

One-Stop Career Centers and Job Seekers with Disabilities: Insights from Kansas

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The purpose of this study was to better understand the needs and experiences of job seekers with disabilities and to relate these findings to requirements of the Workforce Investment Act One-Stop service delivery system. Results from structured interviews and focus groups in Kansas indicate that the One-Stop system often fails to meet the needs of customers with disabilities. Some specific areas for improvement include staff knowledge about disabilities and disability etiquette, staff interactions with customers, physical and programmatic accessibility, and marketing both to consumers and employers.

The U.S. Congress enacted the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 to consolidate a variety of federal job service programs into a single system, partly through the creation of the "One-Stop" service delivery system. The One-Stop system was created to provide job seekers and employers information, counseling, and help in finding education, jobs, and job training (Hoff, 2001). One of WIA's seven key principles is universal access, whereby any job seeker -- including people with disabilities -- can access these employment-related services at one location. Unfortunately, the promises of One-Stop centers' physical and programmatic accessibility for job seekers with disabilities have remained largely unmet (e.g., Holcomb & Barnow, 2004; National Council on Disability, 2002; U.S. Department of Labor [DOL], 2002).

Workforce Investment Act of 1998

Prior to the WIA legislation, the U.S. government distributed approximately \$15 billion in public funds to about 17 different employment and training programs (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2004). These programs were part of four federal agencies -- the Departments of Labor, Education, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development. Many of the programs served narrowly defined populations (e.g., welfare recipients, migrant and seasonal workers, dislocated workers, veterans, Native Americans, persons with disabilities, persons with limited literacy), and other programs served the general population (e.g., unemployment insurance, employment services). The U.S. Department of Labor set out seven key principles for unifying these programs into a single workforce preparation and employment system: (a) streamlining

services through better integration at the street level in the One-Stop delivery system; (b) empowering individuals with financial assistance, information, and guidance; (c) universal access to the One-Stop system; (d) increased accountability through performance measurement and funding incentives; (e) local oversight through local workforce investment boards and the private sector; (f) state and local flexibility to implement systems tailored to local and regional labor market needs; and (g) improved youth programs with strong connections to academic programs and labor market needs (DOL, 2001).

In contrast to programs and services that could only be accessed by particular affinity groups, WIA dictated that any job seeker in the U.S. might access the One-Stop system's core employment-related services (DOL, 2001). These core services include information about job vacancies, career options, student financial aid, employment trends, and instruction on how to conduct a job search, write a resume, or interview. After utilizing the core services available through the One-Stop system, some individuals may need additional services (e.g., career counseling, vocational assessments, training) in order to obtain and persist in productive employment. The One-Stop system was designed to provide these more intensive services when possible, or in limited circumstances make referrals to organizations that can provide them.

The Department of Education's Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program, a mandatory partner in the One-Stop system, provides services to individuals whose disability constitutes a substantial impediment to employment and who can benefit in terms of employment from their services. As such, VR plays a critical role for some job seekers with disabilities who need rehabilitative services, long-term training, assistive technology, or other intensive support in obtaining and sustaining employment. However,

not all people with disabilities qualify for VR services under this definition, and many people with disabilities do not need or want VR services. Moreover, even if a person is receiving VR services, he or she still has a right to use One-Stop services to complement or augment those from VR. In fact, WIA's nondiscrimination regulations indicate that One-Stops may not rely on VR to provide services to people with disabilities, but that they should serve them alongside people without disabilities (GAO, 2004).

Literature review

In principle WIA's universal access provision along with the non-discrimination requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) address the accessibility needs of job seekers with disabilities at One-Stops. However, research shows that in practice persons with disabilities may still face a number of difficulties when utilizing the One-Stop system. A study conducted by Funaro and Dixon (2002) shortly after WIA implementation regarding systems issues that impact effectiveness of the One-Stops in providing services to customers with disabilities identified several problems: lack of accessibility, limited outreach to individuals with disabilities, and having no performance measures related to disability. The research of Timmons, Schuster, Hamner and Bose (2001), also conducted in the early stages of WIA implementation, focused on consumers' perspectives of the characteristics of effective employment services for people with disabilities, regardless of the service provider. Timmons et al. (2001) identified five key components of effective service for this population: agency culture, consumer-directedness, access to resources, quality of personnel, and coordination of services.

A more recent study (GAO, 2004) of 18 One-Stop centers found inconsistent progress toward architectural accessibility, assistive technology, and staff capacity to serve people with disabilities. The study also indicated variability in the structure of the relationship between One-Stop centers and VR, the agency to which many people with disabilities are referred for additional services. The report concludes that, although action has been taken to facilitate access to One-Stops for persons with disabilities, these efforts may not be sufficient.

