

**Workforce
Intermediaries:
Powering Regional
Economies in the
New Century**

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Workforce Intermediaries: Powering Regional Economies in the New Century

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INTRODUCTION

Through the economic ups and downs of the last few years, it has become clear that cities and states simply must have competitive workforce development policies to compete in a changing economy. Coherent and sophisticated training programs accomplish two key goals for policymakers: they help attract knowledge-driven companies that ultimately can help move states away from low-wage economies, and they can connect low-skilled workers to education and training that enhances the economic prospects of these workers.

In the 21st century, local economies won't stand or fall on the presence of sports stadiums and office parks; they'll be built on competitive workforce systems. But that work of construction is far more difficult than it sounds. To do it right, workforce systems must balance the oft-competing needs of workers and businesses; leverage millions in new dollars to pay for increased training programs; and link diverse players including nonprofits, colleges, and business associations through common goals and interests.

This is the role of workforce intermediaries, quasi-governmental entities that are quickly becoming indispensable players in 21st century workforce systems. The consensus behind the intermediary approach solidified in early 2003, when the 102nd American Assembly issued a report entitled "Achieving Worker Success and Business Prosperity: The New Role for Workforce Intermediaries." In this report, we assess lessons learned from three key intermediaries funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. As regions across the U.S. work to develop their own intermediaries, the Casey experience offers helpful insights into the importance of intermediaries and what qualities to look for in organizations that can serve in this role.

Workforce intermediaries offer local officials and stakeholders a new approach to an issue of great and growing importance to a region's (and a nation's) ability to sustain a vibrant economy. More and more, workforce development is the most critical measure of economic competitiveness: cities and regions that have put effective workforce systems in place are attracting employers drawn by the prospect of well-trained workers and governments responsive to their needs. Intermediaries greatly help to advance local workforce agendas, providing focus for all the disparate players, pots of money, and institutional interests. As this report will show, effective workforce intermediaries can bring order and cohesiveness to a very complicated area of policy, helping to mount effective jobs programs and advance positive agendas to support employers and workers.

The intermediary approach has proven successful within a wide range of institutional settings, including community colleges, federally mandated Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), state and local government agencies, unions, employer organizations, community development corporations, community development financial institutions, faith-based groups, and community-based organizations. The workforce intermediary approach is defined by organizational attributes and shared goals rather than by institutional setting.

<p>The Jobs Initiative—a nine-year, six-city, \$30 million effort to reform local labor markets and help connect low-income young people to good jobs—was designed to show the field what an intermediary effort could achieve with adequate, sustained support.</p>

Perhaps the most significant intermediary project to date has been the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative. The Jobs Initiative, an unprecedented nine-year, six-city, \$30 million effort to reform local labor markets and help connect low-income, low-skilled young people to good jobs, was designed to show the field what could be achieved given adequate, sustained support. Starting in the mid-1990s, Casey had designated local organizations in each of its Jobs Initiative cities to take on two missions: operating successful jobs programs and advocating for positive change in local workforce systems.

Since the Jobs Initiative’s inception, across the six sites 10,124 low-income people have been placed in jobs paying wages averaging over \$9.15 per hour. As many as 14 percent of those placed into jobs had no prior work experience; the other participants reported a substantial increase in average hourly wages and weekly earnings. Seattle, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia, which were relatively high achievers, placed a total of 6,655 people in jobs. Their average placement wage was \$10.14 per hour, and their one-year average retention rate was more than 57 percent.

When the project formally ended in 2004, several of these workforce intermediaries had made great progress—and were well positioned to continue their work for years to come.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In this report, we look at three very distinct intermediary organizations—The Reinvestment Fund, a social-purpose lender and financier of community and economic revitalization in Philadelphia; Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, a labor/management partnership in Milwaukee; and the Seattle Jobs Initiative, an agency that began its operations within Seattle’s city government and later reconstituted itself as an independent nonprofit—that share both common organizational traits and operational goals. Despite the very significant differences among the three sites in regional economic and local political support, we found that the successful workforce intermediaries profiled here shared several organizational strengths they could bring to bear as problems arose: proven credibility, access to leaders and key stakeholders in government and business, and a willingness to embrace pragmatism over ideology and make changes to programs and approaches as events dictate. Strong leadership and an organizational willingness to take risks were also key elements in their successes.

