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Key Economic Partners Work Together in Bay Area *Task Force Report Aims to Improve Chances for Low-Skilled Workers*

Green Bay - Better integration between workforce development programs, greater emphasis on job-skills training to improve long-term success, and a focus on long-term outcomes for W-2 participants: those were the general themes coming from the Bay Area Task Force on Low-Wage Work in their report released today, *Toward a Better Design: New-Economy Challenges Require a Better W-2 Program in the Bay Area*.

“The Bay Area Project is a unique undertaking of involved individuals in Northeastern Wisconsin looking at economic development for the future. This area is known for working in constructive partnerships. This task force continues that work with a significant look at the low-skilled portion of the workforce as they struggle to provide for their families in this changing economy,” stated Charity Eleson, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.

The Bay Area Task Force consisted of representatives from the state Department of Workforce Development, the Bay Area Workforce Development Board, the area’s technical colleges (Northeast Wisconsin Technical College and Lakeshore Technical College), and others, who met over the course of a year studying the needs of both low-skilled workers and employers in the 10-county Bay Area Workforce Development Area.

“There’s no single magic bullet to improving outcomes for W-2 participants or other low-skilled workers or the unemployed,” added John Keckhaver, author of the report and WCCF Research Analyst. “However, there are several positive steps that the Task Force identified— based on evidenced-based research—that could be taken by key workforce development partners in the area that could help.”

“We were happy to serve on the Task Force, and we look forward to finding very specific ways of improving outcomes for W-2 participants in the counties that we serve, which now includes Brown County,” said Marcia Christiansen, CEO, Forward Service Corporation (FSC). FSC was a key member of the Task Force, and provides W-2 services in 10 counties and Workforce Investment Act (WIA) services (a federally funded job-training program) in 18 counties across Wisconsin.

"In terms of the W-2 program, we have a significant human resource that can be a real asset to regional economic growth if we can invest in the appropriate kinds of training to give workers the skills to succeed. Because the economy is constantly evolving, a program such as W-2 needs to change with it and be well connected to the economic and education factors that are driving it," said Jim Golembeski, Executive Director, Bay Area Workforce Development Board, and a leader on workforce issues in the area.

The Bay Area Task Force came up with 14 specific recommendations addressing the important roles played by W-2 providers, the Bay Area Workforce Development Board, and the state’s Department of Workforce Development. View the full report online at(ctrl & click): http://wccf.org/pdf/towardbetterdesign_bayareaproj.pdf

Recommendations for W-2 Providers

1. Consistently and thoroughly assess both the strengths and weaknesses of each participant.
2. Develop a plan for each participant – a “roadmap to self-sufficiency” – to take a participant from status at enrollment through economic self-sufficiency – incorporating aspects of the current “employability” and “supportive services” plans.
3. Provide more job skills training and educational opportunities for participants by linking with other partners such as WIA providers, technical colleges, employer networks, and others.
4. Provide informed job search assistance and placement recommendations for every participant, using available labor market information as well as proactive outreach to employers and employer networks to help participants tune in to higher quality jobs (defined not only as having higher wages, but also taking into account hours of work available).
5. Link basic skills and ESL trainings to specific occupations and employers, soliciting the assistance of employers in planning these trainings in order to make them relevant and useful for both participants and employers.
6. Stay engaged with participants after placement to provide increased retention and advancement assistance – maintaining pursuit of the program’s goal of economic self-sufficiency for participants by helping the participant move further along their roadmap, specifically linking participants to education and training opportunities and openings in higher-paying jobs.

Recommendations for the Bay Area Workforce Development Board

7. Establish and support a permanent committee on low-wage work as part of the Bay Area Workforce Development Board to assist with the implementation of these recommendations, and to continue exploring these and other issues surrounding low-wage work.
8. Help educate local employers as to the positive impacts that peer-mentoring can have on their turnover costs and employee work habits, productivity, and loyalty.
9. Actively seek ways to incorporate W-2 participants into available WIA-organized education and training opportunities.

Recommendations for the Department of Workforce Development

10. Create an ongoing W-2 program quality review and improvement team.
11. Develop and publicly share a specific plan for collecting and making accessible more information on the administration of and outcomes from the W-2 program.
12. Work with local providers to allow them to test evidence-based practices in Wisconsin and measure the results, offering grants on a competitive basis to help overcome existing budget constraints.
13. Test approaches against outcomes and work with providers to change approaches when positive outcomes for earnings, retention and employment aren’t achieved.
14. Train local W-2 providers in how to maximize use of the available labor market information to target job search, job development, and job skill training offerings.

The project was designed and Task Force assembled by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) and the Bay Area WDB. WCCF is a private non-profit that has worked for years in the area of low-skilled workforce development and particularly the state’s W-2 program. The Bay Area Workforce Development Board oversees the area’s Job Centers and administers a number of workforce related programs for the area.