SELF-SUFFICIENCY SUPPORT SERVICES

Chapter 7

Combining Business with Rehabilitation in a Public Work Center for Disabled and Low-Income Participants

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Work centers represent a true partnership that benefits the business community, the recipient of public assistance, personnel in social services, and the taxpayer. The business community benefits by contracting with work centers to complete low-cost, high-quality jobs that include assembly, packaging, and shipping. The participant benefits by receiving job training, work experience, and possibly competitive mainstream employment while having access to a wide variety of rehabilitation services. Social services personnel benefit from work centers because they can improve the quality of life for participants by helping them to become self-sufficient. Finally, the taxpayer benefits because increased participant employment results in the reduced expenditure of public funds. Given these benefits, it is somewhat surprising that work centers have not received heightened national attention following the passage of welfare reform legislation as an ideal program to

promote self-sufficiency through employment and reduced welfare dependency.

Advocates point out that, in addition to benefiting participants, work centers affect all citizens because (1) increased participant employment results in decreased public assistance expenditures and lower taxes and (2) as rehabilitation facilities they can often sustain themselves financially without requiring large expenditures from taxpayer-supported public funds. Employing hard-to-place individuals is becoming increasingly important with welfare reforms that require work and set time limits on benefits. Many welfare recipients capable of working will have found employment by the time the first wave of time limits expires. Only those with significant barriers to employment will remain on the welfare rolls (Olson and Pavetti, 1996). These recipients can potentially benefit the most from work center services and support.

In addition to WorkCenter resources, human services clients (primarily CalWORKs or General Assistance [GA] recipients) have access to an additional array of services. In thirty-day intervals, human services case managers connect with clients after referral to the WorkCenter. If the participant is experiencing difficulties he or she is referred to income and employment service specialists (IESS) and/or staff in other county departments that specialize in health, mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence issues. Often, personnel from these departments work together in a team. For example, the family self-sufficiency team combines professionals from substance abuse and mental health services to assist participants with barriers to employment.

If a CalWORKs recipient is not participating in the mandatory five-day job-search skills class, he or she will receive a home visit from a case manager to assess and help resolve the issues that interfere with attendance. Unlike their Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) predecessors, CalWORKs recipients do not work at the WorkCenter, but after the job-search skills class they receive ongoing assistance with finding employment. Recipients may receive federally mandated Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) sanctions if they do not comply with training, job search, or employment participation requirements. To prevent this from occurring, CalWORKs staff offer continuing services to facilitate participation and help clients progress in their goals.

Unlike the progressive nature of TANF sanctions, GA sanctions are immediate in that a client's case is closed if he or she is not participating in the job-search skills class followed by at least three days per week of job hunting. GA recipients that proceed to work at the WorkCenter, however, receive the same services as CalWORKs recipients when they are experiencing problems that interfere with employment. They, too, receive case manager

home visits if, for example, they arrive at the WorkCenter intoxicated or they suddenly stop showing up for work. The family self-sufficiency team is frequently contacted to help GA recipients with undiagnosed mental health problems and/or substance dependence. The supports offered to human services clients by the county are as follows:

1. WorkCenter
   - Vocational rehabilitation services (VRS)
2. Support from human services
   - Home visits
   - Monthly meetings
3. Support from other county departments
   - Domestic violence services
   - Health services
   - Mental health services
   - Drug and alcohol services

This case study includes a brief literature review as a context for describing a unique public service work center operated by the Employment and Services Centers in San Mateo County, California. The description includes WorkCenter operations, staff, and services, followed by an in-depth look at the participants served. The case study concludes with a discussion of WorkCenter challenges and proposed solutions. In this case study the term *participants* is used to describe workers at the WorkCenter. Most participants are also county *clients* that may be *recipients* of public assistance (e.g., General Assistance or CalWORKs). *Staff* refers to county employees that supervise or counsel participants, and the term *customers* refers to businesses or agencies that hire the WorkCenter to complete job contracts.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

By providing employment experience, training, support, placement, and/or coaching, most work centers seek to fully integrate participants into the competitive workforce and the larger community (Visier, 1998). This goal can be traced back to the 1950s when a large number of work centers were established in the United States to serve people with psychiatric, physical, or developmental disabilities (Lamb, 1971). Prior to the 1950s, however, work centers functioned as the only alternative to mainstream employment for people with physical disabilities (Lamb, 1971).