Holcomb and Barnow (2004) examined the One-Stop system capacity to serve people with disabilities by analyzing selected WIA data, reviewing existing literature, and holding discussions with numerous stakeholders. They found significant strides had been made in reducing physical barriers since WIA's inception. However, they identified four major barriers to serving people with disabilities in the One-Stop system. First, job seekers are initially expected to use a resource room on their own without registering or disclosing their disability, thus staff have difficulty knowing who may need assistive technology or accommodations to access core services. Second, when One-Stop staff becomes aware of a customer's disability, they often make an automatic referral to VR rather than making One-Stop services accessible to the customer, and referring to VR only if the customer needs rehabilitation services. Third, many One-Stops are unwilling to use their limited training resources for people with disabilities who might take longer to train, and may not achieve full-time employment as a result of the training. Finally, programs must meet per-

formance standards for employment and earnings of customers receiving intensive services or training. If they fail to meet these standards, they are subject to sanctions, including losing their right to operate. However, the performance standards are not adjusted for customers who face discrimination or other employment barriers, thus discouraging One-Stop staff from providing intensive services and training to people with disabilities.

At this writing, the 1998 WIA legislation is undergoing the congressional reauthorization process. One proposal under consideration seeks to remove dedicated funding to VR and make it available for the provision of more "generic" One-Stop services. This proposal is particularly troubling given the apparent inability of the current service system to meet the needs of job seekers with disabilities, as demonstrated by others' research as well as our own.

We present here information collected from job seekers with disabilities regarding their thoughts about ideal One-Stop service provision and their actual experiences with One-Stops in Kansas. We examine our consumers' comments and experiences using three broad categories -- accessibility, attitudes and disability awareness of staff, and services -- to assess the overall effectiveness of the One-Stops in providing employment services to Kansans with disabilities.

Methodology

We employed a two-step method for studying the responsiveness of One-Stops to job seekers with disabilities: consumer focus groups and mystery customers. First, we conducted focus groups to retrospectively identify recurring issues from the perspective of individuals who had used One-Stop or other vocational services, and to elicit descriptions of an ideal One-Stop. Next we modified the DOL's "mystery customer" investigation technique to examine issues and ideals identified by the focus groups related to universal access for job seekers with disabilities. In contrast to the focus group perceptions and recollections, the mystery customer process provided data and insights into the contemporary experiences of job seekers with disabilities.

Consumer focus groups

We conducted a total of six focus groups in Leavenworth, Kansas City, Overland Park, Topeka, Lawrence, and Parsons, Kansas. These sites represent a range of urban/inner city, suburban, and rural locations. The sessions were held in the last four months of 2001.

Participants. We recruited a self-selected sample through centers for independent living, high-school transition specialists, community mental health centers and disability-specific support groups, and paid each participant \$20. We had contact with a total of 48 job seekers with disabilities who were 65% female, 35% male with ages ranging from early 20's to mid-60's. Their disabilities ranged from visible to invisible, including such diverse conditions as asthma, depression and other mental illnesses, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, multiple chemical sensitivities, diabetes, osteogenesis imperfecta, various mobility impairments, cognitive

disabilities, and HIV/AIDS. We did not collect data on race or ethnicity of participants, although we believe numerous racial and ethnic minorities were represented. Because many focus group members had past experience with One-Stops, they were in a good position to articulate how their experiences could have been better and what ideal services could look like.

Procedures. Our focus group facilitator followed a semi-structured process in which all participants were asked to discuss their past and current job search activities and their perceptions of what would make a One-Stop center seem inviting, welcoming, and inclusive to them. The facilitator posed questions about experiences people had trying to obtain employment, sharing information about their disability, and the support services they would like to reach employment goals. Table 1 lists sample questions from the facilitators' procedural guidelines.

Data collection and analysis. Audio recordings of each focus group session were transcribed, then checked for reliability by two researchers. We examined the transcripts, then categorized and tabulated with the goal of identifying recurring themes or "pattern-matching" (Yin, 1994).

Mystery customers

The DOL's mystery customer investigation technique involves sending job seekers into One-Stops and having them report back afterward using a checklist. This technique allows organizations to collect "real-life" data from the user's perspective (National Center on Workforce and Disability, 2004).

