

Executive Summary:
Summary Report on the WIA Reauthorization Public Forums

June 28, 2002

1. Purpose of the WIA Reauthorization Forums

During the Spring of 2002, the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration (ETA) held a national series of Public Forums on the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA). Congress is scheduled to take up the reauthorization of WIA in 2003. The objective of the Forums was to gather comments on two major issues: (1) What changes the Administration should propose to Titles I, III, and V of WIA; and (2) How linkages between Title I of WIA and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program can be improved. ETA contracted with Technical Assistance and Training Corporation (TATC), a management consulting firm located in Washington, DC, to assist in conducting and reporting on the Forums.

This report provides an overview of ETA's WIA Reauthorization Forums and a summary of speakers' comments.

2. Forum Overview

ETA held 12 Public Forums on WIA Reauthorization between March 24 and May 8, 2002. The Forums were held around the country, with at least one Forum held in each ETA Region. A total of 1,164 participants attended the Forums, 207 of whom made oral comments. A number of presenters supplemented their oral comments with written testimony.

Of those attendees who provided demographic information (about 75% of attendees), 30% were affiliated with a non-profit organization, 21% with state government agencies, 14% with local government agencies, 6% with the Federal government, and 5% with business.

There was a strong showing of Workforce Investment Board (WIB) members and staff at the Forums. More than 100 State and Local WIB members attended and more than 200 State and Local WIB staff participated, which resulted in WIB members and staff representing about one-quarter of total participants. A relatively large number of One-Stop partner organizations and One-Stop staff also attended the Forums. The most frequent One-Stop partner affiliations indicated by participants were the Employment Service, TANF, Welfare-to-Work, Adult Education, and WIA Title I Youth.

3. Summary of Participant Comments

The purpose of the Forums was to allow stakeholders and customers of the workforce investment system to provide input on issues related to the reauthorization of WIA. The Discussion Guide on WIA Reauthorization Issues encouraged speakers to address one or more of the following six issue areas:

- Business Engagement
- Governance and State Flexibility
- Linking WIA with TANF and other Partner Programs
- One-Stop Career Centers
- Unemployment Insurance/Employment Services Reform and the One-Stop System
- Improved Opportunities for Training

Speakers at the Forums addressed the issue areas in the Discussion Guide as well as other topics, and their comments on all topics are covered in the Summary Report. This Executive Summary contains highlights of speaker comments on the twelve topics that Forum speakers addressed most frequently. Topics which were included in the Discussion Guide are presented in the order that they were listed in that document, followed by issues that were not included in the Discussion Guide.

3.1 Challenges to Engaging Business

Speakers who addressed this topic commented that the workforce investment system as currently configured does not attract and keep businesses engaged and involved in strategy and policy discussions and decisions. Speakers indicated that employers find the system political and bureaucratic, and that it is important to demonstrate how business involvement makes a difference in the system. Some speakers noted that it is important to engage businesses because local employers have the best understanding of labor market needs and economic changes.

Strategic recommendations for addressing this challenge included the following:

- Clarify the return on investment for business
- Link the system with economic development organizations
- Work to ensure that the system provides employable candidates
- Focus outreach on big-name employers
- Identify the level of involvement that businesses really want
- Provide resources for intermediary organizations to serve as brokers for employers
- Involve employers with pilot projects

The challenges that the system is encountering in engaging businesses are also tied to operational issues related to the role and membership of Workforce Investment Boards, which are discussed in the next section.

3.2 Workforce Investment Board Membership and Role

On this issue, a number of Forum speakers suggested that State and Local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) should be smaller, that membership requirements should be more flexible, and that the role of the WIBs should be to make strategic decisions rather than spend time discussing technical and administrative issues. Some speakers noted that the current Board size discourages business involvement and results in staff spending a great deal of time supporting Board members. Others commented that representatives of customers with specific barriers should have better representation on WIBs.

