Case Studies

Focus on Co-location

on the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act

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INTRODUCTION

Seamless service delivery means that a customer receiving services can move between two or more agencies with limited disruption. Seamless services have not been accomplished when a customer must take a cross-town bus to travel from one agency to another. To address this issue, many One-Stop career centers (One-Stop) are looking into how staff from their partner agencies can physically share space. This can range from a single staff person from an agency working in the One-Stop on specific days of the week (itinerant staffing) to all staff from that agency working there on a full-time basis (full co-location).

Staff report a multitude of benefits related to co-location. These include the development of relationships across agencies, information sharing, and more comprehensive delivery of services to job seekers. Co-location can foster relationships through which information and expertise are shared. Staff get to know one another, trust each other, and respect the individual skills and knowledge that each agency's staff bring to the endeavor. Despite these overarching advantages of co-location, there are many challenges with which collaborating agencies must contend. The following is offered as a tool for states to use in their efforts to help agencies co-locate or "move in together" as they create their One-Stops.

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, accessibility, 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.

ISSUES

Allocation of office space

The issue of who needs private offices can be a contentious one. For instance, in several states Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) had requested private offices for counselors to see their clients (as had been their previous norm), but other agencies perceived this request as elitist. VR staff placed a strong emphasis on client confidentiality and felt that it was critical for them to have private meeting space. In some instances, the option of cubicles for all staff with the availability of private offices for confidential counseling or phone calls was considered.

Costs associated with co-location

The costs of relocating can be daunting and may make some agencies reluctant to co-locate in a new site. For example in one state, the local VR agency was still maintaining the former office and sending counselors to One-Stops on an itinerant basis. In this case, VR was paying for the new space at the One-Stop as well as the old office. Also, for many agencies that had been housed in older, state-owned buildings, rent was often very inexpensive. Moving from one office to another sometimes involved a substantial rent increase. Another concern that arose was the risk of a shared lease. Partners were concerned and uncertain about what would happen if one agency decided to move out.

Turf

Co-location often brings with it issues of turf and protectionism for partnering agencies. At times, not only did staff not want other agencies to infringe on their customers, services, and funding streams, but there was also a reluctance to take on responsibilities that "belonged to someone else." Even seemingly insignificant tasks, such as answering the TTY phone, can have an impact on the overall level of collaboration among co-locating agencies.

STRATEGIES

Group staff by function, not agency.

In Portland, Maine, turf was initially an issue but was worked out once staff had greater proximity to each other. When the agencies first began to co-locate, all the programs were in different locations in the building. As staff moved into integrated space, they were able to do more joint planning and turf issues began to dissipate. Rather than grouping staff by agency, office space was assigned based on function, so job developers from a private non-profit agency sat next to job developers from Employment Services. Staff felt that this physical closeness allowed for greater levels of collaboration.

Use a neutral site.

One of the challenges to co-locating is determining who moves where. In Kentucky, many involved in the process recommended a neutral site where none of the mandated partners had previously provided services. This ensures that all agencies are on equal footing and one agency does not feel more "ownership" of the space than the others. Thus, turf issues are minimized. As

one staff person commented, "Even in large towns, there's a certain amount of prestige with, 'you come to my place.'"

Find a management strategy that works.

A management strategy that satisfies the needs of all partners is a critical component of the One-Stops. Many states have found success with a team management approach. For instance in Maine, decisions were made and shared among partners through the management team. This team provided leadership and goal-setting and helped people negotiate their roles. Initially, there were many concerns around having a single manager of each center, so the partners agreed upon a team of managers that enabled all agencies to be on equal footing. In this model, each manager was responsible for the supervision of his or her own staff, but operational decisions were made by the team.

In Kentucky, a single site manager was an effective strategy for one of their One-Stops. This manager did not take on supervision of staff from the partnering agencies: that responsibility was retained by their home agencies. The manager of the One-Stop was responsible for the coordination of the day-to-day activities of the center, ensuring that customers received the full benefits of all the partners within the One-Stop. Marketing efforts were also the responsibility of the site manager.

Maintain itinerant staffing and electronic connectivity.

Having personnel from multiple agencies at the One-Stop on a consistent, rotating basis is useful when staffing limitations render it impossible for smaller agencies to co-locate. Itinerant staffing allows for partner staff to be assigned specific days of the week so that customers can have consistent access to those services. In addition, when staff are unable to physically co-locate, electronic connectivity aids in shared referral among different agencies.

Use affiliate sites.

Affiliate sites are satellite centers that provide some but not all of the services of a career center. These sites are electronically linked to the full-service centers where all partners are present. Because of geographic boundaries, especially in the more rural areas of some states, many customers are not able to access the comprehensive One-Stops. Because of electronic connectivity, affiliate sites provide the same access and information as the larger sites. In Kentucky, affiliate sites have been created in several innovative locations including the airport, Wal-Mart, and local shopping centers. Minnesota also made use of affiliate sites to expand its workforce system into areas and populations that would not otherwise be reached. With existing endemic resources, Minnesota set up affiliate sites in institutions already integrated in specific communities, like the affiliate site located in the American Indian Center.

Involve staff at all levels.

When co-location became especially difficult for staff, many participants noted that involvement of all levels of personnel was critical. Having multiple partners around the table enables all staff to feel that their voices are heard. Being involved in discussions, especially around management issues, was noted as imperative. For those who were initially resistant to co-location, contributing their thoughts and ideas helped them to feel supported and a part of the process.

Anticipate unforeseen costs.

It is important to incorporate unforeseen costs into the planning process. Have explicit conversations with all the partners about strategies to address both anticipated and unanticipated costs. Be thoughtful and creative about the ways costs are shared. For instance, training activities can be a significant expense. One way to share resources among agencies is for staff from one another's agencies to cover staffing shortages while other staff are being trained. In this way, agencies exchange not only financial resources but staffing resources as well.

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.

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