Participants. We determined that mystery customers should be authentic job seekers with disabilities. To meet that objective we recruited such individuals from focus group participants and from individuals working with VR counselors at that time. The eight we selected had been looking for work an average of 1.4 years -- some for as little as six months, other up to five years. Their disabilities, including co-occurrences, were: legally blind, depression, anxiety, ADHD, fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis, bipolar disorder, asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, and cerebral palsy. They ranged in age from 22 to 51 years ($M = 36$); all were Caucasian. Five participants held post-secondary degrees, two previously attended college, and one held a high school diploma. Each mystery customer received a \$75 stipend.

Procedures. We developed a checklist for the mystery customers to evaluate the One-Stops by modifying an existing instrument (Hoff, 2001) to include issues and ideas identified in the focus group analysis. Our instrument used a Likert scale indicating whether the mystery customer agreed or disagreed with statements made about their experience at the One-Stop. Statements on the instrument addressed: (a) agency culture (e.g., Asking for help from the staff is easy); (b) accessibility (e.g., It is easy to open the doors); (c) consumer-directness of the service (e.g., I have a choice about what kind of services I want to receive); (d) access to resources (e.g., All the services this agency provides were described to me when I first went there); (e) quality of personnel (e.g., My counselor takes the time to get to know me); and (f) service coordination (e.g., Staff at the Center asked about people from other agencies who are currently assisting me). In addition to evaluating statements on these topics, the mystery customers documented whether specific core, intensive, and training services were made available to them by indicating yes, no, not applicable, or do not know (Table 2).

We provided initial training about services that might be available and the checklist to use in assessing experiences to the job seekers who visited the One-Stops as mystery customers. Although our project was to include multiple One-Stop centers in Kansas, we had difficulty recruiting participants to serve as mystery customers, perhaps because we targeted only people with disabilities who were actually looking for jobs. Consequently, we

Table 1
Focus Group Questions

Category	Sample questions
Past experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever been to the 'job service center'? • What was your experience?
Ideal services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would an ideal career center look like? • Let's make a list of services, attitudes, practices, etc. that would make you feel invited, welcomed and included in the center. • What would marketing materials say that would make you feel like you would get the services you need? • When you get to the One-Stop, what would you like to notice that would make you feel that your needs will be met at the center? • What is important to you about the location of the One-Stop? • If you were given an opportunity to talk to the director of the One-Stop, what advice would you give him or her about serving individuals with your particular disability?
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe how you would like the staff to serve you. • How would the staff make you feel comfortable about disclosing your disability?
Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the best way to ask you about your disability? • What do you expect the people at the One-Stop to know about your disability? • Is it important for you to be served side-by-side with people without disabilities? • Would you want or expect One-Stop staff to speak to employers about your special needs? • Would you expect the One-Stop staff be able to counsel you as to the impact taking a job would have on your Social Security benefits? Where do you get this information now? • Would you want or expect the One-Stop staff to teach you when to disclose your disability and when to ask for reasonable accommodations on the job?
Discouragers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would discourage you from going to a One-Stop?

employed only eight mystery customers who visited the same One-Stop center in one suburban area.

Initially, we met with mystery customers in small groups to discuss the project and to acquaint them with the checklist form used for the evaluation. Once the mystery customers had made their visits, they filled out the checklist and contacted project staff. Staff then interviewed the customers about their experiences. All of the mystery customer visits occurred between February and May of 2003.

Data collection and analysis. Transcripts were made for each interview and checked for reliability by two researchers. The transcripts and notes from the mystery customer interviews were next used to develop a case study for each individual. The case study evidence was examined, categorized, and tabulated with the goal of identifying recurring themes or "pattern-matching" (Yin, 1994). By using multiple case studies to verify themes, we hoped to address the issue of external validity. The case studies in combination with corroborating themes from the focus group transcripts allowed for triangulation of data and, consequently, provided construct validity for the findings.

Findings

Based on the data collected in the focus groups and mystery

customer process, we identified several recurring themes of importance to job seekers with disabilities. These themes emerged across sites and across activities with regard to the provision of services through the One-Stops. Broadly, the themes fall into three categories: (a) accessibility; (b) attitudes and disability awareness of staff; and (c) services, including ideal, actual, and required.

Consumer Focus Groups

The participants in the focus groups had a range of visible and invisible disabilities. Each participant provided at least some input to the discussions. Specific examples of consumer experiences and concerns with regard to seeking assistance in finding a job follow using the categories noted above.

Accessibility. Accessibility can be considered in the context of how welcoming a One-Stop feels to job seekers with disabilities who may need auxiliary aids or services or individual assistance. The focus group discussions underscored the fact that accessibility means different things to different people with disabilities. One person said, referring to a group member with multiple chemical sensitivity, "For her, accessibility is scent-free. For some people it might be physical accessibility, for some it might be alternate formats, and for others it might be something else." Another group member related that a friend had been told he could not get services because he was unable to fill out the requisite forms and had not been allowed to take them elsewhere for assistance in completing them. For him, that prohibition made the Center's services inaccessible.

