

**The Work Advancement and
Support Center Demonstration**

Moving from Jobs to Careers
Engaging Low-Wage Workers in Career Advancement

**Betsy L. Tessler
David Seith
Zawadi Rucks**

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Overview

The Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) demonstration presents a new approach to helping low-wage and dislocated workers take strategic steps to advance — by increasing their wages or work hours, upgrading their skills, or finding better jobs. At the same time, these workers are encouraged to increase and stabilize their income in the short term by making the most of available work supports, such as food stamps, public health insurance, subsidized child care, and tax credits for eligible low-income families. The WASC program — located mostly in the One-Stop Career Centers created by the Workforce Investment Act — is being delivered by integrated teams of workforce and human services professionals in four sites: Dayton, Ohio; San Diego, California; Bridgeport, Connecticut; and Fort Worth, Texas. Based on interviews with staff and focus groups with WASC customers, this report presents preliminary information on the effectiveness of strategies that were used to attract people to the WASC program, engage them in services, and keep them engaged over time.

Key Findings

- Recruitment of low-wage workers for a voluntary postemployment program must be resourced with sufficient staff and funding to reach and engage people while also having the capacity to immediately begin providing services for those who are enrolled in the program.
- Advancement programs for low-wage workers should be prepared to help participants get the training necessary to move into a new career. Most WASC participants preferred to leave their jobs and move into a new career rather than seek more hours or a promotion in their current job.
- Cash incentives may be an effective way to sustain engagement in a postemployment program like WASC and possibly to encourage completion of education or training.
- Most focus group participants took up the work supports for which they were eligible and appreciated the ease of addressing all work support issues in the same office with staff people with whom they had a relationship.
- WASC participants most appreciated coaching that combined knowledgeable guidance with a strong rapport. They deeply valued the role of coach as a motivator and a source of encouragement.

A report describing the complete implementation story — based on additional interviews and survey data — as well as early results of the program will be completed in early 2009.

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Preface

Many low-wage workers, including many who work full time, do not earn enough money to meet the basic needs of their families. Unfortunately, few services are targeted to people who are already working, to enable them to advance in their careers and increase their earnings. The Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) demonstration is one of three large studies MDRC is conducting that are focused on learning how to help low-wage workers progress in the labor market. With generous support from the U.S. Department of Labor and a group of public and private funders, MDRC has developed in WASC a unique demonstration program that brings together workforce development and human service agency professionals to provide intensive coaching to low-wage and dislocated workers. Located mostly in One-Stop Career Centers created by the Workforce Investment Act, WASC coaches help low-wage workers to take strategic steps to advance. The program encourages them to seek increases in their wages or work hours, acquire additional education and new skills, or find better jobs — while raising their income in the short term by accessing work supports like food stamps, public health insurance, subsidized child care, and tax credits for low-income families.

From day one, the WASC model presented a real challenge for a workforce investment system that has traditionally focused more on helping *unemployed* workers. How do you recruit low-wage workers with busy lives for a voluntary, postemployment program and then keep them interested? This report describes some early lessons from three WASC sites (Bridgeport, Connecticut; Dayton, Ohio; and San Diego, California) on strategies to attract people to the WASC program, engage them in the variety of services it has to offer, and keep them engaged over time.

Stay tuned for more on WASC in the coming months. In early 2009, MDRC will release a study describing the full implementation story in these three sites, as well as early effects on take-up of work supports and on employment and earnings. In the meantime, this report offers workforce development professionals some intriguing lessons about meeting the challenge of attracting and engaging busy low-wage workers in an advancement program.

Gordon Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

Many people have helped shape this report. To start, we'd like to thank the participants in the Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) demonstration who generously volunteered their time to share their experiences in WASC. We are particularly grateful to the program administrators and staff in Bridgeport, Dayton, and San Diego. Managers made meeting rooms available in their offices to hold focus groups with WASC participants, and managers and staff members generously gave their time and insights to provide information about the WASC program's offerings and the control group environment at their sites. Special thanks go to Angela Porter, Nestor Leon, and Joe Carbone in Bridgeport; to Erthale Barnes, Vickie Mosier, and Heath MacAlpine in Dayton; and to Linda Weber, Jessica Mosier, and Diana Francis in San Diego: Their leadership has made WASC a reality. Many of these individuals also reviewed drafts of this report. Special thanks also go to the career coaches and other staff from the sites during the time of this report's preparation, who answered all of our questions and welcomed us to observe them with their customers: Milagros Carrasquillo, Kenneth Samu, Sue DePeano, and Paula Breeden in Bridgeport; Charlette Franklin, Nona Rutledge, Simone Stone, Lettia Younger, and Wanda Gilbert in Dayton; and Danilo Aquino, Maria Qaradaghi, Rosemary Luongo, Lupe Cuevas, Patricia Perez, Cristina Yabuta, and Maribel Aguirre in San Diego. Special acknowledgments also go to Jodie Sue Kelly, a consultant to MDRC who developed the training materials for the demonstration and who conducted trainings with frontline staff in all three sites.

