

**THE WORKFORCE PARADOX FOR
ADULTS WITH LIMITED LITERACY OR ENGLISH
LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY:**

A REPORT FROM THE FIELD

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This *Report from the Field* is the result of a qualitative study conducted by the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy (NMCL) through a grant from the New Mexico Department of Labor. The question that guided the study is:

How and how well are adults with limited literacy and/or English language skills (the population of need) being served at One Stop Career Centers in New Mexico?

Under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, One Stop Career Centers were developed to provide training and employment related services to adults, youth, and dislocated workers. The study was designed to investigate the extent to which a specific subset of One Stop clients, adults with limited literacy and/or English speaking skills, received services. Data was collected during a nine-month period from March through November of 2002 from four of the WIA system's most relevant players: 1) One Stop customers, 2) One Stop directors and staff, 3) Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Literacy program directors and staff, and 4) employers.

PROJECT DESIGN:

The data was collected in three phases: **Phase I** (March-June, 2002) consisted of phone interviews with 120 randomly selected employers in New Mexico. **Phase II** (July-September, 2002) consisted of 1) in-person interviews with 23 directors of the One Stop Centers, ABE programs, and volunteer literacy programs, and 2) eight focus groups with 53 front-line staff from these agencies. **Phase III** (October-November, 2002) consisted of seven focus groups with One Stop customers; a total of 22 customers participated in these groups.

Data analysis involved categorization of the data by type of service and identification of major themes, creation of a force-field analysis of the forces that support and make it difficult for staffs from all programs studied to provide the best service possible, and display of the data in a flow chart of services examining critical junctures in service decision-making. Findings were corroborated through an iterative process where each of the project coordinators first arrived at the findings independently and then discussed and modified them as needed.

Upon completion of data collection and the majority of data analysis, training sessions were held for 58 of the participants from Phases II and III of the study to test the veracity of the conclusions and to plan the next steps for improving service delivery to the population of need.

FINDINGS:

1) The population of need rarely gains access to job training services. Data from One Stop customers and staff show that the population of need is not getting beyond core services to access job training due to three factors:

- the “work first” interpretation of WIA legislation creating the perception among One Stop staff and customers that the primary goal of service at One Stops is to get a client a job regardless of whether the job is at a sustainable wage
- the low wage economy driving provision of services and exerting pressure on the workforce development system to plug the population of need into available low wage jobs instead of training them for higher skilled and higher paying jobs for which there is a limited supply, and
- the literacy and credentialing requirements that act as gatekeepers to service: the lack of a GED or high school credential and/or a specific reading level keeps the population of need from accessing training services; businesses have set the bar to require a GED creating the perception that it does not make sense to train people who lack this credential as they will still not be eligible for job placement.

2) The population of need is unlikely to get a formal referral to ABE and Literacy programs at the core level of service at the One Stop Centers. Reasons include:

- lack of enforcement of partnerships mandated by the WIA legislation and lack of effectiveness of existing partnerships,
- a breakdown in the referral process among mandated partners due to frequent system changes that are confusing to customers, the lack of a formal client tracking system, the lack of awareness of specific services available in the community, and the lack of follow-up services at One Stop Centers,
- the lack of assessment at the core level of service of a client’s literacy or English speaking skills; generally One Stop staff are not trained to identify literacy issues as barriers to employment and rely on informal assessment means, and
- client issues around reluctance to disclose literacy and other psychological and personal barriers.

3) The population of need is not guaranteed access to information about intensive and job training services either in their communities at large or within the One Stops. The result is that most receive limited or no information about these services. Reasons include:

- limited or lack of marketing of One Stop services,

- random communication with existing customers concerning services available at One Stop Centers resulting in a lack of consistency in providing the same information about intensive and job training services to all customers who come through the door, and
- an expressed desire on the part of clients not only to receive such information but also to engage in active dialog with someone concerning the information they receive and how to use it in making good decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1) Show leadership on WIA in New Mexico by ensuring universal access to all WIA services by the population of need.

2) Create significant WIA policy changes, specifically:

- set a priority of service policy for New Mexico that includes individuals with low literacy and/or limited English skills in addition to those with low incomes
- expand training options under WIA to include: making core, intensive, and training services available to all clients as an array of services rather than as a mandated sequence; providing universal access to assessment and planning services for all clients; ensuring that participation in WIA intensive and training services be allowed to satisfy the work search requirements for unemployment benefits; improving the ability to combine occupational and basic skills training, and
- more fully integrate employment and employment-related services.

3) Improve services at One Stops in the following ten priority areas identified by participants in the study:

- 1. Marketing/outreach:** reach out to people who are not being served (those in outlying communities, older workers, and those with low literacy and/or limited English skills),
- 2. Partnerships and collaboration:** create a formal system for working together where all partners initiate communication rather than waiting to hear from the other partners,
- 3. Case management:** in assessment, explore long-term goals with customers before determining the services they will receive; tell clients about job training and describe in detail the steps to get there,
- 4. Advocacy and customer service:** help employers and teachers/tutors see that people's experience counts,
- 5. Referral:** take into account the whole person: consider all their needs and make appropriate referrals,

- 6. Follow-up:** create a formal system where the promise at the *first* point of contact with a client is that staff will check up on a client's progress,
- 7. Orientation:** provide staff with opportunities for staff to learn about community services and eligibility requirements,
- 8. On the job training:** work with employers to create opportunities for people to get the training they need while working and collaborate with ABE and literacy programs to include the education workers need to build skills for job retention, promotion, and better wages,
- 9. Raising employer consciousness:** promote the importance of literacy as a contribution to the skilled workforce; encourage basic skills training for employees, and
- 10. Co-location of services:** co-locate employment and employment-related services at One Stops.

The recommendations point to the need for substantive policy change and well-funded services to raise the wages and skills of *all* New Mexico workers.

For a copy of the full report, please go to the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy's website at www.nmcl.org or contact the Coalition at 1-800-233-7587.