Some members talked about the lack of availability of telephones for contacting potential employers as a serious problem. At one Center, the only available phone was a pay phone that did not have amplification. Other participants talked about larger issues such as the location of the Centers, many of which are not on a public transportation route. The limited operating hours, typically 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, were also problematic for many of the focus group members who relied on others for transportation or who were currently working but wanted to find a new job. Finally, one person saw programmatic accessibility in terms of the "accessibility to personnel;" to this person, the One-Stop was not seen as truly accessible if the staff were not available to provide direct support to customers.

We asked focus group members how the Centers could become more accessible and be more welcoming. Many mentioned having explicit signage indicating accessibility. Others pointed out how important it is to have print material and other advertising that not only states ser-

Table 2

Checklist of Services

Category	Specific services
Core Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intake and orientation • Work skills exploration • Resource library including access to computers, telephones, fax and copy machine • Searches for jobs and training • Access to job banks or listings of available jobs • Internet access • Resume development • Job search skills training • Networking skills workshop • Interview techniques workshop • Referral to an employer with current job openings • Customer satisfaction follow-up • Determination of eligibility for additional services • Auxiliary aids and services
Intensive Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessments of skills and services needed • Development of an individual employment and career plan • Career counseling • In-depth interviewing skills development • One-on-one assistance with updating your resume, cover letters, and thank you letters • Case management
Training services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-the-job training • Up to date work skills • Job readiness training • Adult education and literacy • Customized training for an employer who commits to hiring • Vocational rehabilitation

VICES are available to job seekers with disabilities, but that also has pictures or graphics that include people with disabilities alongside "able-bodied" workers.

Attitudes and disability awareness of staff. Comments about Center staff included actual experiences at One-Stops, experiences at other agencies, and feedback about the kinds of staff-customer interactions that would be desirable. A person who had used her local One-Stop center related her interaction with a staff person there: "I felt like he was looking down on me like, 'What's wrong with her? She has all these computer skills, why can't she go out and get a job?'"

Many participants voiced a perception that One-Stop and other services providers are not comfortable working with people who have disabilities. When we asked participants how they knew if a service provider were comfortable talking with them about their disabilities, they talked in terms of unspoken cues and body language:

You can sense it. It's like a connection. If you're used to your disability because you've had it your whole life like I have, you know it.

You get people who aren't disabled and they look down on people who are. The best counselor I had was at the VA [Veterans Administration] and this guy was disabled. I prefer talking to someone who understands and knows what it's like to be there.

Don't sit there and be condescending, "I'm busy with this, excuse me," because I get that a lot. I know that a lot of people do; it's in the back of my mind when I'm walking in with a cane or a brace, are they putting me off because I'm disabled or are they really busy?

In response to these stories, we asked participants how they would prefer to be treated. Answers focused mostly on common courtesies such as One-Stop staff should show "that they're really interested in you... Somebody that has that outgoing personality that shows me that they really care." Another answered that One-Stop staff persons should be people who have "the information and can give it to you, rather than 'Oh, I don't know, go see so and so.' By the time you make four or five rounds of seeing somebody else, you practically give it up." Other people listed traits such as patient, nice, polite, courteous, and "don't put you down" as important for One-Stop staff members.

Focus group members varied in their opinions about how much knowledge One-Stop staff members need to have regarding disabling conditions and related work issues. To some extent, people with invisible disabilities were more concerned that One-Stop staff members understand the complexities of disability and the fact that many disabilities, while not readily apparent, can greatly impact an individual's ability to find and keep a job. Many participants also felt that if the One-Stops hired more staff members with disabilities, the knowledge and awareness about disabilities would increase for all the employees. Some comments shared by the focus group participants included: "There are preconceptions that people have," "Get to know the person and not just the diagnosis," "...being accepting toward you despite what you look

like," and "They [staff] should have not so much knowledge as compassion."

Another issue that arose during discussion about staff knowledge was that of confidentiality. Concerns about confidentiality were addressed in several contexts, including whether the Center's physical layout provides private space for personal interviews (as opposed to open areas or cubicles with low walls), whether a person's disability status was shared with other staff and/or potential employers, and a fundamental awareness and understanding by staff of why confidentiality is an issue for many people with disabilities.