Perhaps the biggest reason why these organizational traits are so important is that workforce intermediaries, almost without exception, are charting new territory, with inevitable missteps along the way. As Casey’s Bob Giloth and others have noted, the road to success for the three sites examined here has hit a few dead ends and unwanted detours.¹ Mistakes, even “failures,” are inevitable; the question is how the organizations respond to them. With a reservoir of credibility to draw upon, a willingness to try different things and change course as events dictate, and the clout to pull together key players, organizations like these three intermediaries can overcome their own misjudgments as well as misfortunes outside their own control.

Beyond considering these organizational traits, we must look at what workforce intermediaries actually set out to do. In *Workforce Intermediaries for the Twenty-first Century*, a collection of essays on the functions, value, and context of intermediaries, Richard Kazis of Jobs for the Future asserts that workforce intermediaries target most or all of the following goals:

- Pursue a “dual customer” approach.
- Organize multiple partners and funding streams toward common goals.

- Provide and/or broker labor market services to individuals and employers that include, but go beyond, job matching.
- Project a vision that motivates and guides its partnerships and activities.²

These four traits will frame our analysis of how the intermediaries supported by the Jobs Initiative fared. The importance of the dual customer approach should be self-evident: without employer support for both jobs projects and reform efforts, it's nearly impossible to get results. Achieving “buy-in” from multiple partners provides a framework in which operational problems can be discussed and solved, as well as access to a wider range of resources. Going beyond job matching in employment projects is a crucial element of success with a population of jobseekers who face barriers to work. And the vision of the intermediary is its calling card and rallying cry for all the constituencies it seeks to manage in pursuit of workforce development goals.

Each of these three organizations provides a model of the power of intermediaries, but each grew out of a unique local context that needs to be explained before diving into the details.

In Philadelphia, the Casey Foundation tapped The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), a community development financial institution created in 1985 and boasting a strong track record of successful investments, as the implementing agency for the Philadelphia Jobs Initiative (PJI). TRF had a steep hill to climb considering both the organization's previous lack of experience in workforce operations and the fragmented nature of Philadelphia's workforce development system. Employers were not engaged with training programs, successive mayors had failed to focus on workforce issues, and among providers and specialists there was a sense that, as one outside expert put it, “as long as we had a persistent problem employing people, everybody [in the field] had a job.”

In the face of general employer apathy and a moribund Workforce Investment Board, TRF looked to do three things: spread information about resources, opportunities, and needs in city and state workforce policy; organize employers around common interests and energize them to engage with the public sector for helpful policy reforms; and set up sector-specific training efforts that were truly responsive to regional economic needs. These efforts would then set the stage for the systems reform phase of the project, where Casey envisioned its grantees achieving lasting change in their local labor markets.

The outlook was arguably more favorable in Milwaukee, where the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) was beginning to leverage its close ties to both major manufacturing employers and powerful local unions into a shared agenda for workforce development and economic growth. WRTP boasted 30 member organizations in 1995, when the Casey Foundation helped create the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJJI); it has since grown to 125 employer and union members. In 2003, WRTP took over all functions of the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative.

WRTP presented a series of assets to Casey. Its strategic partnerships with the state AFL-CIO and the University of Wisconsin-based Center on Wisconsin Strategies (COWS) ensured good labor market information, and its relationships with Milwaukee's Private Industry Council, then responsible for setting workforce policy under the federal Job Training Partnership Act, and local technical colleges offered the promise of leveraging Casey funds with private money and forming quick alliances for training participants.

<p>Seattle Mayor Norm Rice foresaw the likely consequences of the welfare reform debate in Congress during the mid-1990s, and concluded that his city would need drastically increased job training resources to meet the challenge.</p>

Political leadership played a bigger role in Seattle than the other two cities, with then-Mayor Norm Rice in the lead. A former job developer with the Urban League, Rice foresaw the likely consequences of the welfare reform debate then current in Congress as the Casey Foundation deliberated where to invest its resources, and concluded that his city would need drastically increased job training capabilities to meet the challenge. Rice's administration began pitching the Foundation to do something really unusual: designate a Seattle city agency, the Office of Economic Development (OED), as the lead implementer of the Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI). Eventually, they convinced the Foundation that the usual rules of government bureaucracy would not apply, and won the grant. Hopes were high that OED's government status, along with some outstanding community colleges and community-based providers with substantial capacity and expertise, would lead to rapid progress in the Puget Sound area.