MDRC's capacity to carry out a demonstration with an ambitious learning agenda depends heavily on the sustained commitment of key funding partners. For WASC, ongoing support from the following funders has been vital and is greatly appreciated: the U.S. Department of Labor; the Food and Nutrition Service at the U.S. Department of Agriculture; the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; the Ford Foundation; the Joyce Foundation; the Rockefeller Foundation; the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

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The Authors

Chapter 1

Introduction

With their primary constituency being unemployed workers — some of whom are dislocated workers or welfare recipients or leavers — the main goal of workforce investment programs has been preemployment services and job placement.¹ Once in a job, however, this population finds that there are few services designed to help them retain their jobs, advance to better jobs, or build a career. The Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) demonstration was designed in part to meet the career planning needs of low-income people who are working, but whose jobs pay low wages and may provide few or no benefits, and who have little support to learn what they need to advance. Included among this population are dislocated workers who have been reemployed at lower wages than their original employment provided. Additionally, the WASC program seeks to increase low-wage workers' income, at least in the short term, by easing access to work supports — such as food stamps, Medicaid, child care subsidies, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) — which could ease some financial burdens while individuals pursue advancement. These advancement and work support services are provided by “career coaches,” who work with WASC “customers” on their advancement goals. The WASC model is being implemented and tested in four sites across the country: San Diego, California; Bridgeport, Connecticut; Dayton, Ohio; and Fort Worth, Texas. The first three of these sites offer their services at the One-Stop Career Centers created by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, while the Fort Worth site is serving individuals entirely through an employer-based approach.

This report presents preliminary evidence on strategies that were used to attract people to the WASC program, engage them in the variety of services it has to offer, and keep them engaged over time. Based on interviews with staff and on focus groups with WASC customers, the report explores how WASC was marketed and what caught customers' attention; what they wanted or expected from the program and how that compared with what was offered; and what kept customers coming back or, in some cases, why they “dropped out” of the program.² Because it is based largely on focus group interviews, the

¹Although the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 also serves youth, this report addresses adult experiences with workforce investment programs.

²Interviews with staff were held in San Diego in April 2007, in Dayton in June 2007, and in Bridgeport in October 2007. Focus groups were held as follows: one in Dayton in June 2007, with 10 people; three in San Diego (one in English and two in Spanish) in June 2007, with 19 people participating in total; and one in Bridgeport in September 2007, with nine people. Invitations to participate in the focus
(continued)

report cannot be considered the full story of the implementation of WASC but, rather, provides illustrative narratives from customers and staff. A more complete implementation story, based on additional interview and survey data, will be presented in a forthcoming report. That report will also include evidence on the program’s early impacts — or effects — on employment, earnings, and the take-up of work supports.

Key Findings

- **The recruitment of low-wage workers for a voluntary, postemployment program must be resourced with sufficient staff and funding to get the job done while also beginning to provide services for those who are enrolled in the program.** Finding a balance between recruitment and service delivery is challenging, and having sufficient resources is crucial.
- **Advancement programs for low-wage workers should be prepared to help participants get the training necessary to move into a new career.** Seeking more hours or a promotion with a current employer is probably an easier and faster advancement goal to obtain, yet, according to career coaches and focus group participants, it was not the path to advancement that was chosen by most WASC participants; rather, it appears that most participants wanted to leave their jobs and move into a new career. To help low-wage workers move into new jobs and careers, staff must have an in-depth understanding of the labor market, connections to employers, knowledge of which sectors have better-paying jobs, and a good sense of what kinds of training programs can lead people to a better advancement trajectory.
- **Tangible incentives may be an effective way to sustain engagement in a postemployment program like WASC and possibly to encourage completion of education or training.**³ At their best, participation incentives and

group were presented to a random sample of WASC program participants in each site. Focus groups were conducted by MDRC operations and research staff.

³Throughout this report, the word “incentives” is used broadly to describe the offer of cash — in the form of gas cards, gift cards, or actual cash payments — for ongoing participation and accomplishment of certain goals, such as completing training, participating in training while working, or maintaining steady employment. All of these are described as incentives, regardless of the funding source, which can vary. In San Diego, for example, gas cards, which are offered as a participation incentive, are processed through the Workforce Board as supportive services; they are used more as an incentive than a more typical supportive service, such as providing books or uniforms for someone in training. In Dayton, participation and completion incentives are funded through Governor’s Discretionary Funds, rather than WIA supportive services, though supportive services such as books are also offered.

supportive service payments encourage people to stay on their advancement path and to help smooth some of the bumps in that path, while completion incentives reward people for reaching their goals. Less desirable but still useful, participation incentives provide a reason for participants to come in to visit their career coaches, who can then take advantage of seeing their customers face-to-face and can provide a fuller range of services. At worst, incentives come to be considered an entitlement and no longer provide an extra boost to participants to push them onward in their career plans. Coaches in similar programs can use these insights to make the most of available incentives and to guard against their becoming viewed by participants as just another means-tested benefit.

- **Though work supports were not the most attractive component of WASC for the focus group participants, most of them took up the supports for which they were eligible, and they appreciated the ease of addressing all work support issues in the same office and with staff people with whom they had a relationship.** One potential way to increase low-wage workers' participation in work supports, therefore, is to provide services that are most appealing to this population as the primary service and to market work supports secondarily, once workers are engaged in the primary service.
- **WASC participants most appreciated career coaching that combined knowledgeable guidance with a strong rapport; the role of coach as a motivator and source of encouragement was deeply valued.** This observation suggests that both the interpersonal style and the "technical" qualifications of staff matter a great deal for an advancement program like WASC. Success can ride on whether the coach can develop a relationship of openness and trust with customers, perhaps as much as it depends on the career coach's knowledge of labor market information and training programs. Finding coaches who can deliver on both technical knowledge and emotional support seems to be ideal.

