

New York Public Welfare Association

NYPWA Commentary on the Executive Budget for SFY 2014-15 for the Joint Legislative
Budget Committee Public Hearing on Human Services

Sheila Harrigan, Executive Director

February 4, 2014

The New York Public Welfare Association represents all fifty-eight local departments of social services statewide. Our members are dedicated to improving the quality and effectiveness of social welfare policy so that it is accountable to taxpayers and protective of vulnerable people. The State and counties are partners in carrying out the State's commitment for social services.

SUPPORT Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Target Areas

The executive budget proposal effectively aligns TANF funds with the greatest needs by targeting four critical spending areas: caseloads, the Flexible Fund for Family Services, child care, and administration. Any diversion of TANF funds to other areas would significantly weaken our ability to implement state mandates.

RECOMMEND Solutions to the State/Local Funding for the SNA Program

The cost of the Safety Net Assistance Program is growing as more families exceed their TANF 5-year time limits, and it is time to work on new solutions. Starting in SFY 2011-12, the State lowered its share of payment for the Safety Net Assistance Program from 50% to only 29%, shifting a greater burden to counties while maintaining the same eligibility rules. While the State also fully federalized family assistance costs under TANF, the SNA cost has grown an average of 4.5% each year while the TANF caseload has been stable. To address this inequity, New York State should re-commit to a 50% share of this state mandated program. The NYPWA is exploring a variety of approaches with respect to funding and the tools needed to address the Safety Net Assistance caseload with a strong emphasis on promoting employment. Toward that end, we are enclosing a discussion paper on this topic which was the focus of a workshop presented at our annual conference on January 30, 2014.

OPPOSE the Fair Hearing Chargeback Proposal and Pursue More Effective Strategies

The NYPWA strongly urges the legislature to oppose the executive budget language on Fair Hearing Chargebacks and to consider alternatives to improve efficiencies and cost-effectiveness. We are currently compiling our recommendations and will offer our expertise to OTDA as we delve into the administrative and policy details. In order to reduce the cost of Fair Hearings, the executive budget estimates \$10 million in state savings from fiscal penalties against districts for failing to meet new performance measures. This change was proposed to reduce the high rate of withdrawals once a hearing is set. The NYPWA has asked OTDA what criteria they would measure, what changes they are looking for in how districts handle fair hearings, and how client withdrawals from fair hearings would be treated. The chargeback proposal runs contrary to the districts' and OTDA's responsibility to try and avoid Fair Hearings when the issue can be resolved ahead of time.

We are committed to working with the legislature and Governor's office on a better solution. While the \$10 million savings target refers specifically to NYC, the proposed budget language applies to the entire state. We do not believe the budget recommendation would achieve the \$10 million (annualized) savings target. We ask that the proposed language be deleted and, instead we will offer suggestions to improve state and local efficiencies and cost-effectiveness in the fair hearings process.

SUPPORT Open-Ended Child Welfare Funding

We support the continuation of open-ended funding for child preventive, protective, aftercare, independent living, and adoption services and administration, as well as maintaining funding for foster care. Ultimately, funding for child welfare should return to its prior 65/35 formula, and to 75/25 for adoption subsidies, instead of today's formula of 62/38 (state/local share).

RECOMMEND State/LDSS Collaboration on Raising the Age Legislative Efforts

The Governor has proposed the creation of the Commission on Youth, Public Safety and Justice to make recommendations on how to best raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction for youthful offenders. We offer ourselves as a vehicle to contribute the extensive knowledge and expertise of local departments of social services as this initiative is studied to help ensure that the funding and program capacity will exist to serve the needs of this population.

RECOMMEND Collaboration on the Prohibition of EBTs for Public Assistance Funds

A provision in the Education, Labor and Family Assistance Article VII bill prohibits EBTs of public assistance funds through ATMs at certain venues. The proposal was meant to ensure compliance with a federal mandate under the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012. The NYPWA is committed to working with OTDA on how to implement this policy.

SUPPORT Continuation of Full Medicaid Administration Reimbursement

Local administrative funding must be maintained until the state assumes significant administrative responsibilities for Medicaid eligibility that result in local fiscal relief. This is anticipated to begin with the State takeover of Medicaid Administration on April 1, 2018, or on a date aligned with the State's actual progress on implementation. This funding is maintained in the executive budget proposal for 2014-15. As we move into next year, we caution the State against any reductions that will de-stabilize the system and lead to delays in enrollment.