**EXAMPLES FROM
THE FIELD**

A. Pursue a “Dual Customer” Approach

If the history of workforce development as a field has taught us anything, it's that jobs projects and big-picture labor market reform efforts don't work unless the business community is on board. Jobs projects have to address a real demand on the part of employers, whether in a specific sector of the economy or by helping to develop worker attributes that employers across industry lines value. At the same time, workforce reformers cannot and should not abandon their traditional commitment to jobseeker advancement: the Jobs Initiative placed special focus on aiding disadvantaged individuals looking for work, and emphasized particularly hard-hit neighborhoods within the cities in which the project operated. Considering the personal barriers many jobseekers face in finding and keeping employment—from physical and mental health issues to concerns about housing, child care, and transportation—it's arguably more important than ever to focus on the well-being of those individuals the intermediary seeks to assist.

The Reinvestment Fund seeks to convince Philadelphia-area employers that it makes business sense for them to adopt human resources practices that support low-skilled entry-level workers.

Philadelphia and Milwaukee both offer good examples of the value of dual focus. Because of its concurrent work financing neighborhood and economic revitalization, The Reinvestment Fund came to the Jobs Initiative with a keen understanding of what it takes for companies to succeed. That background proved key as the organization strove to incorporate employer needs into its workforce programming. TRF's interest in expanding its socially minded business assistance efforts into workforce services made it an attractive partner for the Casey Foundation.

TRF's strategy in the workforce field is to help convince employers that it makes business sense for them to adopt human resources practices that support low-skilled entry-level workers. In 2003 alone, the organization secured \$128,000 in public job training grants for three of its partner companies. By pushing a bottom-line rationale to complement notions of idealism and civic duty, PJI has tried to align “doing good” with “doing well.”

The organization's website boasts of "add[ing] immeasurable value to the more than 1,600 jobs financed by our first venture fund. By helping to develop stable, family-sustaining jobs for individuals and long-term growth for our companies, we work to establish an integrated fabric of economic health in the communities in which we invest."³

WRTP's focus on serving employers—and the great credibility it gained through the presence of influential business leaders on its board—has kept the organization in a position of relevance through the economic ups and downs of the last decade.

TRF's Human Resources group engages employers in expanding recruitment and building career ladders and developing HR infrastructure within companies. TRF measures its performance in this area by tracking retention, job advancement, and what benefits are offered to workers in the firms it assists. In 2003, TRF reported to the Casey Foundation, "... Workforce Services has become fully integrated into the ... investment process, ensuring that we invest only in companies where we anticipate ripe opportunities for the types of interventions we believe can create opportunity for low-income workers."⁴ TRF has set a goal of creating an average of 30 jobs for every \$500,000 in private equity it invests.

As win-win services go, it's hard to beat finding more money for employees without any added cost to the employer. One way in which TRF tried to help its grantees accomplish this was through the creation of a mobile Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) service to employers who have received TRF loans. VITA works with employees who may be eligible for the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, helping these workers complete and file their returns: the program served over 600 employees at TRF grantee companies over a recent two-year period. TRF also has helped the businesses it has partnered with to furnish discounted health insurance, legal advice, and financial literacy services to low-income workers.

In Milwaukee, WRTP's unusual capacity to get labor and management working toward shared goals grows out of the organization's structure and decision-making process. The co-presidents of the WRTP board are Phil Neuenfeld, the vice president of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, whose labor background and heft within the state Democratic

Party opens many doors for the organization; and James Klauser, executive vice president of WE Energies, who had served in the administration of former Republican Governor Tommy Thompson. These prominent leaders helped assure WRTP a hearing for its goals in the upper echelons of the state business and political communities—a crucial factor for success in Milwaukee, as similarly strong organizational leadership proved to be in the other sites as well.

WRTP’s focus on serving employers—and the great credibility it gained through the presence of influential business leaders on its board—has kept the organization in a position of relevance through the economic ups and downs of the last decade. “Our core competency has always been employer services,” states WRTP Executive Director Eric Parker. “We developed, with unionized firms, a joint approach to recruiting, developing, and advancing workers.”