With advancement services and access to work supports, the WASC demonstration offers a two-part service model that many policymakers, workforce development administrators, and service providers believe is the next logical step in the development of the workforce system. Sites in the demonstration have built integrated teams of workforce and human services professionals. These WASC units are charged with offering intensive career and advancement coaching for low-wage workers, increasing the access to and take-up of

financial work supports, and building new linkages with employers in order to develop and deliver career advancement services — and work supports — to their employees.

If any social program is going to have a chance at being successful, it first has to reach its target population, succeed in getting them to come in and sign up, engage them in services, and maintain that engagement over time. When that population is diverse, is spread out, has various interests and needs, and is not mandated to participate, encouraging and maintaining engagement can be particularly challenging. Accordingly, WASC's designers and program staff have continually confronted the following questions: What are the most effective ways to identify low-wage working individuals and attract them to the program? What kinds of services are such workers looking for? Once they are in the door, what are the most effective ways to engage them in all that the program has to offer? Finally, what seems to work to keep them engaged long enough to benefit from the program? Programs like WASC will face similar challenges and could potentially learn from the experiences of low-wage workers who have been participants in the WASC demonstration.

Outline of the Report

The remainder of this report is organized as follows.

Chapter 2 describes the WASC demonstration and evaluation, including the model, sites, and population as well as the research design.

Chapter 3 presents the marketing and recruitment strategies that were put into place by the WASC sites and the challenges that they encountered.

Chapter 4 describes the response of low-wage workers to the WASC offer and the messages that they heard about the program, focusing on what attracted people to it and what goals they had when deciding to participate.

Chapter 5 discusses WASC advancement coaching, including how it differed depending on certain characteristics of the customer; how incentives were used by career coaches to encourage customers to participate in the program, to complete education or training, and to achieve their advancement goals; and how the tools and training that coaches received were used (or not used) with customers.

Chapter 6 discusses the work support component of WASC, the take-up and resistance to taking up of work supports, and participants' perspectives on the interaction of work supports and advancement.⁴

Chapter 7 discusses how WASC career coaches tried to sustain engagement among customers, why some customers stayed engaged and others dropped out, and the balance that coaches strove to achieve between rapport and guidance.

Finally, Chapter 8 outlines plans for the remainder of the WASC evaluation and the reports that will follow.

Throughout the report, five boxes illustrate real participants' experiences with WASC; their names have been changed to protect their identities.

⁴The work supports that are offered in WASC include food stamps, Medicaid, child care subsidies, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and the Child Tax Credit (CTC).

Chapter 2

The WASC Demonstration and Evaluation

The WASC Model

The Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) model provides intensive career coaching to low-wage workers so that they can navigate successfully the often complicated interaction between advancement and receipt of work supports, ensuring all along that each step they take will increase their total income and improve the circumstances of their employment. This chapter discusses the WASC model and what WASC means by “advancement,” which work supports are offered and how the WASC model is designed to integrate work supports and advancement, the WASC sites and target population, and the evaluation’s research design.

WASC consists of an innovative package of strategies aimed at raising the incomes of currently employed low-wage workers and reemployed but low-income dislocated workers (generally those who lost their jobs because of industry restructuring and who now have lower-paying work than previously). The strategies, listed below, have seldom, if ever, been tested in combination with one another on a large scale.

- **Provide high-quality, intensive retention and advancement services.** These services are provided by “career coaches” at each site who work closely with customers to identify their motivation for advancing, their short-term and long-term goals, and the steps they need to take to reach them.⁵ Coaches bring a combination of technical knowledge of the labor market, education and training opportunities, and other tools and services to help customers advance, together with a personal, motivational touch. Caseload sizes are kept small (under 100 per coach) to facilitate close relationships with customers and a focus on substantive progress, rather than the more typical “case management” function of completing paperwork.
- **Ease access to a full package of financial work supports.** This strategy emphasizes higher use of — and eased access to — child care subsidies, food stamps, and public health insurance, in combination with the Earned Income

⁵Identifying a “motivation” that customers can return to when they are discouraged or stuck is a key tactic of the advancement coaching. A motivation could be “to provide a better life for my children,” “to no longer be dependent on my family,” or anything a customer identifies as a reason for wanting to advance.

Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC). It includes educating WASC participants about these supports and simplifying the procedures for enrollment and recertification.

- **Locate these services within local One-Stop Career Centers.** Also called “One-Stops,” these centers serve as the institutional “home” of the WASC program unit. One-Stops were established under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, with the aim of assisting primarily unemployed workers in finding jobs or gaining the skills that they need to secure employment. Locating the WASC units within One-Stops allows the units to apply the many resources of the One-Stop to a new population — low-wage workers — who could also benefit from them.
- **Encourage collaboration between workforce and human service agencies.** In an effort to make it easier for low-wage workers to take advantage of WASC’s combination of employment services and work supports, the staff of the relevant workforce and human service agencies are colocated in WASC units at the One-Stop; in some cases, staff are also trained to understand and deliver services that span the functions of both agencies.

