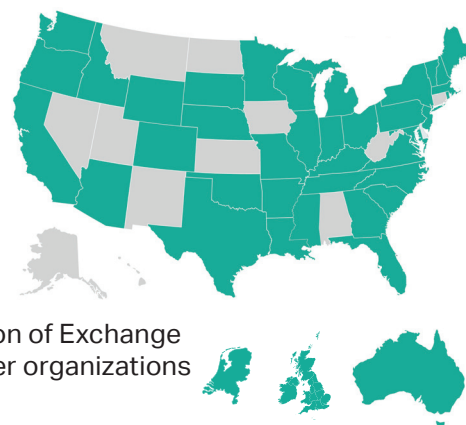
Series to share these learnings broadly with those working in human services, philanthropy, policymaking, academia, and beyond. We know that there are many others out there who, like us, are always seeking to improve practice and ultimately drive better outcomes for families that are struggling.

## Want Help Improving Outcomes in Your Organization?

### EMPath’s Exchange can provide:

- Training on Mobility Mentoring and Goal-Setting for staff
- Technical assistance on transforming the goal-setting culture at your organization
- Peer support and learning from over 145 organizations from across the country—and beyond.
- And [much more](#)

Fill out [this form](#) to learn more.



Location of Exchange member organizations

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# Goals Matter!

## The Impact of Goal-Setting on Economic Mobility Outcomes

### Why look at Goal-Setting? A short review of research.

Although goal-setting is included in many human service interventions, it is not broadly systematized in the field. Program staff may set a goal or a few goals with participants, but then not return to them until months later. This is a lost opportunity, as goal-setting—when done correctly—is very powerful.

Research over the past 50 years consistently demonstrates a strong association between goal-setting and a broad array of outcomes, including workers' performance, academic performance, financial literacy and status, and dietary change<sup>1-7</sup>.

Because the process of goal-setting involves multiple aspects of self-regulation, practicing goal-setting may help children and adolescents develop self-regulation skills and strengthen the development of executive function<sup>8-9</sup>. Reinforcing this theory, comprehensive goal-setting interventions implemented early in students' academic careers substantially reduce gender and ethnic minority inequalities in achievement<sup>10</sup>.

Several characteristics of goals, including difficulty, specificity, and setting multiple conflicting goals all influence the degree to which goal-setting affects performance. Overly simple goals fail to motivate individuals to achieve positive results while overly complicated goals challenge self-efficacy and yield low performance<sup>11</sup>. Moderately difficult goals show the best effects on motivation and performance<sup>5</sup>. Conflicting goals also impede progress towards desired results<sup>12</sup>.

**Goal-setting is  
at the heart of  
Mobility Mentoring,  
EMPath's economic  
mobility coaching approach.**



EMPath has rigorously integrated research on goal setting into our work. Goal setting is at the heart of Mobility Mentoring, EMPATH's economic mobility coaching approach.

## Research Questions



When asked what questions they most wanted to know about Mobility Mentoring, practitioners at EMPATH and across the Economic Mobility Exchange prioritized understanding how mentoring processes relate to participant outcomes. We set out to address the following questions:

- Do participants who set **more** goals have better outcomes (overall self-sufficiency, income and well-being gains, and, for those in transitional housing, a shorter length of stay)? and
- Do participants who set more **longer-term** (proxy for more difficult) goals have better outcomes?

Based on the theory of change underlying Mobility Mentoring, we hypothesized that setting more goals, goals of a longer duration (which could indicate more challenging goals) and setting goals at a higher rate (the number of goals per unit time) would be associated with better outcomes (i.e., greater gains in income, overall self-sufficiency, well-being and, for those in transitional housing, faster moves out of shelter).

## Whom did we study?



We looked at outcomes for two groups of EMPATH's participants. All had to be enrolled in Mobility Mentoring for at least 6 months between July 2016 and March 2020. One group consisted of participants in EMPATH's long-term programs (LTP), while the other included participants in EMPATH's transitional housing programs (THP), family homeless shelters. Participants apply to join EMPATH's LTPs, where participation takes place over a substantial period of time (three to five years), and is not housing-based. In contrast, participation in Mobility Mentoring is embedded into the THPs. Participants reside in the THPs and receive Mobility Mentoring over a relatively short time (one year to 18 months).

The 145 participants in EMPATH's long-term programs (LTP) were enrolled for an average of 42 months. On average, participants had 27 meetings of at least 30 minutes each with their mentors during that time, meeting an average of 0.7 times a month. Participants set an average of 27.4 goals while enrolled in the program, leading to an average goal-setting rate of 0.6 goals/month.