Internationally, work centers vary in the way they view participants. From a survey sent to work center personnel in twenty-five countries, Visier

(1998) identified three types of work centers for participants who are (1) too disabled to be fully employed in the marketplace (Greece and Ireland), (2) considered trainees or clients en route to full-employee status (Australia and many European countries), and (3) considered full employees with job contracts and the right to organize (Sweden and Great Britain).

All of the work centers Visier surveyed varied on a continuum from entirely "therapeutic" to functioning as an entirely "normalized" work environment. Most work centers fall somewhere in the middle of this continuum. Visier's survey results revealed that participants are usually paid at the minimum wage, and their work typically involves packaging, assembly, or manufacturing.

On-site work centers are often combined with *supported employment,* or work that is done off site. This professional support can include on-the-job supervision and coaching, job adaptations and modifications, transportation, and assistance with social skills and money management (Rogan and Murphy, 1991). In most work center models, participants progress through a series of stages culminating in independent paid employment. These stages include preemployment training, adjustment to the workplace, time-limited employment services, and job placement (Parent, Hill, and Wehman, 1989).

One major challenge facing most work centers is finding the best balance between production and training (Rosen et al., 1993). If significant resources are devoted to the training of a large number of participants, then the work center may not have enough staff or participants for production and revenues will decline. On the other hand, future participant employability might be impeded if too few resources are devoted to training. Production will suffer if too many resources are devoted to therapeutic, medical, or social concerns and vice versa. It is difficult to find the most efficacious balance between production and rehabilitation (Visier, 1998).

In general, work centers that are more successful in training, supporting, and placing participants tend to have fewer participants available for production, which may lead to reduced revenues. In this respect, the business component of work centers competes with the rehabilitative component, resulting in the following critique primarily from within the field of vocational rehabilitation (Rosen et al., 1993):

1. The need to generate revenues may result in selecting participants who are the most productive (i.e., "creaming") in order to maximize revenues rather than serving the populations of more disabled, less productive individuals most in need of support (Rogan and Murphy, 1991).
2. The rehabilitative nature of work centers can justify the excessive *sheltering* of participants (protecting disabled participants from risk,

competition, frustration, and failure assumed to accompany independent employment). Critics believe that sheltering can isolate disabled individuals from the workforce and preclude community integration (Reker, Eikelmann, and Inhester, 1992; Rosen et al., 1993).

3. The rehabilitative nature of work centers can justify the absence of labor rights for participants, including the right to formally agree to a job contract and join a union (Visier, 1998).

Despite this critique, many authors (e.g., Rogan and Murphy, 1991; Rosen et al., 1993) discuss the potential of work centers to

- help social service and mental health clients find and maintain mainstream employment along with the material and psychological benefits of self-sufficiency;
- provide assessments of participants based on observed work performance (capability and productivity) that is not easy to obtain from participant interviews or testing;
- be located wherever a participant labor supply and organizations can provide work (Rosen et al., 1993); and
- serve people with more severe disabilities (health or mental health problems, lack of work skills or education, substance abuse, domestic violence issues, legal difficulties, or caretaker responsibilities) that are hard to place in the workforce (Rogan and Murphy, 1991; Rosen et al., 1993).

With these work center strengths and limitations in mind, it is now useful to look more closely at one of the few work centers in northern California. Participants at the WorkCenter are seen as job-search trainees that require varying amounts of rehabilitative services, but they are also viewed as productive and responsible members of the workforce. Rehabilitation staff at the WorkCenter, for example, will often support individual participants after they have found a job and help with job retention. Other times staff will assist whole work crews hired to complete off-site activities. Supervised, off-site jobs are often called *enclaves*.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE SAN MATEO COUNTY WORKCENTER

With a grant of approximately $200, the WorkCenter was established in 1967 to help welfare recipients find employment after assessing their work skills in a supervised setting. It was initially managed by a local priest and operated out of the basement of the county hospital, where participants,

most of whom were women on AFDC, completed small jobs such as packaging surgical equipment and bandages. The San Mateo County Social Services Division (now the Human Services Agency) collaborated with the hospital and oversaw program operations.

