



Identifying Barriers to Employment

By definition, the Welfare-to-Work (WtW) grant program focuses attention and resources on the challenge of helping individuals who face multiple challenges to employment. This issue of *Ideas that Work* will examine options for identifying barriers that may impede employment for WtW customers, and upcoming issues will focus on strategies to serve these customers.

Assessment Options

A new study of welfare recipients in an urban Michigan county¹ quantifies what workforce practitioners have learned from experience: a woman's likelihood of working decreases steadily as her number of potential barriers to work increases (see box on page 2). This finding reinforces the importance of identifying potential and actual barriers to employment for WtW customers.

The program examples cited in this issue use a combination of up-front and on-going assessments to identify challenges that may impede employment. Most practitioners find that up-front assessments, such as interviews or self-assessments conducted during or after eligibility determination, are a necessary starting point—but not sufficient.

An Urban Institute study² concludes that up-front assessments cannot identify everyone who needs additional support to make the transition from welfare to work. Customers' life circumstances change. Some individuals with employment challenges find and keep jobs in spite of them, while others need more time to acknowledge their difficulties and to be willing to seek help for them. Also, it takes time to develop trust, another key to effective assessment. As a worker in the study noted, "Sometimes you have to 'nurture' a recipient into treatment. Over

time, recipients begin to believe that staff really care about them and their well-being."³

Ongoing assessment can be an informal process that occurs every time any worker has contact with a customer. In some programs, formal assessment and referral for additional services is triggered by unsuccessful participation in required program activities—e.g., not showing up for a class, inability to find a job, or losing a job.

Stigmatized barriers are easier to detect within a trusting casework relationship.

Up-Front Assessment: Utah

To detect and address their customers' serious barriers to employment as early as possible, Utah's Family Employment (TANF) Program combines up-front assessment with (for sanction cases) a multi-stage conciliation process. In June 1998, the Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS) introduced a uniform Assessment Interview Guide⁴ for use with applicants to TANF and state workforce programs. The 1–2 hour interview covers a wide range of issues impacting employability. Helen Thatcher, Assistant Director of the DWS Employment Development Division, says that Utah is shifting away from customer self-assessment, having found interviews with assessment tools to be more reliable.

Thatcher adds that assessment continues informally as caseworkers monitor clients' progress. Problems that were not revealed in the initial interview, particularly stigmatized ones, mostly come out over time, "in the context of a trusting casework relationship."

Severe problems disproportionately impact long-term welfare recipients, as indicated by preliminary data from a July 1998 University of Utah survey of state residents who had received welfare for at least three years. Compared to the overall welfare population, long-term

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recipients actually had slightly fewer children and more education, and one third were working while another third were in school or training. However, a huge proportion reported serious problems including: childhood physical or sexual abuse (59%), severe domestic violence (55%), depression (over 40%), substance abuse (47%), and health problems in their children (41%) or themselves (39%).

Follow-Up Intervention: Oregon Step Up

Step Up is a pilot program operating at three Oregon sites (Albany, Corvallis, and Lebanon). It assesses TANF recipients facing sanctions for non-participation, to determine whether their non-participation is caused by mental illness, substance abuse, or both, and provides or refers them to appropriate services.

When a TANF recipient in the program area is at risk of sanctions, she is asked why she would choose benefit reductions instead of participating, given all the supportive services offered. Recipients who don't adequately answer that question are referred to the local Step Up team for assessment. Other customers enter Step Up by self-disclosing their addiction or mental illness during the initial JOBS assessment, or come to the staff's attention through other sources, such as local media coverage of drug arrests.

Everyone referred to Step Up first completes the DSM-4 clinical assessment, and when warranted by the results, a licensed psychologist or psychiatrist follows up with a comprehensive psychological evaluation. At-risk customers are invited to attend support groups or one-on-one counseling. The assessment team also uses the Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory (SASSI) clinical assessment to detect substance abuse. Chemically dependent customers are required to enter treatment.

Step Up's initial report⁵ indicates that 106 of the 192 customers referred in 1996 were diagnosed with both mental illness and substance abuse. Among the 132 DSM-4 assessments conducted in 1997, customers' Global Assessment Function scores averaged 48, indicating potential SSI eligibility.

The program halved "no show" rates for county-run programs and nearly tripled participation in TANF program activities. William Switzer, Step Up's community resources coordinator, attributes these "dramatic" results to staff co-location, particularly of mental health specialists, and to same-day home visits, which surprisingly made customers feel "cared about" rather than intruded upon.

Recognizing Substance Abuse: Iowa

In Iowa, the workforce and substance abuse agencies have collaborated on referring welfare recipients who need treatment for addiction. The mandatory assessment interview that Iowa Workforce Development (IWD) gives

Employment Barriers

Employment Barriers Categorized

The relationship between 14 specific obstacles and employment status was studied in "Barriers to the Employment of Welfare Recipients."¹⁰ A complete list of barriers with definitions is included in the study. The barriers are grouped into the following six categories:

- Education, Work Experience, Job Skills and Workplace Norms
- Perceived Discrimination
- Transportation
- Psychiatric Disorders and Substance Dependence Within Past Year
- Physical Health
- Domestic Violence

Employment Probabilities by Number of Barriers

<i>Number of Barriers</i>	<i>Probability of Working 20+ Hours/Week*</i>
0	78.2
1	70.2
2-3	56.4
4-6	36.1
7 or more	4.7

* Given that respondent is single, Black, lives in an urban census tract, is 25-34 years old, and has a child 0-2 years old.

to all new TANF participants contains ten questions related to substance abuse, scattered throughout the interview.⁶ The interviewers are trained to probe beyond “yes/no” answers for more information from the customer.