Recommendations related to WIB role and membership included the following:

- Create a new Title VI for the Workforce Investment Act that includes authorization for State Unified Plans as well as State and Local Workforce Investment Boards, in order to disentangle the “system” from the single funding stream associated with Title I of WIA
- Give Local WIBs authority to administer all training and employment programs in order to serve employers directly
- Allow local communities to waive WIB representation requirements
- Conduct research to provide Boards with the resources to evaluate the success of the strategies they develop
- Simplify the process of working with Workforce Investment Act funds
- Limit the size of Workforce Investment Areas to ensure that businesses are heard
- Make non-mandatory members ex-officio, non-voting
- Grant decision-making authority to Board executive committees or management councils
- Use a petitioning process for seats representing hard-to-serve customer groups, rather than appointing members
- Focus WIB meetings on strategy and policy issues rather than operational concerns

3.3 Flexibility at the Local and State Level

A number of speakers representing Local WIBs advocated for greater flexibility at the local level; a lesser number of their counterparts at the state level advocated for greater state flexibility. Speakers commented that the flexibility would increase the WIBs’ ability to meet the needs of employers, respond quickly to changing market needs, and create a more holistic and comprehensive service plan that is in line with local needs. Methods to achieve greater local and state flexibility include focusing on outcomes rather than process, changing statutory requirements, allowing waivers, and writing flexibility into the law.

3.4 Workforce Investment System Infrastructure

A number of participants offered comments and recommendations concerning the current status and the potential of the workforce investment system infrastructure. A common theme was that the current workforce investment system under WIA has not been implemented long enough to determine whether or not it can be successful.

Speakers identified qualities of a successful system, including the following examples:

- A strong relationship between Chief Elected Officials and the WIB
- Private sector leadership
- A system that is demand-driven
- Availability of training
- Functional integration of services and service providers
- Guidance to make sure populations with multiple barriers receive services

Other speakers suggested areas where improvement to the workforce investment system is necessary. Here a common theme was the need to achieve true collaboration among partners at all levels, particularly around confidentiality and resource sharing. One speaker noted that “cost allocation has created more division than partnership.” Another speaker recommended that authorization of a One-Stop Career Center System be moved from WIA Title I, where it is associated with a single funding stream, to WIA Title V, so that One-Stops are associated with the whole system.

3.5 Partnership Under WIA

A large number of speakers addressed the issue of partnership, discussing specifically the value of and challenges to developing effective partnerships, the issue of mandatory vs. voluntary partnership, and partnerships with TANF, Education, and Vocational Rehabilitation.

Speakers generally supported the value of partnership within the workforce system as a means to providing better, non-duplicative customer service. However, they cited significant challenges to effective partnering, including the need for common program and reporting definitions and the need to improve data sharing capability. A number of speakers specifically requested guidance from ETA and other federal agencies on confidentiality and data sharing issues. One speaker noted, “If people have access to good data, they will get creative solutions locally.”

Several speakers expressed the view that partnerships should be voluntary and encouraged through incentives rather than mandated. Others suggested various ways of enforcing the current mandatory partnerships, including mandating financial contributions.

On the subject of partnership with TANF, most speakers representing WIA Title I programs strongly supported making TANF a mandatory partner in order to serve customers better and more efficiently. However, most speakers representing TANF voiced strong concerns that the bureaucracy associated with WIA would restrict TANF flexibility and that funding would be reduced if TANF was made a mandatory WIA partner. It was suggested that the purposes of the two programs conflict (reducing dependency on government benefits vs. increasing employment, retention, earnings and occupational skills). Speakers generally expressed support for performance measures that focus on job retention, wage gains, and achieving self-sufficiency rather than on participation rates and caseload reductions.

A number of speakers noted the importance of strengthening local partnerships with K-12 and post-secondary education, and others voiced support for continuing efforts to partner with the Vocational Rehabilitation system.

