

Summary of Focus Group Customer Feedback

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Introduction

The focus groups were the result of the efforts by a variety of organizations that wanted to support the integration of individuals with disabilities into the WorkSource system. The organizations wanted to find out what was working well and what could be improved.

The Major contributors:

The Washington State Disability Network (WDN) was created to help Workforce Development Areas enhance the quality of services for individuals with disabilities within the WorkSource system by training, technical assistance or other supports. The WDN is represented by various entities and organizations, including the Employment Security Department, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment, Workforce Training Education and Coordinating Board, Developmental Disabilities Council, Washington Assistive Technology Alliance, Washington Workforce Association, and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. The WDN was the driver for the focus group design and questions.

The Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment (GCDE) applied for and received a Work Incentive Grant (WIG) from the U.S. Department of Labor to develop a Disability Program Navigator for most of the Workforce Development Areas. The grant ended June 1, 2006 and the GCDE wanted to have some customer information for the grant evaluation.

The Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) has been funded in Washington State to help the state make systemic changes for seamless integration of employment services for individuals with disabilities. The MIG is currently gathering information for its strategic planning process. The MIG Core Team plans to use the information from the customer focus groups to identify and prioritize grant-funded activities. The MIG provided the funding for DVR staff time and travel to the Workforce Development Areas and provided a \$35 gift certificate as an incentive for customers to attend the focus groups.

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) loaned the staff to design, develop, conduct, and write the report on the focus groups.

The Washington Workforce Association (WWA) helped in communicating the purpose and intent of the focus groups to the Workforce Development Council Executive Directors. Many of the Disability Program Navigators helped with the logistics of the focus groups prior to the WIG grant ending. After the Disability Program Navigator funding ended, the WorkSource Administrators and staff helped with the logistics within each area.

Methodology

The design was to hold one focus group in each of the 12 Workforce Development Areas (WDA). Eleven areas agreed to host a focus group. They include:

- Olympic Consortium
- Pacific Mountain
- Pierce County
- Southwest Washington
- Spokane
- South Central Washington
- Northwest Washington
- North Central Washington
- Snohomish County
- Seattle/King County
- Eastern Washington

One area, Benton Franklin, chose not to participate.

For those WDAs that participated, each was provided a letter to be sent to a stratified random sample of customers who identified themselves as an individual with a disability from the SKIES database and who used WorkSource services within the past year. The letter asked the customer to RSVP and promised a \$35 gift certificate for those who attended.

The intent was to obtain 10 to 12 attendees in each area who had used a variety of WorkSource services. When the project first started, the WDAs were asked to identify and invite 20 customers. We had few people choose to attend, so we asked the remaining WDAs to identify and invite 40 customers. Attendance remained poor so the remaining three WDAs were asked to identify and invite 60 customers. No area met the minimum number of 10 attendees. One area had 9, and others ranged from 1 attendee to 5. As a result, only 32 individuals attended on a statewide basis.

Demographic Questions

The first part of each focus group session began with some basic questions about frequency of the use of WorkSource services, identification of the types of WorkSource services used, how they found out about WorkSource, whether they had a previous work history, whether they were a customer of the Division of

Vocational Rehabilitation, and the motivation for work. The intent was to get a sense of who was attending and what services they experience.

Question 1: How often did you use WorkSource services?

Most attendees used the core services at least once per week, and many of them reported using services 3 to 4 times per week. As might be expected, the frequency diminished when they obtained a job, went to school or became discouraged.

Question 2: Did you use the following core services?

- a. Free use of computers, copiers, phones, faxes and other career resources - 31
- b. Internet access to jobs - 27
- c. Job referral and placement - 19
- d. Classes on how to get and keep a job - 26
- e. Information on the fastest growing jobs and wages - 19

Intensive service

- a. Referral to community services - 7
- b. Assistance with childcare, transportation, counseling, clothing - 3
- c. On the job training - 0
- d. Mentoring/internship - 0

Individual Training accounts

- a. Assistance in paying for school & books – 4

In each of the sessions, many individuals did not know about all the services available. Most of these reported that they had not attended the orientation to WorkSource services. Five individuals reported they had attended the orientation but were not aware of all the services available.

