

Housing Works Systems Alignment Recommendations

Introduction

In July 2012, the Portland-Vancouver Metropolitan region received a Department of Labor Workforce Innovation Fund grant to support *Housing Works*. Building on a promising pilot, this collaborative program expands the model to connect Workforce Investment Boards (WIB) and Public Housing Authorities (PHA) in four counties in Oregon and Washington¹.

Partners aim to serve 480 housing residents, providing vocational case management, training, and employment services to assist them to find career track employment. By increasing the earning potential of residents and connecting them to jobs in high demand occupations with pathways for advancement, we help residents to achieve long-term self-sufficiency.

Housing Works partners are committed to aligning our efforts to serve this common pool of participants by dedicating resources for them, reducing duplication in our services, and increasing coordination and communication. Despite our intent to work together and a strong infrastructure to support our efforts, there are still significant challenges serving this population.

Based on our experience to date, a work group met to identify two sets of recommendations. The first set deals with existing practices and procedures currently utilized that are effective and should be continued to support local sustainability. The second set of recommendations address ways in which the policy environment can support our collective work.

Recommendations to Retain Existing Practices

- Co-investing resources – All partners are required to match the Housing Works dollars with funding from their own agencies. The process ensures partners are equally invested in the program and sets up the partnership to be sustainable in the future (at least in part). The hope is that at the completion of the program with just over three years of successfully coordinating to serve a common customer pool,

¹ WIB partners include: Worksystems as the lead agency and WIB for Multnomah and Washington counties; the Workforce Investment Council of Clackamas County Oregon, and Southwest Washington Workforce Development Council. PHA partners include: Home Forward (Multnomah County); Washington County Department of Housing Services; Housing Authority of Clackamas County; and Vancouver Housing Authority.

partners will see value in the effectiveness and efficiency of this approach and chose to dedicate resources to continue it.

- Staff dedicated to supporting connections between Housing Authorities and WorkSource at the service level (WorkSource Liaisons) – These individuals are charged with providing training and technical assistance to case managers about creating solid career plans which utilize WorkSource services to help individuals reach their goals. They help to coordinate the on-the-ground connections between vocational case managers (sometimes called employment specialists) and the WorkSource system. Through time, they understand the terminology, programs and procedures of both partners, so they are able to quickly problem solve to face challenges in either system.
- Staff training – The conversation uncovered the need for additional training of both WorkSource and Housing Authority staff about cultural competency, working with people in poverty, working with people who have barriers to employment, the safety net cliff (which will be discussed later), and cross-training about the performance measures and requirements of each system.

Policy Recommendations

The work group identified the following policy recommendations:

Recommendation #1: Promote policies that support people as common customers through:

- A. Performance that recognizes barriers and is complementary across systems;
- B. Seamless enrollment and eligibility determination; and,
- C. Regulations that make work pay (addressed in Recommendation #4)

Performance

Current State - Performance: Serving individuals with multiple barriers to employment, including low educational attainment, multi-generational poverty, and criminal histories, is an unpredictable process. Because of this, the Housing Works performance measures were established taking into consideration that a higher than average percentage of people may have difficulty succeeding.

Housing Works partners aim to meet this set of common performance measures that are largely focused on traditional workforce goals such as obtaining industry credentials and finding and retaining employment. However, a central feature of this alignment model is that participants are not solely involved in Housing Works—they are also Housing Authority residents and enrolled in Workforce Investment Act (WIA) services. As a result,

each participant's progress might count towards at least three sets of goals, plus more if they are working with other programs or agencies.

This can create problems when some metrics aren't calibrated to reflect the population served. For instance, the Housing Works program essentially enrolls any individual who is interested in one of the four targeted industries and who asserts he or she is able to participate. In Oregon, where Employment Department and Workforce Investment Act (WIA) services work in a fully integrated service environment, the practice is to co-enroll all participants in services supported by both funding streams. This means that the system has latitude to "take a risk" on some job seekers without fearing it will negatively impact WIA performance numbers. In Washington, however, the WIA performance pool is significantly smaller. Lack of success by a Housing Works participant makes a greater impact on their overall WIA performance.