Dawn Schaeffer is WRTP’s liaison to the manufacturing sector. She explains how WRTP works with firms, keeping in close touch with union representatives at each work site to determine if and when to reach out with assistance. “We facilitate labor-management partnering, including formal commitment to partnering,” she says. Even after WRTP’s long and successful track record, it’s not easy work. “The two sides don’t know how to talk [to each other],” Schaeffer notes. “Management dictates and the union reacts. But management doesn’t know everything, and unions can take a more active role.”

<p>To keep Milwaukee Brush in business required cutting the workforce from 97 employees to 74. “Unions don’t want job loss,” United Steelworkers representative Bill Ryan says. “But it’s better to lose 23 jobs than 97.”</p>

One firm that WRTP helped save is Milwaukee Brush, a German-owned plant that has made brushes for decades. In November 2001, facing a threat of closure, labor leaders and management began to work together to search for ways to increase productivity, boost quality, and cut costs. WRTP provided support by helping Milwaukee Brush land thousands of dollars in state funding to train incumbent workers. “WRTP helped facilitate the partnership,” states United Steelworkers representative Bill Ryan. In this case, keeping

Milwaukee Brush open required cutting the workforce from 97 employees to 74. “Unions don’t want job loss,” Ryan points out. “But it’s better to lose 23 jobs than 97.”

Not every employer intervention is as dramatic as this one, but WRTP’s commitment to changing workplace practices for the benefit of both workers and management is another growing component of its work. In a February 2004 update, WRTP documented that it has engaged 28 firms in its “Quality Employers” program, concentrating its efforts with employers in the key sectors of manufacturing, health care, construction, and hospitality. Offering services that include worker-to-worker mentoring, job skills training, and employee assistance, WRTP has measured marked improvements in recruitment and retention among the health care and hospitality (hotel) firms it has assisted, and increased retention, improved productivity, and higher sales among manufacturing clients.

B. Organize Multiple Partners and Funding Streams Toward Common Goals

If businesses, schools, nonprofits, and government officials all act out of enlightened self-interest, the best way to rally them in support of a positive workforce agenda is to offer projects that help each group to achieve desired objectives. This is the case for a specific project, as in Philadelphia, where the Customer Service Training Collaborative sought to address employers’ hiring needs, government’s wish to support a jobs effort that demonstrated return on investment, and the organizational goals of a local nonprofit and a national trade group. It also works for bigger-picture efforts: the other great advantage of this kind of “coalition building” is that it helps cast a wider net in terms of funding and resources. In Milwaukee, the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership has won pledges of funding support from business and political leaders for its proposed Worker Training Center, and agreement from community-based organizations to provide resources once the center is up and running. Finally, the Seattle Jobs Initiative was able to convince a wide range of institutional actors that its efforts to reform and streamline case management at the CBO level would pay long-term dividends in terms of job placement and retention.

Philadelphia’s Customer Service Training Collaborative (CSTC) was modest in scale but conceptually ambitious, with a long-term goal of changing the dynamics of the labor market among local retailers. Based on extensive consultation with Philadelphia-area employers as well as outside research by the National Retail Federation Foundation (NRFF), an arm of the trade group representing an industry with more than 1.4 million retail establishments in the U.S., CSTC took as its basic premise that customer service

jobs across many different fields have certain core competencies in common, and that it is possible to train for those competencies in a course of instruction leading to certification. To make it happen, TRF partnered with Jewish Educational and Vocational Services (JEVS), a very highly regarded nonprofit with a great deal of experience in job training and placement, as well as NRFF, which was sponsoring a handful of similar projects nationwide. TRF also went to great lengths to organize employers across sectors around customer service, to ensure a steady flow of feedback regarding the training as well as buy-in for the effort to get recognition for the NRFF credential. This emphasis on organizing employers informed other TRF projects as well, including its effort to train and provide internship placements for young Philadelphians seeking careers in information technology.

<p>Workforce practice has taught us that jobs projects and big-picture labor market reform efforts don't work unless the business community is on board.</p>

As the economic downturn took hold in 2001, however, many of the employers that had pledged to hire from the program were unable to bring on additional workers, and TRF and its partners recognized that they would have to make some changes to the program. At the end of fiscal year 2003, the Workforce Investment Act training dollars that had supported the program stopped flowing. But when TRF pledged to switch its target population for the program from displaced workers to public assistance recipients trying to make the transition to work, the state Department of Public Welfare offered to step in and provide support. JEVS began to work closely with local welfare offices to deliver recruitment, assessment, and support services for new trainees and workers placed through the program. Going forward, CSTC will reside within JEVS, as part of the NRFF-approved Regional Skills Center network. CSTC now relies on funding from a variety of sources, including the state welfare agency.