By 1970 the county mental health division partnered with social services and rented a small, two-story building in San Carlos to house the WorkCenter. In addition to recipients of AFDC, the WorkCenter also began to employ people receiving ATD, or Aid to the Disabled (a precursor to SSI, or Supplemental Security Income). Welfare recipients worked on the bottom floor and ATD recipients, often mental health consumers, worked on the top floor. Staff at the WorkCenter consisted of four vocational rehabilitation counselors, one mental health clinician, a psychologist who completed weekly vocational testing, and a consulting psychiatrist.

In 1972 the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors approved a measure that would pay WorkCenter participants a wage. These wages would come from customer payments to the WorkCenter for completion of private-industry jobs (Anonymous, 1990). This legislation, the addition of mental health participants, and the relocation to a larger facility allowed for significant WorkCenter expansion.

A major WorkCenter activity in the early 1970s was electronics assembly. One of the larger job contracts was with Lenkert, a large electronics firm across the street from the WorkCenter. A Lenkert employee taught soldering, harnessing, and other electronic assembly skills to WorkCenter participants. Skills such as these enabled participants to earn a wage, complete WorkCenter jobs, and often find independent employment in the community. A large increase in the number of AFDC recipients at this time allowed for the continuing growth of the WorkCenter.

Along with an increase in AFDC recipients at the WorkCenter, General Assistance recipients were also referred to the WorkCenter in large numbers in the early 1970s. This followed a landmark case in which a GA applicant filed a lawsuit after being told he was employable and therefore not eligible for assistance. The lawsuit was successful, and the county began referring them to the WorkCenter.

In the early 1970s WorkCenter participants from mental health and social services began to work together as a team. A new director secured additional sources of revenue for the WorkCenter, and the number of vocational counselors grew from four to thirteen within a short period of time. Social and recreation programs were established for WorkCenter participants. Outreach programs were created to increase the number of referrals from board and care homes, psychiatric hospitals, and day treatment centers. Active efforts were also made to accommodate people with disabilities and other populations that could benefit from a supported work environment.

The WorkCenter again outgrew its facilities and relocated to Elmer Street in Belmont in 1975.

The Elmer Street location was much bigger and more staff were hired to oversee increasing numbers of job contracts. The GA Employment Program was developed at this time, whereby GA recipients earned their GA checks by working at the WorkCenter rather than paying back the cash assistance after finding employment. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s GA recipients could work toward completing their high school equivalency degree on site through collaboration with a local adult school that agreed to outstation a teacher.

The WorkCenter remained on Elmer Street for ten years before moving to its current Quarry Road address in San Carlos in 1985. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s production revenues remained relatively high because of the availability of clients. Revenues have recently fallen, however, due to a shortage of participants during the strong economy of the 1990s.

To facilitate a more intimate understanding of the WorkCenter, the next section recounts the experiences of a single client. This is followed by a current description of the WorkCenter, its staff, the services they provide, and the participants that work and receive assistance.

THE EXPERIENCES OF A WORKCENTER CLIENT

At the age of thirty-seven Richard had recently been released from prison following a ten-month sentence based on domestic violence charges. When seen at the Department of Human Services it was determined that he was eligible for Food Stamps, bus passes, and a monthly GA payment of $265 based on an interest in looking for a job and participating in the WorkCenter. He lives in his brother's house in East Palo Alto and pays a monthly rent of $175. He said the following about his WorkCenter experience: "I needed help with food and paying rent, so I asked for assistance. Here they have a program which helps with government assistance and with Food Stamps, but you have to go to work before you receive anything. . . . A lot of different people come here, and it's a big help. We just need a chance to get back into society. I like to feel like I'm at least contributing something, so if I came here to at least give something while I am looking for a job.

"I work at the WorkCenter as part of the program. We are not here just to work at the WorkCenter—we are here to find employment. That's what this whole thing is about. I've put in so many applications since I've been here, and I'm getting calls. I have a couple of interviews next week. One is for Home Depot, and the other is working in sheet metal. That's what I do by trade. The sheet metal work you can make from nine to twenty-eight dollars an hour. I have two daughters, and that's why I am making an effort to find a job—so I can take care of my responsibilities toward them. As soon as I start

working I'll move out of my brother's house. I'll probably move to Menlo Park. That's where I was before this altercation with my wife happened. I'm on probation now. Every Thursday I go to my domestic violence group, and I see my probation officer once a month. I have to pay a total of about one thousand dollars in fines.

