

## **SAN FRANCISCO'S VIP PROGRAM: VOCATIONAL ENGLISH IMMERSION PROGRAM**

**Julie Aragon\***

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In August, 1996, President Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). One of the key provisions of PRWORA, placed time limits and work requirements on able-bodied adults requiring that recipients be working within 2 years.

As national welfare caseloads decline dramatically, there are still people who require public assistance and have difficulty finding work, or work that pays a living wage. While the reasons vary, ranging from availability of childcare to transportation and other barriers, a common challenge is the "hard to serve". Many of the "hard to serve" find it difficult to obtain jobs either because they have limited English speaking skills or do not speak English at all. This group remains employed in low level paying jobs.

San Francisco Department of Human Services strives to promote self-sufficiency among public assistance recipients and the working poor. During FY 99-00 San Francisco re-affirmed their commitment to their low-income residents by re-defining their workforce development systems through expanding education and training programs and developing new services to help clients retain their jobs and seek better jobs.

San Francisco has taken an innovative and proactive approach to provide services to job seekers

with limited English skills. DHS employment specialists discovered that some of their clients have severely limited English skills. In response, DHS staff met with San Francisco City College to develop the Vocational-ESL Immersion Program, known as VIP. Participants attend classes eight hours per day, five days per week, and the focus on oral communication and worksite-related vocabulary.

### **NEED FOR VESL IMMERSION PROGRAM:**

- Traditional programs were too comprehensive and tended to build skills over an extended period of time.
- Limited English speakers on welfare typically were not successful in traditional ESL classes.
- A customized approach to learning functional English was needed.
- Low English proficiency is a barrier to obtaining a higher paying job.
- Low English proficiency is a barrier to job advancement.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- That the VIP program be further evaluated by our agency's Employment and Benefit Department by conducting an evaluation of the current curriculum used in the current VESL classes offered through our agency. Upon review, consideration should be given to implement a VIP Pilot program.

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\*Julie Aragon is a Program Manager with the Senior Nutrition Program in the Aging and Adult Services Department of Santa Clara County.

- The role of the VIP liaison has been crucial to the success of the program. I recommend that a designated person be considered to serve in this capacity. Attendance in work activities has been a problem in our agency. Monitoring the participant's attendance and providing a case management component, may prevent many from "falling through the cracks" by connecting them to needed services.
- Implementing a similar VESL Immersion program will support one of our Agency's Performance Based Performance goals: That of supporting the working poor in achieving self-sufficiency.

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### **BACKGROUND**

In August 1996, Congress launched an economic and social revolution in this country. President Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The new welfare law requires parents to find jobs within two years and limits their lifetime eligibility for assistance to five years. Moving from an entitlement system that places emphasis in determining who qualifies for assistance, to a system that helps clients find jobs, has become a challenge for all. This has triggered a sense of urgency to help clients meet this requirement.

Welfare rolls have dropped in every state, some by dramatic numbers. However, there are still people requiring public assistance who have difficulty finding work, or work that pays a living wage. While the reasons vary, ranging from availability of childcare to transportation and other barriers, one common barrier shared by San Francisco and Santa Clara Counties is the "hard to serve". Many find it difficult to obtain jobs, for which they are qualified, because they are either limited in speaking English or do not speak English at all. What remains is a large group of people who are employed in low-paying jobs. They have become the working poor.

One of the impetus for the VIP program was the "time limit" that the new Welfare law brought. The Vocational English Immersion Program (VIP) was designed by San Francisco's Department of Health Services in collaboration with instructors from San Francisco City College. They realized that limited English speakers on welfare were unlikely to be

successful in traditional ESL (English-as-Second-Language) classes. It was determined that a more customized approach to learning functional English would be needed. They felt traditional programs were too comprehensive and tended to build skills over an extended period of time. "Time, according to Jeanne Zarka, Program Director of the VIP program, is one thing recipients on welfare don't have". Low English proficiency is a barrier to obtaining and retaining stable employment that will lead to self-sufficiency. English as a Second Language (ESL) and Vocational English as a Second (VESL) consist of education for persons who must acquire or improve their English language skills. After a brief description of the status of the VIP program, the case study: a) focuses on the program components, b) profiles the participants and the learning environment, c) describes the program successes, d) outlines the cost, and e) concludes with recommendations for Santa Clara County.