The 192 participants in an EMPATH-run transitional housing program (THP) lived there for a median of 16 months. During this time, participants set an average of 7.6 goals overall and 2.0 long goals.

## What outcomes did we examine?

Our main outcomes are overall self-sufficiency, monthly earned income, and well-being scores at exit across both LTP and THP participants. For THP participants we also looked at exits from shelter.

**Overall self-sufficiency** is measured with the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency, EMPATH's cornerstone tool. The Bridge has a possible maximum score of 100 points, spread across five domains (each with a possible maximum of twenty points): Family Stability, Well-Being, Financial Management, Education & Training, and Employment & Career. While Bridge scores are not something discussed in the mentoring relationship, they are a useful way to track progress in the aggregate over time across programs.



**Monthly income** is the participants' earned income during the month and excludes any money received through public benefits.

For **well-being**, we used the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale<sup>13</sup> which asks participants to indicate where they currently perceive themselves as compared to their "best life" on a scale of 0 to 10 and where they see themselves (on the same scale) 5 years in the future.

For participants in THPs, we also used participants' **length of stay** in shelter as an outcome measure, because exiting transitional housing to stable housing is the primary aim for participants in THPs.

# What did we find?

## Long-term programs (LTPs)

For each goal the participant set, their exit Bridge score increased by 0.14 points (p=0.05)<sup>a</sup>. Similarly, each additional goal was associated with an increase in monthly income at exit of \$25.29, or \$303.48 annually (p=.02).

Each additional long-term goal was associated with an average increase in income of

**\$111**

monthly

**\$1,338**  
annually



Long goals (i.e., goals with a duration of more than 184 days) were associated with even greater gains. Each additional long goal was associated with a 0.71 point increase in Bridge score (p=.002), and a \$111.47 increase in monthly earned income, or \$1337.64 annually (p=.002) at exit.

Goal-setting was not associated with reported well-being for LTP participants.

In contrast to the findings for goals, the number of meetings for participants in the LTP was not associated with increases in Bridge scores or income.

## Transitional housing programs (THPs)

For every additional goal set by a participant in the THP, their Bridge score at exit increased by 0.27 points (p=.03). For each additional long goal set, their Bridge score at exit increased by 0.70 points (p=.02)

For every additional goal set by a participant in the THP, their odds of reporting a Cantril well-being status of "Thriving" increased by 9% (p=.04). For each additional long goal, their odds of reporting a well-being status of "Thriving" increased by 40% (p=.02).

Lastly, for each additional goal set per month, participants were able to exit transitional housing almost 4 months earlier (coefficient=3.67 months, p=.0004).

Setting more goals did not predict higher income at exit in THP participants.



A higher rate of goal-setting was associated with a **more rapid exit from shelter**. Each additional goal set per month sped up exit by

**3.7 months**

<sup>a</sup> The p value is a measure of statistical significance. It indicates the likelihood that a result of this magnitude would have occurred by chance alone. By convention, p values less than .05 are considered "statistically significant."

## Implications for Practice & Future Research

Helping participants to set more goals, and longer-term goals, helps participants achieve better economic mobility outcomes. Mentors can support participant outcomes by encouraging goal-setting early in and throughout the program.

These findings suggest that programs interested in improving economic mobility should focus on the content of meetings with participants, rather than the number of meetings. Meeting time should be used strategically to set and advance participants' own goals. Supervisors can help by emphasizing the central importance of goal-setting with mentors and providing them the support they need in order to be effective.

Future research could explore which types of goals are most strongly linked to which outcomes, study differences in timing and pattern of goal-setting during programs, investigate the role of incentives in goal-setting and achievement, and compare the effects of goal-setting on outcomes across different programs and organizations.

## Appendix: Methods

We employed linear and logistic regression models (with backward elimination) to test how the number of goals and rate of goal-setting—both for all goals and for long goals—relate to outcomes, controlling for any differences in participant characteristics. We considered the length of the goal to be a rough estimate of difficulty (where longer-term goals typically represent more challenging goals than shorter-term goals), and defined long goals as any goal with a duration greater than the top quartile for participant goals in that setting (184 days in LTPs, and 108 days in THPs).

We accounted for differences in demographic characteristics (age, gender, race, and ethnicity), employment and education status at entry, immigration status, mental health conditions, and physical disabilities. For participants in LTPs, we also included the number of meetings and the participants' length of time in the program to assess their independent effects on outcomes. Data on meetings were not available for participants in THPs.



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# EMPath

Economic Mobility Pathways

308 Congress Street, 5th Floor  
Boston, Massachusetts 02210  
[www.empathways.org](http://www.empathways.org)

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