Just as CSTC presented project management challenges in Philadelphia, the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership has had a hard road to travel in establishing its long-planned career center for worker training. This clearinghouse for assessing and training job candidates from all the community-based organizations that partner with WRTP eventually will comprise a 40,000-square-foot facility, including classroom, office, meeting, and factory floor space, to be located in downtown Milwaukee. WRTP has won promises

of support from Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle's administration as well as an array of local public, private, and philanthropic sector partners.

This will be WRTP's second try at this project. Its Worker Training Center briefly opened in 2002 before the Milwaukee YWCA, WRTP's partner in the venture, encountered severe fiscal problems that forced the training center to close down. WRTP had responsibility for training and placement; YWCA was to handle case management. A series of staff departures, exacerbated by some bad management decisions, hindered the YWCA's ability to meet its obligations on the project, and the training center shut down after a few months.

This time, the plan is to shift most case management responsibilities to other community-based organizations. "The second career center will have us do final screening, but we'll have many partners," says Eric Parker.

In the end, the potential of the center to facilitate job placements on major development projects—and WRTP's demonstrated ability to secure a role in those projects—drew CBOs back into the project. WRTP already has secured contracts from the Wisconsin Department of Transportation for workforce development and diversity on the Marquette Interchange, a highway construction project, and is looking to participate in Power the Future, a project of WE Energies to increase energy supply and reliability in Wisconsin that is projected to create 1,200–1,500 union construction jobs over the next decade; Pabst City, a major downtown development expected to involve 1.25 million labor hours; and the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District.

Among the most important aspects of Philadelphia's Customer Service Training Collaborative was the concept that universal standards in customer service cut across the traditional industry lines—in other words, that a floor sales job with JC Penney and a phone center position taking complaint calls for IBM might require enough common skills that a provider could train for both at the same time.

During its 18-month planning stage from 1995–1997, the Seattle Jobs Initiative came to the conclusion that increasing the capacity of Seattle's community-based organizations,

The seven case managers, job developers, and retention specialists from TRAC Associates who attended SJI’s first class on case management best practices in April 2003 learned how to develop or find resources, worked better as a team, demonstrated a clearer understanding of how to conduct assessment and job readiness training, and had access to a better network of professionals.

which provided job training and related services to individuals looking for work, was crucial to success in many of its planned projects. Because of their strong neighborhood connections and ability to provide a wide range of services in the communities in which they are based, SJI considered CBOs to be their best partners for achieving SJI’s objective of providing greater access to the workforce development system for low-income, low-skilled adults. Staff members with experience working for CBOs both appreciated the value of these organizations, and knew how much room for improvement they had in terms of case management, building relationships with employers, and providing retention services for those placed in jobs.

But at the outset of the Jobs Initiative, the 13 agencies SJI contracted with for job training and workforce services weren’t meeting their goals for job retention. Through a series of conversations with the CBOs themselves, SJI staff tried to determine what factors were responsible for the organizations’ difficulties in meeting retention goals. “People really keyed in on barriers around human service issues,” recalls Judy Summerfield, a former SJI staff person now with Seattle’s Human Services Department, citing mental illness and homelessness as examples of the obstacles between participants and staying in training or at a job. “A couple of the [CBOs] said, ‘Our case managers are not trained to do that kind of work’”—referring to serious case management around those issues. “They were hired on to do employment and [job] training.”

As the curriculum came together over time, initially reluctant CBO partners responded with increasing enthusiasm. Laura Rowley, then an employment director at TRAC Associates and now SJI’s director of core programs, cites the direct benefits for TRAC: the seven case managers, job developers, and retention specialists from the organization who attended the first class on case management best practices in April 2003 had fewer

questions on how to develop or find resources, worked better as a team, demonstrated a clearer understanding of how to conduct assessment and job readiness training, and had access to a better network of professionals.

