

All in One Stop? The Accessibility of Work Support Programs at One-Stop Centers

By Elise Richer, Hitomi Kubo, and Abbey Frank

Introduction

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 changed the federal employment and training service system in an attempt to streamline services for both job-seekers and employers. Under WIA, all local workforce areas in the U.S. (there are currently over 600) are required to develop a “one-stop” delivery system that makes an array of federally funded employment programs available at one location. The one-stop system is designed to make the workforce development system more user-friendly for both job seekers and employers, and, over time, to serve people looking for help finding an initial job, a better job, and/or accessing

services to improve their skills. The system is also designed to serve employers seeking qualified workers or funding to train prospective or incumbent workers.

One-stop centers are in a unique position of being potential clearinghouses of employment and employment-related information, services, and programs. These services and programs include those typically associated with employment, such as job search assistance and access to job training. Services may also include work support programs—programs designed to help workers find a job, accept a job, and/or keep a job by helping families make ends meet when earnings are not enough—such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), subsidized child care, and food stamps. Under WIA, one-stop centers are only required to provide “information” about supportive services. Nevertheless, as one-stops

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This brief summarizes the report, *All in One Stop? The Accessibility of Work Support Programs* by Elise Richer, Hitomi Kubo, and Abbey Frank. To read the full report on how one-stop centers are providing work support services to their customers, visit the CLASP website at www.clasp.org, or call (202) 906-8000 to order a printed copy.

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become increasingly important places for low-income job seekers to find employment services, the centers are well-situated to be useful linkage points for work support programs.

A key concern with work support programs is declining participation among individuals and families who are eligible. In fact, recent research indicates that an increasing number of families are

not taking advantage of public benefits for which they are eligible, particularly food stamps, Medicaid, and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). One such study recommends increasing program awareness through locally based outreach activities

HOW WE ASSESSED THE ONE-STOPS

We divided the 30 one-stops surveyed into three categories—high, medium, and low—which describe the level of access to work supports they offer. We determined whether a given one-stop would be considered to provide high, medium, or low access based on the provision of information about work supports, the type of referrals made, the availability of on-site application, and the inaccessibility of work supports. We judged a work support to be inaccessible via the one-stop when our interview indicated that, at best, only written information or a passive referral would be available to those customers who asked. At worst, a work support is inaccessible because nothing is done to facilitate a customer accessing the program.

Out of the 33 one-stop centers surveyed, three are located in Utah. Since all three one-stops in Utah provide a high level of access, we have focused this policy brief on the remaining 30 one-stops, and have left the Utah sites out of this discussion. The full paper includes a separate discussion of the integrated services offered at Utah one-stops.

and improving access through “outreach units”—that is, places working families may frequent for other purposes—that can offer assistance with applications and eligibility determination.¹

Between December 2002 and March 2003, CLASP conducted surveys with 33 one-stop centers located across the country, from different-sized counties and from various geographic areas (urban, suburban, and rural). The primary focus of our interviews with one-stop directors was to examine the accessibility of seven work support programs: the EITC, subsidized child care, child support, food stamps, publicly funded health insurance, transportation assistance, and cash assistance. This policy brief discusses the major findings of the survey and common barriers to providing better access to work support programs.

Survey Findings

Provision of Information Is Common, Except for Child Support

Verbal and written methods of communication about work supports are equally common in the one-stops we surveyed, and many of the sites use more than one method, typically relying on a case manager to discuss the program with customers and perhaps also having printed material available. About one-quarter to one-third of the sites rely solely on printed material to provide information about various work supports, and a smaller number

(typically four or five, depending on which work support) offer information only in verbal format. The number of sites providing information on programs during group workshops or orientations is small (three or four sites, depending on the work support).

- **Child support is considerably less likely than the other work supports to have information available.** In 14 of 30 sites, respondents indicated that no information about child support is available. This is much higher than any other work support (the closest is the EITC, for which six sites stated they provide no information). In addition, six sites indicated that caseworkers discuss child support with customers *only if the customer asks about it*.