SUPPORT Takeover of the Local Share of the Cost of Medicaid Benefits

We support the State's fiscal assumption of the entire Medicaid benefits program in the future. We urge the legislature to move forward as rapidly as federal funding opportunities allow using savings that arise from the Affordable Care Act.

For additional information, please contact:

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New York Public Welfare Association
Winter Conference – January 28-31, 2014

The Art of Managing What Comes Next in Social Services

Employment Strategies: "Finding the Key to What Works" Discussion Paper

Setting the Stage

Employment is tremendously important. It can be the anecdote to a personal financial crisis, the best outcome for a veteran returning to civilian life, the basis for economic security for a growing family, or a lasting remedy for breaking away from generations of poverty. While getting hired and keeping a job is tough for people who may lack the necessary skills and experience, strategies used by local departments of social services and their contract agencies have met with success. But, they can only go so far without the State's equal partnership in sharing the responsibility.

Expenses have soared as more families exceed TANF time limits and stay on assistance longer. The number of single adults on assistance has also increased in some regions. In the 2011-12 State budget, the state backed away from its historic and constitutional commitment to provide basic care and support for the needy. Instead it lowered its fiscal responsibility by shifting the cost to 71% county and 29% state share. While initially, federalizing family assistance costs were intended to help, over time, there is absolutely no doubt that this action is creating increasingly unfair burden on counties that has now become unsustainable. The restoration of the 50/50 share in the cost of Safety Net Assistance is absolutely imperative.

While in this untenable situation, local departments of social services continued to prioritize employment efforts by pursuing effective practices and community partnerships; but funding has been scarce. In fact, funding for employment programs for adults on the Safety Net Assistance caseload is practically non-existent. In addition, families who have exceeded five-years on TANF have more challenges, and require more employment resources, than families who have a shorter history on public assistance.

Leadership and Gathering Wisdom at Regional Forums

The NYPWA Board of Directors, led by President Kira Pospesel (Commissioner-Greene County DSS) established a committee, chaired by Commissioners John Imhof (Nassau County DSS) and Dennis Packard (Albany County DSS) to reach out to every local department of social services in New York State and engage them in a meaningful dialogue on their most effective strategies and their toughest challenges in promoting work. We held eight meetings in October 2013 and covered 100% of the districts. In order to gather wisdom across multiple levels of social services departments, these regional forums brought together front-line workers, supervisors, administrators and commissioners. This was our starting point. Now it is time to share what we learned and invite others into the conversation.

The forum covered the same set of questions, but the time spent on each topic varied based on regional factors and spontaneous discussions. In all, we heard a wide variety of creative options districts utilize to improve employment outcomes while operating under tight fiscal constraints.

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Employment Strategies: Finding the Key to "What Works"

Solving the Funding Dilemma

The restoration of the 50/50 share in the cost of Safety Net Assistance is the first essential step. The next step is to prioritize funding for employment programs for single adults and families on the Safety Net Assistance caseload in order to produce savings reflected in lower caseloads. This is important because federal dollars cannot be used to pay cash assistance in these cases.

Leading People to Self-Sufficiency

When people come to the department of social services for help, urgent needs, such as emergency housing, health care or food assistance, are addressed and applications for financial assistance are provided. When training and job opportunities are offered. Orientation and assessment informs clients about their responsibilities when applying for assistance, and staff works with them on an employment plan to pursue self-sufficiency.

Putting People to Work Despite Challenges

The fact is that most people on public assistance work. If they are not working, they are required to meet state and federal laws that are geared toward getting them into the workforce. These laws allow a small percentage of people to be exempt from work requirements on a temporary or permanent basis under certain criteria.

What is being done locally to assist those who face the most difficulty obtaining and maintaining employment?
It starts with understanding the reasons why someone is not working. Difficulties are identified by asking for assistance or through independent medical evaluations, screening for mental health and substance abuse, and more comprehensive assessments. Strategies may evolve to include work-limited assistance, reasonable accommodations consistent with impairments) or exemptions if the person qualifies. After a thorough evaluation, a treatment regimen may be instituted. Treatment programs are monitored to make sure the person is participating and to re-assess whether work limitations or exemptions can be removed.

There is another set of challenges to obtaining employment—including extensive criminal records, restrictions, as well as lack of permanent housing and domestic violence concerns. People may have disabilities, language challenges, poor work histories, and inadequate skills. Often individuals lack the support of close family members or others who would help them manage personal crises that impede their success. Resources are targeted to address these needs and to work with people individually. Strategies include specialized case management, business mentoring programs, ACCESS (NYS Vocational Rehabilitation), independent living centers, use of vocational resource specialists at local agencies, employers' support for those with impairments, targeted work experience assignments based on individual strengths and employer work tax credits and the limited funds that can be used for employment retention.

