

Commission To Develop Strategies To Increase Postsecondary Access, Retention and Completion for Low-wage, Low-skilled Adults

A “Snapshot” of the National Work Advancement and Support Center Demonstration

National Work Advancement and Support Center Demonstration (WASC): Overview.

Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) is in the early phases of implementing the National Work Advancement and Support Center Demonstration (WASC) with the intent of identifying effective strategies to enable low-wage workers and reemployed, dislocated workers (those who, because of industry restructuring, now work in significantly lower-paying jobs) to stabilize their employment, find better-paying jobs, and prepare for positions that require higher skills -- all the while assisting employers in the process.

WASC programs are being established in One-Stop Career Centers, which were created under the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 and which, in most jurisdictions, have been used primarily to help unemployed people find jobs. Services will be provided by teams consisting of staff of WIA agencies and staff of welfare agencies that administer support programs. In most jurisdictions in the United States, these two systems operate in separate bureaucratic silos and have not made assisting low-wage workers a common cause.

In 2003, MDRC chose the first two sites for the WASC demonstration project: Dayton Ohio, and San Diego, California. Each represents a very different type of relationship between the workforce and welfare systems, yet both are typical of One-Stops across the country. MDRC is providing these pilot sites with the technical assistance to help them build strong programs and plans to conduct a rigorous evaluation to assess WASC program operations and the impact of program services on job retention, wage progression and career advancement, and family income and poverty.

Key elements of the WASC Model.

- 1) Job retention and career advancement services through:
 - Career coaching;
 - Skills development;
 - Enlisting employers in efforts to help workers advance; and
 - Services offered to groups of participants at their workplaces.
- 2) Simplified and assisted access to financial work supports through:
 - Simplifying enrollment and recertification procedures;
 - Educating customers about work supports using the WASC income calculator; and
 - Guaranteeing child care subsidies to participants with children.

Critical Challenges.

- 1) Encouraging participation of low-wage and dislocated workers who have little or no past connection with One-Stop services or Work Support Programs;
- 2) Engaging current One-Stop customers who could benefit from WASC services;
- 3) Engaging employers;
- 4) Integrating the functions of workforce and human service staff;

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Critical Challenges (continued).

- 5) Changing how frontline workers interact with customers;
- 6) Making work supports more accessible;
- 7) Coordinating work supports with career advancement plans; and
- 8) Program management to foster an ethos of advancement within the WASC unit.

'Packaging' work support products: Questions to ask first.

- What are the rules and regulations that govern work support application processes.
- What work support products are currently offered?
- What agencies currently administer work support products?
- What are the institutional relationships between the agencies that currently administer work supports? How willing are these agencies to work together?

Initial Findings.

- Dayton and San Diego are developing distinct approaches to WASC to respond to their substantially different demographic, institutional, and labor market conditions. For example, Dayton is operating in an economy hard hit by a decline in manufacturing, especially in the automotive industry. In contrast, San Diego enjoys a more vibrant economy that includes growing high-tech and service sectors.
- WASC is being viewed locally as a welcome opportunity to expand the mission of One-Stops to include services for incumbent (that is, currently employed) low-wage and dislocated workers and their employers, rather than focusing almost exclusively on an unemployed population seeking work.
- Employers have responded positively to the sites' efforts to work with them to identify advancement opportunities in high-demand occupations, new routes to participation in career advancement activities, and strategies for recruiting eligible members of their workforce for WASC.
- In learning how to develop and adapt services aimed at assisting working people, both workforce and welfare agency staff are bridging the substantial gaps between the workforce and welfare systems. This entails a major culture change to transcend the systems' traditional isolation and lack of experience combining employment services with access to work supports for low-earners.
- As part of their efforts to create an ethos of advancement, the sites are devising new management techniques and performance standards to keep the entire WASC team focused on career advancement and income improvement.
- Sites have begun outreach campaigns that market economic advancement and are initiating partnerships with employers and community-based organizations to reach low-wage workers.