“Advancement” in WASC is defined as one or more of four changes in employment: obtaining an increase in wages, obtaining an increase in work hours, obtaining employer-provided benefits, and/or obtaining better work hours. Career coaches have several tools at their disposal to assist low-wage workers with advancement, including an Income Improvement and Advancement Plan (or IIAP, which helps customers identify their advancement goals; possible pathways to advancement, such as training; and their motivation to advance) and the Work Advancement Calculator (which quantifies the changes in income that would result from specific advancement moves, taking into consideration the loss of work supports and the increase in taxes). WASC staff also received training in advancement coaching to help them work with customers on their IIAPs and on establishing both long- and short-term goals, as well as the steps necessary to reach those goals.⁶ WASC’s integration of work supports and workforce services, through a variety of models, leads to an eased application process for work supports; the eased access is intended to encourage the take-up of those supports for which customers are eligible.

⁶All trainings mentioned here were developed and provided by Jodie Sue Kelly of Cygnet Associates. Web site: <http://www.cygnetassociates.com/>.

Site Selection and Program Models

MDRC selected the first two sites for the WASC evaluation in the fall of 2003: the Job Center in Dayton, Ohio, and the South County Career Center in Chula Vista, California (part of San Diego County and commonly referred to as the “San Diego” site). In 2005, the Southwestern CTWorks Center in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Workforce Solutions for Tarrant County in Fort Worth, Texas, were chosen as the third and fourth sites. These last two sites began to pilot the WASC demonstration during the summer of 2006, while the first two sites began their pilots in January 2005 and have been operating full programs since fall of that year. Three of the four sites — those in San Diego, Bridgeport, and Dayton — offer their services at the One-Stop Career Centers created by WIA, while the fourth site (located in Fort Worth) is serving individuals entirely through an employer-based approach.

The WASC programs in Dayton and San Diego use a model in which the career coaches — who come from both the local workforce and the local welfare agencies — were cross-trained to provide both advancement coaching and work support services. This means that staff from a workforce background were expected not only to provide advancement coaching services but also to screen for eligibility for work supports and to assist with the application process for them.⁷ Conversely, staff from a welfare background were expected not only to handle financial work support eligibility and applications but also to provide retention and advancement services. All staff were expected to provide intensive advancement coaching and not to get stuck in conventional practices that focus primarily on the customers’ employment barriers and crises or simply on processing applications. In theory, all program staff were expected to feel comfortable providing the complete range of services; in practice, however, there has been some specialization among staff on either the workforce or the work support side, depending on the background of the career coach.

Bridgeport’s WASC model is one of specialization, rather than cross-training, though the specialized staff are located in the same office. Two to three “career navigators” provide most of the advancement coaching and WIA services, while a staff person from the local Department of Social Services (DSS) comes to the unit part time to screen for financial work support eligibility and to process applications. As the program is maturing, however, these roles are expanding a bit. The career navigators are becoming familiar enough with eligibility rules to do some basic screening and start the work support application process, though the actual eligibility determination and application must be completed by the DSS staff person. Likewise, when the DSS staff person meets with a customer to discuss work supports, this does not happen in a vacuum; she also contributes to the advance-

⁷In San Diego, though all staff could screen for and provide assistance with work supports, only Health and Human Services Agency staff could actually process work support applications.

ment coaching. Though Bridgeport’s model was set up to be one of specialization, some cross-training is beginning to occur. In a sense, these varying models resemble each other more than they were intended to — each has drifted toward a middle position, somewhere between cross-training and specialization.

The WASC Population

The WASC demonstration is a departure from previous large-scale evaluations of strategies to improve the labor market prospects and earnings of people at the bottom of the economic ladder, and its target population represents one of those differences. Rigorous evaluations of workforce development programs have rarely focused exclusively on low-wage workers. Instead, they have concentrated either on all low-income people (both working and nonworking) or on current and former welfare recipients — a group that includes many working people but that nevertheless excludes a broad range of low-wage workers. In contrast, WASC targets a broad cross-section of low-income people who are not receiving welfare and who are currently working. Also, unlike most welfare-to-work programs, which mandated participation in employment activities, WASC is completely voluntary.

In general, the population whom the WASC program intended to target was fairly heterogeneous: It included individuals who had never received any public assistance as well as those who had. It included low-wage workers who might currently be receiving one or several types of work supports but who might not be receiving the “full package.” And it included not only single mothers — who represented the majority of adults in welfare-to-work programs — but also single fathers, two-parent families, couples without children, and single individuals without children, including single men.

In practice, the individuals who were actually recruited into the WASC demonstration reflect this diversity. For example, WASC was hoping to include adults without minor children, and, in fact, it succeeded: About 37 percent of WASC enrollees in Dayton and 35 percent in San Diego have no children under the age of 19. WASC enrollees are also fairly highly educated, with a large percentage having a high school diploma. Approximately 90 percent of enrollees in Dayton and 75 percent in San Diego have a high school diploma, a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, or additional education. (Appendix Table A.1 presents selected baseline information for enrollees in Dayton, San Diego, and Bridgeport.)

