

**ESPRI Workforce Development Work Group – Meeting Highlights**  
**April 10, 2017 3:30 – 5:20 PM**  
**Community Action Planning Council – 518 Davidson Street**

Present: Jill Ahlgrim, Bridgeview Real Estate Services  
Teresa Gaffney, Jefferson County Department of Social Services  
Jane Gendron, American Red Cross  
Kevin Hill, Workforce Development Chair / Community Advocate  
Steve Hunt, NC Regional Economic Development Council  
Melissa Jenkins, Community Action Planning Council  
Aileen Martin, Northern Regional Center for Independent Living  
Mary Jane Mathewson, Community Action Planning Council  
Cheryl Mayforth, Workforce Development Board  
Rafael Reyes, Community Advocate  
Karen Richmond, Children’s Home of Jefferson County  
Don Rutherford, Watertown Local Development Corporation  
Jim Schell, Jefferson County Department of Social Services  
Orales Stroud, Community Advocate

Georgia Dusckas, Jefferson-Lewis BOCES  
Nathan Mandsager, Schenectady Works (via WebEx)  
Peter Schmitt, Watertown ESPRI Director  
Tobi Darrah, United Way of Northern NY  
Dawn Cole, Watertown ESPRI

Excused: Michelle Alba, Community Advocate  
Robin Holmes, Salvation Army  
Yvonne Reff, Flower Memorial Library  
Roberto Smith, Community Advocate  
Denise Young, YMCA

Welcome

Work Group Chair Kevin Hill welcomed the group and called the meeting to order at 3:35 PM. Members of the group introduced themselves.

Employer Resource Network – via WebEx

Nathan Mandsager, Director of Schenectady Works, provided an overview of the employer resource network (ERN) model. The program launched in 2013, in response to needs identified through the business community – to reduce training / hiring costs by reducing staff turnover. Feedback from many area employers indicated that staff were late to work or didn’t show up for work due to a variety of crises, including transportation issues, evictions, utility shut-offs, etc. Employers also reported that staff were sometimes reluctant to accept wage increases or promotions, due to a loss of benefits (cliff effect). Using the feedback gleaned from employers,

Mr. Mandsager was charged with identifying a model to help employees to stabilize their lives so that they could remain employed and businesses could improve retention rates. After visiting Michigan (the birthplace of the ERN 12 years ago), Mr. Mandsager and his associates introduced the idea to the local community where it has grown in leaps and bounds in the past four years.

ERN is built on the primary constructs of Bridges Out of Poverty:

- Mental models – individuals who live in an environment of poverty (instability) tend to be relationship-centered, as they rely on relationships to survive. Those who live in an environment of middle class (stability) tend to be more achievement-based. It is important to investigate the opposite side of the equation to avoid collisions.
- Tyranny of the moment – for employees who lack stability, the paycheck does not cover all the gaps. They become overwhelmed working and navigating the system for benefits – constant survival mentality.
- Hidden rules – the business world is achievement-based and future-focused (organizational goals, strategic plans, etc.); decisions are made against future ramifications. Individuals living in instability are focused on the present, and decisions are based on feelings or survival.
- Resources – poverty / instability is defined as “the extent to which an individual or family does without resources.” Resources encompass more than financial. Individuals living in middle class environments tend to have greater depth of resources.

Mr. Mandsager explained that the Bridges foundation is not meant to excuse anyone’s behavior but rather to provide context for understanding where people come from. This understanding becomes the basis for healthy relationships.

ERN deploys success coaches who work in the field, helping employees to work through issues. Success coaches are not employed by the company and are not representatives of HR but are positioned as a benefit offered to employees. The model was described as a three-prong approach with success coaches providing coaching, advocacy and connections to resources. Success coaches navigate in real time, fast-tracking issues; they remove barriers quickly and efficiently. They are not case managers.

ERN is a sustainable model with employers sharing the cost of success coaches. There are currently 36 participating employers, each paying \$7,500 - \$16,000 per year. The program began four years ago with one success coach; today there are eight.

Mr. Mandsager reported that the ERN serves 1,278 distinct employees who have requested 3,538 services. The utilization rate is 15%. The overall retention rate has grown to 90% and the return on investment is 533%

A question was asked regarding the funding mechanism to get the ERN started. Mr. Mandsager shared that five employers originally agreed to participate; costs were offset with private donations and grants.

A member of the group asked Mr. Mandsager to expand on “fast track barrier removal.” He explained that transportation and child care are the biggest issues facing many employees. Coaching through an ERN helps to “open the door to resources wider.” Success coaches have connected people to financial literacy and budgeting education. For individuals living in instability, it can be difficult to pause and take a deep dive into the issues whereas a success coach can help facilitate further analysis. Mr. Mandsager also credited ERN with helping to build collective strength to address needs on a community level. For example, in Schenectady they have had some success in encouraging the creation of third shift child care slots. In addition, talks have begun with cab companies and local transit.

A question was asked regarding clarification of the target market for ERN services. Mr. Mandsager explained that ERN is a resource for individuals who are employed (within participating organization) and struggling with an issue. However, employers participating in ERN have begun to reach out to Schenectady Works for referrals as openings arise.