"I go to the Network Center three days a week, when I am not at the WorkCenter. Everyone is asked to bring in three or four job leads. Sometimes they pan out and sometimes they don't. They teach you how to use the newspaper, how to fill out an application correctly, and how to use the phone. They even have posted the correct way to use the phone as far as using the person's name, not to say 'yeah' and all that on the phone, but to say 'yes.' They help you with a résumé and the do's and don'ts of interviews—even how to sit and hold your hands and throw in some light talk so the interview won't be all serious. We did a couple of mock interviews, where they videotaped us. We are our own critics as far as what we did wrong and what we did right. And then our job coach, Jerry, he told us our weak points and our strengths. We also got help using the computer. They will give you individual help if you need it and extra help in general. They even have maps to give locations of where to go and what buses to catch to jobs and interviews. It really works when they help you send out your résumé and use the phone. It's so much better than running up and down the street looking for some work.

"There are only two of us left from the group of eight that I came in with. Everybody is really taking the initiative to get out of there and look for work. I know one wanted to be a waitress and she became one, and one found work at the airport in customer service. There are a lot of jobs out there. I should have a job by next week. I feel that if you come here, put in the time, and ask people for a job, you'll find it. And if you don't, in my opinion, you're not even looking. You can tell when someone's not looking for a job, especially if the job offered won't pay the bills."

CURRENT WORKCENTER OPERATIONS

With over 45,000 square feet of floor space, the current facility has the modern equipment necessary to remain competitive in securing contracts with a wide variety of private industries in the greater San Francisco Bay Area and the Silicon Valley. The equipment includes shrink-wrap machines, forklifts, two delivery trucks, and electric conveyor-driven assembly lines. There are six sections of the production floor, each with a production supervisor and a participant lead client-worker. Two production managers oversee the entire floor, and a quality control manager ensures that jobs are completed according to customer specifications. A marketing director identifies and recruits customers, and an operations manager provides executive leadership.

WorkCenter participants complete a wide variety of jobs. The major on-site activity is called *fulfillment,* or the packaging and shipping of different products. Participants ship an average of 300 packages per day, learning job skills such as forklift operation and shipping and receiving. The WorkCenter serves about thirty different companies per month, with about five jobs in operation at any one time. Companies are charged between eighteen dollars and twenty-one dollars per hour to cover participant wages, overhead, equipment, shipping, and receiving. In addition, companies frequently send engineers to train and supervise participants in electronics assembly. For example, participants are currently building Internet video cameras for Vista Imaging. In the past, other types of on-site work activity have included bicycle repair, microfilming, and the refurbishing of office equipment. The WorkCenter is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF).

The WorkCenter off-site activities are also highly varied and include a food service catering operation, a recycling service, and a janitorial program. All three serve private industry and public organizations. The food service program, for example, caters to Cañada College and many other customers in addition to serving as a cafeteria for county employees. Other off-site jobs include staff-assisted participant placement in, for example, the medical or social service records department of hospitals or county departments.

From the perspective of the customer that contracts with the WorkCenter, the WorkCenter offers competitive pricing, quick job completion, and quality that competes favorably with private industry. For example, the local United Airlines Maintenance Center contracted with the WorkCenter for the mentally disabled to sort and inspect hundreds of pounds of nuts, bolts, and clamps which were generated from tearing down a jet engine (Anonymous, 1990).

Although most WorkCenter participants are paid the minimum wage, some off-site work can pay from eight dollars to ten dollars per hour. Lead workers, for example, often find higher-paying work after obtaining supervisory experience in one of the six sections of the WorkCenter production floor. Mental health clients are paid according to a productivity assessment that is determined in their first two weeks of work and reviewed every six months thereafter. They receive half the minimum wage, for example, if their work is half as productive as the work of a nondisabled individual.

GA recipients receive the minimum wage from GA county funds. In essence, these recipients work off their benefits and do not receive wages that exceed them. All participants are evaluated regularly.

WORKCENTER SERVICES

The WorkCenter is a part of several larger organizational structures, including Vocational Rehabilitation Services. VRS is itself a small component of one of three regional (the Central Region) Employment and Services Centers in San Mateo County that include various programs from the county human services agency. Participants are supported by a variety of VRS staff while they receive work assessment, training, and experience. If needed, transportation, child care, and interview clothes are provided throughout the job-search process.