The Research Design

WASC was designed so that the model could be tested for effectiveness and robustness. Because the sites are diverse with regard to workforce and welfare agency structures,

demographics, and labor markets — among other factors — they therefore should help test the adaptability and feasibility of the WASC program model in different contexts across the United States. The WASC evaluation is testing the program’s effectiveness using a random assignment research design, in which low-wage workers are assigned, using a lottery-like process, to either the WASC group or a control group, whose members are not eligible for WASC services but are eligible for existing services in the community. By comparing the earnings, income, and other outcomes of WASC participants with those of the control group, MDRC researchers can determine whether the WASC model created positive effects, or impacts, for participants that they would not have achieved without the program. The Dayton WASC site recruited 1,218 people (to both the WASC program and the control group) from October 17, 2005, through March 30, 2007; San Diego recruited 999 people from November 7, 2005, through October 31, 2007; and Bridgeport recruited 713 people from October 18, 2006, through March 31, 2008. Fort Worth is not included in the impact evaluation but is being studied for lessons from its implementation of an employer-based program. Implementation and impact findings will be included in future reports.

Chapter 3

Marketing and Recruitment Strategies

The varied characteristics of potential participants in the Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) program — coupled with the fact that the program was not simply enrolling people directly from another program or agency — presented a recruitment challenge that other programs attempting to reach a broad low-wage working population could also face: How to identify the most effective messages and sources to recruit a varied population that could benefit from WASC's services. This chapter discusses the WASC sites' marketing and recruitment strategies: what appeared to work, operationally, and what did not; what parts of the message and the offer were the biggest draw; what program changes were made to enhance recruitment; and what it takes to successfully and simultaneously recruit and enroll new participants and provide services to those already enrolled.

- **In the absence of a recruitment list or direct flow of participants into WASC from another program, WASC sites had to cast a wide net and a varied message to recruit participants from among the broad cross-section of low-wage workers who could be eligible for and potentially benefit from the program.**

Marketing Strategies

WASC program staff and MDRC went into the demonstration with a clear understanding that recruiting a voluntary population of working people could be particularly challenging. To face that challenge head-on, WASC sites worked with MDRC to develop a multipronged recruitment strategy and a clear and consistent message. Some sites conducted surveys of prospective customers to try to understand what would appeal to them. MDRC also provided sites with assistance from a marketing consultant, who helped them further refine the marketing messages and develop marketing materials, such as posters and flyers. In order not to dilute the effects of the program, the control group's experience needed to be close to what would generally be experienced in the absence of WASC; as a result, one of the challenges for sites was crafting a message that would be appealing and draw the attention of potential participants but that would not provide too much information about services before people were randomly assigned into the WASC or control group. For example, marketing materials did not specifically mention that part of the program offer

was to help people get connected to work supports; if that message had been explicit, then control group members might have sought out work supports on their own.⁸

Marketing materials were designed to have broad appeal across different types of potential candidates for the program. Some flyers stressed the immediate gains in income that people could receive if they signed up for WASC; through the flyers did not explicitly mention work supports, they did suggest that “fast money” was available through this program, and they enticed people to come in and learn more: “Make more money now. Let us show you how!”⁹ Others showed a stepladder image, indicating that one could begin to take steps, such as participating in training, that could ultimately lead to higher earnings.

WASC program staff attempted to market these messages using many different methods. Some methods targeted individuals in a working environment, such as making presentations at workplaces and putting notices in paycheck envelopes. Some methods targeted individuals who were receiving some work support but might be attracted by the opportunity to advance in their career or take greater advantage of other available work supports. These methods included posting flyers at the child care or Medicaid offices, for example, or calling individuals from lists of people who received work supports in the past, from lists of people who exited the WIA program, or from waiting lists for child care subsidies. Other methods were aimed at reaching a broad segment of the population, including notices in “Penny Saver” magazines, posters on public buses, and presentations at churches and community organizations. Dayton, in particular, was able to take advantage of walk-in traffic at the Job Center, where the WASC unit is located. Inasmuch as the Job Center is the largest One-Stop in the country and many county services are colocated there, Dayton WASC staff were potentially able to tap into more than 3,000 people who visited the center weekly. Additionally, each of the sites created a name for its unit that was designed to draw attention and convey something of its purpose; rather than calling it the “WASC unit,” which would have no meaning to the general public, both San Diego and Fort Worth called their unit “Project EARN”; Dayton’s was the “Move Up” program (also known as the “Career Advancement Unit”); and Bridgeport’s was the “Academy for Career Advancement.”

Recruitment Incentives for Staff

Part of the strategy to meet recruitment goals was focused internally on staff. Some sites established monthly recruitment targets for staff and rewarded them — with pizza parties, staff lunches, and the like — for meeting those targets. Some sites made use of who staffed what was essentially a phone bank and called potential customers from various lists.

⁸In the absence of a research study and random assignment, a program could be more explicit about its offer, as there would be no control group, and issues related to diluted effects would be moot.

⁹Quoted from a San Diego WASC site flyer.

Box 1

Jim Johnson: Putting His Career Plan in the Fast Lane

Jim Johnson (not his real name) completes a private truck-driving program and gets a much better-paying job driving commercial trucks coast to coast.

The Customer

In the fall of 2005, Jim Johnson signed up for the WASC program. Thirty-eight years old, he was married to Lisa Johnson, and they had three children. Jim worked part time for a home improvement company, for \$8 per hour plus commissions, and part time as a limousine driver, for about \$200 per week. He was enrolled in a commercial-truck-driving program and hoped eventually to get a full-time truck-driving job with benefits.