Services. We examined the services provided to focus group members through many lenses. One aspect of service delivery that we considered was consumer directedness. As defined by Timmons et al. (2001), consumer directedness encompasses active involvement of the consumer in the job search process, their choice-making ability about services, and the provision of individualized services based on the needs of the job seeker. Only in the sense that customers at the Kansas One-Stops seem to be expected to conduct their own job searches with minimal staff assistance are the Centers' services consumer directed. Most often focus group participants related stories of being pointed to computers and left to fend for themselves. One person said, "You sit there and post a résumé with the Kansas Job Link [the on-line job service system] and I've never gotten one answer back on Job Link, never."

When asked to identify ways that the One-Stops could become more consumer directed, many participants expressed a need for counseling services. Several different roles for the counseling were identified, including help to "put you in the right frame of mind so you can be productive," to identify "your issues in a confidential way," "skills counseling," and, particularly, understanding of or at least familiarity with the myriad issues encountered by people with disabilities who are attempting to find and maintain employment. Even for those who did not identify a need for counseling services, the availability of a staff person who could work one-on-one with customers was rated as very important.

Under WIA (20 CFR 663.200), adults who have used at least one core service (such as computer job search) and are unable to obtain employment are eligible for intensive services such as assessments, counseling and career planning, and interview skills training. The experience of most of the focus group participants who had used One-Stop services was that, even if they had been unable to find a job using core services, they were not informed of other options nor given the opportunity to pursue them. When we asked a One-Stop staff person how she knew if a person was being unsuccessful using the job search services, she replied, "we notice if someone keeps coming back." Other than this, no formal method was related for identifying persons who might be eligible for intensive services. Given these experiences, customers with disabilities did not have access to the resources potentially available to them.

Focus group participants were not specifically asked about their experiences regarding coordination of services between the One-Stops and partner or community service providers. Some expressed a desire, however, that the One-Stop staff act as a liaison with employers to assist job seekers in instances where job accommodations might be needed. Others noted that the One-Stops did not seem to have relationships with the employers in their communities, and therefore could not provide advice about which ones might be more "disability-friendly."

Mystery Customers

While each mystery customer had a disability, four of the eight had disabilities that were evident: one had multiple sclerosis and walked with a limp; one had cerebral palsy, with gait, cognitive, and communication difficulties; one had low vision; and the fourth was blind. The other four participants had invisible disabilities: one had asthma and depression, one had bipolar disorder, one had major depression, and one had recently been diagnosed with ADHD. Though we did not initially feel that this distinction between evident and hidden disabilities was important, as we looked over the information gathered we discovered subtle differences in the way Center staff treated these individuals. Our mystery customers' experiences corresponded to our overarching themes of accessibility, attitudes and disability awareness of staff, and services.

Accessibility. On the whole our mystery customers did not find the One-Stops to be the welcoming place our focus groups had envisioned. While our mystery customers found the Center to be mostly physically accessible, they encountered problems relating to the staff's lack of knowledge of disability including the use of auxiliary aids and services.

Upon entering the Center the first point of contact is the reception desk, which is approximately four feet tall, precluding the receptionist from seeing anyone who approached in a wheelchair and the customer who uses a wheelchair from seeing the person at the desk. No lower desk is available to facilitate conversation with a person who uses a wheelchair, a person of small stature, or one who simply needs to sit down when talking to the receptionist. While none of our mystery customers used a wheelchair, most felt this desk seems like a barrier to keep them away from the staff.

The Center that our mystery customers visited has an accessible workstation located separately from the other workstations and not labeled. The accessible workstation includes ZoomText®, a CCTV, and expanded keyboard, among other items. Our blind mystery customer, when asked if she could fill out a form, stated that she would either need help or assistive technology. The receptionist told her they did not have assistive technology. The receptionist may have been uninformed about the technology that was available or unfamiliar with the term assistive technology. The staff member who eventually helped our mystery customer attempted to use the technology. Our mystery customer related the following:

The man I was working with said this was the first time he had worked with someone with a visual disability

and he had not a clue how to get into it [the assistive technology]. We tried to do ZoomText® [a text enlargement program] but that wasn't working well because we couldn't get the settings like I need them. So then he tried to use the voice reader, but he could never figure out how to do that either. We just decided in the interest of time he could read it to me.

Our other customer with a visual impairment said he was never told that the Center had assistive technology (and he couldn't see it) so he never went back to the Center; he was able to access job-search websites through the Internet on his computer at home. On the other hand, our mystery customer with cerebral palsy stated "when I couldn't read a bunch of words together, he read it to me. He actually showed me and underlined everything. He was real helpful. He was awesome."

Except for a list of job-search websites that was given to each of our mystery customers, they utilized no other written material. Furthermore, no one was offered any alternative format for the list of websites, even when it was evident that two of the customers would have difficulty reading it.