Vision - Performance: In an ideal world, employment programs would support the participation of interested (and eligible) individuals without concerns for whether their enrollment may have a negative effect on other federal performance measures. While some metrics would be specific to funding streams, the programs would also have complementary metrics so that participation in the programs of one funding stream would inherently work towards achieving success in another.

Recommendation - Performance: The partners recommend setting federal performance measures in a way to encourage communities to serve a population that may have multiple barriers to employment. This could include issuing federal waivers to WIA programs or using a regression analysis that determines performance based on individuals' circumstances. To encourage collaboration across funding streams, each would include complementary metrics that support shared stabilization goals for individuals.

Enrollment and Eligibility Determination

Current State - Enrollment: Participants are required to complete multiple eligibility processes. Housing Works participants are currently recruited by the Housing Authorities and interested individuals are then referred to the WorkSource centers for enrollment in WIA. This requires presenting eligibility documentation to WIA staff so they may verify eligibility at the point in time when they became enrolled in WIA. Next (though typically not on the same day) individuals return to the Housing Authority where they show the same set of documents to become enrolled in Housing Works. This means that individuals must show documentation a total of three times, including the initial enrollment in Housing Authority services. The bulky, inefficient process means that participants' first impression of the program is one of "bureaucratic hoops".

In Clackamas and Clark counties, the WIA and Housing Works enrollment meetings can happen at a single shared site on the same day. However, program staff do not share office space in the Multnomah and Washington County region. Organizations cannot take on the liability of transferring copies of documentation in light of Federal requirements regarding personally identifying information.

Vision- Enrollment: In an ideal world, once an individual became enrolled in a federal program, that documentation could be used to make them eligible to receive services through any other federal systems (assuming the documentation is current and demonstrates the appropriate eligibility). At a minimum, the panel would like for it to be possible for a participant to show documentation only once to enroll in both WIA and Housing Works services. Furthermore, there would be no wrong door, so that the full programs and supports would be available to people in workforce programs in need of housing in addition to residents in housing in need of workforce programs.

Recommendation- Enrollment: The panel recommends the Federal government investigate ways to reduce the burden of documentation through technology solutions and sharing of data across federal programs. For the purposes of this specific program, Worksystems is investigating using cloud technology to store participant documentation so that WIA and Housing Works staff can access and use the documentation to verify eligibility.

Recommendation #2: Strengthen alignment between Department of Human Services (DHS)/ Department of Social and Human Services (DSHS), Workforce Investment Boards, and Public Housing Authorities

Current State: Partners report varying degrees of collaboration with state human service departments. In Clark county, the relationship with the DSHS is fairly close. DSHS partners with Vancouver Housing Authority staff to develop Individual Responsibility Plan for participants who are receiving a TANF grant. DSHS allows for training to count toward program participation, ensuring program participants do not lose benefits. In Clackamas County, DHS staff are co-located at the WorkSource Center and coordinate smoothly with WorkSource staff. In Washington County there is some coordination, but it is reliant upon front line staff reaching out to one another and negotiating plans on a case by case basis.

In Multnomah County, program managers arranged a structure for re-assigning Housing Works participants to a single DHS case manager with the intent that this person would coordinate plans and goals with Housing Works staff and ensure participants do not lose DHS benefits because the Housing Works activities weren't "qualifying" for benefits. However, implementation is inconsistent and reliant upon the interest and availability of DHS staff to coordinate. Each case manager reportedly has a caseload of between 200 and 300 individuals, making coordination with a case manager external to their system nearly impossible. Because there is no streamlined process for collaboration, some participants

have missed out on Housing Works activities because the PHA and DHS were unable to connect in a timely manner to “approve” a plan for training through Housing Works. Frequent caseload transfers at DHS also resulted in case managers being unaware of client circumstances and Housing Works protocol and they slowed down or reversed approvals of support.

