Seven Delivery Practices to Achieve Better Results for High-Need Jobseekers at WIOA Career Centers

This technical guide provides a set of seven practices to produce better outcomes for high-need clients served by the nation's network of Workforce and Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA)-funded one-stop career centers. The recommended practices center around identifying high-need jobseekers, improving their progress through services, and increasing access to training and high-quality employment. These recommendations are targeted to career centers that are managed by a local workforce board which contracts with private providers for center services and operations.

Context on Local Career Centers

More than 2,300 WIOA-funded career centers across the country provide much-needed services to under- and unemployed jobseekers looking to advance in the labor market. Most career centers offer job search assistance, resume assistance, interview training, information on Unemployment Insurance, scholarships for short-term training, connections to employers, and referrals to outside services such as housing support or veteran and reentry services. Centers also often operate open computer labs that individuals from the community can use to conduct job searches or develop and print materials for meetings with employers. Centers can serve adults from a broad range of backgrounds, including varying levels of educational attainment and work experience.

In most cases, local workforce boards receive federal funds for operating career centers and contract out for services through a competitive process. The contracted career center operator is then responsible for providing WIOA-funded required services and meeting state and federal performance targets assigned to the local workforce board.

Challenges in Connecting High-Need Jobseekers to Employment

In January 2020, there were 1.2 million individuals facing long-term unemployment (actively seeking work for 27 weeks or more), accounting for 20 percent of unemployed individuals in the country.[1] Jobseekers with significant barriers to employment – such as a disability, a criminal justice record, housing instability, or substantial behavioral health needs – often have more complex needs than other clients seeking help from a career center.

There are three types of challenges that make it difficult for career centers to succeed with these high-need clients. First, a high volume of clients entering career centers, combined with conflicting views on which clients to prioritize, makes it challenging to systematically identify and connect high-need jobseekers to employment. Both walk-ins and those with required appointments enter the center each day, often overwhelming staff managing large caseloads. This inhibits career center teams from being able to follow up and provide comprehensive case management with everyone who enters. While there are federal guidelines that specify priority populations, including recipients of public benefits, low-income individuals, and individuals who lack basic skills, career centers often do not have a consistent strategy for identifying high-need jobseekers and prioritizing them for more intensive services.

[1] "The Employment Situation – January 2020," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 7, 2020, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empsit_02072020.htm

Second, the career center system largely focuses on the quantity of services provided, with limited ways to assess service quality. The case management system records which services are provided during each interaction with a client, but doesn't indicate the intensity of support or how these services align with a client's needs. For example, providing 'job search assistance' could mean spending three minutes showing a client how to log in to the state job search platform. Or, making a 'supportive service referral' could mean giving a client a handout with a phone number for another provider. It is difficult to assess through these metrics whether clients are actually receiving quality, meaningful assistance to help connect them to jobs.

Finally, career centers are not well-equipped to directly provide the broad range of support a high-need client may require. Many times, clients face systemic barriers to employment, which could include homelessness, lack of transportation, overcoming a criminal record, mental or behavioral health needs, or affordable child care.

Delivery Practices to Produce Better Outcomes for High-Need Clients

In response to these challenges, this technical guide details seven service delivery practices that career centers can undertake to achieve better results for high-need jobseekers served by the nation's network of WIOA-funded one-stop career centers. These recommendations focus on career centers that are managed by a local workforce board which contracts with private providers for center services and operations.

1. Adjust intake practices and assessment tools to more effectively screen for high-need jobseekers and flag them in the center's case management system
2. Assign a subset of staff to flexible schedules with dedicated time for follow-up outreach and high-touch service provision for high-need clients
3. Set up real-time tracking to monitor and troubleshoot jobseeker progress through services
4. Create seamless, guided handoffs from center staff to external support services
5. Streamline the application process for training scholarships and provide resources on the range of training options and expected employment outcomes
6. Cultivate a pool of quality employers for high-need jobseekers, with increased support to the employer and client for the post-hire period
7. Match data on high-need jobseekers to wage record data to measure client outcomes and make improvements in service delivery

Each of these delivery practices is described in detail below.

1. Adjust intake practices and assessment tools to more effectively screen for high-need jobseekers and flag them in the center's case management system

Challenge: Typical workforce development case management platforms include fields to identify jobseekers with certain barriers to employment, such as those with criminal justice records or those with less than high school education. However, information on other significant barriers – such as a disability, housing instability, behavioral health needs, or long-term unemployment – may not be consistently recorded by staff or are recorded solely in case notes. This structure of recording information can make it challenging for career centers to readily identify and prioritize the subset of clients with the highest need. Searching for clients who meet specific criteria can be particularly challenging in the Geographic Solutions platform used by many states.