Several of our mystery customers commented on the lack of phones. This Center did not have phones available to customers to make contact with employers. When they asked, they were directed to a pay phone in the hallway. This was inconvenient and difficult for some customers to access.

Attitudes and disability awareness of staff. The first person encountered by the mystery customers was the office receptionist. The receptionist's job is to answer questions and to direct individuals to the computer work areas. Researchers have no way of knowing if the same receptionist greeted all of our mystery customers but several of them commented about the chilly reception they received: "I went up to the front desk and got this cold kind of stare from the receptionist" and "I walked in there and right away the person behind the desk kind of leered at me." Another customer explained:

The receptionist had something that needed to be filled out. She asked me if I would be able to fill it out, and I said, no, that I would need some assistance. Instead of getting up and going over to ask one of the other people who worked there to help me, she picked up the telephone and called him. I could hear both ends of the conversation across the office, so I think everyone could probably hear it fairly well. She said something like: she had someone up here who needed assistance with filling the form out.

Our mystery customer said she was embarrassed and felt that such behavior indicated a lack of understanding about confidentiality issues. Finally, the customer with multiple sclerosis related the following incident, which made him reluctant to ever return to a One-Stop center:

I told the receptionist, "I'm looking for a job." Immediately she put out a paper that listed Internet job search sites. She said, "It's all done on the Internet. Do you have a friend who's got a computer or somewhere

you can go and use their computer?" She didn't even offer to let me use the computers in the room. Half of them were empty. I told her, "I've got a computer in my home." She said, "Oh, you can go home and do it then." Then I asked her, "Do you want me to fill out something or to start a file on me to get me in your system?" And she got angry. She said, "It's all done on the Internet--go home and do it."

In contrast, two of the eight mystery customers stated that the people working the greeting area were helpful and friendly. However, for one these two customers, the receptionist was the *only* helpful person. "People there were either helping others or looking busy moving around. Other than the person at the front, really nobody there looked approachable."

Comments about other staff members who interacted with our mystery customers were mixed. Our blind customer and our customer with cerebral palsy gave the staff and Center good reviews while the others were dissatisfied with the services that they received. Comments included: "They always seem grouchy," "One out of four people was really nice, but nothing went past the getting online again," and "I turn around and they're gone."

People with disabilities often have low self-esteem (Human Resources Development Canada, 2004), especially when it comes to issues of employment, and they may be sensitive to even the slightest inattentive behavior. The participant who felt he wasn't even welcome to use the computers when the receptionist told him that he could do what they offered at a friend's computer, walked out and said, "I'll probably never go back there. I don't know what these people are getting paid for, to sit around in front and read a paper." It took quite a bit of persuading from project staff to get him to go back.

Only one of the mystery customers indicated that he had been asked either in writing or in person about having a disability. Another customer commented:

He left my disability alone. I think he was afraid to talk too much about my disability. Well, some people believe they're going to hurt your feelings. He was comfortable with me, but I don't think he was comfortable talking about disability.

The only customer who stated he was asked about his disability was the same customer who got information about intensive services in the form of training.

Services. The One-Stop centers in Kansas all work on a resource center model. Customers are directed to computer workstations and are essentially on their own to find a job. As one of our mystery customers said "...basically the people there are tech support." When he directly asked whether or not there were "counselors or someone to assist in the job search" a mystery customer was told, "We used to do that but not anymore." Another customer told us:

He didn't tell me anything about how to do a job search, all he did was show me the computer and show me how to get on the Internet and how to look up the jobs. He

didn't talk to me about any of them. I just printed out a bunch of what I like when I went through; what sounded good. Then I printed it out and I brought it home.

Customers did not feel that they had a choice about the method they could use at the One-Stop to find a job. Some of them did notice that newspapers were available but none of them were told about other ways to search for work. When asked if they would be able to search for a job on their own because of what they learned at the One-Stop, all of the customers stated that they did not feel their visits were helpful in teaching them about how to do a job search on their own. All of the mystery customers stated that they were not asked if services were helpful to them. It should be noted that customer satisfaction surveys were sitting on the front desk but none of our customers saw them. Customers with visual disabilities would have needed additional supports or alternate formats to fill out the forms and people of short stature or people who used wheelchairs would not know that the forms were there.

After mystery customers had made one visit to the One-Stop center and used the basic computer services, we asked them to return and tell the staff that they were not having success with their job search strategies and to ask if there were any other services available that might help them to secure employment. Again, staff members had said they would talk to customers about intensive or training services after the customers had been to the Center several times and had not been successful in their job searches. These second visits, especially, highlighted the differences in the experiences between people with apparent and invisible disabilities.

