



Improving Equitable Employment Outcomes in New Orleans

As part of Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities initiative, the Government Performance Lab (GPL) provided pro-bono technical assistance to the City of New Orleans to procure for workforce services that better support equitable employment outcomes.

The Challenge: In New Orleans, as in many cities across the country, high unemployment rates disproportionately affect certain segments of the population. For example, in September 2019, the city's unemployment rate for people of color (9.5 percent) was more than double the overall unemployment rate (4.5 percent). Dislocated workers, those who have been laid off, and opportunity youth, young people aged 16-24 who are neither enrolled in school nor working, are also at a greater risk of experiencing adverse employment outcomes. In 2020, city-wide employment challenges were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and many New Orleans residents lost their jobs. Groups already vulnerable to poor employment outcomes, including people of color, opportunity youth, and service workers, were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic's economic fallout.

To improve employment equity across the city, New Orleans aimed to strengthen its existing workforce services and provide high-quality employment support to all residents in need. While the City has a long history of seeking to advance economic mobility, including through improving equity in employment outcomes, existing workforce services faced a number of key challenges:

- ***The City had only one career center, which was not equally accessible across neighborhoods:*** In contrast to other cities, New Orleans offered only one career center, a one-stop location for residents to access an array of workforce and training services and meet with workforce specialists for individualized supports. This career center was not equally accessible to all parts of the city. As a result, it was difficult for many people, particularly those from priority neighborhoods with high unemployment rates, to access the center and its services.
- ***Workforce staff faced difficulties identifying and providing targeted outreach to individuals with poor employment outcomes.*** It was difficult for workforce specialists to provide targeted outreach to advance the City's equity goals because they had no way to tell how effectively they were reaching high-priority populations. In addition, staff didn't know which services were most successful in getting people employed. While the City offered a wide range of employment services, including career coaching, resume development, education and training, and hiring events, there was no way to tell which services were in highest demand or which providers were performing well.
- ***The career center offered a broad array of services, which didn't always align with City-wide priorities:*** Career centers are federally mandated to provide certain services and have broad target populations, which means they typically undertake a lot of activities to support workforce development. In New Orleans, it was difficult to pinpoint the role that the career center played in the City's broader workforce strategy. The career center did not receive consistent guidance on which populations were most important to prioritize, nor was it effectively set up to be responsive to changes in the labor market or coordinate training opportunities that aligned with career openings.

To address these challenges, New Orleans deemed high-quality employment support for residents a strategic priority and aimed to strengthen the City's existing workforce services. As the contract for workforce services was set to expire in June 2020, the City had an opportunity to use the procurement process as a strategic lever for improving workforce outcomes.

The Innovations: With help from the GPL, the City of New Orleans released a new procurement for workforce services that prioritized greater support to vulnerable groups and developed a new approach for managing workforce providers. In particular, project partners:

1. Released a results-driven request for proposals (RFP) for over \$4 million of annual workforce services to support more equitable employment outcomes

The City developed and released a results-driven procurement for workforce services in an effort to better reach priority populations and mitigate inequitable employment outcomes. The newly procured services aim to provide high-touch supports to approximately 1400 adults and 200 youth per year, and include services such as resume development, career coaching, adult education, scholarships for professional training, job referrals, and hiring events. In addition, many more individuals can access lighter-touch supports at the career center on a walk-in basis, such as attending hiring fairs, participating in career workshops, and using the center's computers for job searching.

In developing the new RFP, City staff involved the New Orleans Workforce Development Board early on in the procurement process to help identify high-priority populations and clearly articulate workforce goals. The workforce board was strategically engaged in the procurement stage, and together with City staff they identified a number of key goals, including improving the overall customer experience at the central career center, partnering with community-based organizations to increase their reach in communities where residents may have had difficulties accessing the center, and increasing the utilization of employer-based training. In addition, one of the primary goals identified by the team was to better support opportunity youth, through increasing recruitment for work experience and training opportunities, increasing the number of high school credentials and industry-based certifications awarded, and strengthening partnerships for services offered by the City's YouthWorks Center.