- **Work supports affiliated with TANF are less likely to be discussed.** Sites are more likely to provide information in written form only (through flyers and brochures, with no oral follow-up) for the three work supports most closely associated with TANF, or least likely to be perceived as linked to employment: food stamps, publicly funded health insurance, and cash assistance. About one-third of all sites indicated that they provide only written information for these programs. These responses may indicate less of a commitment

to linking non-TANF one-stop customers with certain types of work support programs.

Coordination at Many Levels Appears to Distinguish High-Access One-Stops

We found that six of the 30 one-stops provide a high level of access to work supports, defined as allowing relatively easy access to four or more of the work supports. Fifteen provide a medium level of access, by allowing easy access to two or three of the work supports, while one program is typically inaccessible. And nine provide a low level of access, allowing easy access only to one or two programs, while several others are completely inaccessible.

- **One-stops with high access to work support programs tend to have close relationships with TANF agency staff.** These close relationships with the TANF agency do not guarantee that a one-stop center will provide easy access to numerous work supports but, without them, easy access appears unlikely. One-stops offering easy access to many work support programs also appear to benefit from having a TANF agency that actively communicates with one-stop staff.

- **One-stop centers offering medium access to work support programs are not well-linked with the TANF agency.** One notable shared characteristic of the 15 medium-access sites is that none provides on-site application for either food stamps or Medicaid for the general public. (Two have on-site application for SCHIP available, while a third allows TANF recipients to apply for Medicaid on-site.) Although more than half of the medium-access sites have some kind of connection to the TANF agency—either they are collocated, are physically very close, or have TANF agency staff come on-site regularly—these sites do not provide access to programs the TANF agency typically administers (such as Medicaid and food stamps). When connections to the TANF agency exist in these sites, the centers fail to capitalize fully on their connection to the TANF agency workers. It is possible that at these centers the TANF agency workers assist only current TANF recipients rather than function as eligibility specialists for all customers. These patterns show that mere proximity of the TANF agency is not enough to guarantee customers' easy access to many work supports.

- **One-stops with low access to work supports tend to have weak connections with the TANF agency.** We classified nine of the 30 one-stops as low access because they provide customers with limited ability to access work supports. In three of these sites, customers can access no work supports

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE REFERRALS

For many of the work supports in question, one-stop centers provide customers with referrals to outside agencies in order to access services. A referral can be as simple as giving a customer the name of an organization or as complex as calling a specific outside agency worker and setting up an appointment for the customer.

What is an active referral?

An active referral occurs when a one-stop staff member provides the customer with detailed contact information, or actually assists the customer in setting up an appointment at the referral site. For example, for a customer interested in finding out about child care options in his/her community, an active referral would involve the one-stop staff calling the outside agency and making an appointment for the customer or providing the customer with a written referral form to present to the outside agency.

What is a passive referral?

A passive referral occurs when a one-stop staff member provides basic information to a customer seeking specific assistance that is not available on-site. In the worst case, one-stop staff might simply provide the customer with the name of an agency (not an individual at the agency) that handles the work support program in question. Another example is to provide a customer with a generic brochure (for example, a brochure for publicly funded health insurance that includes a toll-free number one can call for more assistance).

on-site, and in four of them, the only accessible work support is transportation assistance. Although the low-access one-stops are distributed across different county sizes, only one is located in an urban area. In addition, only one of the low-access sites is collocated with the TANF agency, and only two others are near the TANF agency office. The rest have a more distant relationship with the TANF agency and its staff. Indeed, it appears from the interviews that coordination of services and referrals between these sites and the TANF agency is rather weak.