In April 2000 – July 2000, in collaboration with DHS and San Francisco City College, a VIP Pilot Program was launched with 16 participants (ESL level 1,2, and 3). Ten completed the program in July 2000. Two participants left the program early to begin working, and one participant dropped out of the program. Of the 13 participants who continued in the VIP program, ninety-two percent achieved a positive outcome- job placement or completion. Eighty percent of students who completed the program demonstrated an improvement of 2 or more ESL levels. The outcome of the Pilot VIP program was considered a success. Since September, 2000, the VIP program has been implemented as a

permanent (VESL) program that can be offered to individuals with low English proficiency who are required to participate in an approved employment plan.

### PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The VESL Immersion Program (VIP) is an 18-week, intensive, customized, vocational ESL language program for the limited English-speaking participant. The objective is to teach functional workplace English so that participants can acquire and improve their vocational English language skills, and assist participants to advance 1 to 2 levels within 18 weeks. Through intensive employment-focused (ESL) and workplace culture immersion, the clients with limited English can compete for higher level jobs and advancement and are at less risk for becoming the working poor.

The following are available class options:

- **Core VIP**, 6 hrs/daily 30 hrs/week for 18 weeks
  - Designed to meet the 32-hr/week participation requirement for recipients on cash aid.
  - Offered Mon. – Fri. 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
  - Includes practical, vocational English and workplace culture with emphasis on speaking & listening skills, plus introduction to computers, computer assisted language learning, pronunciation, and conversation. The program provides an optional computer lab from 3:00-4:00 p.m. for participants who desire to build further skills.
- **Modified VIP**, 4 hrs/daily 20 hrs/week for 18 weeks
  - Designed for 2nd parent in home or other voluntary or part-time work activity participant
  - Offered Mon. – Fri., 9:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.

- **Part-time VIP**, 10 hrs/wk, 2 eves. + weekend half day for 18 weeks
  - Designed for working participants who desire to improve their work-related English to advance in employment
  - Offered Wed – Fri, 6:00 p.m.- 9:00 p.m. + Sat., 9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.
- **Literacy Immersion**, 10,20, or 30 hr/wk.
  - Designed for participants who are not literate in their home language, and desire to be successful in VIP, other ESL or job training programs.

### VIP/ESL Computer Component

The curriculum is based on actual tasks pertaining computer skills that are related to the classroom and the workplace. The tasks that are assigned simulate the activities that are performed in the class. The training offers instruction in the areas of Basic Computer Processing, Introduction to Applications: Microsoft and Excel, Printing and Internet Basics. The hands-on training supplements the on going English classes where a participant completes assigned homework and class writings on a computer. As an example, I observed a Level 1 class, where the students were asked to interview a partner in English about what kind of work they would like to do. As their homework assignment, they were asked to complete their homework in their computer class and type their answers, save them on disk and also print a copy.

### SCREENING PROCESS

Prospective participants meet with their Employment Specialist to be registered for an ESL level assessment, conducted specifically for the VIP program at designated times and locations. The

assessment is used to group prospective participants by ESL level and to determine language-training needs. If an applicant is assessed above the appropriate level for a particular VIP session, or does not meet minimum literacy requirements the VIP Liaison will notify the Employment Specialist and attempt to identify and recommend other option(s). Prospective participants should have attained a basic literacy level in their home language. Persons interested in language immersion who speak very little or no English and who are illiterate in their home language are encouraged to consider the Literacy Immersion option prior to applying for any of the VESL Immersion Programs.