NYC's Wellness, Comprehensive Assessment Rehabilitation and Employment (WeCARE) program is regarded for the customized assistance and services that are provided. A client may obtain treatment for health conditions, be given specialized employment services including a work setting that accommodates their limitations, receive assistance with legal and family problems, and assistance in applying for employment when clinically appropriate.

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Employment Strategies
Finding the Key to "What Works"
January 2014

The New York Public Welfare Association (NYPWA) represents New York's fifty-eight local departments of social services (DSS). Our members are dedicated to improving the quality and effectiveness of social welfare policy so that it is accountable to taxpayers and protective of vulnerable people. This paper is dedicated to all of the local DSS employment coordinators, supervisors, and directors who use their hard-earned knowledge and experience on a daily basis to serve individuals seeking employment.

Commissioners' Policy Committee and Regional Focus Groups on Employment Strategies

President Kira Pospesel and the NYPWA Board of Directors identified promoting employment as a policy priority for 2013. Commissioners John Imhof, Nassau County DSS, and Dennis Packard, Schenectady County DSS, led a working committee of sixteen commissioners who planned eight regional focus group meetings held throughout the state. Discussion participants included employment coordinators, job developers, recruitment specialists, supervisors, directors, deputy commissioners, and commissioners representing local districts, as well as county behavioral health specialists, WIA and WIB representatives, and individuals responsible for determining employability. Special thanks to our host county commissioners for providing meeting space as well as staff time to serve as facilitators, recorders, and participants in order to make these meetings possible. The following local DSS commissioners each hosted a regional forum on this topic or participated in our statewide employment strategies workgroup.

Commissioners:

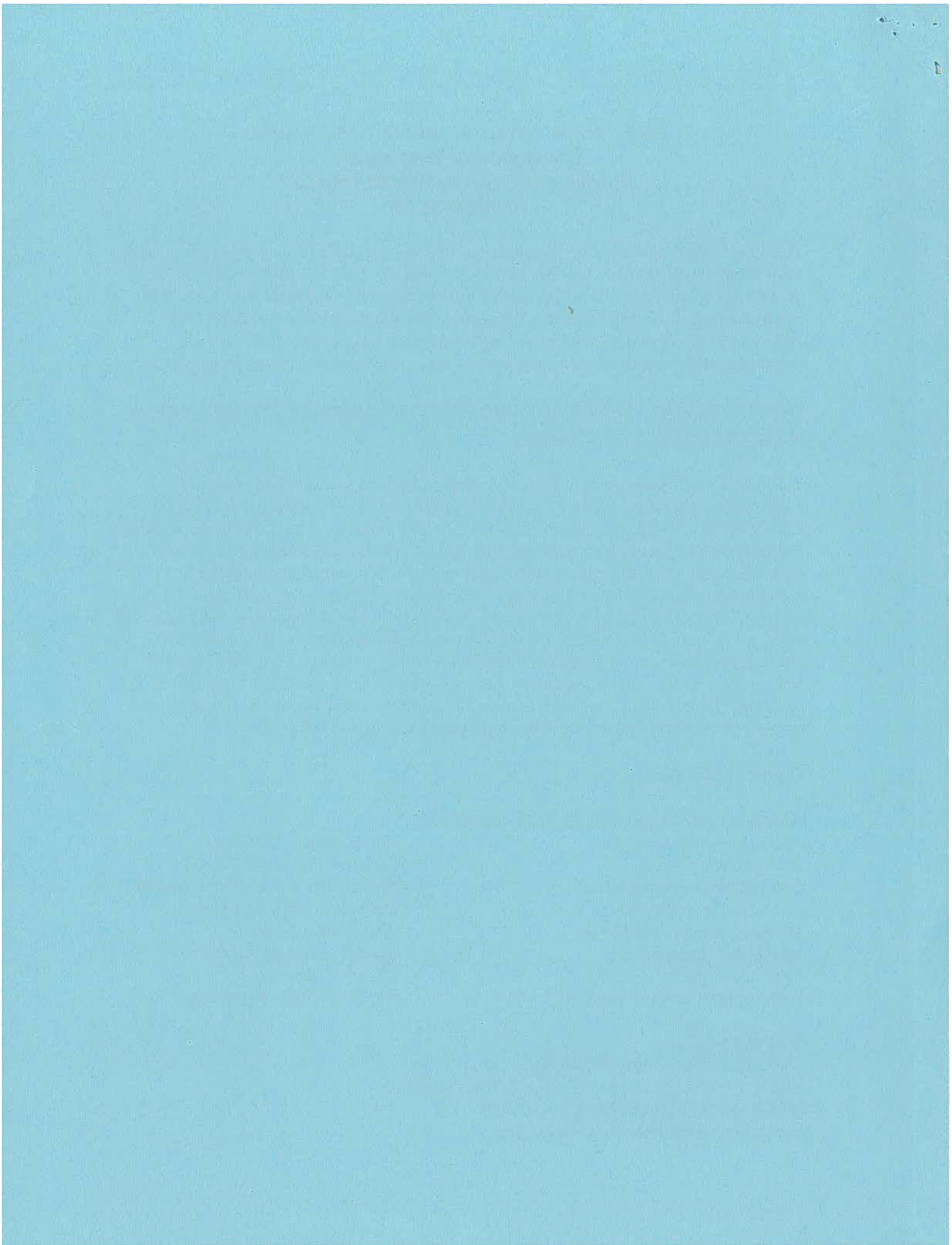
Kira Pospesel, Greene, NYPWA President 2013

