

Northeast Region Site Report

Introduction

In February 2011, the Kaiser Group, Inc. was hired by the Arkansas Workforce Investment Board and the Arkansas Department of Workforce Services to conduct an evaluation of the workforce investment system in Arkansas. The evaluation was designed to be a process review rather than a data or compliance review.

There were three primary components to the project:

- Regional site visits and Regional Site Reports
- A Workforce System Report
- A Workforce System Certification Process Review

This Site Report for the Northeast Region is intended to be used in conjunction with the Workforce System Report and the Workforce System Certification Process Review.

It is the hope of the Kaiser Group, Inc. that this report will be used as part of an active planning and continuous improvement process that will help further define and more completely implement the vision for the Arkansas Workforce System. We encourage the readers of this report to discuss these findings, pick and prioritize topical areas, and work together to improve services and outcomes for the customers of the Arkansas Workforce Centers.

The Kaiser Group, Inc. would like to thank all of the staff in the Northeast Region for their assistance in arranging and participating in the interviews and focus groups that were part of the research in this project.

Overview

In the Northeast Local Workforce Investment Area (LWIA), Employment and Training Services, Inc. (ETS) is the Administrative Entity. Workforce Professional Services, Inc. (WPS) is the LWIA Title One Provider and the LWIA One Stop Operator.

In this region, visits were made to the Comprehensive Center in Jonesboro and the Satellite Center in Paragould. There are seven counties in this LWIA and the other Centers include a Satellite Center in Blytheville and an Affiliate Center in Walnut Ridge. This site visit occurred April 5-7, 2011.

All required services are provided at the Comprehensive Center in Jonesboro including: Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Transitional Employment Assistance (TEA) and Work Pays, Resource Room coordination, Business Services, Employment Services (Wagner-Peyser), WIA registration in Arkansas Job Link (AJL), Unemployment Insurance (UI) and Veteran's Services. All the central elements to fulfilling the requirements for WIA are present.

Services available at the Satellite Center in Paragould include: Unemployment Insurance (UI), Employment Services (ES), Veteran's Services, Transitional Employment Assistance (TEA), WIA, Experience Works, and Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA).

A total of fourteen interviews were conducted and included Local Workforce Investment Board (LWIB) staff, the Area Operations Chief (AOC), Department of Workforce Services (DWS) Managers, the WIA Supervisor, the TEA Supervisor, the Unemployment Supervisor, the Veteran's Representative, WIA case managers, a TEA case manager, Resource Room staff, and Partner Agency Staff. In addition, one focus group was held at the Jonesboro Center with both Center and Partner Agency Staff.

Organizational Structure

Findings

Judy Clayton (DWS Manager) and Vickie Jones (WIA Program Manager) co-manage the Arkansas Workforce Center (AWC). There is no single Center Manager function being filled by design. Organizational charts provided included a DWS chart with the AOC Judy Duncan at the top followed by Judy Clayton and a Workforce Professional Services Inc. chart with Keith Steele Chairman of the WPS Board followed by Vickie Jones.

Almost everyone in the AWC views Judy Clayton (DWS) as “the boss.” The Business Plan and Certification Criteria both identify the WIA provider as the designated One Stop Operator, however, in Jonesboro (as in several other regions visited); this is implemented as a cooperative process between DWS and WIA leaders.

The DWS AOC, Judy Duncan, doesn’t see leadership as a structure, but rather as a team approach with clear roles. Everyone is in charge. In her view, co-management is the best model and should be recognized as what works in some regions.

There is a noticeable climate of cooperation in the Centers and it’s clear that it starts with a shared vision within leadership. This manifests itself in the respect staff show for each others’ supervisors and the consistent theme in the interviews that staff work well together to meet customer needs.

The Local Workforce Investment Board (LWIB) is an active Board. Their staff members Sammy McGuire, Executive Director, and James Morgan play an important role in AWC leadership even though they do not appear on the organizational charts given to us.

Board Chair is Dean Inman, the Human Resources Director of American Railcar Industries (ARI). Many of the local private sector Board members are active customers of the AWCs in the region. ARI, for example, is adding 500-700 positions in 2011 and is working with the Center to use the Career Readiness Certificate (CRC) to screen and place candidates.