Unlike customary ESL or VESL classes, VIP provides immersion in practical, workplace language and culture, with emphasis on speaking and comprehension. Training sessions are limited to 20 participants from a variety of home language groups, who are pre-assessed for compatible ESL levels. It integrates development of vocational language and workplace soft skills. All VIP sessions operate as cohort models, rather than open entry/open exit. Participants are expected to complete the entire 18-week program. Language skills are assessed at the beginning, middle, and end of the program to measure language improvement. The core full-time session performance objective is to assist participants to improve two ESL levels during the 18-week period. Participants are linked to case management services where attendance and progress are monitored to remove other barriers that prevent full program participation and employment.

### **CASE MANAGEMENT**

- All of the programs include an integrated case management component.

- Case management provides immediate intervention around issues of attendance, punctuality, childcare, domestic violence, health needs and other potential barriers.
- A VIP liaison monitors daily attendance communicates frequently with participants and their Employment Specialists, meets frequently with instructors and participants to resolve problems/and or help keep them on track.

As an example of the intervention on the day of my first visit I went to a level 1 class. One of the participants was assigned to do a floor plan of where he lived and label each room by its name. He looked over to me and stated in Spanish that he had just become homeless. I told the instructor and she immediately left the room and got a staff person to talk to and assist him. Earlier in the class this same person had expressed to me how difficult the class was for him and that he thought he would not make it. As I write this report I am happy to state he is still in class and expects to graduate in May!

### **VIP Liaison**

Serves as part of a collaborative team to ensure the effective implementation of the VIP training as an employment support service for the participant. The liaison facilitates communication with program instructors and Employment Specialists to support timely follow-through and resolution of participant issues and performance problems, as needed. The VIP liaison serves as the information contact for Employment Specialists, participants, and instructors regarding day-to-day operations of the training program. The liaison conducts periodic instructor and participant evaluations to evaluate and improve overall program effectiveness.

### **PROFILES OF LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT PARTICIPANTS:**

I found it interesting that typically in an ESL level 2 or 3 class the participants are recent immigrants who have beyond a high school or professional education, who may have studied English grammar, but have limited speaking and comprehension skills. They may be computer literate with work experience in their home country, but lack knowledge of U.S. workplace culture. They desire to learn vocational English as quickly as possible to enter a vocational training program and/or obtain entry-level employment with a career path. I observed the higher level classes to have a higher percentage of Russian speaking participants. ESL level 1 typically has participants who have been in the U.S. 6-10 years, have few years of formal education, and may or may not be literate. They have work experience in their home country and have spent months in ESL classes but demonstrate very limited ability to communicate in English. They desire an entry-level job but state that lack of English is a primary barrier to their employment.

### **SUCCESSFUL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE**

From the teacher's perspective the uniqueness of the VIP program comes from having an environment where successful learning can take place. What the teacher does in the classroom depends on support from administration, careful monitoring of student attendance and progress, and support services for the students. Organizing a program in this manner can only be done in an atmosphere where students are attending regularly and can focus on learning with a minimal amount of distraction from problems in the areas of child care, family relations, and physical and emotional disabilities. A

good working relationship between teachers, the VIP liaison, the employment specialist, and other administrators and support staff, gives the students the support they need to reduce these outside distractions and give their full attention to learning. They define successful learning as a significant improvement in language proficiency and readiness for employment. Readiness for employment means that the students have acquired interpersonal skills and personal qualities that make them more employable, in addition to improved English. The teachers believe that once a stable learning environment is established, the learning is enhanced by building the class around teamwork, classroom jobs, short-and long-term projects, work-site visits and computer assisted language learning.

### **Teamwork and Classroom Jobs:**

Students are told that in order to be a successful employee they need to learn how to participate as a member of a team and work with cultural diversity. The class is divided into 5 teams with 2-4 members on each team. Classroom jobs, such as making photocopies, are assigned to each team and rotated every 2 weeks. Team members are also responsible for helping each other with homework and collecting handouts and assignments for members who are absent.