Access to Work Supports Varies Considerably by Program

- **Eligible customers can easily access transportation assistance at one-stops, when it is available.** Transportation assistance is clearly different from the other work supports. Although it is a frequently provided work support, there is no large, dedicated funding stream one-stops can use to pay for transportation services, unlike Medicaid funding, which pays for health insurance. One-stops that want to provide transportation assistance do so by tapping into a variety of funding streams, including TANF and WIA funds, county or city funds, public transit funds, and others.
- **TANF agency staff usually handle cash assistance, health insurance, and food stamp applications.** About one-quarter of the sites accept applications for cash assistance, health insurance, and food stamps on-site, while two-thirds provide outside referrals, although most are passive. Even when applications are accepted on-site, however, it is usually other agency staff (such as TANF agency staff) who handle the application process with the customers. Thus, sites that are not closely connected to the TANF agency are unlikely to provide easy access to this service. In six of the 30 sites, these work supports appear to be inaccessible.
- **Outside agency staff typically handle subsidized child care applications.** Sites are more likely to allow on-site application for subsidized child care, but less likely to provide outside referrals. About one-third of all the one-stops we interviewed allow on-site application, while six provide active referrals to an outside agency. Twelve sites provide a passive referral to an outside agency. Both applications and active referrals are often targeted to specific populations—TANF recipients, WIA intensive and training service customers, and so on—although the reasons for this are unclear. Most of the time (in eight sites) outside

In our interviews, it appeared that most of the time, if transportation assistance was available in the area, customers could apply for it on-site at the one-stop. Of the 30 one-stops, 24 allowed on-site application for transportation assistance—by far the highest number of one-stops allowing on-site application. An important caveat, however, is that in 10 of the 24 one-stops accepting on-site applications for transportation assistance, only a targeted population could apply, often TANF recipients, WIA dislocated workers, or WIA intensive services clients. In these instances, transportation assistance may be a benefit of program participation in one-stop activities rather than a work support for low-income working families in general.

Publicly funded health insurance is slightly different, partly because of the division among sites offering access to SCHIP only and not to Medicaid. In four sites, one-stop staff handle the application process, but in two of those sites, they only assist with the application for SCHIP. Also, this work support is more targeted than some of the others. In the eight sites that accept an on-site application for Medicaid, three provide this service only for a targeted population, typically TANF recipients or WIA intensive service customers.

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TABLE 1.

Number of One-Stop Centers in Sample Providing Access to Work Supports, by Type of Access and by Work Support

Work Support Program	Number Providing Access (out of 30 total)				
	Information Available	Passive Referral	Active Referral	Apply On-Site	Inaccessible
Transportation assistance	29	4	0	24	2
Cash assistance	27	14	3	8	6
Publicly funded health insurance	28	18	7	8	6
Food stamps	26	19	2	7	6
Child care	29	12	6	12	2
Child support	16	14	3	2	16
EITC	24	9	1	7	14

Note: Figures do not include the three Utah one-stops. Also, figures in the last four columns sometimes add up to more than 30 due to some sites providing different methods to different types of customers and to some sites' "passive referrals" being so passive as to make the program appear inaccessible.

agency staff handle the applications for this support.

- **One-stop centers rarely handle child support applications on-site, and often provide no access whatsoever.** Child support stuck out as a work support with little connection to the one-stop centers we interviewed. Only two sites allow on-site application for child support, the lowest number of any of the work supports. In both cases, staff target the service to TANF recipients only. (Even in Utah,

a state that has combined its public benefits and workforce development agencies, customers could not apply for child support on-site.) In only three of the one-stops, staff make active referrals to an outside agency to assist with child support applications. Thirteen sites make only a passive referral, often merely providing the contact information for the District Attorney's office. In 16 sites, child support appeared to be completely inaccessible. This was surprising, given the financial importance child

support plays in single parents' lives.

- **The EITC is often inaccessible.** The EITC provides substantial amounts of cash to low-income working families each year—in 2001, 18.4 million families received over \$30 billion through the program.² Despite its importance as an earnings supplement, the EITC frequently does not have much of a place in one-stop centers. Part of this is understandable, as applying for the EITC is done in conjunction with filing

one's tax return. Therefore, making the EITC accessible is not as simple as merely having an application available and having a staff person who can complete it with the customer. We consider it impressive that seven one-stops provide help with applications on-site, some going so far as to be certified as a Volunteer Income Tax Assistance site.

More surprising is that only one of the 30 sites is able to provide an active referral for customers to get assistance elsewhere with the EITC. Nine offer passive referrals, and nearly half do nothing to make the EITC accessible to their customers, even though many could presumably benefit, and some quite substantially, from the program.

Factors Influencing the Accessibility of Work Supports

Several factors seemed to play a role in determining the accessibility of work supports at a given one-stop. These include the collocation of the TANF agency, or of TANF agency staff, with the one-stop center; strong support from the local Workforce Investment Board for providing these services; and the type of environment in which the one-stop is located (rural, urban, or suburban).