The Certification process was carried out by the LWIB. As seen in most regions in Arkansas, very few staff are aware of the process nor were they involved in it. Staff know that the Center is certified but were largely unaware of the Business Plan or the criteria used. Yet they are impacted and influenced by the principles. These principles are promoted and implemented without being connected to the certification process itself.

One leader described the Certification process as “a solid starting point” and as a necessary tool and guide to use as a frame work for working together. “It opens our eyes to what we should be doing.” When asked if everyone needs to know the details, the response was that it is a leadership tool more than anything else. When discussing the next stage for the Certification process, it was suggested that some kind of a grading system be established that rewarded levels of development in the Certification process.

The LWIB staff offered their perspective on the Certification process as a tool that provided basic guidelines and a framework for multiple partners to use to coordinate services and resources. The Recertification process added a standard of excellence above the core. They believed it needed to be updated to reflect how the Workforce system has evolved and developed. It was described as a starting point more than an ongoing process improvement tool.

Challenges

Sustaining collaborative relationships during times of dwindling resources will test the partnerships (MOUs, cost sharing, etc.).

The co-managed leadership model is tested when conflicts arise. While this is a challenge, it is also a strength when collaborative solutions emerge. When Center leaders were asked who they would go to if conflicts arose, they identified Judy Duncan (AOC) and ETS staff as needed. Both leaders were comfortable that this process would work.

The further down you go in the organizational structure, the more of a separate or silo identity you find. It is still collaborative, but a challenge to sustain.

Recommendations

- Create a consolidated organizational chart that clarifies the leadership model and clearly defines roles and responsibilities for all Centers in the region. Share this with all AWC staff and partner agencies.

Service Integration and Collaboration

Findings

Communication is key in any leadership model, but in an interagency collaborative model like they have in Jonesboro it takes on even more importance. One leader said, “collaboration is a leadership issue, you need to talk directly to people and build positive face to face relationships.” This system has grown together and had many successes, which builds trust and prepares them for the collaboration that’s needed in more difficult times, such as when budgets are cut. This is the climate in Jonesboro; trust, respect and communication foster an environment for building positive relationships and working together to meet customer needs.

Collaboration partnerships are a key aspect of the Arkansas vision for world class Workforce Centers. The leadership currently in place in this region really understands this, models it for staff, and takes it beyond the walls of the Center. Active collaborations in the community are having a positive impact here. One example is the partnership that has developed with the Chamber of Commerce.

One common theme in this region was that partners are seeing more and more of the benefits of collaborating, especially in trying to meet all the needs customers have, not just their initial reason for coming in. Whether it was handling traffic flow for job fairs, or UI quarter change, putting on a community function, sharing upfront customer service or engaging employers with multiple job openings, there is a team concept at work.

Serious attempts are made to make all customers aware of all services, and to do “personal hand offs” to other staff when appropriate. This type of informal referral promotes peer to peer connections and is often more effective with customers.

Cross training and communication strategies are essential to sustain interagency service integration. Cross training is mostly done one on one. New staff are given a list of staff they may job shadow to get to know staff and services. Most staff liked this process, but some felt it didn’t go far enough and more formal cross training would provide a more consistent base of understanding.

Leaders of the partner agencies meet quarterly to explore system improvement. They focus on what’s working and what needs fixing and try to stay proactive. The DWS leadership team meets regularly, as does the WIA management team. Monthly meetings are planned for all partner staff (1/2 gather at a time), but they get regularly cancelled, and don’t always meet staff needs.

Quarterly partner meetings reach a bigger audience and help expand collaboration into the community. All the participants in the focus group (internal and community partners) felt that the AWC provided a collaborative service environment.

The routing sheet used at the front desk is used to identify needs and provide follow up services. With the exception of being poorly copied at times and hard to read, this process helps implement service integration.

Challenges

The greatest challenge for service integration is fully incorporating TEA and Work Pays into the AWC system. TEA and Work Pays staff still feel somewhat like outsiders in the system.

Informal one to one cross training has many positives, yet it's inconsistent. Relying on staff initiated, informal cross training may miss the staff that don't take the time to do this on their own.

Monthly partner meetings for staff are regularly cancelled and don't always meet staff needs. Minutes from these meetings are not regularly shared.