C. Provide and/or Broker Labor Market Services to Individuals and Employers That Include, But Go Beyond, Job Matching

The days when job training providers could find a few large-scale employers desperate for bodies, give clients directions to the worksite, and then say goodbye and good luck, are long gone. With job retention now a key benchmark for virtually all workforce contracts—and a particular area of focus for the Casey Foundation in the Jobs Initiative⁵—the level of engagement with both workers and employers is much higher. This most commonly plays out in two ways. First, workforce intermediaries increasingly continue working with both program participants and the firms that hire them well after placement, as the Seattle Jobs Initiative does in all its sector-based employment projects. Second, sectoral projects often involve attempts to change conditions within the industry itself, as the Customer Service Training Collaborative has attempted to do by convincing employers to acknowledge workers who have earned a certificate in customer service.

<p>SJI's follow-up efforts include contracting with partner CBOs to work with both participants and employers for one to two years after placement. Program graduates frequently note that they "still feel like part of the family."</p>
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Among the most important aspects of the CSTC in Philadelphia was an overt focus on universal standards in customer service that cut across the traditional industry lines—in other words, that a floor sales job with JC Penney and a phone center position taking complaint calls for IBM might have enough in common that a provider could train for both at the same time. The program was designed both in response to the input of area employers who expressed interest in hiring graduates, and to prepare participants to take the National Professional Certification in Customer Service exam offered by the National Retail Federation Foundation. In 2003, CSTC students passed at a 93 percent rate, comparing favorably to 80 percent nationally.

As with a number of sector-based job training projects, CSTC aspires not just to provide services to workers and employers directly involved, but to change conditions throughout the industry as well. JEVS and the National Retail Federation Foundation remain engaged in efforts to make the certification meaningful to local and national employers, with support from a U.S. Department of Labor grant. For a variety of reasons, including the severe slowdown in hiring during and after the 2001 recession, progress here has been slower than the partners had hoped. But all parties remain committed to working with employers to win recognition of the certificate, through higher starting wages or faster promotions and raises for those employees who have earned it before starting on the job.

Informed both by employers' focus on profitability and union priorities for worker advancement, the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership engages both employees and firms on a long-term basis—and has transcended the usual training-placement-retention paradigm by developing a core competency in helping to save embattled manufacturing firms

SJI's various sector initiatives attempt to engage jobseekers and employers beyond just placement. Sector efforts include a heavy focus on retention—starting from the “workplace rules” that govern the training projects, in which participants must dress professionally, punch in and punch out, and make up whatever class time they miss. Unlike most workforce programs, SJI continues follow-up activities for more than a year after placement. Follow-up with employers is another priority for the program. The employer board that guides SJI's Office Occupations sector program has suggested changes in the program, including PowerPoint training; instruction on business communications, including training on Microsoft Outlook e-mail; and greater emphasis on soft skills and customer service skills.

The board still meets on a quarterly basis, with SJI staff asking business representatives about the hiring outlook for their organizations and their impressions of the general business climate. Companies and organizations represented on the board include Regence Blue Shield, Safeco, Zymogenetics, the University of Washington, and Manpower, among

others. Employers with whom Office Occupations places interns as part of the training are a second source of feedback for the program; in addition to Manpower, University of Washington, and Regence Blue Shield, intern placement sites have included Amgen, Seattle City Council, Dendrion, and First Choice Health, among dozens of others.

Participants in the program praise SJI's follow-up efforts, which include contracting with partner CBOs to work with both participants and employers for one to two years after placement. Roughly three-quarters of the employers who have hired from the Office Occupations program regularly work with retention specialists at the CBOs, according to SJI's Laura Rowley. Follow-up services include regular communications; financial tutoring on how to budget, set up bank accounts, and other subjects; and further training and re-placement as needed. Comments such as "I still feel like part of the family" are commonly heard from program graduates.

D. Project a Vision That Motivates and Guides Its Partnerships and Activities

For most workforce intermediaries, the vision they offer will logically follow from their institutional setting: a community college-based intermediary is likely to stress worker learning, a business association will emphasize employer needs, and so on. But as long as that vision complements the goals of other actors, it will serve as a way to bolster credibility within the pro-workforce coalition the intermediary seeks to manage as well as with the outside world. In Milwaukee, WRTP drew upon its roots in both the labor movement and business community and was able to offer the strengths of those constituencies as an inducement for other groups to support its efforts. The Seattle Jobs Initiative was a newly created entity, but its ties to the city's Office of Economic Development sent a strong signal that this workforce effort would prioritize serving Seattle employers rather than take the traditional, largely ineffectual antipoverty approach.