Clarifying expectations and engaging providers: Hosting a pre-bid webinar

As part of the RFP process, project partners hosted the City's first-ever pre-bid webinar to outline workforce priorities and increase awareness of the upcoming procurement in the provider community. Jointly facilitated by the Workforce Development Board, the City's Procurement Office, and the City's Office of Supplier Diversity, the webinar attracted more than 60 registered participants, including representatives from four national workforce services providers. A press release issued by the Mayor's Office contributed to strong engagement and email updates to registrants about the status of the procurement process kept prospective vendors up-to-date. The pre-bid webinar demonstrated a new strategy for meaningful, early engagement with the provider community, and served as a forcing mechanism for the City to succinctly articulate expectations and priorities for contracted workforce services.

In addition to explicitly identifying key goals in the RFP, City staff included a new set of performance metrics that could be tracked to measure progress. As part of this effort, City staff augmented the federally-mandated performance metrics by incorporating shorter term metrics (including program completion rates and short term employment outcomes) that

would allow for more timely feedback. Project partners also aimed to explicitly address challenges with center accessibility and better target individuals at greater risk of poor employment outcomes, by prioritizing performance metrics such as:

- the number of clients served residing in neighborhoods with high unemployment rates,
- the number and percentage of clients from priority populations who obtain employment with family-sustaining wages, and
- the number of clients receiving support from partner organizations (e.g. for services related to housing, behavioral health, child care, food security, etc.).

Augmenting federally-mandated performance metrics to improve workforce services

Collecting shorter-term and goal-oriented performance metrics is an opportunity for workforce boards across the country to improve workforce services. The previous workforce contract in New Orleans, like many local workforce contracts, focused exclusively on federally-mandated Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) metrics. These metrics include employment rates and median earnings at six months and one year after completion of services for adults, dislocated workers, and youth. Often these WIOA performance measures take years to process, and without shorter-term indicators of client success, workforce services may miss opportunities to strengthen their approach to programming and improve supports for high-need populations. Furthermore, the federally-mandated metrics don't allow for disaggregation by priority populations (i.e. youth with prior interaction with the criminal justice system or residents of a community hit hard by COVID-19) that can inform service decisions. Collecting shorter-term and priority population-specific metrics, as City staff did in New Orleans, can enable an improved, context-informed, and targeted workforce service array.

To ensure data collection of these performance metrics translated to operational action, the new procurement also specified a plan for contract management, collaboration, and troubleshooting between City staff, the workforce board, and service providers. This new strategy of [active contract management](#) could support improved quality of service delivery and allow providers to address challenges in real time, serving to advance the City's goal of strengthening employment rates and reducing disparities in employment outcomes. For example, if provider staff at a training program saw attendance dropping or low rates of enrollment, they could immediately seek to troubleshoot the issue with City staff and brainstorm ways to re-engage clients. Potential solutions might include having case managers more proactively remind clients on upcoming trainings (through calls, emails, or texts), providing transportation assistance, or supporting clients in arranging child care.

2. Identified barriers and potential solutions to better supporting opportunity youth achieve their employment and training goals

One of the City's top priorities identified during the procurement process was to improve enrollment, engagement, and employment outcomes for opportunity youth. To better support this population, the City met frequently with workforce service providers to review data and take action to help connect young people with education, training, or employment opportunities that support self-sufficiency and put youth on a path to a career in a high-demand, high-wage job or to continued education towards a 2- or 4-year degree.