3.6 The Challenges of One-Stop Integration

The challenges to One-Stop integration echoed the more general challenges to partnership cited above. A primary challenge cited relates to information sharing, especially data confidentiality concerns and duplication of information systems. Speakers also noted challenges in developing effective partner relationships, including communication gaps, difficulties front-line staff experience in serving customers when partner relationships are rocky, procurement rules hindering good coordination, and the need for cross-training of both managers and front-line staff. A third challenge cited was the need for financial integration to support service integration. For example, one speaker noted, "Local One-Stops are spending too much time worrying about resource allocation instead of seamless services because each partner has its own rules."

3.7 One-Stop Customer Service for Persons with Disabilities and Other Specific Barriers

A significant number of Forum speakers commented that One-Stops are not accessible to persons with disabilities and that One-Stops do not provide adequate services to persons with disabilities. The accessibility issues cited included not only physical access but programmatic and communication access as well. Speakers noted the need for better federal guidance, more One-Stop outreach to persons with disabilities, a resolution of the issue of sharing information about persons with disabilities across agencies, and performance measures that reduce disincentives to serving persons with disabilities.

Additionally, some speakers cited the need to provide better services with a greater emphasis on training to other groups of individuals with specific types of barriers, including farmworkers, residents of rural areas, persons with limited English proficiency, ex-offenders, and youth.

3.8 Employer Involvement in Training

A number of speakers noted the importance of providing employers with workers armed with job-specific skills. A few speakers identified incumbent training as one of the most effective ways to identify necessary training programs and engage the business community. Other participants stated that they would like to see the system increase the number of opportunities for customized training. Most speakers who addressed this subject stated their support for increasing resources for employer-driven programs.

3.9 Eligible Training Providers

A number of speakers supported eliminating the Eligible Training Provider list or modifying the certification and reporting requirements to make it attractive for providers to participate. These speakers voiced strong concerns that the current approach has resulted in less access to training providers and training opportunities for customers of the workforce investment system, and in reduced services to special populations with unique training needs.

A number of speakers pointed out that community colleges are currently not well-incorporated into the workforce investment training system, and suggested that WIA be changed to make it easier for community colleges to participate as training providers.

Others made specific suggestions relating to certification and reporting requirements, which are viewed by many as the obstacle to fuller participation by training providers. Suggestions included limiting WIA tracking to WIA-funded participants, allowing Local Boards to waive reporting requirements, and automatically qualifying Ticket-to-Work providers, community colleges, and apprenticeship programs as Eligible Training Providers.

3.10 Employment and Training Services for Adults

Many participants stated their support for increasing the availability of and customer choice associated with adult training programs. The comments addressed eligibility requirements, tiered services, Individual Training Accounts, sectoral initiatives, and entrepreneur training.

Several speakers noted that adult eligibility should be based on raising individuals above the poverty level, and that the lack of a GED keeps many customers from accessing training. Many speakers voiced support for an increase in training regulation flexibility that would enable customers—especially those with barriers such as limited English or disabilities—to access services in a non-sequential manner rather than the current tier approach. Speakers also noted that the process of accessing core and intensive services needs to be streamlined.

A large number of speakers shared the view that the Individual Training Accounts system as currently configured is inaccessible, does not serve the purpose of expanding opportunities for training, and is unable to respond rapidly to changes.

A number of speakers voiced their support for expanding the use of sector-specific training in order to increase access to training opportunities for low-income workers. Additionally, several speakers commented on the importance of teaching entrepreneurial skills to both adults and youth, particularly in rural areas where unemployment is high.

3.11 Employment and Training Services for Youth

Forum speakers commented frequently on youth programs, addressing eligibility requirements, service category definitions, youth partnerships, funding issues, and service provider identification.

A number of speakers suggested that youth should have universal access to core services, just as adults do. Speakers noted that current eligibility requirements for training are overly restrictive and that documentation requirements are excessive and deter participation. These speakers generally suggested using eligibility for the school-lunch program or criteria from other school low-income programs. Some speakers also suggested replacing the distinction between older and younger youth with categories of “In-School” vs. “Out-of-School,” and reconsidering the definition of Out-of-School youth to include students in alternative schools, continuation schools, and court schools.