Informed in roughly equal measure by employers' focus on profitability and union priorities for worker advancement, the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership engages both employees and firms on a long-term basis—and has transcended the usual training-placement-retention paradigm by developing a core competency in helping to save embattled manufacturing firms in Milwaukee. MJJ's November 2003 Strategic Impact Plan proudly states that over the previous year, its work with local businesses "has made a significant impact on the retention and creation of 1,750 family-supporting jobs"⁶ in manufacturing and telecommunications.

“Firm retention isn’t necessarily part of the dialogue about workforce intermediaries,” explains Executive Director Eric Parker, “but it is connected to economic development”—WRTP’s larger mission. It’s also vitally tied to the well-being of the target population for the Jobs Initiative: a quarter of Milwaukee inner-city residents are employed in manufacturing, and the industry-wide meltdown put their jobs in immediate danger. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of WRTP’s efforts to save firms in burnishing its credibility and relevance in the sphere of workforce development.

With the employment crisis in manufacturing apparently over, at least for now, WRTP is hard at work developing other mechanisms to serve both workers and employers. These include a staffing entity for health care workers, through which currently uninsured workers could access health coverage at a much lower cost to them and to employers than otherwise would be possible. Parker notes that eight employers already have voiced enthusiasm about retaining staff through the new entity.

While Jobs Initiative sites in Philadelphia and Milwaukee built new entities to support their systems reform agendas, the Seattle Jobs Initiative has focused its own efforts as an intermediary on finding better ways to connect existing workforce assets. SJI has attempted to rationalize the delivery of workforce services in Seattle by creating established pathways through which low-skilled workers can acquire training and access support services, then utilize the strong relationships SJI has established with employers in finding job placement and advancing into career-sustaining work. SJI works with community-based organizations as “feeders” into these pathways, brokering new relationships between CBOs and training institutions in which every partner focuses on what it does best.

Within that client flow, SJI has worked to improve case management in its contractor agencies by disseminating standards for best practices. These standards, developed in close collaboration with the contractors, help to improve outcomes, reduce redundancy in service provision, and provide added value to CBOs that now earn their compensation from government contracts based mostly on performance. Externally to these pathways, SJI builds relationships with employers and government agencies and legislators that help ensure SJI is doing work it’s best suited to do—a key rationalizing function for this intermediary.

CONCLUSION

With government at the local, state, and federal levels generally having failed in an intermediary role, it has fallen to organizations like the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, The Reinvestment Fund in Philadelphia, and the Seattle Jobs Initiative to assemble the pieces of effective local workforce systems. While none has achieved all they and the Casey Foundation hoped for, each can point to significant progress over the years of the Jobs Initiative and all continue their work in the belief that still better days lie ahead.

Many of the steps government could take to provide greater support for workforce intermediaries do not entail large new investments. These include building the capacity of organizations through spreading best practices, such as what has worked in the Jobs Initiative, through workforce boards and other channels; and rallying the different constituencies that have particular interest in more effective workforce development policies—including the business community, educators, and political leaders at all levels—to speak out on behalf of progress in the field.

The sprawling nature of the topic itself makes focus elusive, as the American Assembly acknowledged: “. . . the broad tasks of advancing workers, increasing business productivity, and enhancing regional competitiveness span so many institutions and stakeholders that they inhibit the necessary attention and public support.”⁷ But by forging alliances that integrate workforce priorities into economic development and educational goals, it will be possible to achieve the great integration of these missions needed to ensure that America’s workforce is ready to meet the challenges of a changing economy. As other cities explore how best to establish effective workforce intermediaries, the opportunistic and results-oriented approach of the three sites in Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Seattle should offer many valuable lessons.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Mistakes, Learning, and Adaptation: Philanthropy and the Jobs Initiative*, Robert Giloth, March 2004.

² “What Do Workforce Intermediaries Do?” Richard Kazis, in *Workforce Intermediaries for the Twenty-first Century*, 2004.

³ www.trfund.com/workforce/workforce.htm

⁴ Philadelphia Jobs Initiative, Strategic Plan Update, December 2003.

⁵ *The Road to Good Employment Retention: Three Successful Programs from the Jobs Initiative*, Center for an Urban Future, May 2005.

⁶ Milwaukee Jobs Initiative, Strategic Impact Plan, December 2003.

⁷ “Keeping America in Business,” the 102nd American Assembly, February 6–9, 2003.



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