

ITbiz Pre-Apprenticeship Program + Housing Lessons for the Field

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Project Background

Research has shown that women encounter barriers in the workforce resulting in lower wages and decreased opportunities for career advancement. Women at risk of or experiencing homelessness – particularly those who are survivors of human trafficking and domestic violence – face additional barriers to securing long-term, family-sustaining employment because they are navigating the impacts of housing insecurity.

Love Never Fails (LNF), is a Bay Area-based nonprofit organization dedicated to addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by survivors of human trafficking and domestic violence. With a focus on fostering pathways to economic and social mobility, LNF provides comprehensive workforce readiness opportunities and safe housing that enable individuals to rebuild their lives and achieve sustainable success.

A cornerstone of LNF's workforce development initiative is the ITbiz Tech Academy, which equips participants with post-secondary education, technical certifications, and skills tailored for the technology sector. By emphasizing digital equity, sustainable technical education, career readiness, and self efficacy, ITbiz creates opportunities for survivors of human trafficking and domestic violence to enter and thrive in the workforce, as well as gain a greater autonomy in their life outcomes.

However, even with comprehensive career readiness support, survivors remain at risk of limited social and economic mobility and higher rates of recidivism. To mitigate these risks, LNF also provides housing and wraparound services, such as case management, life coaching, and family reunification support. These services are provided either in-house or through organizational partnerships.

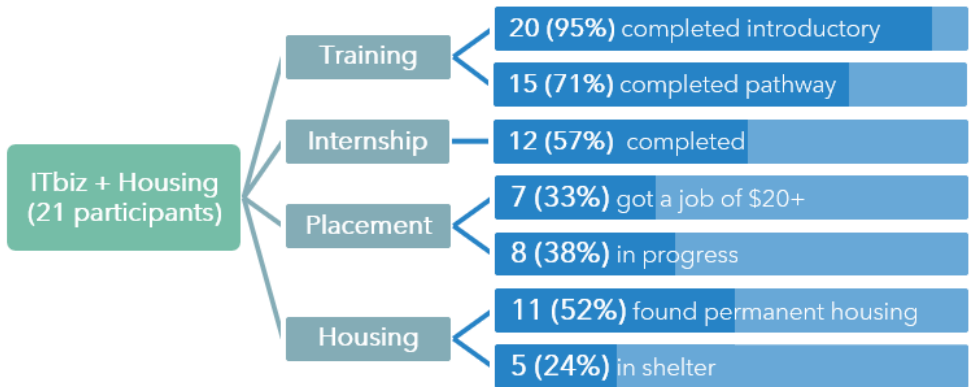
From April 2023 through December of 2024, an evaluation team monitored the progress of a cohort of ITbiz program participants who were also experiencing homelessness. The program cohort were selected from women living in shelter housing at LNF or other partner programs. In addition to housing and the technical training of the ITbiz program, participants also received wraparound services and a stipend while they were enrolled in ITbiz. This white paper briefly highlights insights from the evaluation that may be useful to organizations and funders interested in providing similarly comprehensive services.

Lessons for the Field

Holistic Support Leads to Transformative Outcomes

Love Never Fails and ITbiz provided more than housing, technical training, and career readiness skills. Participants received a regular stipend, access to technology, and trauma-informed wraparound services to help them address barriers to success. The positive impact of this comprehensive approach was reflected in the participant outcomes, where most of the cohort saw significant progress through steps of the ITbiz program as well as toward their own goals during the evaluation period.

Figure 1. Summary of Participant Outcomes



86% of the participants in the ITbiz + Housing cohort reported the program had a “very positive impact” on their life, compared to 53% of participants in ITbiz alone. Moreover, the participants reported gains in measures of self efficacy, career confidence, and ego resilience.

Programs that holistically address the emotional, practical, and professional needs of survivors create an environment where genuine healing, skill development, and lasting career readiness can flourish. The integration of stable housing, wraparound services, and tailored career pathways fosters a foundation for participants to rebuild their lives. Embracing this comprehensive approach ensures participants' multidimensional needs are met.