At intake, screening, and assessment specialists determine eligibility and assess work skills through vocational testing and interviewing. To be eligible, participants must be U.S. citizens that reside in the county, and they must be willing to work. In addition, they should be receiving mental health services if deemed appropriate by a treating professional, or be referred from the State Department of Rehabilitation or another sponsoring agency.

The screening is followed by participation in a weeklong class on job-seeking skills in which interests are explored and résumés developed. The class is part of the Network Center. The center is equipped with computers, telephones, job listings, phone books, and other resources that assist in seeking employment, and it is staffed by job-search and placement specialists. A participant flowchart of the WorkCenter intake process is included in Figure 7.1. The curriculum encourages self-sufficiency and teaches job-search and retention skills. Like the earlier GA Employment Program, participation in this class is mandatory for GA and CalWORKs recipients unless they are exempted from work requirements. Recipients are usually exempted because they have a disability or they are caring for someone that has a disability.

After the job-search class, a ten-day WorkCenter participant assessment begins with the identification of significant barriers to employment. In the

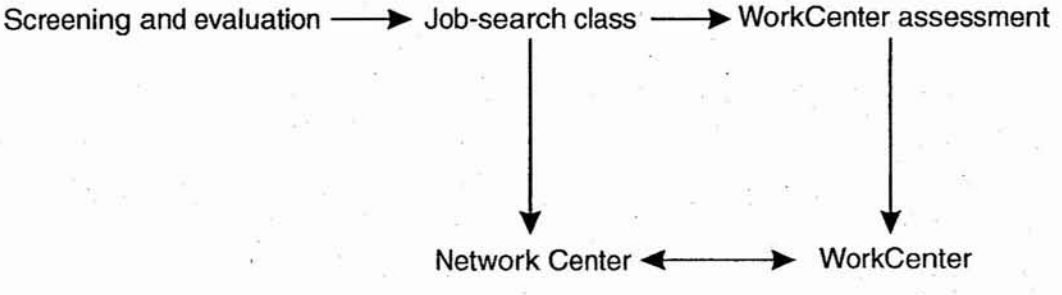

FIGURE 7.1. Flowchart of the WorkCenter Intake Processes

assessment, the participant is evaluated for work performance and stamina, as well as the ability to follow instructions, learn, get along with co-workers, and arrive at work on time. Information from the assessment is used to remove barriers to the client's employability. Participants continue to work at the WorkCenter and look for a job at the Network Center until employment is found.

A CLOSER LOOK AT WORKCENTER PARTICIPANTS

Recipients of GA and CalWORKs work together on a daily basis with a variety of other populations, providing an integrated and transitional employment experience. Although most participants are referred by county departments of mental health or human services, smaller numbers come from a prison work-furlough program, substance abuse programs, rehabilitation programs, and the family court for nonpayment of ordered child support. Mental health clients are also referred from the State Department of Rehabilitation. According to one senior employee, the biggest changes at the WorkCenter over the course of its history have been the addition of these new populations of participants.

Approximately 100 people work at the WorkCenter on a typical day, and about 2,500 people are served each year, based on the goal of a high turnover rate. Most WorkCenter positions are vacated more than twenty times per year. An estimated 25 percent of participants find competitive employment, while the remainder drop out of the program, periodically reenter, or continue as WorkCenter participants. Many of the remaining participants have chronic mental health disabilities and stay in the program for longer periods of time. Due to shortages in the labor market, WorkCenter participants are occasionally employed by a community organization in order to complete contracts in a timely manner.

The proportions of participants from these different populations have changed over time. In the 1980s and early 1990s about two-thirds of the participants were human services (GA or TANF/AFDC) recipients and about one-third were mental health clients. However, these percentages have recently reversed themselves. Now, about two-thirds of the participants are mental health clients and only one-third are human service clients. As a result of low unemployment in the county and welfare reform, there has been a dramatic decrease in public assistance recipients at the WorkCenter. For example, a few years ago there were about 285 GA recipients at the WorkCenter each day, whereas there are now only about sixty-five per day. This 77 percent decrease in GA recipients at the WorkCenter is caused by (1) a strong economy, (2) a very low (2 percent) local unemployment rate, with most GA

clients finding competitive employment within a short period of time, and (3) a high cost of living in the county resulting in poor people moving to more affordable communities.