Arthur Johnson, Broome
John Redden, Clinton
Carol Dankert-Maurer, Erie
Laura Cerow, Jefferson
Michael Fitzgerald, Madison
John Imhof, Nassau
Patricia M. Smith,
First Deputy Commissioner, NYC HRA

Randy Hall, Rensselaer
Susan Sherwood, Rockland
Christopher Rediehs, St. Lawrence
Dennis Packard, Schenectady
Paul Brady, Schoharie
Charles Schillaci, Seneca
Shawn Yetter, Tioga
Kevin McGuire, Westchester

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Employment Goals and Safety Net Assistance

The Safety Net Assistance (SNA) population includes the toughest employment challenges because it includes TANF cases that have already had five years of employment efforts in place, as well as safety net single adults, some with criminal records, addictions, mental health issues and other obstacles. There is little, if any, financial support to help people move off the safety net caseload and become self-supporting. While the same employment strategies may be used with this group, the needs are greater, and there is very little funding.

SNA is a state-mandated program with limited state support, no federal dollars and no local control. The cost was shifted from an even split to now 71 percent local district and 29 percent state, and the caseloads are growing. There is no state funding for employment programs for persons on SNA. The state and districts need to collectively address the problems we are facing in meeting this nearly-unfunded mandate.

The high number of SNA recipients who are either work-limited or unable to work is growing. The incapacities presented often leave them in limbo, when they are not medically qualified for SSI. In addition, state policies make the program very expensive for district taxpayers, and districts have no say in the program.

Proposed Strategies for SNA population:

- Return to an equal partnership: 50/50 state/local share for safety net.
- Include state funding for employment programs.
- Provide higher state share for families who exceeded 5-years on TANF.
- Cap local share of SNA cost increases.
- Impose a lifetime cap on benefits for singles (non-family) for a set number of years.
- Provide money for districts to come up with innovative programs to reduce Safety Net cases.
- Focus on strategies to address housing needs.
- Address revolving issues of drug/alcohol rehab.
- Allow full family sanctions to encourage people to comply with work requirements.

Effective Use of WIA One-Stop Centers

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 established regional One-Stop Centers that bring together the labor, education, social services and business communities to promote the training, education and employment needs of individuals.

One-Stops house employment staff—in some cases under the management of the local social services district—and offer a wide range of resource to help customers receive the services and training they will need to enter or rejoin the workforce. It is helpful when counties have a One-Stop presence at DSS—or ongoing communication exists between DSS and the center. Required attendance and job activities are tracked at One-Stops by employment staff. In addition, employment efforts are enhanced when the business community is aware of how One-Stops can help them fill positions. The following are some common One-Stop services:

- Job Search: Non-exempt individuals are required to conduct monitored job searches after they apply for assistance.
- Comprehensive and specialized assessments to gauge work-readiness and any underlying educational needs.
- Resource room access to computers, job libraries, fax machines, the Internet, telephones, and copiers
- Job placement and retention services (resume help, interview strategies, etc.)
- Intensive case management
- Educational Training (GED, TABE, computer skills)
- Career Counseling

Contracting Employment Services and the Importance of Performance-Based Contracts

Contracts with outside employment agencies can be a viable option to perform job search, retention, legal aid, assessment and/or medical evaluation services. Districts also partner with local colleges, universities and BOCES to help with training skills, GED/TABE instruction, and more. In some cases, clients receive retail experience from working at non-profit thrift stores and other venues.

