

Five Lessons Learned From Summer 2009

Enhancing Year Round Youth Services and Planning for Summer 2010

1. Align Vision and Policy

Oklahoma took the opportunity to reinforce their vision for youth service and refine policies at both the state and local levels. Major outcomes of this process were clarity of policy intent and discussion on how to develop policy that meets legislative requirements, supports state vision, and that enhances quality programming practices. The process they have committed to:

- provides opportunities for statewide leaders and youth service providers to share innovative program design, to dialogue about quality services, and to make wise investment of resources.
- creates increased communications between state and local leadership to clarify vision and review policy.

2. Identify and Recruit Target Youth

Traditional summer employment programs targeted in-school youth not only because they could benefit from services, but also because they were the easiest to recruit and word of mouth spread quickly among this group. To support their vision, Oklahoma wanted to ensure that they would serve older, out-of-school youth and took proactive steps to target this population. Approximately 57% of their summer employment program customers were older, out-of-school youth, with 24% continuing services beyond summer. With the success of this strategy, programs throughout the state:

- continue to support the goal of shifting focus to older youth – those most likely to fall through the cracks or youth that have fewer targeted resources in the community.
- have identified new recruitment strategies and rethought marketing messages.
- are aligning with the Federal youth vision and investing in older youth as an anticipated direction for WIA reauthorization.

3. Incorporate More Work Experience, More Often

Young adults join WIA programs as an entry to the world of work. When this opportunity is withheld until later in the process, many become disillusioned and drop out of programs. Moreover, young adults have provided feedback that they want to work “more than in the summer months.” Shifting to the older population opens new programming options and removes the limitations governed by labor laws and scheduling conflicts due to the major priority of completing education (for younger population). Incorporating work experience more often for more young people provides:

- motivation for the target audience – starting with employment and building additional services around work opportunities.
- a source of income for living expenses combined with career pathway options and reinforcement for continued skills building.
- opportunities to learn new skills and “test” these skills in action in order to ensure a successful transition into unsubsidized employment.
- ways to wisely invest funding to build skills and/or reinforce classroom learning.

4. Expand Private Sector Involvement

Shifting to private sector work experience placements provided both challenges and opportunities for staff. Challenges included rethinking how programs were promoted, rethinking policies and procedures to ensure that they were not cumbersome to employers and higher expectations for worker performance. As providers throughout Oklahoma delved into this newer arena, they found that targeting private sector employers for work experience placements:

- supports career pathways as an opportunity to explore options through a “real world” experience.
- had a higher likelihood of leading to placement after work experience – either at the worksite or other employers.
- builds a positive reputation within business community.
- changes view of young adults – now seen as skilled competent employees dispelling myths and misconceptions about this audience.
- requires staff to become more “business savvy” not only in how they market services to employers, but also on how they include private sector business practices into other programming aspects.

5. Design Services to Reflect Target Audiences

One size does not fit all! Local areas were challenged to be creative and innovative with their program design. Many areas took this challenge and ran with it. While summer was a way to try out new ideas, many ideas are now being incorporated into year-round programming activities. Four successful program design highlights in Oklahoma were:

- developing program services around “Academies” – including Technology, Entrepreneur, and Green Energy. These academies were inclusive of career exploration, applied academics, exposure to career pathways and work experience activities within the career field.
- incorporating “Community Service Projects” – young adults across the state performed over 9000 hours of community service embedded within the program design. Community Service included lending a helping hand in Business Improvement and Main Street Projects; city clean up and landscaping; not-for-profit service; and green projects.
- Instituting a “4+1 Model” – this program model took the approach of four days of work at the worksite and one day of reflection/learning in a classroom setting, providing the opportunity for young adults to process lessons learned, problem-solve workplace issues, and focus on job search activities in order to transition into unsubsidized employment.
- Going “Green” – ARRA provided the opportunity to move into green jobs and connect with other agencies that were charged with implementation green strategies. Programs throughout the state connected with community partners to assist in weatherization, rebuilding, and recycling projects as part of the going green trend.