Largely due to a strong economy in the late 1990s, the WorkCenter completed fewer job contracts along with dramatically reduced revenues and the need for county subsidy. In 2000 the WorkCenter generated approximately $900,000, representing roughly 27 percent of total revenues. About 42 percent of total revenues are from the county human services agency, and the remainder (31 percent) is from the State Department of Rehabilitation and the county Mental Health Unit.

WORKCENTER CHALLENGES

In addition to a reduced supply of labor and revenue shortfalls, the WorkCenter faces several other challenges.

Participant Challenges

- A significant percentage of participants, especially the most disabled, are hard to place in the competitive workforce. Many of them have a fear of independent employment that further complicates the more apparent physical and psychiatric barriers to self-sufficiency. Flexible and creative approaches are often taken in placing these participants, yet new approaches still need to be developed and implemented.
- A significant percentage of participants, especially from human services, have difficulty retaining jobs once they are placed as a result of substance abuse, undiagnosed mental health problems, legal issues, or family problems. Although job coaching assists participants in keeping jobs, many return to VRS and the WorkCenter after varying periods of time.
- Conflicts sometimes arise among participants working together in an integrated work environment. GA recipients, for example, sometimes state they feel uncomfortable working with mental health clients. Other times the inappropriate behavior of some participants interferes with WorkCenter production. Problems such as these are handled at the WorkCenter by assessment and behavior modification techniques, followed by individual and group counseling if needed.

Administrative Challenges

- It is often difficult to obtain the types of customer jobs that WorkCenter participants are able to complete. Participants can complete

packaging and assembly jobs within customer time limits, but other jobs are more complex and are more quickly completed by private industry. Competing with private industry, therefore, is an ongoing struggle.

- As a result of rapid changes due to welfare reform and the recent creation of the Employment Services Center for the central region of the county at VRS, many staff positions are changing quickly. For example, employees (IESS) that had primarily engaged in screening and eligibility now have many case management responsibilities, resulting in some role confusion.
- The majority of participants today are mental health clients with cognitive difficulties related to lack of concentration or attention skills that can lead to lower productivity.

To address the major challenge of reduced production revenues due to labor shortages, plans are being prepared to assist CalWORKs recipients to the WorkCenter when their two-year TANF time limit expires. This would enable them to fulfill their work requirements and continue their job search while providing needed WorkCenter labor. Another idea under consideration is to provide broader and more assertive outreach to underserved low-income or disabled populations.The future success of the WorkCenter is dependent on strategies that increase its capacity to involve a sufficient number of participants to meet the demands of new contracts.

The rehabilitative success of the WorkCenter, however, has remained constant for over thirty years. What started as a $200 operation out of a hospital basement has grown into an organization recognized nationally as a model for successful vocational rehabilitation services. In counseling, supervising, or helping with job search and retention, WorkCenter staff have viewed low-income and disabled individuals as capable and productive yet in need of temporary assistance. More importantly, staff members have helped people to overcome personal obstacles and find employment. Services that achieve this objective will be increasingly needed as greater numbers of people are encouraged to find work and exit public welfare and disability rolls.

In helping welfare recipients achieve self-sufficiency, the county human services agency offers a great deal of support to WorkCenter participants, including ongoing contact with a case manager, home visits, and referrals to a continuum of county professionals. In addition, welfare recipients receive services that are available to all participants, including (1) a job-search skills class; (2) access to a variety of rehabilitation staff; (3) assistance with transportation, child care, and clothes for interviews; (4) WorkCenter as-

sessments and job experience; and (5) access to the Network Center and help with finding and retaining employment.

WorkCenter staff members have learned valuable lessons in delivering these services. First, it is important to keep an eye on the balance between productivity and employability. Although employing participants is the primary WorkCenter objective, success in achieving this objective will result in lower production revenues and increased public subsidy. In this respect the need for increased state and county funding is an indication of the rehabilitative success of the WorkCenter.

Staff members have also learned to change the way they view WorkCenter participants because they are no longer exclusively mental health clients or GA recipients. Participants have recently become much more diverse. Rather than qualifying for services because they are disabled or poor (deficit-based eligibility), participants now qualify for assistance because they have the desire to learn new skills and transition to higher-level employment (strength-based eligibility). As a result, staff roles have changed dramatically as the WorkCenter has opened its doors to the larger community.

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