Two of the four mystery customers with visible disabilities who returned for second visits were told about additional services. Our blind customer who had been looking for work as a paralegal for four years said:

They first thought I was interested in training. When I sat down with him I said, "No, I'm not interested in training. I already have that. I'm interested in seeing if you have some other resources." They gave me a couple suggestions of possible placement services but that was about all they could do, because they just didn't have the resources or people to do any more. One of the suggestions I think I'll look into. I guess they will look for a worksite for you and if they find somewhere willing to take you on, then the Center will pay, I guess, half your salary for six months. The other they mentioned was on-the-job training. This would have to be set up through the VR counselor.

Our mystery customer with multiple sclerosis agreed to go on a second visit only because we said he could go to a different office. He relayed the following:

I was very favorably satisfied. This is a small office and I could tell the staff member was quite busy, but she spent a lot of time discussing what the Kansas Job Link could provide. She gave me the same list of Internet contacts, but her thoroughness was a refreshing change

from my first experience. She encouraged me to check into the WIA services and mentioned [a local community college] as a source of upgrading skills. It was unclear to him how he was to check into the WIA services, however.

The experience of our customers without visible disabilities was different. They felt that "Basically, the only way that they have to be able to look up job listings is on the Internet." One of the mystery customers contacted the One-Stop's assistant manager because he believed there were more services available than the Internet and he was told, "we used to offer all sorts of services but with budget cuts, everything we have is on the computer." He said that he told her that he had a disability and she reiterated the above statement.

Another of our mystery customers without a visible disability was concerned about her résumé. She had a four-year gap in her work history and was concerned that she was including too many health professionals on her résumé as references. She relates this story:

I told this gentleman, 'I've been having trouble getting a job and I've been off four years because of health problems. They're going to ask why I've been gone for so long' and he kind of shook his head like he understood but there was no further mention of anything. He was just kind of quiet. He didn't listen. I was putting people from SRS [Social and Rehabilitation Services, the state welfare agency] for references. I don't know if this is the right thing to do because I think it tips the employer off that I've had problems. I told him this and he just shook his head again. Then he went back to his desk.

Many individuals with disabilities struggle with the issues of gaps in work history and lack of professional references. One-Stop staff can easily give advice about how to address these gaps in a brief period of time and with some simple changes to the mystery customer's résumé this potential problem could have been resolved. Instead she felt that the staff member wasn't listening to her. If One-Stop staff members do not feel they have the knowledge or resources to help a person on this level, they need to make referrals to other agencies that can.

Surprisingly, none of the mystery customers was referred to VR even though none of them reported to us having mentioned to One-Stop staff that they had already worked with VR. We found in working directly with One-Stop staff members that they were fairly uninformed about VR services even though VR is a mandated partner in the One-Stop system. Again, this lack of a consistent referral system to VR indicates a lack of awareness by staff of appropriate service options for customers with disabilities.

Discussion

In 1998 when the Workforce Investment Act was signed into law it was hoped that the integration of the nation's workforce preparation and employment system would improve the quality of

the workforce, sustain economic growth and productivity, and reduce dependency on welfare (Storen & Dixon, 1999). The resultant program would provide universal access and partnerships between the workforce system and disability organizations such as VR. All workers would have access to the core services and workers with disabilities would be eligible for intensive services and training available through the One-Stop centers (Funaro & Dixon, 2002).

The focus group findings indicated that the ideal One-Stop would be welcoming and the personnel would be accessible. Further, the One-Stop staff would have a high level of comfort working with people with disabilities and show interest in them as individuals. Many of the focus group participants indicated they would like to receive more one-on-one counseling support than is available through the resource center model of service delivery. In fact, much of what they wanted was intensive and not simply core services. The issues identified in focus groups about experiences at One-Stops were corroborated by the mystery customer reports. A chart comparing the mystery customer experiences with the focus group themes appears in Table 3.

Our study indicated needs in the disability community were not being met by the workforce system in Kansas. Persons with disabilities felt that they needed more services to find jobs than people without disabilities and did not feel that those services were available at the One-Stop center they visited. They were disappointed that staff at the Center did not discuss their disabilities with them nor were they encouraged to determine whether they were eligible for intensive services. The Kansas Workforce Network's goal of providing core services in a largely self-directed manner (Kansas Department of Human Resources, 2000) has been only partially realized. Individuals with disabilities who accessed One-Stop centers were told about computer job searches but were not given sufficient orientation for them to ascertain whether there were services for which they were qualified beyond basic job searches.