A question was asked regarding the qualities of success coaches. Mr. Mandsager indicated that those who “speak corporate American” make the best candidates. Success coaches can be trained on available resources; above all, they must be able to communicate effectively with CEOs and HR officials as well as frontline staff. Mr. Mandsager went on to say that his success coaches are paid lower than market rate but are sold on the mission of ERN.

A question was asked as to whether Schenectady Works is available to consult with communities looking to start an ERN. Mr. Mandsager responded that his organization is currently contracting with Schenectady Community Action Program (SCAP) to provide technical support to help start a Mohawk Valley ERN. Schenectady Works is also consulting with communities in Ohio and Massachusetts.

In response to a question from a member of the group, Mr. Mandsager explained that his organization collects and reports outcome data. Key metrics include retention rates, return on investment and utilization.

A member of the group asked how the ERN model differs from an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Mr. Mandsager said that the utilization rates for ERN are 5 – 10 times higher due largely to accessibility and program design.

#### Jefferson-Lewis BOCES Adult Education

Georgia Dusckas, Jefferson-Lewis BOCES, provided an overview of a strategy to “break the cycle” in workforce development. She explained that local non-profits, educational institutions and businesses need to invest in the workforce to develop skills not to service immediate needs. Ms. Dusckas noted a lack of soft skills among entry-level applicants and the need for institutions

to build stronger baseline skills among applicants. She went on to define the supply chain that will help lead new entries to careers and how business, education and institutions need to work to improve the supply of employment ready individuals for entry level positions.

Ms. Dusckas described how BOCES makes the determination on training programs that are to be offered. She reviewed the three vocational education program categories offered through Adult Education Center for Business and Industry:

- Trade and Technical Training – National Certificate
  - Auto Technology
  - Electrical Wiring
  - Manufacturing Technology
  - Welding
- Health Care Careers Training – NYS Certificate
  - Home Health Aide
  - Nursing Assistant
  - Practical Nursing
- Customized Training – No Certificate
  - Apprenticeship Courses
  - Business Office Skills
  - Commercial Drivers' License
  - Hospitality – TBD
  - Director Support Professionals – TBD
  - Electrical Wiring
  - Manufacturing Technology
  - Welding

A question was asked regarding the difference between nationally-certified and customized training. Ms. Dusckas explained that nationally-certified programs are traditionally offered in 10-week blocks while customized training programs teach only the skills requested by the employer, running shorter in duration.

A question was asked as to whether public assistance programs are available to individuals while they are enrolled in vocational education. Ms. Dusckas explained that classes are offered

at various times (days and evenings) to allow individuals to pursue education while working, as financial assistance is not offered to individuals who are full-time students. Ms. Mayforth, Executive Director for the Jefferson-Lewis Workplace, indicated that there are very limited circumstances upon which an individual can draw public assistance while undergoing vocational training, as the system is designed to encourage “work first.” It was noted that the majority of adults pursuing vocational training are receiving unemployment benefits or are increasing skills at the request of their employers.

### Navigating / Mentoring

Karen Richmond, Executive Director for the Children’s Home of Jefferson County, shared her thoughts on a navigator model. She suggested navigators as a means to break down the silos in which many organizations operate and to maximize existing services. Ms. Richmond talked about navigators as individuals who share their education, experience and exposure in the community to enhance other individuals. In addition to connecting individuals to services, navigators provide guidance and mentoring.

Bright Futures was cited as an example. Ms. Richmond explained that 18 months ago, her organization was approached by NY Air Brake, with officials communicating a need to better prepare young adults to enter the workforce. Subsequent to the program’s launch (September 2016), Ms. Richmond and her staff learned that the average literacy of a cohort of 10 young adults was 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

### Open Discussion

Mr. Schmitt suggested that the group begin to narrow in on initiatives supporting workforce development. He shared that in other work groups, reference had been made to supporting “motivated” individuals. Mr. Schmitt anticipates further clarification of the timeline under which programs will launch from Liz Morrissey, ESPRI Contract Manager for Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. Liz will be attending the next meeting of the Steering Committee, scheduled for April 12.

A point was made that ESPRI year two funding was not included in the Governor’s budget.

Discussion ensued regarding the distinction between the ERN and navigator models, with several members of the group expressing confusion. Eventually it was explained that the ERN offers support to individuals employed within organizations that buy in to the ERN model while a navigation system would be inclusive of others outside the employment network.

The group pondered whether an ERN model would be sustainable locally, as our employment base differs from that of Schenectady. It was suggested that we have adequate employers with Kinney Drugs, Timeless Frames and Stewart’s Shops mentioned as examples. Mr. Schmitt indicated that there is potential to secure community partners, such as Jefferson Leadership Institute and the Northern NY Community Foundation.

The group discussed how an ERN differs from EAP. It was suggested that ERN staff are more corporate in their way of thinking while EAP professionals tend to be therapeutic in nature. ERN success coaches work through immediate barriers, helping individuals to maintain employment. EAP staff offer counseling over an extended period of time.

The idea of microloans was discussed. Members of the group expressed interest in earmarking a pool of funds to provide small dollar loans. As loans are paid back, funds are deposited back into the pool.

Mr. Schmitt agreed to present two initiatives – navigation and employer resource network – to the Steering Committee.

#### Next Meeting

Work Group Chair Mr. Hill thanked the group for their time and closed out the meeting. The next meeting will be scheduled once the timeline has been confirmed.