Recommendations

- Expand the spirit of collaboration through communication, and be more systematic about holding all staff and partner meetings that focus on process and information sharing in addition to social networking. This is especially critical given the additional partners at the new Center.
- Ensure that all meeting minutes are done timely and consistently and are shared with all AWC staff in a systematic way.
- Survey staff on cross training needs and identify areas of impact they suggest as priorities. Newer staff may provide even more insight into this issue.
- Focus on fully integrating the TEA and Work Pays staff and customers into the AWC. Explore options with the Department of Human Services (DHS) that will improve the initial handoff of customers to TEA.

Customer Satisfaction

Findings

It is often easy to see when an organization has created a customer focused culture. To a large degree, that has been accomplished in Jonesboro because of the leadership commitment. Territoriality is discouraged and numerous staff commented that the collaborative One Stop seamless model promotes better customer service than stand alone agencies did.

When asked how they would feel being a customer at their Center, they overwhelmingly responded in a positive way. They also refer family and friends to the Center, which shows pride and confidence in the quality of services at the Center. There is a general feeling that the Center provides good customer service, but what is the proof?

Word of mouth is positive among employers using the Center and they serve as references. LWIB members endorse the services by using them. Staff gets positive feedback from customers they help. WIA gets student evaluations of all customers in training from training providers. In other words, much of the proof is anecdotal.

There are customer service forms available. Forms related to DWS services go to Judy Clayton. If any problems are noted, they will get a follow up and it is recorded. There is an 800 number for TEA customers posted on the front desk.

WIA is somewhat more systematic. They do participant interviews that are shared with staff and reported out to their Board. This is a part of WIA internal local monitoring by the LWIB.

Feedback is gathered from employers using the AWC, but it is informal and does not classify as a systematic quality improvement process. Customer satisfaction is an important metric for the AWC, given the high value placed on customer service.

Staff in the focus group and in interviews identified customer feedback as an area needing review and improvement.



Challenges

The Vision Statement in the Business Plan that is a part of the Certification process says, “Jonesboro Workforce Center Partners will ensure universal access to services for all customers, provide customer choice in service and service delivery, and ensure accountability in performance and customer satisfaction.” To meet this vision, a process for gathering, recording, reporting and using customer feedback must be in place. The current process of available comment cards, the 800 number for TEA and limited WIA participant feedback does not go far enough.



Recommendations

- The Northeast Region would benefit from a strategically designed customer satisfaction process. There are many models available nationwide to draw from and they all include several key elements: systematic data gathering from a significant sample of all customers; timely reporting and analysis of the data gathered; and using the data to respond to customer needs and continually improve the service delivery design.

Performance Management

Findings

For all the efforts made at collaboration and service integration, when it comes to performance management, it is strictly program based. Most staff view the AWC as successful, but are knowledgeable only about their own program performance (TEA, WIA, UI, ES, etc.). One common theme from many of the staff when asked about outcome goals was to say “meet customer needs.” This certainly is an important service value and an important outcome, but measuring it in a meaningful way is also important.

WIA has very high (some of the highest in the country) negotiated performance goals that the Department of Labor (DOL) passes on through DWS. This means even very good performance may show up as “not meeting” the standard. This also affects the WIA enrollment process in that the provider needs to be very selective in these decisions which results in smaller numbers of people are served in intensive services.

It is interesting to note that the largest volume of customers in each region are for unemployment services. Integrating unemployment customers into the mainstream of services at the AWCs is critical to the future viability of Workforce Centers. With Unemployment benefit dollars facing huge budget deficits and the strong desire of states to limit increasing employer unemployment taxes, services to unemployment claimants need to go beyond the timely issuance of checks. Regionally this is also an important performance issue and it is worth greater leadership focus.

The Certification Criteria calls for quantifiable and measurable goals for the Center as a whole and also calls for reporting and monitoring partner goals. This is not happening in a meaningful way. Some leaders in the region are unsure if it is needed.

Having an AWC scorecard that documents and measures success for at least a few critical indicators can have value for the Center partners and to inform the community of the Center’s impact. Awareness of partner goals and outcomes that impact funding and customers also has mutual value. As staff are aware of partner’s outcome goals and performance, they can contribute to collaborative efforts to improve.



Challenges

There is a good deal of data already collected in each of the programs. Some of it is shared at the manager level, but direct staff know and see little about partner performance or AWC outcomes.