Performance-based contracts allow districts to measure the effectiveness of programs so that clients receive the necessary support in order to not become dependent on cash assistance. Communication and monitoring is vital to keep individuals on the path toward self-sufficiency—including making sure they follow their required employment plan.

Bringing Businesses and Workers Together

There are various ways to bridge the gap between businesses and job seekers. At job fairs businesses are on-hand to talk about open positions, receive resumes and schedule initial interviews. For DSS clients, an effective job fair includes entry level positions as well as more skilled offerings, and is at an easily accessible location. Districts can arrange transportation for job seekers and help them prepare for meeting employers face to face—including appropriate interview clothes. It is also useful that employment staff is on hand to monitor attendance, especially when the events are part of someone's employment plan.

Other ways to connect businesses with clients are through employer tax credit programs and wage subsidies for temporary workforce placements. To shrink the skills gap, DSS-sponsored Employer Forums allow businesses to describe what skills and traits they look for in new employees—including conducting mock interviews with clients.

Mobile work crews are another job placement option for districts. Crews pick clients up and bring them to work sites directly—overcoming any existing transportation issues. They provide real-world work experience—from basic office filing and document scanning to construction-related tasks. Similarly, 'on-the-job' training programs—like the Transitional Employment Assistance Program (TEAP)—can offset the cost of a business hiring and training new employees.

Creative Job Development and Job Search Efforts

Job developers work with local businesses to build professional relationships, track clients, mediate issues between an employer and a placement, and find ways to fill an employer's need. This includes collaborating with businesses, colleges and hospitals to make sure clients have the skills employers are seeking.

Effective assessment tools (i.e. WorkKeys, Do What You Are, etc.) help match the right workers with the right job—which leads to lower turnover and higher retention. Technology can be used as well to improve job search efforts—helping clients navigate web-based employment sites (indeed.com, craigslist, LinkedIn) or utilizing 21st century notification services like TweetMyJob or Text2Work. With use of these technologies on the rise, incorporating them into job search activities can be beneficial. Districts can also refer clients to the Department of Labor's Job Zone website for additional employment resources. In some cases, help is available for completing online applications, which are widely used by employers to sort out applications. If clients lack computer access or cannot effectively fill out an online application, they will find it much harder to obtain an interview.

Individuals with criminal records are among the hardest to place given their history. However, programs like O.A.R.S. (Offenders After Release Support) help ex-offenders obtain employment through assistance with applications, resumes, and interview skills—while guiding them to local support to assist with their reentry into the community. Liability issues and other parole restrictions make it even harder to place sex offenders, but districts seek work for them in supervised placements.

Transportation & Child Care as Work Supports

Without adequate public transit options, residents in rural areas need a driver's license and a car to get to work. Often in these areas, affordable housing is located away from business centers or public transit hubs. That's why certain districts offer gas cards, taxi rides, and/or bus passes for those with nearby routes. When funded, programs like Wheels to Work can help clients with auto insurance and vehicle registration, low-cost car loans, driver education classes, donated automobiles and repair assistance. In addition, post-employment transportation assistance helps new workers avoid travel issues that could put their job at-risk.

Child care subsidies are mandated for families who are eligible for financial assistance and for the year of transition after receiving financial assistance. Other low income families also receive child care assistance within the limits of allocations provided to each district. Dependable child care, in close proximity and available during different work shifts, is important to maintain employment. Partnerships with local non-profit organizations help to address child care needs. Additionally, parents are encouraged to take advantage of existing state and federal child care tax credits.

Recommendations to Promote Employment

Re-Align State Funding Partnerships

- Return to 50/50 share for Safety Net Assistance (SNA).
- Provide higher state share for families on SNA (exceeded 5-years on TANF).
- Establish a cap on local cost increases for SNA.
- Impose a lifetime cap on benefits for single adults on SNA.
- Provide money for districts to come up with innovative programs to reduce Safety Net cases.
- Reinstate funding for transportation.

Help Hard to Employ Populations Become Self-Sufficient

- Address the revolving issue of drug/alcohol rehabilitation by allowing authority for intensive monitoring.
- Secure appropriate funding for ex-offender employment programs.

Enhance the Incentives for Employers

- Subsidize employer wage reimbursement efforts under SNAP Employment and Training—including reimbursements for work site creation; supervision of clients; and materials and/or equipment necessary to support work placements.
- Make employer tax credit programs more flexible and less restrictive. Employers find current tax credit programs too labor intensive.