“The program offered a positive foundation that supported me through a mental health crisis and homelessness and gave me hope for a brighter future. The trauma-focused, self-improvement-based learning approach supported my road to recovery. Additionally, the student stipend and program grant funding were helpful in easing socio-economic challenges.” – program participant

Housing Partnerships are Critical, and Require Care and Attention

To broaden the program’s reach beyond residents of their own shelters, Love Never Fails sought program participants from local shelters run by partner organizations. Recruitment from partner shelters began slowly, but accelerated throughout the evaluation period as LNF staff learned the importance of identifying values aligned partners and investing in building relationships there. Among

the lessons – not all shelters focus on career readiness as part of their programming and, even more importantly, trust is a prerequisite for partnering where vulnerable populations are involved. More specifically:

- **Identify values-aligned organizations.** Not all shelters have a focus on career readiness. Finding partners who can make a commitment to supporting skills development and will invest in trauma-informed practices is step one to a successful partnership.
- **Invest in Relationship Building.** Recruitment from external housing programs requires significant investment in building relationships and trust, given that the population served is, by its nature, vulnerable. Potential partners will need to see that a career program has the skill and mindset to adequately support survivors throughout the program.
- **Build Ongoing Partnerships.** Because the investment to build trust and relationship is significant, plan on building ongoing partnerships. This may mean selecting a one or two partners, rather than casting a wide net.
- **Ensure Access to Resources.** Programs like ITbiz require that participants have not just access to technology (laptops, Wi-Fi), but also access to quiet and/or private spaces to do online coursework and participate in classes. Work to identify housing partners who can support their residents in meeting these needs.

A dedicated investment in building and maintaining these partnerships can help create a steady pipeline of participants and ensure participant success.

Assess Participant Readiness and Stay Flexible

Not all participants may be immediately ready to fully engage with intensive career readiness programs, especially when recovering from and transitioning out of traumatic situations. Programs should:

- **Allow Time for Stabilization.** While the ITbiz program was available to any shelter residents at LNF, staff determined that participants were most likely to stay in ITbiz if they had been in stable housing for at least 3 months.
- **Assess Readiness.** Implement readiness measures to identify participants who may need additional support before entering a career training program. LNF works with participants to identify potential barriers to success at the outset.
- **Offer Intermediary Support:** Develop transitional services or preparatory phases to bridge gaps for participants who want to engage but need time to stabilize emotionally or logistically.

Participants' pathways through the program were not always linear. Some needed to pause their studies as life events took priority, others skipped or repeated phases, depending on their needs or readiness. This highly individual nature of participants' journeys underscores the importance of flexibility in program design and service delivery. Key considerations include:

- **Tailored Services.** Programs should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, instead adapting services offered to meet participants' unique needs, goals, and circumstances.

- **Adaptive Delivery Models.** Flexible timelines and the ability to design personalized “choose your own adventure” paths through the program allow participants to progress at their own pace, increasing the likelihood of retention and success.

Hire – and Support – Staff with Lived Experience

Among the most powerful features of Love Never Fails and ITbiz Tech Academy is that many staff members share lived experiences with the people they serve. Most of the interviewed LNF and ITbiz staff are survivors of traumas similar to those faced by participants, have gone through the ITbiz program themselves, or fall within both categories. This shared experience can help staff in establishing trust and credibility when working with participants.

“Almost all of us took ITbiz100 and took pathways... so I can connect with students on that level as well.”
– program staff member

However, this means that many staff members are *also* on a healing journey and benefit from ongoing support of their own. This is particularly critical as they navigate the emotional work of supporting fellow survivors.

Recommended supports include:

“I struggled with a student wanting to commit suicide, but I had a lot of support from Vanessa and other staff and was immediately given resources.” – program staff member

- **Staff Training.** Comprehensive training is necessary to equip staff with the tools to address participants’ varied challenges, which can include healing from traumatic experiences, meeting mental health needs, and experiencing setbacks.
- **Professional Development.** Recent graduates of ITbiz or similar programs are still on a career development journey and will benefit from ongoing professional development as they grow in their careers.
- **Ongoing Mental Health Support.** Similarly, survivors should receive continued support, especially as they support others in navigating challenges that they have experienced.

About the Evaluation

This evaluation was made possible by a generous grant from Tipping Point Community. This work is the result of a partnership between program staff at Love Never Fails – particularly Vanessa Russell, Executive Director, and Davina Kerrelola, Senior ITbiz and CEC Program Manager – and the evaluation team: Heather Imboden, Communities in Collaboration, Dr. Chaneé Hawkins Ash, Foresight Strategy Solutions, and Dr. Yoonyoung Kwak, YK Stats & Consulting. The full evaluation is available online and by request.

Given the vulnerable nature of the program’s population and the complexity of their lived experiences, the evaluation was designed to prioritize participant comfort and safety. The evaluation team strived to ensure that their unique perspectives and insights contributed in a meaningful way. Participants were compensated for their time and expertise based on their level of involvement in the evaluation process.