Vision: In an ideal world, Housing Works participants would have access to the range of supports (including childcare) available through all systems they are enrolled with, and participation in Housing Works would fulfill participation obligations for the DHS/DSHS employment programs. They could attend career exploration activities, earn industry-recognized credentials, develop skills in internships, and search for employment through WorkSource with coordinated support from their Housing Works and DHS/DSHS case managers. All programs would support and encourage the attainment of career track jobs and resources from both systems would be prioritized to support these individuals.

Recommendation: The panel calls for stronger alignment between WIBS, PHAs and DHS/DSHS to support individuals’ employment goals, with specific emphasis on career track goals (as defined by the individual’s career goals.) This might include local agreements for coordinated case planning that allows participants to access the range of supports they need to be successful.

In Oregon, the panel believes the leadership at the state level needs to align the WIA and HHS funding streams structurally to support individuals to participate in both systems. This includes reducing duplicative or redundant services, organizing case management services to support individual success in an integrated effort, and ensuring policies do not inadvertently discourage individuals from participating in training programs and finding employment.

Recommendation #3: Federal, state and local policy makers should reduce the “safety net cliff” by setting policies that provide a gradual reduction in benefits over time.

Current State: A fundamental premise of Housing Works is that by helping people to get training and find career track employment, they would move off housing (and other) subsidies, allowing those dollars to be used for another individual or family. However, as noted in “A Path to Prosperityⁱ”, a plan developed by ECONorthwest for the Oregon Business Plan, “Oregon’s safety net design includes disincentives for work, especially as families move from 100 percent to 200 percent of the federal poverty level.” The plan explains that, if a household income moves from \$30,000 to \$35,000 in annual earnings, the family loses \$4,650 to increased tax liability and a decrease in benefits.

To illustrate this further, consider a single parent with two young children living in Multnomah County receiving TANF, SNAP and Section 8 housing. Finding minimum wage

employment means an elimination of TANF benefits, but could (if resources are available) mean the person receives Employment Related Day Care (ERDC) to help support childcare costs. However, when the income jumps from minimum wage to \$12 per hour and benefits begin falling, the net income starts to drop precipitously because of a drop in benefits and tax credits, and increase in tax liability. It's not until the hourly wage progresses to \$30 per hour that the parent's net resources reaches the same level it was at minimum wage.

Vision: Ideally, the safety net would be constructed in such a way that allows benefits to phase out gradually and in a coordinated way, so that people have incentives to increase their skills and income. Programs would support asset building, increase opportunities for attaining credentials or degrees, and ensure access to affordable childcare for young children (one of the most expensive expenses with the least available support).

Recommendation: The panel recommends that policy makers design a tax structure and benefits system that allows individuals and families to increase income gradually without experiencing a net loss because of an increase in income.

Recommendation #4: Promote a cultural shift in policies and practices in federal and state-funded housing programs that encourages and sets expectations for employment.

Current Reality: Federally regulated housing programs, such as Section 8 and Public Housing, are designed to focus on housing stability. While elements of those programs do encourage employment (such as the Earned Income Disallowance – which allows tenants who have been out of work to accept a job without having their rent increase right away – or the Family Self-Sufficiency program – which funds staff positions to work with residents on meeting employment and stability goals), the structure and resultant policies of PHAs often do not effectively support and encourage employment. The regulatory requirements for these programs are so administratively burdensome, that few PHAs have the staffing levels needed to support residents in gaining employment and achieving self-sufficiency. Without resources to support residents, it is difficult to implement policies that truly create an expectation for employment.

For those few PHAs that have Moving to Work (MTW) status, which allows them to waive many of the federal regulations in order to increase efficiency and help families work towards self-sufficiency, the challenge of learning how to engage with and support families effectively remains. Many PHA residents want to work, but families that are successful first face the safety net cliff described above and then the reality that once they give up their housing subsidy, they cannot get it back if income decreases. Even getting back onto the waiting list for subsidized housing may take years. Therefore, for many families, long-term success requires more than accessing training and a job. It requires building a support network, savings, and a strong enough work history to be able to quickly replace a lost job.

