

Southwest 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 Southwest 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 Southwest 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 Southwest Local Workforce Investment Area (LWIA), Western Arkansas Planning and Development District, Inc. (WAPDD) is the Administrative Entity. Southwest Arkansas Planning and Development District, Inc. (SWAPDD) is the LWIA Title One Provider and the LWIA One Stop Operator.

In this region, visits were made to the Comprehensive Center in Camden, the Satellite Centers in Magnolia and Texarkana, and the Affiliate Center in Lewisville. There are twelve counties in this LWIA. Other Centers in this region include Comprehensives in El Dorado and Hope, and Satellite and Affiliates in Ashdown, DeQueen, Fordyce, Hampton, Magnolia, Nashville, and Prescott. This site visit occurred March 15-17, 2011.

All required services are provided at each of the Comprehensive Centers 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 of the central elements to fulfilling the requirements for WIA are present.

A total of eighteen interviews were conducted and included the Center Managers, Department of Workforce Services (DWS) Managers, WIA Supervisors, WIA case managers, TEA case managers, and Resource Room staff. In addition, one focus group was held at the Camden Center with both Center and Partner Agency Staff.

Organizational Structure

Findings

The Southwest Region covers a large area and with three Comprehensive Centers, three Satellite Centers and six touch points or Affiliates, it is critical that the region work as a coordinated system. To carry out the vision of an integrated, seamless delivery method of services would be challenging for this large of an area for a single organization.

The Southwest Region has three primary partners who shape the service delivery model for their Centers. Western Arkansas Planning and Development District (WAPDD) is the administrative entity and they have a small staff. The Local Workforce Investment Board (LWIB) has struggled to establish an active stable membership and its One Stop committee was not active at the time of the site visit. Southwest Arkansas Planning and Development District (SWAPDD) as the WIA provider and One Stop Operator has a new Executive Director (who is new to the Workforce system) and has several business priorities beyond the Workforce system.

The challenge facing SWAPDD leadership is significant on several levels and mirrors challenges faced in several of the regions visited for this evaluation. The Certification standards and Business Plan calls for the designation of the Workforce Center Manager by the One Stop Operator (SWAPDD). The operational reality in the Southwest region is a little less clear cut than that.

In Camden, Reese Broadnax is the Regional WIA Manager for SWAPDD (she is also the Business Services Manager), and oversees multiple sites including Comprehensive, Satellite and Affiliate Centers for the WIA program. She is a ten year veteran with a long history of successful collaboration.

Robin Thrower is the Camden WIA Center Manager (and the Business Services Representative). She co-manages the Camden Center with Patrick Strickland (DWS), the manager of Employment Services (ES) and Unemployment Insurance (UI).

While this organizational structure may seem to lack clarity and clear lines of authority, it works very well in Camden and other locations. That success is often dependent on personal relationships. Since the One Stop Operator has limited authority or functional management over other partner agencies in the Centers, the co-managed/team leadership model has emerged as a practical solution.

In spite of the organizational challenges, there are many examples of service integration and resource collaboration that have a positive impact on customers. The three leaders active at the Camden Center all are committed to operating the Center as a seamless system from the customer experience. They have developed a close knit staff who are professional, customer focused, and actively seek ways to collaborate to serve all customers better.

When partner agencies leadership is clearly aligned and committed to the seamless, integrated Arkansas Workforce Center (AWC) service model, as they are in Camden, staff seem to accept and embrace the challenges. Interviews with staff clearly point this out and those involved see the AWC as good for customers and the community. Leadership collaboration creates the culture and environment needed for staff collaboration to develop and grow.

In 2009, the area managers, board staff and some partners had input into the Business Plan. The process had value, gave direction and provided a framework for those involved; however, many staff were unaware of the Business Plan or the Certification Criteria. The Certification process created a vision on paper for people to refer to that works to reduce the separation of programs and increase the collaboration of resources. It was described by leaders in this region as “parameters for consistency.” The process was limited in that it was primarily a onetime event not an ongoing quality improvement process.

Keys to success in the Southwest region include a number of factors. They have a ten year history of collaboration and an effective partner leadership on the Center level (at most Centers) to implement the model. The One Stop Operator takes a team approach and the Business Plan focuses on a collaborative model for serving employers.