Outside of the case management system, needs assessment tools may not collect all of this information on jobseekers, and information may be stored on paper rather than in digitized formats that are easily sortable by client characteristics. For example, to identify those who requested housing assistance, leadership might have to comb through the handwritten assessment sheets of dozens or hundreds of new clients who have shown up each day. The result is that (1) staff may develop individual service plans that fail to address important client needs, (2) information about client needs may be inconsistently communicated between staff, and (3) leadership will struggle to prioritize and follow up with groups of clients who have specific risk factors.

Practice: Career centers can more effectively flag high-need clients for additional follow-up and support by implementing adjustments to the intake process to acquire better information regarding client needs and barriers to employment. For example, creating new fields in case management platforms to record a broader array of potential client barriers will allow career centers to better identify groups of clients with specific needs and gauge demand for particular services. Even simpler, staff may be able to create special project flags for key groups that mark subsets of clients at intake to track service progress, engagement, and follow-up.

2. **Assign a subset of staff to flexible schedules with dedicated time for follow-up outreach and high-touch service provision for high-need clients**

Challenge: Many high-need jobseekers get discouraged and disengage from career center services prior to securing employment. Compared with typical career center clients, these jobseekers have higher barriers to employment that often include criminal justice records, housing instability, disabilities, less than high school education, etc. They need more intensive staff support and additional follow-up compared with typical career center clients. The typical career center's service model fails to allocate staff capacity for actively following up with clients or carving out longer appointment slots for more intensive coaching on resume development, job search, or interview preparation, and, in some cases, actively disincentivizes staff from providing such intensive supports.

Practice: High-need jobseekers would benefit from a higher-touch, more intensive service array that incorporates regular follow-up from career center staff and longer appointments for intensive one-on-one coaching. By proactively scheduling a next appointment when meeting with clients and sending reminder messages to jobseekers prior to an appointment, staff can more successfully engage high-need jobseekers in services. To develop a high-quality resume and the skills necessary to secure quality employment, high-need jobseekers may need more individualized support than can be provided during a 30-minute appointment or a large group workshop. Optimizing operations to create space in staff schedules to offer longer appointments for resume development, job search activities, training program counseling, and other coaching will allow career centers to better meet the needs of hard-to-serve client groups.

3. **Set up real-time tracking to monitor and troubleshoot jobseeker progress through services**

Challenge: Jobseekers with significant barriers to employment often benefit from additional follow-up support by career center staff, as they are less likely to be familiar with navigating online job boards, have a less consistent employment history, and have complex needs competing with their job search. These jobseekers may meet with career center staff over multiple appointments for intensive support with resume development, interview skills, job search guidance, etc. in order to secure high-quality employment. With existing case management platforms, staff must look each client up individually and review case notes in order to monitor jobseeker progress, creating significant challenges to actively monitoring the progress of more than a very small number of clients. Given the volume of jobseekers served by career centers, without an effective system for prioritizing high-need clients and monitoring their progress, these jobseekers may fall through the cracks.

Practice: By implementing a tracking system for a subset of high-need jobseekers, staff can more readily identify which clients to prioritize for additional support and when to conduct follow-up outreach. A tracking system that incorporates information on jobseekers, their progress through services and employment outcomes, and the staff point person for each case elevates the needs of a high-priority group of jobseekers and allows staff to quickly access important information on the status of each case. Managers can also utilize the tracking system as a tool for monitoring client progress through services and adjusting staff supervision or delegating responsibility as needed.

4. **Create seamless, guided handoffs from center staff to external support services**

Challenge: Many jobseekers with significant barriers to employment may have additional needs for external supportive services, such as for housing, food, transportation, child care, behavioral health services, reentry services, or vocational rehabilitation. Even if high-need jobseekers receive intensive job search or other workforce assistance from career center staff, these additional barriers often impede clients from successfully securing and maintaining employment. To connect jobseekers with external supportive services, career center staff may often only share a pamphlet of information with jobseekers who express a need or interest in additional services rather than actively reaching out to external organizations on behalf of the client. In some cases, such as when assessing addiction, staff may not be fully equipped with the skills or expertise to appropriately identify a client's needs. Limited staffing capacity also means that career center staff do not follow up with the jobseeker or staff at the external service provider to know whether services have commenced.

Practice: For high-need jobseekers, connections to external services should be an integrated component of service delivery rather than an ancillary support. Career center staff can play a key role in connecting jobseekers with external services that are a good match for their needs and financial circumstances, and may benefit from additional training on how to comprehensively assess and identify jobseeker need for these supports. For high-need jobseekers, taking the additional step to either (1) reach out to the external contact by phone with the jobseeker present or (2) introduce the jobseeker to an appropriate contact in person if the external organization is co-located may increase the likelihood that jobseekers successfully access the supportive services they need. Career center staff can advocate for the jobseeker and facilitate a warm handoff to additional services by sharing relevant context on the client's background and needs, ensuring a first appointment gets scheduled, and following up with both the jobseeker and the provider about the client's progress.

