

In support of the Governor's WorkFirst Re-Examination project, Employment Security Department (ESD) hosted three (3) statewide WorkFirst staff forums to discuss the overall WorkFirst re-examination process and hear firsthand from staff how we can improve how we help parents go to work; stay working and move towards self-sufficiency.

The forums were held in July (14th, 15th, and 16th) in Everett, Moses Lake and Tumwater. Prior to the forums, WorkFirst supervisors were asked to meet with their staff to discuss the following 'Key Questions' and gather input to share. The following is a summary of staff feedback gathered through the forums.

In addition, ESD developed an Employer WorkFirst Survey with Business Services to gather local employer needs and expectations input. The results of the survey will be available next week and will be shared with the various WorkFirst redesign workgroups.

ESD Staff Key Forum Questions:

1. How would you define 'self-sufficiency' for the parents we are working with? If self-sufficiency is the goal for WorkFirst parents, what should our role be? What would that look like?
2. In the past we have focused on serving parents who are 'job ready'. If we needed to tighten the eligibility criteria for our WorkFirst services to focus more on helping parents become self-sufficient, would that change our definition of 'job ready'? If so, what would that look like?
3. What should our role be in helping parents build career plans or ladders that connect them to skill development and better job opportunities? How would we need to shift the way we provide services today to achieve that?
4. Based on our current employment services model -
 - a. *What services would we want to continue providing?*
 - b. *What services would we stop providing?*
 - c. *What would we want to provide that is new or different?*
5. Regarding the overall WorkFirst Program, what has worked well and what has not in helping parents go to work and get off of TANF?
6. What should the role of Local Planning Area (LPA) partnerships be in the re-design of WorkFirst?
7. What question(s) do we need to address as a part of the overall WorkFirst re-examination?

Major ESD Staff Forum Themes:

It is the parent's responsibility to determine what 'self-sufficiency' means to them. It is our role as partners to provide the necessary tools and supports to help WorkFirst parents prepare for work, attach to the labor market, and stay working. Staff felt they needed to do more to help parents stay connected to WorkSource for longer-term skill and career development once they leave TANF. Staff saw themselves as listeners and felt their roles had shifted away from a case management 'transactional' approach towards coaching; mentoring and career connections 'transformational' service delivery approach.

Staff felt that the amount of time they dedicate to tracking and verifying hours of participation has taken away from the time they need to help parents prepare for work, go to work and stay working. They wanted to see automation or other changes to reduce the amount of time they are dedicating to this activity. They have to make choices about spending valuable time working with parents or managing the administrative responsibilities of federal participation. In addition, they wanted to see more efficiencies created to reduce the number of systems they have to enter or retrieve information from.

Staff felt the program has shifted away from the 'work' focus to a program that emphasizes participation for sake of actual hours. The program should focus on meaningful participation activities that meet parents where they are at and engage them in activities and services that add value to them. Staff wanted to see a stronger emphasis on participation that directly connects to employment outcomes and helps parents get off TANF and become self-sufficient. The impact of this mixed message has forced some LPAs to make choices about meeting participation or putting parents to work. A clear message is needed – what happened to the work pays message and value of work in helping families become self-sufficient?

Staff shared that they felt our current definition of 'job ready' did not provide enough information to assist DSHS staff in making the appropriate referrals to Job Search. Staff wanted to see more criteria added to help DSHS connect the right people to ESD employment services and to reduce the number of parents being referred back. Staff felt that current high numbers in Job Search were not an accurate reflection of the true number of parents who are 'job ready' and who could best benefit from employment services.

Summary of the Forum Feedback -

How would you define 'self-sufficiency' for the parents we are working with? If self-sufficiency is the goal for WorkFirst parents, what should our role be? What would that look like?

Self-sufficiency -

- *An ability to make a "livable wage" and have opportunities for advancement/wage progression*
- *An ability to generate enough income to support a family without TANF cash assistance*
- *Independence from supports or government services (cash assistance)*
- *An ability to maintain your family financially/physically/emotionally; know of resources within community to assist with short term issues in achieving long term self-sufficiency*
- *Self-sufficiency looks different around the state based on geography, economic opportunities, cost of living and wages*

What should our role be in helping families become self-sufficient?

- *Coach, monitor, (provide employment readiness 'soft skills', connect people to resources)*
- *Provide assessment and solid employment readiness foundational activities*
- *Provide tools (assessments, Key Train, MS, other skill development) to help parents attach to the labor force, provide retention and wage progression supports*