The new AWC facility opening in Camden is tangible evidence of the potential for the system to improve and increase collaboration. The expanded partnerships, design of the Center and effective use of resources are a model for other regions.

Challenges

The organizational structure and co-management structure was not consistently viewed by different levels of staff. It was not as clear to direct service staff as it was to the managers.

While significant progress has been made toward a seamless integrated model, there are many factors that still separate the primary partners (WIA and DWS), such as policy, funding and performance requirements. Direct service staff naturally identify with programs and agency supervisors.

The Southwest region covers twelve counties and operates twelve centers in an effort to provide touch points of service to customers in a large, mostly rural area. SWAPDD as the One Stop Operator and DWS have a strong collaborative base to build on but are challenged with developing consistency in leadership from Center to Center. Each Center has unique needs yet the core operating principals and structure should share the same framework. Collaborative leadership models may require training and peer coaching to succeed. This is especially true with newer less experienced managers. The leadership challenges in Texarkana are especially complex and warrant additional focus from both SWAPDD and DWS to find positive solutions.

WIA performance in the region has been a challenge not only in the struggle to meet standards but also in the fact that the very high negotiated WIA common measure goals have created a tight enrollment policy. The attempt to target enrollments that will succeed given the high standards means fewer people are served and relatively low WIA caseloads. The Centers visited have a capacity to serve more people and that warrants regional leadership attention.

Recommendations

- The Southwest region would benefit from a proactive leadership retreat that focuses on the strengths of current operations and the evolving management partnership between the LWIB, WIA and DWS. Funding challenges, the expansion of the Camden Center at its new site, strengthening the model in Texarkana, and performance goals of all partners would be a good starting agenda.
- Regular partner meetings have become inconsistent in some areas and communication between partners, which staff overwhelmingly cited as key to collaboration, would benefit from a more systematic meeting structure. A meaningful agenda, developed with partner input, and minutes available for all soon after the meeting, are important components.
- SWAPDD and DWS regional leadership need to review the dynamics of Center leadership in Texarkana and problem solve with Center leaders to provide supportive solutions.

Service Integration and Collaboration

Findings

The Centers we visited were consistently aligned around the theme of customer service and meeting customer needs. At the Comprehensive Center in Camden, they had developed all the key components to a well functioning integrated service model; common reception, menu of services for all partners, clear referral processes between programs, some cross training and functional help with services, and open communications between staff members. Teamwork was seen as a strength by the majority of staff interviewed at all levels.

There is still a separate aspect to agencies and programs, but staff work to make connections once people are at the Center. The process of staying informed of all partner services is a major challenge and the creation of an online service directory which is under development, was seen as a real value. The link to the Chamber of Commerce and the community is impressive, but it must be operationalized and maintained.

The Certification standards call for the AWC to function as a single business with multiple investors in a joint venture. That “single business” concept is still a stretch for most staff. Separate, but collaborative, partners united by the AWC joint venture seems a more viable description of the reality in this region.

From the perspective of the job seeker customer in Camden, the Center and staff appear integrated. The reception function acts as a gate keeper directing access to all services. The listing of services did not highlight agencies and the AWC brand was emphasized. Staff use both formal and informal referral processes. Instructing all staff to use the same referral form would be helpful. The informal “handoff” of customers to other staff/services is effective for customers and provides practical peer cross training.

The website for Southwest Arkansas Workforce centers is an effective tool for outlining, describing and connecting jobseekers and customers to resources at the integrated service Centers in the region. It was one of the best found in the seven regions reviewed. It is easy to find, navigate, and is organized in a customer focused format.

Service integration is an ongoing developmental process with many levels. Many of the customers who come into the AWC come initially for the “Unemployment Office” and with the single purpose of a benefit check. Cross training often focuses on training other DWS staff and some partner staff to assist UI during peak customer flow periods like quarter change. Cross training UI staff to connect the UI customer to all “dislocated worker services” is an important challenge for the workforce system in the next few years.