- **Close relationship with the TANF agency is important.** One common factor among the one-stops with high access to work supports is collocation, staff-sharing, or close proximity to the TANF agency (or the equivalent TANF-administering agency). True collocation is not necessary as long as staff are reasonably proximate and able to work together.
- **Top-down support makes access to work supports more likely.** In addition to collocation with the TANF agency, another characteristic most of the high-access one-stops share is an active local board. Of the seven high-access one-stops, five told us that their local board is active, interested, and engaged in the activities of the one-stop. In some cases, the local board formally directs the activities and programs offered in the one-stop, while in other instances, the board is simply supportive of the decisions of the one-stop.
- **Rural one-stops may encounter more challenges.** Of the 30 one-stops we contacted, 14 are located in urban areas, eight are in suburban areas, and eight are in rural areas. Of the eight rural sites, only one is fully collocated with the TANF agency, while four others lack evidence of any close relationship with the TANF agency. The consistency

of answers is suggestive of a broader trend. Rural one-stops, and those in smaller counties, tend to have fewer staff and other resources and are often geographically isolated. These factors may combine to make it harder for rural areas to offer access to many work supports.

Barriers to Service

Most of the one-stops we talked to are feeling increased pressure from the recession and the associated layoffs, slowdown in employment opportunities, and increase in customers. Directors spoke of needing additional resources to hire more staff or to hire better qualified staff. They would also like more funds to increase work space. Repeatedly, one-stop directors explained that they might like to have TANF agency staff on-site, for example, but that one reason they were unable to do so was the lack of space for that extra person to have a desk and a computer. Other specific barriers the survey uncovered include the following:

- **Child care is a common barrier.** A number of the one-stop directors we spoke with mentioned child care as a barrier for customers seeking services from the one-stop. One-stop directors said they are hampered by resource and space constraints from providing

child care on-site and felt this is a serious limitation in their ability to assist customers.

- **Transportation is perceived as a barrier in all geographic areas.** Concerns about transportation came from rural, urban, and suburban one-stops. Most directors believe they are at the mercy of funding streams and public agencies with which they have little influence. Rural sites had difficulty helping clients navigate the long distances to their offices, while urban and suburban sites wrangled with public transportation offices to modify bus lines to accommodate their locations. Clients' difficulty in getting to the one-stop center limits their ability to apply for services.
- **Negative attitudes may affect services.** A negative attitude toward TANF clients and work support programs presents a substantial barrier to provision of services. A number of one-stop directors we interviewed believe that it is not their job to provide access to these work supports or that, in

their current capacity, they are not truly able to offer access to the programs.

Conclusion

The goal of the one-stop delivery system was to make the workforce development system more user-friendly for both job-seekers and employers. As the name implies, the one-stop system was also created to offer a range of services, including job search assistance, training, supportive services, and services for employers, at one location. Although federal legislation does not mandate that one-stop centers provide access to the seven work support programs we have examined, the centers do appear to be in a prime position to help the unemployed and underemployed access services that could help them obtain and retain employment, as well as support their families. As is evident from this survey, there is great variety among one-stop centers in all aspects of operation, including resources and program

accessibility. One-stop centers interested in assisting customers access work support programs need to work hard at coordinating closely with local agencies and need to have staff available who can inform customers about and assist customers with the application processes.

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Endnotes

- 1 Pavetti, L., Maloy, K., & Schott, L. (2002, June). *Promoting Medicaid and food stamp participation: Establishing eligibility procedures that support participation and meet families' needs*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
- 2 The National Tax Assistance for Working Families Campaign. (Undated). *EITC fact sheet*. Retrieved from http://www.eitc.info/resources/pdf/fact_sheet.pdf, on May 29, 2003.

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The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on

issues related to economic security for low-income families with children.

CLASP focuses on helping low-income families succeed in the workforce by promoting

policies that improve job retention and advancement through access to high-quality job training, to other post-secondary education, and to work supports.

CLASP POLICY BRIEF

Workforce Development Series, No. 3

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