Recommendations

The findings from this study lead us to make six recommendations for improving the accessibility and consumer orientation at One-Stop centers. Specific areas for improvement include staff knowledge about disabilities and disability etiquette, staff interactions with customers, physical and programmatic accessibility, and marketing both to consumers and employers.

First, we recommend that types of services available at One-Stops need to be made clearer to customers with disabilities. For this to happen, their staffs need to have more time to interact with individuals who come to the Center for job information. An effective way to increase interaction is through an orientation process to the Center. Orientation can be as easy as providing written materials outlining services of the Center and its partners -- available in alternate formats -- to all who enter. Captioned videos can also be used for orientation to the Center and the services available.

Next, we believe individuals who enter the One-Stops need to be made aware of auxiliary aids and services that are available and staff need to be able to set up equipment and software for individuals who are not able to do so for themselves. Partnering with local disability agencies such as centers for independent living or state assistive technology projects for staff training on aids and services would help One-Stop staff feel more confident in their use of these devices.

Third, we observed that most of our mystery customers and focus group members, especially those in larger suburban areas, were not familiar with the One-Stops. We reiterate recommendations made by Funaro and Dixon (2002) that state and local agencies representing people with disabilities and One-Stop operators and staff should work together to develop and implement effective outreach strategies. As pointed out by focus group members, outreach materials should specifically mention services that are

Table 3
Focus Group Themes & Corresponding Mystery Customer Experiences

Focus group theme	Positive experiences	Negative experience
<i>Accessibility</i>		
Auxiliary aids and services	Accessible workstation present Staff read computer screen for customer	Staff did not know how to operate workstation Staff did not make customer aware of available assistive technology
Help filling out forms	Staff helped when asked	--
Telephone available at workstations	--	No free phones available to contact potential employers
Transportation	Destination on bus route	--
Signage	--	Accessible workstation unlabeled
Physical access	Mostly accessible	Receptionist's desk too tall
<i>Attitudes & Awareness</i>		
Welcoming	25% welcoming experiences	75% unwelcoming experiences
Comfortable with people with disabilities	--	Not comfortable talking about disability
Shows interest in individual	--	Nobody looked approachable Sat around and read newspaper
Knowledge about disability	--	Receptionist did not understand the term "assistive technology"
Patient, nice, polite, courteous	Some staff were nice	Only receptionist was helpful Staff was "grouchy"
Familiar with disability related issues in maintaining employment	--	Did not assist with gaps in work history on résumé
<i>Services</i>		
Informed of options and make own choices	Made suggestions about placement services	Not told about optional job search methods
Services based on individual needs	25% (visible disabilities) told about additional services	75% (invisible disabilities) not told about additional services
Direct staff support	--	Inattentive-turned around and they were gone "Go home, its all done on the Internet now" "We used to do that, but not anymore" Just showed how to look up jobs, no discussion or guidance provided

Note: No mystery customer experienced skills counseling, motivational support, or liaison with employers for accommodations and disability-related issues, all identified by focus groups as desirable.

available to job seekers with disabilities, be available in alternate formats, and include images of people with disabilities.

Fourth, it seems that although Center staff members are aware of labor market information for their local areas, they are less aware of the unemployment rate of people with disabilities. Our attention has been primarily on the job seeker and access to the services of the One-Stop system, however, it should be noted that if employers are not hiring people with disabilities then it doesn't matter if the person has access to services or not. Focus group members related many instances of discrimination in the job application and interview process. Outreach to employers regarding hiring individuals with disabilities is essential for the system to be successful in serving the needs of individuals with disabilities.

Our fifth recommendation is that local Workforce Investment Boards become more educated on the issues of persons with disabilities by including them as members. Vocational Rehabilitation is frequently included as a mandated partner in the One-Stop, but other disability agencies should also be represented on local boards. Similarly, increasing the number of One-Stop staff members with disabilities can increase agency awareness of disability issues in addition to making the Centers seem more welcoming to customers with disabilities.

Finally, we recommend that One-Stop staff receive more training about disabilities and disability related topics. This training needs to be on-going due to staff turnover and a changing policy landscape. Making information available on-line facilitates quick access by staff.

Although our study was limited to Kansas One-Stop centers, the issues identified are widespread. At a national forum on the reauthorization of WIA (DOL, 2002), consumers, disability service providers, One-Stop partners, and even One-Stop staff from across the country highlighted in more general terms many of the same concerns identified by our study. More recent testimony before the U.S. Senate (Reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, 2003; Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, 2003) confirms that problems exist nationally for people with disabilities attempting to utilize the One-Stop system. Our recommendations are intended as specific first steps One-Stops and their partners can take to begin to better meet the needs of job seekers with disabilities.

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