### **Short and Long-term Projects:**

Projects help students learn by doing. An example of a short-term project is an information scavenger hunt. The students go out in teams and are required to find information on a list from the surrounding area such as addresses, locations, prices of certain items, and transportation information. An example of a long-term project is a bake sale. Students organize the production of baked goods, decide on

prices, make flyers, deal with customers, and decide what to do with the profits.

### **Work-site Visits:**

Students get a chance to see people working at jobs about which they might have an interest, talk to workers (sometimes in their own language), and ask questions. Very often the person who conducts the tour is someone who started in an entry-level job and is now in management, so they can understand the possibilities for advancement. Students are given pre- and post-tasks to get the most out of the visits.

### **Computer Assisted Language Learning:**

Students are given an opportunity to experience modern technology in their language. The activities are not designed to specifically teach them how to use computers, but by learning to navigate these programs they learn computer skills which, even at a minimal level, are valuable in today's job market. In job exploration, for example, students can go online, find an occupational interest survey, do the survey, print up the results and discuss in groups what jobs are suggested by the results.

### **SUCCESS TO-DATE — PARTICIPANT DATA**

Based on the Fall 2000 enrollment and Final Report dated February 2001:

- Twenty people participated in the VIP program during the Fall semester
- Thirteen received 30 hours of instruction weekly in the day program
- Seven received ten hours of instruction weekly in the evening/weekend program
- ALL STUDENTS COMPLETED THE PROGRAM

- Sixteen continued with the VIP in either the day or evening/weekend program in Spring 2001
- One enrolled in a medical assisting program at the California School for Medical Sciences and the other three are involved in job search activities
- The results of their language development: 10% percent of the participants remained at their entering level. 50% increased one level and 40% increased two or more levels
- The program provides job readiness where a participant, if they wish, can go to a 4 week job search program with better preparation and more likelihood for success
- The program provides participants with the skills needed to enter a regular vocational program and be better prepared with necessary language skills
- Upon completion of the program, participants have a better chance of obtaining a better paying job with a career path
- Participant attendance in the VIP program is high in comparison to other VESL programs

### **FUNDING**

The cost for instruction is split between San Francisco DHS and San Francisco City College. Funding sources for San Francisco DHS are: Department of Labor, W2W/DOL funds, and General Funds. Up until recently it included CalWORKs incentive funds. If our agency would pay for the entire cost of a VIP class the cost would run about \$30,000 per 18 week session, for certified instructors, books materials, and curriculum development/non-instructional hours and graduation expenses. With maximum allowable enrollment of 20 the cost per student would be \$1500. With 12-15 students, the cost would run \$2,000-2,500

per student. An estimated cost of a number of CBO training program proposals run about \$4,000-\$5,000 per participant enrolled.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- That the VIP program be further evaluated by our agency's Employment and Benefit Department by conducting an evaluation of the current curriculum used in the current VESL classes offered through our agency. Upon review, consideration should be given to implement a VIP Pilot program.
- The role of the VIP liaison has been crucial to the success of the program. I recommend that a designated person be considered to serve in this capacity. Attendance in work activities has been a problem in our agency. Monitoring the participant's attendance and providing a case management component may prevent many from "falling through the cracks" by connecting them to needed services.
- Implementing a similar VESL Immersion program will support one of our Agency's Performance Based Performance goals: That of supporting the working poor in achieving self-sufficiency.

### **CONCLUSION**

During my visit to San Francisco, I had an opportunity to observe classes from levels 1 through 5 of the VIP program. I am most impressed with the level 1 class. Writing this document does not capture the spirit of the classroom environment. The commitment, the passion, the patience, the encouraging words and the respect the teachers express to their students is genuine and the participants know it. The classes are highly interactive and promote the teamwork the program is intended to create. It

was amazing to see adults with different ethnic backgrounds coming together and helping each other with their class work. Students had an opportunity to evaluate the program after nine weeks and some changes and adjustments were made based on their input.