Recommendations

- The leadership team at the AWCs in the Northeast region could review existing performance data for each of the programs and create a regional profile with goals and outcomes in a simple format. Present this profile to staff and partners to develop a meaningful measure of success, and a collaborative strategy to achieve mutual gain.
- Broader AWC performance goals, such as customer satisfaction, numbers served, and revenue generated from federal funds into the region, to name a few, could be organized into a quarterly AWC profile and reported to all stakeholders.

AWC Brand

Findings

In Jonesboro, like many other Workforce Centers in Arkansas, there is a serious and sustained effort underway to promote and distinguish the Arkansas Workforce Center brand. The Certification and Recertification process created a baseline and framework for consistent standards and moved the system forward with the beginnings of a brand identity.

In Jonesboro and this region, there are many examples of developing the AWC brand, both internally and externally. Internally, customers at the center are oriented to all the services of the AWC to counter the common view of it just being the Unemployment Office or TEA office.

This region has made significant progress in moving beyond program silo identities and becoming a known brand (AWC) in the community. Involvement with employers is a significant part of this process. There is no hard evidence to verify the increased brand identity awareness, just observation and community contacts. However, many staff offered the same view that among job seekers and employers, knowledge and positive views of the AWC is increasing.

Challenges

There is no AWC marketing budget, so partners rely on DWS for materials to market the brand. In the two Centers that were visited, there were inconsistencies as to which identity is used on name tags, business cards and even how phones were answered. There is a mix of AWC, DWS, and LWIB/WIA in what was said. The AWS brand is promoted and internal consistency is growing, but separate identities are still important to some staff, and in some situations.

The website situation is similar and even less focused on the AWC brand as the portal to information. Attempts to find the Jonesboro Arkansas Workforce Center online provided links to a variety of sources with different contact information, none of which are interactive to meet either job seeker or employer customer needs. The only exception to this is listing a job opening on AJL.

The Certification Criteria promote the AWCs as a single business. However, when staff were asked about this, there were some interesting reactions, such as: “It is not promoted in those terms. It is a collaborative more than a single business.” The single business model did not fit for some leaders because they have varied funding, different performance standards, and separate employers.



Recommendations

- Partner leaders need to review overall marketing strategies and reduce inconsistencies in nametags, business cards, and how phones are answered. Since DWS is launching an AWC marketing campaign statewide, take advantage of their efforts and supplement them with locally specific efforts.
- The Northeast region may want to review website options with State DWS officials to develop a more coherent pathway to link to the regional AWC website.

Business Services/Services to Employers

Findings

One of the visions of the Arkansas Workforce system is to have a system designed by employers for employers. In other words, businesses and employers are a priority customer for the AWCs, and their input and involvement is needed for the system to be market driven.

The Northeast Region has the advantage of an active economy, yet it's still important to have an effective process in place to identify and meet employer needs. There is a collaborative effort being made in the region to engage employers. It involves all primary partners in the AWC and significant community partners including the Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development agencies. Collaboration is evident in coordinated events such as targeted recruitments, onsite recruitment, job fairs, rapid response efforts, and business expos. All partners use AJL as the common database.

While there is no formal Business Services Team or a designated leader, the core group of DWS Managers, several WIA staff, and Veteran Representatives work together in many ways. They coordinate where needed and people step forward to lead as needed.

The Veteran Representatives in Jonesboro are very active collaborators and without giving up any focus on Veterans, they use the whole toolkit of services and market the whole value of the AWC to employers. They feel that the One Stop concept is very helpful to their veteran customers.

The Business Plan developed for the Recertification in 2009 is outdated and needs to be renewed. SERCO is no longer the One Stop/WIA Operator and the strategies outlined don't match current efforts. The value of a new Business Plan would be to more formally develop an interagency Business Services Team and work to build on positive collaboration efforts underway with a proactive action plan.

The region has had success using the Career Readiness Certificate (CRC) to meet employers' needs. Jonesboro is listed as having the highest number of CRCs issued in Arkansas with 4,105 and Paragould is second with 3,462.

 **Challenges**

All of the staff who provide business and employer services have multiple duties. They are Center managers, program managers, Veteran Representatives, or WIA staff. Juggling multiple responsibilities and being the interface with the employer community is a challenge.

Tighter budgets anticipated in the next few years may well strain resources, therefore, informal collaboration efforts may need to be more highly organized to meet employers' needs.

