

1-1-2003

Case Studies on the Implementation of the Workforce Investment Act: Focus on Involving Customers with Disabilities

Sheila Fesko

University of Massachusetts Boston, sheila.fesko@umb.edu

Jaimie Ciulla Timmons

University of Massachusetts Boston, jaimie.timmons@umb.edu

Allison Cohen Hall

University of Massachusetts Boston, allison.cohen@umb.edu

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Recommended Citation

Fesko, Sheila; Timmons, Jaimie Ciulla; and Hall, Allison Cohen, "Case Studies on the Implementation of the Workforce Investment Act: Focus on Involving Customers with Disabilities" (2003). *Case Studies Series, Institute for Community Inclusion*. Paper 5.
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on the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act

by Sheila Fesko, Jaimie Ciulla Timmons, & Allison Cohen

INTRODUCTION

Although it is uniformly accepted that customers with disabilities should be involved in the process to create a new workforce system under the mandates of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), anecdotal evidence suggests this to be more rhetoric than reality. Currently One-Stop Career Centers (One-Stops), workforce boards, and states are struggling with how to solicit and incorporate this important input into the planning process. The following is offered as a tool to help involve customers with disabilities as One-Stops are developed.

ISSUES

Explicit emphasis on choice and control in One-Stop service delivery.

A value articulated in WIA is the importance of individual choice and control over service delivery. If all individuals are automatically referred to vocational rehabilitation services, either because this is the local practice or because the One-Stop is not prepared to serve them, then individuals are being denied the choice of where they want to receive their services. To accomplish universal access and customer choice and control, One-Stops must be prepared to meet the needs of all customers.

This brief is part of a series of products offering practical solutions for state and local entities as they implement the Workforce Investment Act. Topics covered in other briefs include: leadership, merging cultures between partnering agencies, co-location of staff, and accessibility. The source of much of the information presented below is from state case studies conducted in Maine, Minnesota, and Kentucky, completed as part of the Center on State Systems and Employment. Additional information is derived from other Institute for Community Inclusion work on increasing access for individuals with disabilities within the workforce system.

advocates help to ensure that the focus remains on the customer and that supports are available and accessible to all job seekers. Alternatively, when the input of users of the system is not considered, the needs of those users may be overlooked or inadequately addressed. This input must be valued and recognized for its potential contribution to the overall accessibility of the workforce system.

Customer perspective incorporated into the planning process.

The most effective way of ensuring that the needs of customers with disabilities are met through the One-Stop system is through their involvement in the planning and implementation process. The voices of customers with disabilities and their

STRATEGIES

Use existing partner agency boards.

Advisory board members (especially those with disabilities) can be instrumental in providing feedback to planners. They can act as observers and auditors, ensuring that services are in place, and can make recommendations. In Maine, the Council for the Blind board members challenged planners and questioned the agencies about specific outcomes, direct and indirect costs, and how the changes would affect customers with disabilities in particular.

Minnesota's advisory councils from State Services for the Blind and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) worked closely with the Governor's Workforce Development Council. Members of the councils had various disabilities and brought up specific issues of concern such as assistive technology and accessible transportation.

Create a task force.

Minnesota created the Workforce Center Task Force to ensure that customers with disabilities were involved in the planning process during initial implementation and development of the One-Stops. This work team included input from individuals with disabilities.

Involve customers with disabilities in site selection.

In Minnesota, customers with disabilities played a role in deciding the location of some One-Stops. In one instance, self-advocates became involved by "testing" the location of One-Stops, making their way to the sites and determining their accessibility through public transportation. As a result of this initiative, the One-Stop worked with the public transportation system to move a bus stop to the other side of a mall, which created easier access to the One-Stop.

Encourage participation of staff from disability agencies on local boards.

Staff from VR should be represented on local boards. Most workforce staff agree that local workforce investment boards have great control over service design and decision-making. This is especially important when considering the interests of people with disabilities. Staff that work with individuals with disabilities should be on the board so that they are well-positioned to ensure that customers with disabilities will have full access to services.