If the customer answers “yes” to two or more drug-related questions, or if the caseworker observes signs of substance abuse, the customer is referred to an **Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH)** substance abuse treatment program.⁷ The program conducts an in-depth clinical assessment, which can include family members, to determine whether the customer is chemically dependent and if so, what level of treatment she needs. Customers deemed not addicted but high-risk can be referred to drug education or prevention.

This approach has operated since late 1997 in two pilot SDAs (one rural, one urban). Staff were cross-trained: IWD staff learned how to recognize signs of substance abuse, and IDPH staff learned how to make treatment accommodate work activities. Janet Zwick of IDPH notes that in comparison, universal drug testing would cost too much (\$150 per person), deter participation, and often miss alcohol—the drug of choice for about 60% of the pilot’s customers.

However, few of the substance abusers identified in this pilot have chosen to enter treatment. Zwick would recommend making referrals mandatory to ensure that all customers who need treatment receive it.

Learning Disabilities: Washington State

Research has found learning disabilities (LDs) in about one-third of all welfare recipients, concentrated among the “hard-to-serve.”⁸ The recently completed, four-year **Washington State Learning Disabilities Project** estimated LD prevalence among its TANF caseload, developed and tested a simpler, more cost-effective screening tool, raised staff awareness, and provided specialized services.⁹

LD prevalence was first measured for 679 voluntary JOBS participants, who on average had received welfare for 50 months and completed 10.3 years of education (60% lacked high school equivalency). For each participant, a JOBS caseworker administered the Payne & Associates Special Learning Needs Inventory, and a clinical educational psychologist conducted a formal assessment. This protocol found LDs in 44% of the group and other special learning needs in another 13%, including mental retardation in 3%.

Statistical regression identified 21 Payne items as the strongest predictors of diagnosed special learning needs, including 13 for LDs. These items were combined into a “Brief Screen” that, when tested on a second group, achieved 74% accuracy—slightly better than the full Payne instrument.

Using the Brief Screen, and follow-up accommodation planning with the full Payne instrument, caseworkers incorporate clients’ strengths and weaknesses into their employability plans. Clients with continuing employability problems are referred for clinical assessment. However, most of the LDs are mild enough for the clients to succeed in sensibly targeted job placements.

Former Project Director Melinda Giovengo says that since many participants had long been labeled “stupid,” an LD diagnosis was a “relief” that boosted their self-esteem. “The greatest LD-related barriers are not the disorders themselves but the failure to diagnose them.”

Learning disabilities are less of a barrier than the failure to identify them.

NOTES

- ¹ Danziger, Sandra, et. al. “Barriers to the Employment of Welfare Recipients.” October 1998. University of Michigan, Poverty Research and Training Center. Available on-line at <http://www.ssw.umich.edu/poverty/pubs.html> or by calling (734) 998-8514.
- ² LaDonna Pavetti et al. *Welfare-to-Work Options for Families Facing Personal or Family Challenges: Rationale and Program Strategies*. The Urban Institute, August 1997. Available on-line from <http://www.urban.org/welfare/pave1197.html>.
- ³ LaDonna Pavetti et al. *Designing Welfare-to-Work Programs for Families Facing Personal or Family Challenges: Lessons from the Field*. The Urban Institute, December 30, 1996. Available on-line at <http://www.urban.org/welfare/report2.htm>.
- ⁴ For a copy of the interview guide, see <http://wtw.doleta.gov/ideasthatwork/pub/utassess.wpd> or call Helen Thatcher at (801) 468-0177.
- ⁵ For more information see <http://wtw.doleta.gov/ideasthatwork/pub/steprpt.htm>, or contact Mr. Switzer at (541) 757-4201 x217 or william.switzer@state.or.us.
- ⁶ For more information contact Dianne Milobar at (515) 281-9030.
- ⁷ For more information contact Janet Zwick at (515) 281-4417.
- ⁸ “Learning Disabilities and Welfare-to-Work.” August 10, 1998 Policy Update, National Institute for Literacy, (202) 632-1500.
- ⁹ For the project’s August 1998 Final Report or other information, contact Melinda Giovengo at (206) 679-0994.
- ¹⁰ See Note 1.

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For More Information

- Front-line workers across Maryland have been trained to identify domestic violence among TANF recipients. For more information, contact Vesta Kimble of the Anne Arundel County Department of Social Services at (410) 269-4500.
- The National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center (NALLDC), a National Institute for Literacy project at the Academy for Educational Development, offers training and manuals on understanding and screening for adult learning disabilities. For more information, call 1-800-953-2553, or e-mail info@nalldc.aed.org.

About *Ideas That Work*

Ideas that Work is a series of issue briefs designed to provide practical and innovative technical assistance to the local practitioners who are implementing the U.S. Department of Labor's Welfare-to-Work grants. Anticipated topic areas include recruitment, job retention and labor force attachment, and serving families with multiple barriers to self-sufficiency.

The ideas presented in this series are intended to spark innovation and to encourage peer networking. Replicability may depend on individual state and local guidelines. Any activities carried out by a State or local Welfare-to-Work program, using WtW grant funds, must also comply with the Federal WtW law and regulations.

Ideas that Work is offered through the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Welfare-to-Work, and produced by Technical Assistance and Training Corporation (TATC). We want to hear your comments about this issue and your suggestions for specific topics or programs to include in future issues. To share your views, contact TATC via e-mail at ITW@talc.com, or call (202) 408-8282 (ask for *Ideas that Work* staff).

Other Issues in this Series

Future topics:

- Serving families with multiple work barriers
- Serving non-custodial parents
- Involving employers in WtW programs
- Job retention and advancement

Previous issues:

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2. Recruitment Through Marketing and Outreach
3. Recruitment Through Interagency Collaboration

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