Some families can do this on their own. However, many require one-on-one support, which is resource-intensive for PHAs.

Vision: PHAs would have the resources and flexibility to assist people to find employment. Policies and programs would be in place to help support individuals to transition off of public housing assistance gradually.

Recommendations:

1) Encourage HUD to grant policy waivers or more broadly extend Moving to Work status to PHAs that demonstrate commitment to providing intensive support to families working towards self-sufficiency. Ensure applications are accessible to smaller (and therefore more resource-strapped) PHAs.

2) Build positive conversations about employment with residents into existing PHA practices, such as including an introduction to WorkSource in the enrollment process, incorporating materials about training and employment on PHA websites or standard mailings, and exploring dual enrollment into WorkSource at time of entry into housing for work-able households.

3) Encourage HUD and State legislatures to enact policies that incentivize PHAs and WIBs to use subsidized housing as a platform for delivering workforce development services.

Appendix: Background and Work Group Process

Housing Works is supported through Workforce Innovation Funds (WIF) from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). The purpose of these funds from is to support innovation at both the systems and service delivery levels. As noted by Secretary of Labor Hilda L Solis, *"The Workforce Innovation Fund was created to cultivate and test innovative approaches to workforce training and encourage the replication of evidence-based practices in the workforce development field. Developing new and creative strategies and expanding existing programs we know work will help make the workforce system more effective to unemployed Americans and employers looking for qualified employees."*ⁱⁱ

Housing Works goals include both systems alignment and participant level outcomes:

1. Increase collaboration between the region's WIBs and PHAs through the execution of formal agreements that dedicate ongoing resources to coordinate co-funded services and through purposeful policy alignment that reduces barriers to partnership over time.
2. Increase collaboration between the region's WIBs and PHAs through the execution of formal agreements that dedicate ongoing resources to coordinate co-funded services and through purposeful policy alignment that reduces barriers to partnership over time.
3. Increase the earning potential of PHA residents by improving access to and retention in training services linked to high-demand occupations.
4. Accelerate a path to self-sufficiency for PHA residents through attainment and retention of employment in high-demand occupations with pathways for advancement.

This focus of improving outcomes for job seekers through systems alignment is encouraged and supported by the Department of Labor. They stated, "We believe that innovation at the systems level – where policies, organizational structures, planning processes, performance measurement, procurement, investment priorities, and information management systems reside – is necessary to support service delivery strategies that result in better outcomes and lower costs. In support of this goal, the Administration is seeking new ways to remove administrative, statutory, and regulatory barriers and enable a closer alignment and integration of agencies and programs with overlapping missions and clients."ⁱⁱⁱ

In order to inform the Administration's interest in system alignment and to enhance our abilities to work better together, the Regional Alliance, comprised of leadership from each of the partner agencies, appointed a work group to identify the most critical issues and suggest strategies for addressing those issues. This paper is a result of the work group's

efforts to uncover any inefficiencies, redundancies, or missed opportunities, and to provide some recommendations to leadership and policy makers at multiple levels.

Process

On October 29, 2013, members of the Housing Works Systems Alignment work group, met to identify policies, practices and relationships that would foster more effective collaborations between housing authorities and WIBS to improve employment outcomes for public housing residents. Each representative was asked to consider this question from the perspective of their own organization in advance of the meeting, and to use those thoughts as the basis for our discussion. The work group met initially in small teams to conduct a gap analysis, identifying the current and ideal states as well as strategies for addressing the gap between the current and ideal states. Each small team included WIBS and Housing Authorities from two counties. A large group discussion helped the work group to distill the topics down to the most critical issues for further exploration and refinement of recommendations.

i

http://media.oregonlive.com/politics_impact/other/oregon%20business%20plan%20Poverty%20Strategy%20Paper.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://www.dol.gov/opa/media/press/eta/ETA20121237.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.doleta.gov/workforce_innovation/