His Advancement Goals

Jim had already applied for Medicaid and was approved. His WASC career coach helped him to obtain food stamps. Since Lisa Johnson opted to care for their children full time, the Johnsons were ineligible for child care subsidies.

His Experience with WASC

Within a month, Jim lost his second part-time job as a limousine driver. He asked his coach whether WASC could help him pay for truck-driving training at a private vocational school, which offered a program that he could complete in half the time of his current program.

By the spring, Jim had completed the career assessment, school search, and additional application requirements to qualify for the private truck-driving program. WASC paid nearly \$5,000 in tuition, and, by June, Jim successfully completed the program, earning his Class A commercial truck driver's license, with certification for hazardous materials as well as passengers. In late June, he began a three-week training program for a national trucking company that paid \$280 the first week, \$350 the second week, \$350 the third week, and \$500 the fourth week.

By late August, Jim was earning \$19 per hour — more than \$9 above his hourly wage when he signed up for WASC a year earlier. Throughout the year, Jim's coach left messages for him at home, and Jim returned calls from the road while driving coast to coast. They discussed Jim's goal of owning his own rig. In December 2007, Jim met with his career coach for an exit interview. He was still driving for the same company and was earning about \$1,000 per week with full benefits, including a retirement account. He was earning more than twice as much as when he enrolled in WASC two years earlier.

And one site gave individuals a “refer a friend” incentive: For every successfully enrolled participant, the person who made the referral received \$25.

Changes in Eligibility Guidelines

At one point relatively early in the recruitment period, when it became clear that sites were having a difficult time reaching potentially eligible low-wage workers — particularly single adults — MDRC changed the eligibility guidelines for WASC, raising the limits on hourly wages and total household income, so that the pool of potential enrollees was larger. The eligibility guidelines were changed from a wage cap of \$9 per hour and a family income cap of 130 percent of the federal poverty guideline (FPG) to a wage cap to \$15 per hour and a family income cap to 200 percent of FPG — still widely considered to be low-income.¹⁰ This made recruitment much easier while still maintaining the demonstration’s mostly low-wage, low-income population.

Where and How the Marketing Messages Were Heard

WASC program group members who participated in focus groups in Dayton, San Diego, and Bridgeport reported learning about the program through all the various methods mentioned above. In some sites, however, the sources that were mentioned were more varied than in others.

In San Diego, formal flyers marketing the program were distributed by the WASC unit through a variety of avenues, many of which were mentioned by focus group participants. The same messages were printed in circulars and posted on the South County Career Center’s Web site. Among the sources mentioned were flyers at the participant’s place of work, which was a community-based organization; a flyer at the One-Stop, where one participant’s husband happened to come in for other services; a Penny Saver magazine; the Internet; and a “stuffer” in a paycheck envelope:

I was surfing the Internet, and that’s how I found it. Then I called, the phone number was there. I called, and they immediately put me through to someone.

¹⁰In 2006, when eligibility limits for WASC were changed, 130 percent of FPG for a family of three was \$21,580, while 200 percent of FPG for a family of three was \$33,200. The rationale for using 130 percent of FPG initially as the eligibility threshold for WASC was that, at this income level, most participants would be eligible for the full package of work supports offered by WASC. This threshold was also nearly identical to the food stamp threshold, which has a household income cap of 130 percent of FPG (as opposed to the family income cap used for WASC). The hourly wage of \$9 was originally selected as the eligibility cutoff because when the demonstration was being planned in 2005, a quarter of the nation’s labor force earned \$9.46 or less per hour (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Web site).

[I found out about the program] through the flyers that they would send in the envelopes where the check would come [from work].

Additionally, information about the WASC program was provided to potential referral sources, such as providers of other assistance or public benefits that low-wage workers might access:

I was applying for daycare [assistance]. Because I had been looking and I didn't qualify in this program nor in the other program and I had been looking for a long time. I put my name in the YMCA list and others, and I didn't qualify for any of them. Then someone in Medical asked me if I knew about [this program], and I said, "No, I haven't heard about it." And they gave me the information, and I came and inquired about it here.

Other referral sources included a staff person in the One-Stop's computer lab, a staff person at the daycare center that one participant's child attended, and one participant's adviser from the Section 8 housing Family Self-Sufficiency program. Baseline data collected at the time that individuals came in to enroll in WASC affirm the diverse sources of information about the program that were mentioned by the focus group participants. Among all participants in San Diego, about 26 percent reported that they heard about WASC through direct marketing efforts (a phone call, e-mail, letter, or postcard); 23 percent learned about WASC when they walked into the One-Stop for other services; 17 percent learned about it from a friend or family member; and about 13 percent heard about WASC from a government agency or social service provider.

The majority of focus group participants in Bridgeport reported learning about the WASC program through the WIA One-Stop Center, called CTWorks. One reported learning about the program from an acquaintance, while another found the program online.

