

WELFARE PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NETWORK
Work Experience Teleconference
March 4, 2004

Discussion Points

Background

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), in collaboration with the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance (TA) Network, hosted a teleconference to discuss strategies, lessons learned, and ideas to develop successful work experience (WEX) sites. The teleconference was a response to several Frontier State (as defined as states with population densities of fewer than six people per square mile) inquiries regarding the development of WEX sites in both tribal and non-tribal rural areas. Participating states included Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. Federal ACF and Welfare Peer TA contract staff also participated in the call.

This teleconference provided an exchange forum for questions and answers, resources, challenges, and ideas. Below are brief highlights of the information shared.

Montana

Montana wanted to know about successful WEX sites and the recruitment of WEX sites in tribal and non-tribal rural areas where sites are rather limited or non-existent. Specifically, Montana was interested in what other states with similar demographics are doing. Up until December 2003, Montana operated their FAIM (Families Achieving Independence in Montana) TANF program as a Section 1115 waiver demonstration project. Under the waiver authority the State enjoyed the ability to broadly define allowable work activities which allowed for countable activities such as no limits in the number of persons in vocational education -- which included post-secondary education and no limit on length or duration of vocational ed. Montana recently held a conference call with the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) senior staff members expressing their concern regarding the end of the waiver authority and to seek guidance on work activities. OFA thought that Montana might be strict in their program definitions. As a result of the OFA guidance, Montana has decided to broadly define their training definition as it relates to WEX sites.

South Dakota

South Dakota is very rural and those areas with no WEX sites require a great deal of creativity on the part of the State. For example, assigning a client to the responsibility of cleaning an elementary school lot is one solution in a rural area that had no WEX site. While this is a rare situation, it is an example of South Dakota's creativity surrounding this issue. This approach allowed clients to garner some work experience. Regardless of the task, each training agreement outlines the exact tasks and responsibilities of the site.

South Dakota also supports the use of partners and collaborators in the community. They feel it works to have more than one organization working toward the same goal.

Utah

During the teleconference, Utah shared their findings from an analysis of Utah's Family Employment Program – Two-Parent (FEP-TP). This study was conducted by the Social Research Institute College of Social Work at the University of Utah. Findings and recommendations were submitted to the Utah Department of Workforce Services. Two-parent families are not typical TANF recipients. However, this study yielded valuable information from participants regarding the unique needs and opinions of two-parent TANF families. Among the findings shared, study respondents were found to be generally appreciative of education and other job preparation activities. However, only a small percentage of respondents participated in such activities. Most were involved in job search activities and at work sites. Respondents viewed the work sites negatively due to the lack of opportunity for gaining employment and building skills. Moreover, they viewed work sites as “community service” that interfered with seeking and acquiring employment. Respondents perceived their site assignments as activities to fulfill work requirements rather than activities that prepared them for employment. Very few identified acquiring skills at their particular work sites that would lead to gainful employment. Utah will use this study to develop program improvement strategies for their Family Employment Program.

Utah also highlighted their Work Site Learning Program. The program is designed to assist Utah residents in increasing their occupational skills in order to obtain, maintain, and enhance their chances of meaningful employment. The goal is to provide the customer with skills that will enable them to financially support themselves and their families. Through temporary participation at a work site, the customer has an opportunity to:

- evaluate their abilities;
- identify areas needing improvement;
- enhance pre-employment skills;
- practice effective work habits;
- experience particular work assignments; and
- gain exposure to working.

Work site learning involves paid or unpaid internships, on-the-job training, or registered apprenticeships. Potential work site employers are identified through recruiting local businesses, organizations and agencies interested in partnering with the Utah Department of Workforce Services. Networking is also a strong component of recruiting work sites. Prior to placing the customer at a work site, an employment plan is developed and approved. Once placed, the customer is monitored and evaluated to ensure ongoing compliance, progress, performance, and suitability of the work site placement.

North Dakota

North Dakota decided to examine their definition of work experience. They broadened their definition to encompass online training that would count as an allowable work activity. As a result, North Dakota has implemented the WorkKeys® program. WorkKeys® is a system for measuring the skills required in the everyday workplace. The goal of WorkKeys is to help improve the workforce by sharpening the workplace skills of students or employees. Employees are then placed in jobs where they can be more successful. This system benefits individuals, businesses, and educators by providing a common language for describing basic skills needed for jobs. The WorkKeys employment system is a product of ACT, Inc. Additional information regarding this program can be found at www.keytrain.com.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the call, the States agreed that the call was useful and appreciated the opportunity to share with one another. There was a connection across a few of the States once they saw that the complexity of this issue was being experienced by each of the other States. The need for creativity among the States was the primary resource shared and was well received by participants. Creativity combined with a clear understanding of the work opportunities available in communities with limited economic activity appears to be the best solution for addressing limited to non-existent WEX opportunities among the Frontier States.

For more information about this teleconference, contact Chandra Robinson with AFYA, Inc., at 301-270-0841 or e-mail crobinson@afyainc.com