5. **Streamline the application process for training scholarships and provide resources on the range of training options and expected employment outcomes**

Challenge: Completing a credential or degree program may have a significant positive impact on the long-term employment outcomes for high-need jobseekers, yet complicated application and enrollment processes can create barriers that result in few clients successfully being awarded training scholarships. A typical application process may include several steps, including an initial meeting with a career center staff member to discuss training options, an adult basic education assessment, the completion of an application for training, and a two-hour appointment to enroll in WIOA following application approval. In addition, for some training programs, jobseekers may be expected to prove employer demand in the area for that credential. Workforce boards sometimes use this prolonged application process as a way of screening out potential training candidates, to ensure only those who are the most motivated receive funding.

Additionally, jobseekers often make training decisions with limited information on the array of training options, the quality of a particular training program, or the expected wage and employment outcomes associated with each field. For example, among two possible options for a commercial driver's license (CDL) training, jobseekers may be more likely to find stable, high-quality employment by participating in the program with a history of higher completion rates and higher wages upon exit. However, when recommending particular programs, staff may draw primarily on anecdotal experience with previous clients. As a result, many jobseekers are offered training programs in a limited number of fields (often with employment prospects in low-salary professions) or directed to training programs with track records of poorer results relative to competitor programs.

Practice: Connecting more high-need jobseekers to high-quality training programs may improve their long-term earning potential and employment stability. By redesigning the application protocol to consolidate the overall application timeline and provide additional support, career centers can test strategies that enable more jobseekers to successfully begin training programs. In addition, career center staff play an important role in supporting jobseekers to identify a "good fit" program. Jobseekers may have multiple program options for the same credential within their local area, each with varying completion rates and employment outcomes for participants. Developing resources on program characteristics, completion rates, credential rates, and employment and wage outcomes for each WIOA-eligible training program can enable career center staff to support jobseekers in making more informed decisions regarding their training plans. Having access to this data will also support improved decision-making among workforce board staff in determining how to manage the list of eligible training providers.

6. **Cultivate a pool of quality employers for high-need jobseekers, with increased support to the employer and client for the post-hire period**

Challenge: A strong employer portfolio is an important asset for career centers and a key driver of their ability to connect clients to quality employment. For fear of damaging these relationships, staff are often reluctant to refer jobseekers with more complex needs to open positions with preferred employers.

Practice: To support high-need jobseekers in securing quality employment, career centers should seek to cultivate relationships with a more expansive portfolio of employers, including those employers facing significant challenges filling open positions or those with a social mission who may interested in receiving referrals for candidates who could be considered higher-risk. Career centers can mitigate some of the risks to employers by continuing to offer additional support to both the employer and the client for a period following employment. Career center staff can leverage their existing relationship with jobseekers and connections to external supportive services to mediate challenges that may arise if, for example, jobseekers experience unexpected transportation or child care challenges.

7. **Match data on high-need jobseekers to wage record data to measure client outcomes and make improvements in service delivery**

   Challenge: Required federal performance measures do not provide workforce boards with appropriately nuanced information on jobseeker outcomes to evaluate the effectiveness of services for high-need subsets of jobseekers. Career center staff currently only learn about wage and employment outcomes of high-need jobseekers through self-reported data from individual clients, and some clients may disengage with the career center before finding employment. Management lacks access to information to review outcomes for jobseekers broken down by characteristics such as educational attainment, age, race, or work history. Additionally, without wage records, staff do not have context on whether jobseekers successfully find quality employment and remain in those roles for substantial periods of time. As a result, workforce boards are left with a vastly incomplete picture of client outcomes necessary for improving services to ensure more clients are successful in finding quality, stable employment.

   Practice: By regularly matching high-need jobseekers to state-administered Unemployment Insurance wage record data, workforce boards can better understand key outcomes for these clients and implement new changes to service delivery. In addition, breaking analysis out by key characteristics—such as educational attainment, age, race, length of unemployment, veteran status, disability status, etc.—will provide boards with a more nuanced understanding of these outcomes from which to inform service changes. Compared with federal reporting by program year cohort, this approach allows workforce boards to review jobseeker outcomes much sooner, as early as 6 months following the start of services, so they are not waiting for multiple years to see results of service changes. Workforce boards can use this data to:

   - Identify characteristics of high-need jobseekers at risk of experiencing low wages or long periods of unemployment
   - Make adjustments to service delivery to improve outcomes related to training or job search
   - Support staff in developing high-quality individualized service plans and monitoring progress of high-need clients
   - Strengthen connections with relevant external support organizations or apply for new grant funding for high-need populations

For more information about these practices, including case studies from governments implementing these and other innovations, visit the Education & Jobs page of the Government Performance Lab's website, at https://govlab.hks.harvard.edu/education-and-jobs.

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