Though a few focus group participants from Dayton mentioned being referred to the WASC program while at the One-Stop for other services, the vast majority learned about the program from a variety of informal sources. Most notably in Dayton, but also in the other sites, the most important form of marketing that occurred was one that was not within their control: word of mouth. While Dayton staff made formal presentations about the program to community organizations and churches, and while a variety of other formal marketing messages were used, almost every WASC program member who attended the focus group in Dayton mentioned word of mouth — mostly through friends, though sometimes through a caseworker or other source — as the source from which they learned about the program:

I heard about it from a [former] caseworker at my job. I was working at [a restaurant chain]. And the caseworkers come in there to eat. And somebody

had knew me. And she had spoke to me about it. So I just came on over to see if I could get accepted.

I heard about it through a friend. And she told me that I can further my schooling. I've already got my STNA [State Tested Nursing Assistant] and I want to get my RN [Registered Nurse]. So I just came down here and signed up.

- **Staff found it especially challenging to maintain a recruitment effort while simultaneously beginning to provide services for those who were enrolled in the program.**

WASC sites — particularly those with fewer staff — found it challenging to find the time to recruit participants while also providing services to those who were already in the program. When sites had to make a push to increase enrollment, they found that delivery of services fell short, and some program group participants went without seeing a career coach for too long.

Staff in all the sites initially assumed that they could manage outreach and enrollment as well as the provision of services to enrollees without dedicating some staff specifically to the task of recruitment. What they found is that it was extraordinarily difficult to provide services while simultaneously recruiting a voluntary population of what initially was 1,600 people per site who matched the eligibility criteria. Staff were also probably not aggressive enough initially in their outreach efforts: Staff in Dayton thought that they could rely exclusively on walk-in traffic at the Job Center; staff in Bridgeport were relying on referrals from the One-Stops; and staff in San Diego ultimately relied too much on community-based organizations for referrals.

In the end, recruitment turned out to be far more difficult than envisioned. In part this may have been because the target population was already engaged in work and, therefore, was harder to reach and involve. The difficulty also may have reflected that staff were used to having customers come to them — without needing active recruitment — and so these staff may not have been comfortable “selling” the program. The WASC sites and MDRC recognized these challenges early on, and both made changes to facilitate the recruitment of a large enough number of people into the study.

As mentioned above, MDRC changed the eligibility criteria to increase the pool of potential enrollees. MDRC also reduced the number of people that each site was expected to enroll; while each originally was expected to recruit 1,600 people (800 for the WASC program group and 800 for the control group), that number was lowered to 1,000 for Dayton and San Diego (though Dayton ended up recruiting more than 1,200) and to 700 for Bridgeport. Finally, MDRC extended the enrollment period several times, giving the sites more time to recruit their target number of enrollees. WASC program staff also began to

make recruitment more of a priority, and they began to do such things as reward staff for successful enrollments, extend outreach and enrollment into the evenings and weekends, and make phone calls to more targeted lists of potential enrollees. Again, as recruitment efforts were boosted, customer engagement suffered. As a result, once Dayton and San Diego reached their target sample size, they turned full attention to reengaging customers.

Chapter 4

Why Low-Wage Workers Volunteered for WASC

The Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) sites implemented a wide variety of marketing and recruitment strategies, understanding that some approaches could be expected to work with some people and others with other people. Individuals hearing the various marketing messages could be expected to focus on a part or parts of the message that appealed to them the most. For some, it might have been the message about putting more money into one's pocket; for others, perhaps it was the opportunity to pursue education or training; and for still others, the informal messages that they heard about the program through word of mouth might have been most important. To some degree, what attracted people to WASC depended on where they heard about the program and what kind of message they heard. In the end, however, most who did respond to the WASC marketing effort had the same overall career goal: to leave their jobs and move into a new field.

- **Varied marketing messages and referral sources led to a variety of reasons for signing up for WASC and to differing expectations of the program.**

Where marketing was more formal and more varied, such as in San Diego, the reasons that focus group participants mentioned for applying for WASC were also more varied. They included both continuing and completing studies, progressing in a career, finding a better job, obtaining child care assistance, getting more money in one's pocket, and more:

For me it was the daycare [subsidy]. Because . . . I had been struggling with different programs, and I didn't qualify for any of them.

In my case, I've gone to school for engineering; I didn't finish my studies. So it called my attention to the fact that they told me that they can help me improve and finish my career. That's what I really want — to finish my studies.

Nothing to lose. . . . Might as well try it.

Didn't the flyer say, "Get more money"?

In Bridgeport, where most focus groups participants reported learning about the program through the One-Stop and not through any other marketing, most people signed up for WASC as a route to get into training — perhaps more quickly than through the One-Stop — and to have training paid for, particularly if they were ineligible for WIA funding:

I was coming there [to the One-Stop] for the CDL [Commercial Driver's License] training. [The WASC program] has opened the door wider. They said

it should go faster through this program, you get more aid — and it's been true.

Where marketing was more informal and the message less controlled, such as in Dayton, the reasons mentioned for applying were much more uniform. Almost all the focus group participants mentioned that they signed up for WASC to go to school and to have their schooling paid for:

Somebody I was working with said that he came and [found out] they would pay for a bachelor's [degree program]. So I came and signed up.¹¹

[My friend] was telling me about how they help you with school and just everything that you would need to get through school while I was in school. So I came to the job center to try it out.