Speakers encouraged greater emphasis on youth partnerships. Recommendations included strengthened Youth Councils; better linkages with local education, health and human services, and juvenile justice programs; and performance measures that encourage rather than deter partnership. Some specifically recommended stronger integration between WIA and TANF because the TANF population includes a high percentage of youth. Several speakers advocated for more flexibility in youth funding, particularly allowing more funding to be used for Out-of-School youth.

Several speakers noted that youth programs should be administered consistently with adult programs in terms of services provider identification and selection.

3.12 Performance Measures

The issue of WIA performance measures was perhaps the most frequently addressed topic during the Forums.

The concern most frequently raised about the current performance measures was that they create incentives that have a negative impact on service delivery. Specifically, a number of speakers commented that the current performance measures motivate service providers to exclude “hard-to-serve” customers, while others expressed concerns that manipulation of information results in a lack of integrity for the current measures as well as unintended negative effects. Recommendations for improvement included establishing universal

standards; having separate performance standards for “hard-to-serve” populations, for youth, and for incumbent workers; and making incentive eligibility based upon average performance across all three funding streams of WIA Title I-B.

Speakers also noted that job seekers receiving universal/core services, who are the majority of One-Stop customers, are not “captured” in current performance reporting. One speaker noted that “this sends the wrong message that universal service is not a priority.”

A number of speakers noted that the current WIA performance measures do not capture the relevant information needed to aid strategic planning and continuous improvement for the workforce development system as an integrated whole, that they are not easily understood by business and do not align with business needs, that the measures are not timely, and that they should focus on worker progress toward self-sufficiency rather than job placement. One speaker suggested that reform be based on the principles of “timeliness, simplicity, and local priority setting.”

Many speakers described the 17 current performance measures as too complicated to be useful to businesses or workers. Suggestions included drastically reducing the number of measures (e.g., using the entered employment rate applied to older youth and adults only, and the employment retention rate earnings) and maintaining customer satisfaction measures for employer and job seeker customers.

A number of speakers said that the performance standards should be flexible enough to account for factors that make it more difficult for some local areas to show success. Suggested changes included use of a “sliding scale” to account for differences in local unemployment rates, use of a regression model to correct for local variances, and greater state flexibility toward local areas as it relates to serving customers with significant barriers. However, other Forum participants noted the need for more consistency in how performance is compared among different local areas or states in order to ensure fairness in responses to performance and to address performance deficiencies constructively.

Many speakers discussed the problems presented by the variations among different agencies’ performance measures and requirements, including the barriers that multiple reporting requirements and inconsistent definitions of success present to partner participation, and the need to measure both system-wide success as well as good performance in WIA Title I-funded programs. In addition, several participants commented that the administrative difficulty of collecting performance data hurts access to and delivery of services and discourages partner participation in WIA.

4. Forum Evaluation Summary

Forum evaluations were collected at 10 of the 12 WIA Reauthorization Forums. Out of the 1,037 participants who attended the 10 Forums where evaluations were used, a total of 225 (22%) submitted evaluations. Numerical responses on the evaluations were based

on a scale of satisfaction of 1-10 with 1 representing “Not at All” and 10 representing “To a Very High Degree.” On this scale, participants rated their overall satisfaction with the Forums as 8.6.

Participants’ highest ratings were for their overall satisfaction with the Forums (8.6), their opportunity to provide public comment (8.5), the facilitation of the Forums (8.3), and the facilities at which the Forums were held (8.3).

None of the areas evaluated were ranked particularly low. However, on a relative basis participant satisfaction was the lowest for satisfaction with notification of the Forum (7.3), the usefulness of the preliminary comments in framing the discussion (7.3), and satisfaction with the pre-registration process (7.9).