- *Help parents maintain stable employment and assist them with 'next steps' to a better job, skill development, training and/or education*
- *Focus on parents short/long-term career goals - career planning, retention and wage progression support*
- *Help them go to work in a livable wage or in a job with advancement opportunities or benefits*
- *Provide 'world of work' employment readiness skills – Dependable Strengths, etc.*
- *Help parents learn the value of work – why work pays (connect this concept to their children and their care)*
- *Assessment, employment & career development coaching*
- *Workforce skills identification & skill development – MS, KeyTrain, Customers Service*
- *Focus on parents, work with parents (no restrictions, without barriers), truly job ready*
- *Motivate them to participate in their employment search.*
- *Provide OJT and WEX services – longer-term WEX*
- *Connection to local employers, business services teams, job matching and job development*
- *Focus support services toward employment – less on participation*
- *Offer 'job shadow' experiences for parents prior to enrollment in training programs – stronger connections with real jobs.*
- *Continuous engagement for longer-term connections*
- *More one-on-one time to have meaningful conversations with parents – build relationships*
- *Work with partners for better outcomes for families*
- *Develop exit plans/surveys – next steps plans – community resource connections*
- *Address the prevention of generational poverty (for long-term parents)*
- *Develop a self-sufficiency plan*

In the past we have focused on serving parents who are 'job ready'. If we needed to tighten the eligibility criteria for our WorkFirst services to focus more on helping parents become self-sufficient, would that change our definition of 'job ready'? If so, what would that look like?

'Job Ready' definition elements/considerations – Must have partner support.

- *Minimum level of education (HS diploma/GED)*
- *Willing, able & available to start work*
- *Housing, child care, transportation secured*
- *Wants to work - has employment goals*
- *Have recent work experience – minimum of 4 months*
- *Prioritize those parents who have completed Community Jobs and/or community or technical college training*
- *Have driver's license*
- *Completed alcohol/drug treatment – stable*
- *Not in last trimester of pregnancy*
- *Able to show up on time daily - No court ordered obligations*
- *Completed 'life skills' training*

What should our role be in helping parents build career plans or ladders that connect them to skill development and better job opportunities? How would we need to shift the way we provide services today to achieve that?

Our 'role' should be -

- *Post-employment activities – Budgeting/financial literacy and how to use income*
- *Online resources for parents – KeyTrain, MS, etc.*
- *Use the OJT option to target higher wage jobs with benefits and wage progression opportunities.*
- *Develop career plans including ways to build skills through work experience and formal training*
- *Meet client where they are – move them to where they want to be*
- *Transformational – value added experience – less focus on support services (DSHS)*
- *Provide ongoing connections with employers to help working parents advance on a career ladder*
- *Assessment and identification of transferable skills & skills gaps*
- *Working closer w/Business services – better understanding of the local labor market*
- *Provide more flexible hours of operation to accommodate working families*
- *Focus on assessment, employment coaching and packaging, job matching, placement and retention (up to one year) – CBO's should provide 'soft skills'*
- *Provide choices for parents – move away from 'one size fits all' approach*
- *Work more closely with partners, colleges and employers*
- *Firm understanding of generational poverty and need for parents to experience success to know they can be successful*
- *Focus parent time on meaningful activities that prepare them for work – not just activities that count towards federal participation*

We should shift 'away' from -

- *Tracking & verifying actual hours (average time by staff approx. 10-14 hours per week)*
- *Redundancy of systems tracking*
- *Less focus on data or program requirements – (actual hours)*
- *Less telling clients what to do, more parent 'buy-in' – focus on what they want to do (engagement)*
- *Activity planners & logs*
- *Requiring daily participation*
- *Focus on participation for the sake of participation*
- *Shift focus from the parent and a job, to the family and the kids.*

Based on our current employment services model -

1. What services would we want to continue providing?

- *Orientation & Assessments*
- *One on one coaching and case management*
- *Intensive job readiness activities & workshops*

- *Job Development, Job Matches & Job Referrals*
- *CSP and employment retention and wage progression services*
- *Employment packaging (competencies) – resume, interviewing, etc.*
- *Workshops – including Job Hunter, etc.*
- *Support Services: Interview clothing & transportation payments (employment focused)*
- *Job Club & Prove it*
- *KeyTrain, Microsoft, Choices & Workforce Explorer*
- *OJT/WEX - Modify/make easier*
- *Partnering*
- *Ongoing staff training & development – different levels (engagement, motivational interviewing, program)*

What services would we stop providing?

- *Car repairs until hired*
- *Licenses until hired*
- *Activity planners*
- *Job search logs*
- *Multiple systems – use one only – SKIES*
- *No auto pay gas without a driver's license*

What would we want to provide that is new or different?