Support businesses that work with individuals with disabilities in joining local boards.

WIA mandates that 50 percent of the workforce board must include members who are employers. Entities such as community rehabilitation providers and independent living centers are employers whose needs must be met by the workforce system. While representing employer needs, the individual can also weigh in on disability issues.

Use federal grant funds to expand resources for One-Stops.

Opportunities are available to supplement existing resources with grant funding. For example, the Ability First Initiative was a joint project between the Portland Career Center in Maine and Alpha One, an independent living center. This project was funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (US DOL). Staff from Alpha One have been using the One-Stops to expand service delivery for people with disabilities. One of the greatest benefits of the project was the creation of two peer benefit specialist positions. These staff helped customers with disabilities to better understand their Social Security benefits and the financial ramifications of entering or re-entering the workforce. Project funding will also allow One-Stop staff to build an electronic database that enables potential employers to read resumes on the Internet, match up with potential employees, and set up interviews. Alpha One committed to working with other One-Stops to explain the goals of the Ability First project and to become familiar with their resources and their support needs, specifically around assistive technology and accessibility. The project has also funded the hiring of an instructor to work with individuals with hearing impairments on computer and technology instruction.

There are several US DOL initiatives that can support One-Stops' efforts to expand their services for customers with disabilities. The Employment and Training Division has issued Workforce Incentive Grants, and the Office of Disability Employment Policy at US DOL has both a Youth Innovation Grant competition and Customized Employment Projects.

Share documentation with customers with disabilities.

Each state must submit a report to USDOL to document how well the state's workforce investment system supports people with disabilities. Sharing the annual report with customers with disabilities ensures system accountability while engaging customers in the monitoring process.

Each state is required to have a Methods of Administration (MOA), a document that explains how the state will ensure compliance with the Nondiscrimination and Equal Opportunity Regulations for WIA. Governors must review and update the MOA every two years. Customers with disabilities can provide feedback concerning the changes that need to be made to the state's MOA to prevent discrimination against job seekers with disabilities.

Include customers with disabilities in the evaluation process.

What happens to job seekers with disabilities when they enter a One-Stop without referral or knowledge of the system? If their disabilities are visible, do they automatically get referred to disability services or are their needs assessed like all others? In order to "test" this, the Portland, Maine One-Stop hired a mystery shopper (a man with a disability who posed as a job seeker). The mystery shopper was instructed to enter the One-Stop and request assistance and report back to One-Stop staff about his experience. This was important because the individual was taking an active role in the evaluation process and providing a true picture of how staff interacts with people with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

No prototype exists for the best way to implement this new workforce system. Local cultures vary, and the key to successful implementation is not national standardization but flexibility. The many changes brought forth by WIA create opportunities and challenges. To ensure success, it is important for partners to consider a wide range of possibilities in addressing these issues. Strategies presented in this brief must be adapted locally and are intended to stimulate discussion, creativity, and thoughtful planning among members of the workforce and disability communities.



If you have comments or questions on this publication, or need additional information please contact:

Sheila Fesko, PhD

**Center on State Systems and Employment
Institute for Community Inclusion**

UMass Boston

100 Morrissey Blvd.

Boston, Massachusetts 02125

617.287.4300 (v); 617.287.4350 (TTY)

sheila.fesko@umb.edu

www.communityinclusion.org

This is a publication of the Center on State Systems and Employment (RRTC) at the Institute for Community Inclusion/UCIE (#H133B980037), which is funded, in part, by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) of the US Department of Education. The opinions contained in this publication are those of the grantees and do not necessarily reflect those of the US Department of Education.



Completion of this brief was made possible by the time and effort provided to us by the research participants from the Maine, Kentucky, and Minnesota workforce systems. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of ICI staff, including John Butterworth, Susan Foley, Elena Varney, Danielle Dreilinger, Hal Kemp, and Pauline Donnelly. Tom Broussard, Eleanor Mower, and Jessica Ripper also assisted in revisions.

This publication will be made available in alternate formats upon request.