Case Studies

on the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act

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The workforce development system has undergone significant change in the past five years, including the development and implementation of new partnerships. Maintaining the integrity of services and conducting major organizational change has been a challenge for local, state, and federal leaders. Some states have a limited vision of how this new workforce system can operate and the ways in which their customers can benefit from the new partnerships. Other states, however, have embraced the challenge put forth in the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and have built on previous collaborations or begun new initiatives. This publication discusses some of the challenges faced by leaders in the workforce system and strategies that may assist in addressing these issues.

ISSUES

Fiscal constraints.

One of the most significant challenges faced in WIA implementation related to cost allocation is the fiscal silos mandating that agency funds can only be used for specific purposes. While WIA "mandates" a cohesive system, it is left up to the local areas to figure out how to implement it. Conflict exists at a local level because although local officials have been given this

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: accessibility, 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.

responsibility, they see their federal mandates as interfering. The federal mandate issued can be particularly challenging for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), since WIA is Department of Labor (US DOL) legislation that instructs an agency that is accountable to the Department of Education. The Rehabilitation Services Administration has tried to ensure that VR funds are not being used for generic services but remain dedicated to serving customers with disabilities.

Economic changes.

The timeframe in which WIA was implemented had financial implications for the One-Stop Career Centers (One-Stops). During the early phase of WIA implementation, the economy was strong with low rates of unemployment. Since the funding formula is based on economic factors and unemployment rates, funds to One-Stops were reduced, resulting in One-Stops downsizing staff at the time they were making wholesale changes. Staff were asked to be creative in how they approached client services and partnerships with other entities while they were concerned about their own employment status.

New paradigm.

In addition to the fiscal considerations of the new workforce system, leaders at a state and local level needed to communicate and develop a new system of doing business. While some states had begun to do this through US DOL early implementation grants, for most states the passage of WIA meant significant changes in their relationships with partner agencies. An organizational change process is difficult in any environment, but change in large, structured agencies requires leadership that can direct the change and inspire staff to embrace this new, more expansive vision.

STRATEGIES

Clearly articulate goals.

A clear statement of the goals of the new workforce system is critical to the success of the change process. The goals, as well as the vision by which these goals will be achieved, may vary somewhat from state to

state, but the importance of communicating a clear message cannot be underestimated. States took various approaches in defining the vision but what was consistent was that the vision was clearly articulated and communicated. For example, Minnesota began its collaboration with a strong emphasis on the physical infrastructure of the One-Stop system and the commitment that all One-Stops would have representatives from the partner agencies.

Remain flexible.

While maintaining a clear sense of the overall goals, leaders need to demonstrate and communicate flexibility in how these goals are achieved. This is a new system with many challenges. Strategies that worked in the past may not be effective now, and it is important for leaders to consider why an approach may have been unsuccessful and then make adjustments. Partners and staff who trust each other were able to say that if they tried a strategy that did not work, they would "punt" and try something new. Communicating from the onset that this process is "trial and error" gives staff the freedom to experiment and be prepared for uncertainty and change. The flexibility shown by VR in Maine when presented with problems in their cost-sharing arrangements is a good example of this trust and flexibility. Initially there was concern that VR was making less of a commitment to the One-Stop since they could not support the resource room, but the managers were flexible about how they considered their resources and identified costs that VR could support which benefited the whole One-Stop.

Maintain a focus on the customer.

In the midst of major change, entities can become focused on the details and lose sight of the larger purpose. During difficult times in the planning process, the commissioner in Minnesota would remind staff to place customers in the center of the discussion and consider how the decisions would impact them. Staff in all three states, at both local and state levels, reported the importance of keeping the customers in the forefront of their thinking.

Promote multi-level involvement.

While WIA emphasizes local control, there are important decisions that are also made at the state level. Communication and involvement in planning must occur at and between both levels. Having local boards and agency staff involved in, and contributing to, the planning process will ensure that state guidelines are acceptable and practical for use at the local level. Likewise, state entities need to be actively involved in planning with the local staff to share their knowledge on what has been effective in other parts of the state. When Maine was developing its One-Stop system, partners used a four-month planning process that was facilitated by an outside consultant and incorporated feedback from 40 state and local staff members. These leaders had to put aside their fears about retaining organizational identity and make decisions about the administrative structure.

Recruit individuals who have the information necessary to implement changes.

Some of the changes associated with WIA have very practical implications for issues such as real estate and financial management. During the planning process it is important that representatives who can address these issues are involved and have either the authority for decision-making or easy access to those who do. Minnesota used weekly meetings of key state level agency staff to work through all of the details of establishing a co-located One-Stop system. Represen-tatives from each agency's fiscal and service provision areas were represented to ensure that decisions could be made at these meetings. As a result, staff could go forth and implement the decisions through the remain-der of the week. While there was a core group that met each Monday morning, additional staff were brought in to deal with specific issues when the need arose.

