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Case Studies on the Implementation of the Workforce Investment Act: Focus on Accessibility

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on the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act

by Sheila Fesko, Jaimie Ciulla Timmons, & Allison Cohen

INTRODUCTION

Universal access is a central tenet of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and mandates that One-Stop Career Center (One-Stop) services be accessible for individuals with disabilities. Partnerships between Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and workforce development agencies have increased awareness about the importance of service accessibility and states have been responding to this issue in their planning and service delivery. This brief highlights the innovative strategies states have used to make their One-Stops better able to support job seekers with disabilities.

ISSUES

Performance measures.

Disability advocates have expressed concern about whether individuals with disabilities can be better served in an integrated workforce system as compared to a specialized service system. Since One-Stops are assessed based on performance measures, there is a concern that staff will be reticent to work with individuals with disabilities whom they view as having barriers to employment. It is incumbent on the workforce system to ensure that there are no disincentives for serving individuals who may require additional assistance.

Fear that quality of service may suffer

The culture and service approaches of generic workforce systems and disability agencies are historically very different. This presents challenges when trying to ensure that One-Stops are welcoming to individuals with disabilities.

Disability agency staff fear that quality or specialization of services will suffer since such supports have not traditionally been provided by other agencies.

Limitations in accessibility

In addressing accessibility of One-Stops, the emphasis has primarily been on considering the physical setting and ensuring that individuals are able to negotiate the

environment. While physical access is very important, it is equally important that individuals who enter the One-Stop be able to benefit from the resource room, workshops, and training opportunities. Service accessibility means that services are provided so that people with different learning styles can benefit from the experience in the same manner as other participants.

Many One-Stops have focused on the purchase of technology as the solution to making computers and self-service options more accessible. Unfortunately, in some cases, equipment and software was purchased but no one was trained in how to use it. In one state, software was purchased for all of the One-Stops but was in a closet at the state offices because no one took responsibility for installation and training.

STRATEGIES

Emphasize universal design.

In considering One-Stop design and implementation, create environments and services to meet as wide a range of preferences and needs as possible. Consider alternative approaches to benefit customers with various backgrounds, learning styles, abilities, and disabilities. Barriers experienced by some individuals with disabilities may be similar to barriers experienced by other customers who do not have disabilities. For example, an individual with a cognitive disability may have a limitation in his ability to read, but this barrier is the same for someone who is not literate or has limited English proficiency. Rather than solely focusing on accommodating the individual with the cognitive disability, think broadly about your services and how any non-reader would be able to access them.

Consider the establishment of an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) coordinator position.

Accessibility must be the responsibility of all staff, but having one person available to ensure that it remains a priority is important. Minnesota created the position of ADA coordinator for each workforce partner agency to address some of the challenges around physical and service accessibility. Job responsibilities spanned the gamut and included aiding in identification and referral for people with disabilities, training, conducting investigations, ensuring reasonable accommodation, increasing staff's competence in assistive technology, developing programs, and coordinating disability supports. One ADA coordinator also directed the efforts of her workforce One-Stop's diversity office. The Minnesota ADA team developed an assessment instrument

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 inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce planning process. 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.

for centers, which can be viewed at
(www.disability.state.mn.us/pubs/bluebk/intro.html)

Create a team of auditors.

Some One-Stops have created audit teams whose function is to assist with identification of accessibility limitations and to develop recommendations to resolve these issues. These teams are not intended to be evaluative or to monitor compliance but to assist with accessibility. Staff from VR, community rehabilitation providers, or disability advocacy agencies may be able to participate on these teams.

Use disability expertise to create resource kits.

Minnesota's State Services for the Blind (SSB) was instrumental in adequately equipping One-Stops to support people with disabilities. SSB provided a "starter kit" for each One-Stop. Kits included a pocket talker and voice output software. The One-Stops were also required to complete a two-hour training/orientation upon distribution of the kit so that they could assist customers who are blind.

Develop practical Memorandums of Agreement (MOAs).

MOAs are required for all One-Stops to ensure nondiscrimination. Required documents such as these can often be treated as extra paperwork by staff who fill in the basic information and then file it away, failing to refer to it ever again. More thoughtful development of the MOA can provide the framework for how One-Stops address marketing and outreach to people with disabilities and how they ensure and continually evaluate their physical and service accessibility, their plan for responding to accommodation requests, and the appeals or grievance process. By developing a thorough MOA that addresses issues such as accessibility, a One-Stop will have fulfilled its requirement and established a working document that is helpful to staff.

Get assistance with interior design.

For new physical space, consider physical accessibility at the onset of the planning and design process. The Portland, Maine Career Center worked with a designer to assist in the center's planning and layout. Having the designer understand the importance of accessibility and safety was initially a challenge. By using simulated goggles, staff demonstrated different levels of visual impairment for the designer to experience first-hand. After this experience, the designer was more thoughtful about contrasting carpet to show differences in flooring and how to properly shade windows to control light flow.

Focus on all partners serving all customers.

Adopt the approach that all the partners share responsibility for serving people with disabilities. New customers will feel welcomed to the One-Stop if their needs are the primary focus rather than classification by label or funding source. During the initial stages of WIA implementation in Maine,

when a person with a disability entered a One-Stop, they were sent directly to disability agency partners. In One-Stops such as Portland, staff no longer wholly rely on disability professionals. They consider the person's support needs instead of focusing on the apparent disability. If individuals are interested in job listings and interview and resume workshops, they do not need to receive these services from VR but can access them as part of general workforce services.

Develop abilities of all staff to work with customers with disabilities.

The identification of one staff person who serves as the disability "expert" presents some challenges for universal access. This approach may be necessary as One-Stop staff are first developing their ability to respond to the needs of individuals with disabilities, but over time, it is more important that all staff be prepared to serve all customers. The presence of a disability specialist begins to create separate services for people with disabilities. This is inconsistent with the goals of WIA and limits an individual's choices since they may be more comfortable working with another staff person or the specialist may not be available when the individual needs assistance. Another limitation of the specialist approach is that only one individual has all the



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

information and resources related to disability services. If he or she leaves the position, all of the expertise goes with that person and the One-Stop is unprepared to continue to serve individuals.

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.