 **Recommendations**

- Identifying and funding a dedicated Business Services Lead to take full advantage of the cooperation that exists and to add structure would be a good investment. Their scope of work could include special employer events coordination, onsite recruitments, development of a unified marketing plan, and systematically gathering and using employer and customer feedback. The right person in that position could leverage additional resources and improve outcomes for all partners.

Customer Flow, Facilities, and Resource Rooms

Findings

The Jonesboro Center serves between 900-1,500 customers a week. In Paragold, they provide 700-900 services to 450-500 customers each week.

When customers come in to the Jonesboro Center, they enter a welcoming, brightly lit reception area, they sign in, and are given a routing slip. Staff feel the routing slip is a process that works well and is a key document to identify and follow through on customer needs. The staff up front do a good job of talking to customers to determine needs and refer them to the proper partner.

If customers need UI, Job Search, Key Train, or resume assistance they're served up front. TEA customers have appointments because they're referred by DHS. WIA customers are referred to the case managers.

When asked about Center strengths, staff responded with: the caring and quality of the employees (the close-knit group makes the customers feel comfortable), teamwork, a supportive environment, a seamless process, customer friendly, the number of services, community knowledge, flow of information, adequate computers, and strong leadership.

Due to the large volume of UI customers during quarter change, long wait times can occur. Staff meetings are held before quarter change to discuss plans for creating a better flow and reduce wait times.

The Resource Room in Jonesboro has friendly staff, helpful and abundant signage, a big screen TV with job postings, and plenty of room.

One unique practice here is the use of a "Help" card. Customers are given one of these cards when they sign on to a computer. When they need help, they hold up this card. This avoids disrupting others using the Resource Room, and easily identifies those customers who need help from staff.

Challenges

The volume of customers at times strains the very positive customer service focus. Limited resources sometimes do not allow staff to respond to all customer needs. First time customers may be confused about what the process/flow is. One focus group participant who was a former customer stated that the first experience in the Center was frustrating and intimidating; more information would have been helpful.

The front desk is staffed on a rotating basis and while this often puts knowledgeable staff at this critical service point, it can be inconsistent and a real strain on staff.

While there are a couple of offices that can be used for private discussions, during the focus group, both TEA and WIA staff expressed concerns about having discussions about sensitive topics with customers in their cubicles.

Recommendations

- Explore dedicated customer service specialists for the front desk and reduce staff rotating through that function.
- Develop a process to inform customers very early in the process of what to expect when visiting the Centers, and what services are offered. Consider creating a graphic explaining the flow of services, and/or a brochure that explains the process. Since first time customers have no idea what to expect, it's important that staff (front desk staff in particular) remember to take extra time to explain the process and services.

Jonesboro Basic Facility Review

Facility Feature	Yes	No
Located on public transportation (n/a if not available)	NA	
Common Reception Point	X	
Space for group services	X	
Private space for personal discussion *see below	X	
Space for itinerant or part-time services	X	
Space to expand to add new partners	X	
Clearly posts hours of operation – 8:00 – 4:30	X	
Expanded hours when warranted		X
Adequate general parking and handicap parking	X	
Visible and prominent external signage	X	
Clean exterior, free of trash and weeds	X	
Clear and professional internal signage	X	
Staff wear name tags	X	
Staff use common logo for stationery and cards	X	
Site has been ADA reviewed (reference checklist cited on page 10)	X	
Has adequate computers available for use by general public	X	
Restrooms are clean and adequately supplied	X	
Menu of services is displayed	X	
Vision and mission are displayed		X
Information about center performance is displayed or readily accessible		X

Jonesboro Basic Resource Center Review

Resource Center Feature	Yes	No
Resource area is the focal point of the center and draws customers in	X	
Self-help materials are readily available	X	
Materials are available in alternative formats for the disabled or non-English speaking	X	
Staff are stationed in the resource area and readily available to customers	X	
Resources are available for employers as well as job seekers	X	
Information is available in a wide array of media, including video, audio, books, periodicals, and software	X	
The area has appropriate signage to guide customers to resources	X	
The area includes capacity for customers to photocopy, print, telephone, fax, and access the internet	X	
There are materials appropriate for youth to use in career exploration, postsecondary selection, and financial aid assistance	X	
Labor market information is easily understandable and accessible	X	
There are tools for customers to self-assess their skills and develop resumes	X	