- *Have parents bring in Job referrals (3x a week) instead of us looking for them*
- *Have parents bring in resumes, application, business cards from employers (5 per week)*
- *Empower us to be their coach*
- *Empower parents to develop their next job*
- *40 hour workshop*
- *Expand office hours – more flexible hours*
- *Job coaching – define the model and training to it*
- *Life skills for men only taught by men*
- *Support services – work related*
- *Stop providing gas voucher to people without license*
- *Electronic actual hours driven by client if we have to do them*
- *Clients do activity planners electronic*
- *Enforce accountability*
- *Focus on time management*
- *E-sign capability More LMEA tools*
- *More community workshop opportunities*
- *Long Term WEX's for Non-Profit/Profit*
- *More time to do Initial Assessment*
- *Wage Progression/Job Retention – build a program*

- *Job Shadow – new version*
- *Career exploration, career ladder workshops*
- *Specific computer skills training or specific training.*
- *Additional LMEA tools*
- *Pre-Employment skill development – customer service, basic computers, etc.*
- *Separate case loads by industry sector connect them to markets in that industry + do some job shadowing*

Additional comments -

- Job seekers need to work harder (accountability) + we work smarter
- Webinar WF +W/S orientations
- Develop service plan in SKIES
- More short term training options (open door)
- More incentives available to parents
- Teeth to the program for not following through
- Many referrals to sanctions don't result in sanction
- ESD determine who is job ready before clients come from DSHS to job search
- More use of WEX + longer lengths
- Mock interviewing, with a panel – “show me”
- More OJT activity/enrollments
- JS competencies must be proven “show me”
- Goal setting, motivation + career planning activities
- Use technology as a means to communicate w/Job seeker
- More connections w/local businesses, economic development, business outreach
- Career broker staff
- More staff development through the training academy – career development, KeyTrain, Motivational Interviewing, engaging customers, Dependable Strengths, etc.

Regarding the overall WorkFirst Program, what has worked well and what have been challenges in helping parents go to work and get off of TANF?

What has worked well -

- CSP is a great addition to assist parents transitioning from TANF to self-sufficiency.
- We need more services geared at helping parents retain their jobs and assist them in advancing either within their current occupation or into higher level jobs.
- Intensive one-on-one services to parents; including weekly meetings to build relationships.
- Spending time with parents to ensure their applications and resumes are thorough and complete.
- Focus on career planning, coaching and mentoring vs. case management
- KeyTrain

- Employment focused workshops that parents walk away from with a portfolio with everything they need to get a job.
- Partnership communication through the LPA.
- Motivational Interviewing training.
- Comprehensive Evaluation process – the original.
- Having parents report daily.
- Spending time engaging the parents in activities that mean something to the parent.
- Employment competencies, one-on-one
- GED for those who need it.

What have been the challenges -

- Expecting parents to do all the work on their own – many have barriers that make assimilating information difficult. Need more time for structured goal setting and plan building.
- Need more community based organizations at the table to help with the growing needs.
- Lack of formal training programs that are short-term (less than one year).
- Need a closer working relationship with local Business Outreach teams to find OJTs and mentoring/shadowing opportunities within the private sector.
- Lack of program options for returners.
- Lack of accountability on parents to engage in activities – sanction is not working.
- Limited training options that lead to self sufficiency jobs
- Participation as the goal vs. really helping people go to work.
- Different performance focuses – DSHS on Participation, ESD on outcomes of employment.
- Lack of incentives for parents to get off and stay off of TANF – they can always come back. The revolving door syndrome is a problem.
- Lack of a real time limit.
- Job logs don't work.
- Too much dependency on support services.
- Activity planners – cumbersome no value.
- Parents are being sent to Job Search with no work experience and little to no education – no GED, skills training, etc.
- Making parents go to Job Search when they are not ready.
- One size fits all Job Search delivery system --- making some drive 80 miles to report in.
- Time spent tracking and reporting actual hours.
- Unrealistic expectations of parents to look for work 35 hours per week.
- Lack of access to some information in ejas.
- Lack of WEX and OJTs for parents.
- Lack of mandatory Life Skills component for all parents prior to any activity.
- Time spent on compliance with DRA vs. helping parents.

What should the role of Local Area Planning be in the redesign of WorkFirst?

- Start over – get them all on track and clear on their role, responsibility and accountability.
- Community outreach and local service delivery coordination.
- Bigger role in developing job skills and vocational training options.
- Greater responsibility of keeping partners informed.
- Manage local operational issues.
- Information sharing, brainstorming, not advisory
- Share promising practices.

What question(s) do we need to address as part of the overall WorkFirst redesign effort?

- Need more operational flexibility to meet needs of parents.
- Need to expand communication tools to engage WorkFirst parents – email.
- What is self-sufficiency?
- What is each partner's role in helping parents get there?
- What are the penalties to the state for not meeting federal participation?
- Can our performance measures support each partner's role in the new program?
- What is our role in helping parents become self-sufficient?
- How do we balance demands on services with quality of service provided?
- What more can be done to reduce redundant reporting of information in multiple systems?
- How we will develop staff to meet the changing needs of the program?
- How can we count volunteer work?
- Will a 60 month time limit become a reality?
- How will we measure success – performance and outcomes?
- How can our goals support one another's services – reduce costly duplication and meet the objective of the program?
- What is the priority – participation or employment?
- Will the change make the program more effective?
- Are we changing for the sake of change or changing to make things better?
- How will the budget reductions drive the outcome of the program redesign?
- What services do parents need?
- How can we provide services more flexibly to families?
- How do we help parents envision a life off of assistance?
- How will we prepare staff to meet the challenges of a growing caseload with fewer resources?