The focus group that was held in Camden had a strong mix of onsite partners and community partners and the participants actively shared their perspectives. Several themes emerged from the focus group participants:

- Progress has been made particularly with coordination of services to job seekers and expanding partnerships.
- There has been success with collaborative events such as the recent job fair. It was organized by Economic Development with many partners involved.
- The new Center in Camden will help develop the collaborative service model even more, with more resources and space.
- Services to employers are not as coordinated as they need to be.

Challenges

One of the greatest challenges is getting consistency at all the sites. This is especially true of the Texarkana site. The process of service integration is more complex with one side of the Center Arkansas and one side Texas. Even the collaboration between DWS and WIA is less defined and the co-management structure more challenging.

Caseloads and workloads vary between programs. WIA and TEA caseloads are quite manageable and there is capacity to serve more customers. Workload and available resources directly impact collaboration efforts. Putting more resources into business and employer services is needed to build on opportunities and meet needs. Most staff calling on employers have multiple functions and are not dedicated to employer focused services.

Recommendations

- Complete the roll out and implementation of the online service directory and dedicate staff time to maintaining and maximizing its use.
- Highlight communications and promising practices between sites and invest in peer to peer site manager support options. Review cross training to provide more consistent levels of training and expand involvement of TEA and UI staff.

Customer Satisfaction

Findings

Staff at all levels were asked how they would feel being a customer at their Center. Many do refer family and friends to the Center and several had been customers themselves. The over whelming response was positive. Staff have pride in the services they provide and there is a strong shared commitment to quality customer service.

There are a variety of ways customer feedback is gathered. There is an 800 number that customers can call, forms are at the front desk for customers to share their views, there is a suggestion box, staff have their “ear to the street”, and managers have an open door policy and interest in improving services.

While there is an informal knowledge of customer satisfaction expressed by staff, there is no systematic formal process that gathers, reports, and uses regular feedback for ongoing validation of strengths and adjustment to needs. Currently staff seem to relate to feedback as taking care of complaints. That concept needs to be expanded to incorporate the full spectrum of feedback to allow customers to also express what is being done right and what’s effective for meeting their needs. With the pride that exists in customer service, this seems like a missed opportunity to benchmark and measure a strength of the Center.

Two of the partners in the focus group (Manpower and Experience Works) shared how they use systematic customer surveys to document results and improve services. It is important to identify feedback processes that are timely, used properly, and that touch a large enough base of customers to be significant. Previously WIA had a customer satisfaction performance measure, but it was quite delayed and not useful for ongoing process improvement.

It may also be worthwhile to implement an annual staff “climate survey” to benchmark how staff in the AWCs perceive their work environments. If staff are seen as internal customers then their feedback should also be valued and measured. There are many national models to use in developing climate surveys for interagency workforce centers.

Specific projects with employers such as customized training and use of the Career Readiness Certificate require a dialogue with employers that identify needs and work to meet those needs. This process only touches a small number of employers in the community. A more systematic process is needed for all customer groups.

Challenges

Methods of receiving customer feedback are not consistent, nor very effective from a process improvement standpoint. Each agency/program has a different approach and none address important AWC service areas.

How to decide on a systematic process of measuring job seekers' and employers' experiences is a challenge, as is creating a process of sharing that information with staff and then actually developing improvement strategies.

Even the internal informal method of sharing feedback one to one or in staff or partner meetings lacks consistency because of meetings being cancelled and small sample sizes of feedback. Some of the customers are "mandatory" customers and staff must require their participation or issue sanctions. This must be considered in the gathering and analysis of the feedback.

Recommendations

- Implement a monthly sampling of customers across agencies, services, and Centers to standardize a customer satisfaction process on the AWC level. Include a reporting process and improvement process to actively respond to the feedback.
- Benchmark results to show patterns and trends that are both Center based and regional. Include the information as part of an AWC "score card" report to stakeholders.

Performance Management

Findings

While the service model at the AWCs strives to operate as a single business, promoting the AWC brand, and offering services in a seamless integrated manner, the performance management process is entirely program focused. It is very difficult to translate the positive customer service observed, the strong spirit of collaboration that is in place, and the expanded range of services available in the One Stop into outcomes.