Question 3: How did you find out about WorkSource services?

- Internet – 2
- Unemployment Insurance – 10
- Noticed the building – 2
- DVR referral – 3
- Family/friends – 5
- Workfirst referral – 3
- Community program referral – 4
- Employer referral – 3

Question 4: Do you have a previous work history?

All attendees had a previous work history.

Question 5: Are you currently a DVR customer? - 19

- a. On waitlist – 9
- b. Developing an Individual Plan for Employment – 2
- c. In plan and receiving services – 6
- d. Employed – 0
- e. Former client/case closed - 2

Question 6: What is/was your motivation to go to work?

All reported that money to pay the bills was the prime motivation. Two reported they sought the money to supplement retirement income. Two reported wanting employer health insurance. One reported wanting a better career.

Discussion Questions

- Did WorkSource services help you become employed?
- What services or supports have been the most useful or important to you?
- Are there services or supports that would help make WorkSource more useful to you?
- What didn't work for you at WorkSource?
- Do you have suggestions for how WorkSource could improve its services to individuals with disabilities?
- Do you know what services DVR provides in this center?
- As part of the WorkSource system, what services can DVR offer to improve employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities?
- Additional comments

Response Themes and Recommendations

Responses to the discussion questions and subsequent recommendations have been grouped into the themes listed below.

Staff support:

The overwhelming majority of attendees found WorkSource staff professional, welcoming, helpful, and informative. When asked about services, staff support was often the first item mentioned and most felt the staff-customer relationship was a major contributor to their progress. It is clear that staff across the state are developing a strong relationship with customers that is truly valued.

Four of the 32 individuals who attended had unpleasant experiences with staff assistance. One individual had used services at two WorkSource centers in the same WDA. She found the first center she attended “not very professional and they didn’t help.” The second center’s staff was very helpful. The other individual was a DVR customer on the waitlist for services and needed extensive support to access self-services. One individual felt that staff he worked with didn’t return phone calls in a timely manner. One individual recommended that staff be cross-trained so that a back-up could handle customer requests when the primary staff person is sick or on vacation.

While few individuals identified the business specialist role as important, at least two individuals had a positive relationship and felt their assistance should be more frequently available.

Center equipment:

The use of copiers, computers, phones and faxes was the next frequently mentioned item of importance. Thirty-one of the 32 individuals used this service and found it very valuable. A few individuals said they had minimal computer skills and felt they needed more individualized attention to be successful. Several individuals felt that getting approval from staff to fax information was time consuming. One individual wanted to use the center’s accessible equipment but needed training or a workshop on how to use it.

Job Hunter series workshops:

Twenty-six of the 32 individuals attended at least one of the Job Hunter series of workshops. They reported that the workshops were informative and helped them improve how they presented themselves to employers. They also found it a good way to network with other job seekers. The classes most frequently mentioned for their usefulness were the resume and interview skills workshops.

On-line job search:

The majority of individuals found the on-line job search and referral very useful.

Weekly class on job leads:

One center publishes a weekly “Leads & Needs” that provides weekly job updates and resources. The customers get new information and value the chance to network with the instructor and other customers. Those who participated had high praise.

Transportation:

Only 3 individuals received transportation assistance. All three reported it was a necessity and couldn’t manage without the assistance. One was seeking jobs statewide, had maxed out her credit cards and needed the transportation money to get to interviews all over the state.

Issues identified by customers for improvement

Knowledge/Availability of services:

Many attendees were not aware of all the services available at WorkSource Centers or through partners or affiliates. At every focus group session, at least one person learned of services that they previously had not known about. These services ranged from the workshops/classes to the intensive services available. While a few of these individuals reported they had not attended the orientation session, many had. Customers suggested that the Center/Affiliates provide more information on the services available, the eligibility for those services, and more information about the services available through partner programs.