Working together, City staff and workforce board members first discovered that enrollment numbers of opportunity youth in key workforce services were low. They identified a number of potential barriers to successfully engaging and supporting opportunity youth, and brainstormed potential solutions. These included:

- ***A lack of knowledge or negative perceptions of the career center among youth:*** Project partners reflected that low enrollment among opportunity youth may stem from previous negative experiences with the education system or employment programs that resulted in a lack of trust. Additionally, youth may not have known about the career center or what services were available. To address these barriers, team members suggested conducting a survey of youth to better understand the perception of the career center and services offered, interest in services, and desired employment pathways. This survey could help workforce staff learn more about the career and educational goals of young people, while simultaneously raising awareness of the career center’s service array. Project partners also proposed cultivating partnerships with high school guidance counselors to refer in-school and out-of-school youth to services at the career center.
- ***An office set-up that does not cater to a young audience:*** Without a dedicated space for young people, staff hypothesized that the center may come across as uninviting or unwelcoming to youth. Potential solutions to this barrier included creating a unique space dedicated to youth within the career center as well as hiring youth peer navigators to manage the front desk.
- ***A need for additional services to support opportunity youth, including housing, substance use, and mental health support.*** The career center lacked strong relationships with providers of comprehensive services, including support for housing, transportation, substance abuse, mental health, or domestic violence. Youth in need of these services often struggled to gain meaningful employment. For example, many youth lacked transportation, which made it hard to get to employment or training opportunities. These barriers could also make it more difficult for the center to provide services; for example it was difficult to get in contact or conduct follow-up with youth experiencing homelessness. Workforce board members and City staff identified a number of potential solutions to these barriers, including hiring a new Director of Youth Initiatives to create a dedicated focus for youth workforce services and cultivate partnerships with supplemental programs. In addition to meeting monthly with contracted service providers, the Director convenes community partners quarterly to discuss shared challenges and coordinate strategies for holistically supporting opportunity youth.
- ***A mismatch in the services offered by the center and the employment landscape available to young people.*** The career center did not offer enough support to meet the specific needs of opportunity youth. Some employers were not interested in hiring youth due to hesitations around work readiness or lack of certifications. In addition, many small or mid-size employers could only support training opportunities for one or two youth, requiring significant effort to coordinate on-the-job training or work experience opportunities for young people that could demonstrate work readiness. Provider and City staff brainstormed a number of potential solutions to these barriers, including increasing the number of offerings for summer internships and strengthening efforts to coordinate on-the-job trainings, work experiences, or work-based learning for young people. These

“What the GPL helped us do is be laser focused. A lot of the stuff the City did was generalized, [the project] helped the City drill down on key components they needed to be successful.”

- Sunae Villavaso, Deputy Director,
Mayor’s Office of Workforce
Development

additional offerings might help to alleviate employer concerns around youth being unprepared for the workforce.

The Results: Although it is still early after the rollout of these new approaches to workforce services, New Orleans has seen promising results. In particular, the project has:

1. Strengthened the City's strategic focus on equitable employment outcomes, in order to improve economic mobility for New Orleans residents

The City of New Orleans made progress towards equity in employment outcomes by releasing a new procurement for improved workforce services city-wide. Developed with help from the GPL, the City's new RFP advanced equity goals by incentivizing high-quality workforce services and engagement of high-need populations. New expectations for service delivery set out in the RFP hope to improve short- and long-term employment outcomes for approximately 1600 New Orleans residents per year, with an explicit focus on vulnerable populations (including opportunity youth). In the long-term, City staff hope that New Orleans residents, regardless of age, race, or circumstance, will consistently experience better employment outcomes and advanced economic mobility.

2. Built capacity among both City and provider staff for leveraging procurement and contract management to accomplish key goals

New Orleans City staff have built capacity and expertise conducting both results-driven contracting and active contract management that can be applied to future procurements. A training on active contract management with workforce board members and City staff, attended by approximately 10 staff members, emphasized strategies for tracking performance metrics to monitor progress towards the City's vision of success, using data to identify opportunities for performance improvement, and planning for regularly reviewing performance data in collaboration with providers. The City is set up to use these processes for procurements beyond workforce services. In addition, providers now have tools to use data in new ways to identify and elevate service delivery issues and respond in real time. For example, providers are now equipped with enrollment data to identify priority clients and strengthen targeted outreach efforts.

For more information on the GPL's workforce projects, visit our [Education and Jobs](#) website page. For strategies to improve workforce services, see our technical guide, '[Seven Delivery Practices to Achieve Better Results for High-Need Jobseekers at WIOA Career Centers](#)'.

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