Each of the programs is focused on their own performance which is expected. But throughout the interviews, little or no awareness of the performance goals or outcomes of other partners was found. The Certification Criteria calls for the sharing of performance reports, and even more importantly, identifying opportunities for mutual gain.

The Certification standards also call for AWC goals for the Centers as a whole. There are no such goals in place, other than the highly desirable goal of identifying and meeting all customer needs and numbers of customers served.

A focus on outcomes is important. It impacts funding, it's a scorecard to measure improvement or gaps and it can even be a way of showing return on investment to the community. The wide range of performance standards for different programs may seem to present a daunting problem. UI focuses on timely benefits and minimal errors, TEA on work participation rates, and Employment Services and WIA on employment and training.

Other Workforce Centers around the country have found shared goals may increase outcomes and reduce duplication. Several key outcomes impact all programs such as quality customer service, entered employment, and job retention. The number of people served in various service components such as Resource Rooms, job readiness workshops, skill training, and partner support services can be used to show resources brought into the community and effective cost per service numbers.

Challenges

It is a challenge to get up to speed on the performance outcomes in individual programs, so managers and staff tend to focus their efforts just on their own programs. Unfortunately, this "silo" approach misses opportunities for mutual benefit and collective impact on the customers everyone serves.

The WIA performance standards set through a negotiated process between DWS and the Department of Labor (DOL) have established the WIA goals for the nine common performance measures at one of the highest levels in the country. This is significant because the region has only been meeting two of the nine standards and the process makes it more difficult to enroll and serve “hard to serve” customers. Since staff tend to focus on what’s measured, performance outcomes impact service design and delivery.

Recommendations

- Identify mutually beneficial AWC goals (such as a customer satisfaction rating) and measure them, report them to all stakeholders, and use that data to improve processes and services.
- Identify key performance outcomes each of the partners is working to meet and review them on a quarterly basis. Put together performance reports for each partner with goals and actual results and share these with all staff.
- Identify strategies to improve partner performance using resources already available. Have staff at all levels participate, not just managers.
- Look for strategies partners can use to reduce duplication and assist each other in meeting targeted outcomes.

The AWC Brand

Findings

In both the interviews and in the focus group, there was a widespread belief that significant strides had been made in the last year or two in the development of the AWC brand. The Workforce system is marketed using the AWC brand, and all partners are on board in promoting this brand.

Marketing and brand identity efforts include: answering all initial calls with “Arkansas Workforce Center”, using standard marketing materials with employers and at community events, and using the AWC nametag over agency identity. The results are somewhat inconsistent from Center to Center however, and it is easy to fall back to agency identity.

In the community people still identify with their immediate needs and for the majority of customers, that means unemployment services. Once customers arrive at the Center, staff really work together to reframe the view of customers to see all the services the AWC has available. There is a positive atmosphere at the Centers visited and staff have pride in their work. This is extremely important in creating a more customer focused brand identity.

The Certification standards set criteria for what qualifies as a Comprehensive AWC, a Satellite Center and an Affiliate. In the Southwest region, and in many of the other seven regions visited, there were inconsistencies in those categories. If the AWC brand is extended to Satellite and Affiliate Centers, and the goal is to have a “franchise” standard, then this is an issue. With twelve centers in twelve counties, the Southwest has made it a priority to offer as many service points as possible to serve their large geographic area.

The Southwest region website is well laid out, clear, and prominently displays the AWC brand. There are links for Job Seekers, Employers, Training, and Youth. Resources and partner agency information is displayed with active links for more information. All Center location and contact information is clearly displayed, along with Mapquest links for directions to each location. While this is one of the best examples of using the website to market the brand and services of the AWCs, there was some information that was out of date, some links were not active, and the calendar of events is blank.

Challenges

The creation of a “seamless system” out of a myriad of programs with different policies, procedures, funding streams, outcome measures, eligibility guidelines, and leadership is complex. It is always a “work in progress” and ebbs and flows with many factors. The AWC brand is a unifying element for these diverse partners.

The consistency of the brand is important, and at the time of this review, that varies from Center to Center in this region. Value added products and services like the Career Readiness Certificate (CRC), training, and staff assisted Resource Rooms will grow the positive image of the brand.