Customers had the following recommendations for improvement:

- Conduct a Question & Answer session at the end of the orientation session
- Have partner programs come in to orientation to explain their programs
- Create a publication like Frequently Asked Questions about the services and programs
- Post all available services on a bulletin board

Standardization between Centers within a single WDA and between WDAs:

Two individuals used services at more than one center within a WDA. Both said they were required to do the same things when they felt the information could have been shared between the Centers. Three individuals felt that the quality of services varied by center, with some center staff more professional/helpful than others. Another individual entered a vocational program that crossed WDA lines. He said that he had to complete paperwork again and wished his information could just be transferred.

Staffing Level:

A few people suggested that more staff be available for one-on-one services and lamented the loss of a Veteran's Representative. One individual said that she wished she had career counseling and guidance before starting school to make sure the path chosen would lead to a job.

Disability Issues/Etiquette:

Several individuals thought that staff of centers and affiliates and the business specialists could benefit from training on disability issues, how disability may impact an individual in the workplace, including, dispelling myths or stereotypes about what an individual are perceived barriers to a job. For example, one customer was not referred to a job because he didn't have a car. It turned out that the job did not require driving, only that the individual have reliable transportation to the worksite. Another individual clearly let staff know of her

physical limitations, yet staff didn't understand the limitations and referred her to jobs that she could not physically perform. Another individual used a service dog and she had to keep reminding staff that it is a working dog and ask that they please do not distract or pet the dog. Customers suggested that staff and business specialists receive training and/or refresher courses on various disability issues and disability etiquette. Another customer who used services mostly through the internet felt that he would benefit from video relay services with WorkSource staff.

Individualize services:

Consistent with the concerns about disability issues, several customers said that services could be improved if they were more individualized to the customer needs, while acknowledging this would require more one-on-one service time.

Suggestions included:

- Increase staff knowledge of customized employment so that they can find an employer who understands disability issues, such as needing time off when there is an exacerbation of the disability.
- Help with self-employment.
- Specialists for providing services to older, seasoned workers.
- Expand training benefits for customers

DVR and WorkSource:

Nineteen of the 32 individuals who participated in the focus groups were customers of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). Nine were on the DVR waitlist, 2 were in the process of developing an Individual Plan for Employment, 6 were in plan and receiving services, none were employed and 2 were former clients of DVR.

Most of the other individuals who participated did not know about DVR or its services and felt that DVR should be more visible. Those that were familiar with DVR expressed dissatisfaction with the waitlist and that DVR should do a better job of referring to community resources, including other programs and food banks.

Of those who identified themselves as a DVR customer, the most frequent suggestion was to eliminate the waitlist. Other suggestions included:

- DVR staff could spend more time with clients at WorkSource Centers
- Be present in WorkSource Centers – at least 2 times per week
- Publicize the services available through DVR
- Provide workshop on how and what to disclose to employers about disabilities
- Provide information on Ticket to Work
- Increase flexibility with timelines to get things accomplished
- Provide guidance on what to do while on the waitlist

- DVR is good at providing material services, such as training, bus passes, etc. but need to focus more on how to increase the soft skills and counseling and guidance

Disconnect between WorkSource Centers and affiliates or partner programs:

Many customers reported disconnects between WorkSource and other programs. The one mentioned most often was between unemployment compensation and WorkSource services. Four individuals said that they wished that WorkSource and DVR staff would collaborate more because they felt services were disconnected. One individual said they received conflicting guidance from a Community College affiliate and the WorkSource staff.

Conclusion

Readers are cautioned not to generalize too much from the information obtained because of the small number of focus group participants. With that said, several themes occurred in each focus group session.

Focus groups participants viewed the WorkSource staff as its greatest asset. They clearly felt that staff were welcoming and helpful. Also frequently mentioned as very valuable were the Job Hunter workshops, center equipment and on-line job search.

Focus group participants identified several issues for improvement. The primary area identified was to find better ways to provide customers information about all the services available through WorkSource Centers, affiliates, and partner programs. Other issues most often mentioned included improving staff knowledge of disability issues and the impact on work, the need to individualize services to match the customer needs, and better collaboration between WorkSource and DVR or other partner programs.