Acknowledge the expertise of others.

Local and state leadership communicate their acceptance and respect for partner agencies through both discussion and action. Acknowledge and value the areas of expertise that the different agencies can provide and use those attributes to strengthen the skills of all staff. The following examples demonstrate how partners have benefited from one another's expertise:

♦ In Minnesota, through awareness training, staff from Vocational Rehabilitation learned about resources used by Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) staff to help their clients obtain interview clothing and deal with transportation difficulties.

♦ Workforce staff in Minnesota valued the relationships that VR staff had with schools and community agencies. Subsequently, workforce staff gained greater access to the community and were able to expand their outreach efforts.

♦ Providing consultation and advice to the One-Stops was a role that was valued in Kentucky. From the start of the partnerships, VR staff were clear that it was not their intention to serve every customer with a disability since some of these individuals would not be eligible for their services or might elect to receive all of their services through the One-Stop. The VR staff worked with Employment Services staff to prepare them to serve these individuals and in specific cases, acted as consultants rather than as hands-on service providers as they would have in the past.

Allow staff at all levels to have some control over decisions that impact them.

Change is hard for everyone. For most staff, their participation in the One-Stop system is not an elective change but one that has been imposed upon them. Acknowledge the impact of feelings associated with the change and allow staff to participate in the decision-making process. This will ensure that staff retain some semblance of control in a situation that is otherwise largely beyond their control.

Early in the planning process, the Portland, Maine One-Stop had staff develop a wish list, detailing what they envisioned to be possible for their customers and how the One-Stop could ideally be organized to best meet these needs. They found many consistencies across agency staff, indicating that agencies were more similar than they were different. While not all of the wishes could be granted, staff felt that they had greater control over the process and contributed by generating ideas from a different perspective than those of the managers.

Focus on relationship building.

The relationships within an agency and between staff in partner agencies are critical to the success of the One-Stop system. The best policies and approaches will not work if staff do not communicate with or trust each other. Communicating respect for the partner agencies and creating opportunities to develop relationships will result in better service to the customer and improved staff morale. In Portland, Maine, the leaders used both work and social opportunities to bring staff together. Planning groups included representation from each of the partner agencies and while initially people were reluctant to participate, they gradually began to work collaboratively on their shared task. Food was also a central component of their developing relationships. During times that were more challenging, the agencies would host a make-your-own-sundae party or an apple pie bake-off, operating under the assumption that it is easier for staff to collaborate when they are sharing apple pie. Look for common activities that will allow staff to get to know each other in a fun and social way so that they can start appreciating one another as people in addition to representatives from an agency.

Relinquish power and traditional authority.

True leadership means knowing when it is time to step back and let others lead. Allowing staff and customers to have greater control over the design of services will increase the commitment that people have to making it work.

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.

> The self-assessment on the following page is offered as a planning tool for One-Stops to identify effective strategies to build the capacity of their leadership.

Leadership: Self-assessment for One-Stops

Clearly articulated goals
- Can all staff articulate the One-Stop's mission?
- Have short-term goals for the One-Stop been developed and communicated?
- Have long-term goals for the One-Stop been developed and communicated?

Remain flexible
- Do partnership agreements allow for adaptation based on changing needs?
- How is staff encouraged to try new approaches in partnership interactions and in service provision?
- How does management convey that there will not be repercussions if staff tries an innovative approach that may not be successful?

Maintain focus on customer
- How is customer feedback solicited (job seeker and employers) and how is it used to inform One-Stop planning activities and service delivery?
- How are potential customers of the One-Stop, including individuals with disabilities, included in planning activities?

Promote multi-level involvement
- How is front-line staff involved in planning and decision-making?
- How does local staff contribute to state level planning?

Recruit individuals who have the information necessary to make changes
- Do planning meetings involve appropriate staff who have the authority to make decisions?
- Who are the key players and what is each one's area of expertise?
- Who is missing from your planning group and how do you identify those people?

Acknowledge expertise of others
- Does staff from partner agencies provide training in their area of expertise and/or role in the workforce system?
- In what ways have staff benefited from the knowledge contributed by new partners in the workforce system?

Allow staff at all levels to have some control over decisions that impact them
- In what ways do front-line staff have ownership over aspects of One-Stop design and service delivery?

Focus on relationship building
- How does leadership facilitate relationship building between staff from partnering agencies?
- What opportunities exist for staff to interact informally or socially that allows them to build relationships?

Relinquish power and traditional authority
- In what ways does management allow all levels to contribute to the decision-making process?

These questions are specifically targeted to One-Stops, but can be useful to any entities within the workforce system.

This brief is available online at
www.communityinclusion.org
or
www.onestops.info

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