Recommendations

- Continue to develop and market the AWC brand particularly with community partners and employers. Build on the DWS statewide AWC marketing campaign to promote Southwest’s AWCs.
- Establish a workgroup of staff from across the region to identify promising practices, reduce inconsistencies and discuss challenges. Put them on a time limited, action oriented agenda and include partners active in multiple centers (such as Manpower).

Business Services/Employer Services

Findings

The team approach to Business Services is a potential strength of this region. The AWCs are involved with the Community Colleges, Economic Development and others. There are five business and industry partnership teams serving the twelve counties. This is written out in the Business Service Plan developed through the Certification process.

The Center Coordinator serves as the lead point of contact when possible and employers are targeted as a priority customer group. The process focuses on needs assessment, doing whatever it takes to meet needs, and following up with employers.

This region's success with CRCs, their Business and Industry Partnership Team (especially Camden's) and their expanded external partnerships with groups like Manpower and the City of Camden are promising practices.

Within the AWCs, the Business Services are coordinated and there is active collaboration on projects and events. Office managers for WIA and DWS double as Business Service Representatives and do the best they can to make services to employers a priority.

All staff who provide outreach services to employers market the AWC brand, however, they are more program focused in their strategies and are not effectively organized as a team. There is a WIA Business Lead, but not an AWC Business Services team leader. Arkansas Job Link is the common database available to primary partners and employer contacts and job leads are entered into the system.

Certification criteria calls for the AWCs to be designed by employers for employers, but there is little evidence of active employer advisory groups having an impact on services. Considering the informal structure and limited resources, the region has had success serving and engaging employers. A good example is the number of Career Readiness Certificates issued. The potential for greater collaboration is evident and should be a priority for the partners.



Challenges

The service philosophy is clearly stated to target employers as customers, and the collaborative spirit is in place at most Centers, however, the implementation of a coordinated plan is lacking.

Southwest Arkansas Planning and Development District (SWAPDD) developed a Business Service Plan to encourage a team approach, but it mostly includes only WIA staff.



Recommendations

- Pilot an interagency Business Services Team in Camden with a dedicated Team Lead. It could be jointly funded, however, the preferred choice would be a WIA lead. WIA has a more active employer outreach focus and in National models most often takes the lead for this function. Discussions need to occur locally to make a decision on adopting this model.

Customer Flow, Facilities, and Resource Rooms

Findings

When asked about strengths in the Camden Center, responses included: teamwork, partnerships, staff gets along, close knit staff, everyone is customer focused and professional, cross training, and awareness of other's services.

The Camden facility had a common reception area (serving all partners in the Center) with reception clearly visible and attentive. A clear menu of services was displayed by service and not by agency. Although staff were sometimes not visible (sitting behind a cube wall), staff that assisted in the Resource Room were friendly, and ready to assist customers. As Center staff passed through the Resource Room (non Resource Room staff), they also helped customers as needed.

This site visit included a tour of the partially completed new facility in Camden. The new facility will have more space, more partners, and a better customer flow design.

The following tables represent the findings from the former Center the evaluation team visited.

Camden 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	x	
Space for itinerant or part-time services	x	
Space to expand to add new partners		x
Clearly posts hours of operation	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)	?	
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

Camden 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 <i>Materials all seemed up to date and appropriate.</i>	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 <i>Staff was not visible much of the time. Seating is behind a cube wall. Staff did walk through and assist customers, however, it seemed more random than systematic.</i>		X
Resources are available for employers as well as job seekers <i>Limited employer resources, mixed in with the rest of the resources. When asked, staff didn't understand the concept of employers being customers of the Center.</i>		X
Information is available in a wide array of media, including video, audio, books, periodicals, and software <i>Limited library of resources. Very few books (seemed dated), none on resumes, cover letters or job search help. The resources were in a staff area, not open to the public. Did not get the sense that these materials were used much with customers.</i>		X
The area has appropriate signage to guide customers to resources <i>Customer materials and flyers need to be organized better by category and with appropriate signage.</i>		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 <i>Very few youth specific materials.</i>		X
Labor market information is easily understandable and accessible <i>Only available online.</i>	X	
There are tools for customers to self-assess their skills and develop resumes	X	