Though formal marketing materials never mentioned that WASC would pay for someone to go to school, this is the message that “got out” in Dayton and drew many people to the program.¹² Interviews with career coaches there confirmed that “the grapevine” was the single most fruitful source of enrollees and that most customers came into the program interested in school and hoping that the program would pay their tuition. One coach's perspective on this was that many of the people who came to WASC had depleted other sources of funding for schooling and had heard, and were hoping, that WASC could pick up where other funding left off. In contrast, focus group members in San Diego and Bridgeport were much more familiar with the formal marketing message, to which many of them responded; the messages regarding the opportunity to pursue training and advance in one's career came through and attracted many people to the program.

- **With the exception of child care in San Diego, the opportunity to advance was more appealing to people coming into the program than the opportunity to take up work supports, and the notion of self-**

¹¹WIA funding in Dayton would pay for up to two years of college. Customers who came to the program interested in having their “bachelor's degree paid for” were either already in the last two years of their program or had completed an associate's degree and were interested in continuing for two more years to complete a bachelor's degree.

¹²Dayton WASC staff eventually learned that unauthorized flyers had been posted at one of the local community colleges, stating that the program would pay for school, and they believe that these flyers were the primary source of the word of mouth that spread about the program. While WASC did have funding to help pay for school, this was clearly not the sole focus of the program, and flyers representing it as such did not convey the true intention of the program or the full range of its services. Furthermore, community college students were not the intended population from which to recruit participants, as they are a highly motivated group who are already taking steps toward advancement and also tend to be younger and in an early stage in their career trajectory. Nevertheless, if these community college students met the income guidelines for the program, then WASC could not turn them away.

Box 2

Rosa Mercado: Combining Work and School to Get Her Dream Job

Rosa Mercado (not her real name) relied on WASC for supportive services while working part time and taking college courses to become a substance abuse counselor.

The Customer

In the spring of 2006, Rosa Mercado signed up for the WASC program. A single parent of three, she had been employed almost full time for the past 10 months at a big-box retail store, working 34 hours per week for a wage of less than \$8 per hour. She was also attending a community college program to become a substance abuse counselor. In addition to her earnings, she relied on public health insurance, child care assistance, and food stamps.

Her Advancement Goals

Rosa explained that she wanted to earn more for her children and that her longer-term goal was to become a substance abuse counselor, for which she needed another nine units of courses. Her career coach explained how WASC could help with the cost of tuition and books, and the coach challenged Rosa to try to advance to a wage of \$10 per hour and to work 40 hours per week.

Her Experience with WASC

That same spring, Rosa received a raise of \$1 per hour, and she picked up a second part-time seasonal job in the summer. She checked in monthly with her coach, who provided her with participation incentives and a little over \$100 for textbooks in the fall. Early in 2007, she had earned another \$0.25 per hour raise. Her coach offered a referral to free tax preparation, a little over \$100 for textbooks for the spring semester, and participation incentives.

In the fall, Rosa took up a full-time job working the night shift at a residential treatment facility, but it proved to be too much, and she quit. By the end of the summer, Rosa had completed her coursework for the substance abuse counseling program and expected to begin an internship the following month.

During her one and a half years in WASC, Rosa completed the coursework and most of the 255 internship hours required for her longer-term career goal, and she earned \$1.45 per hour more than when she first enrolled. Her career coach was able to offer her \$155 in participation incentives and \$217 for textbooks and — perhaps most important — checked in with her monthly to offer encouragement and advice. At the end of the year, Rosa was close to completing her internship program to become a substance abuse counselor and had researched opportunities for jobs at two local treatment centers. Despite her perseverance in keeping up with her part-time job at the big-box store and in taking on two additional jobs to supplement her earnings, she still had to pick up a child care job to amass full-time hours.

improvement resonated more strongly for participants than the idea of simply getting more money in their pockets.

Ultimately, across all the WASC sites, early findings indicate that WASC did, in fact, appeal to a broader cross-section of participants than was typical for many earlier employment programs — including, for example, many who already had a high school diploma, a large number who were in community college or other education and training programs at the time of enrollment, and many who had been in the same job for at least 12 months. These participants came into the program with a range of goals; in general, however, the opportunity to advance was more of an appeal than the opportunity to take up work supports, and advancement for most participants involved moving into a new job or career rather than advancing at their current job.

Regardless of the site, nearly all the focus group participants talked about being enticed to the program by some aspect of advancement — including making more money, going back to school, finishing school or training, getting a better job, and advancing in a career. Though flyers stated that one could get “more money in one’s pocket,” only one person in all the focus groups mentioned the program’s offer of “more money.” Once in the program, participants learned that getting more money could also include applying for work supports; still, no one specifically mentioned the ability to take up work supports as a particularly attractive aspect of the program, with the exception of child care in San Diego. While the appeal of the program varied across sites, it was more similar within each site, likely due to the referral pathways at each site that led people to the program. So, for example, the one place where the appeal of money was more prevalent — though still related to advancement — was Dayton, with regard to funding for tuition; once word got out that tuition money was available, this certainly was a draw for current students, though it still related to their advancement plans.

The appeals of advancement over work supports and of longer-term career change over shorter-term opportunities to earn more money are at variance with what was expected from the target population of low-wage workers. Designers of WASC assumed that the promise of “more money” was the message that would draw people in; therefore, the marketing consultant who worked with the WASC sites helped them develop messages that focused primarily on this promise. While focus group participants did talk about the desire to earn more money, the idea of increasing one’s income quickly through work supports, once in the program, was not especially attractive.

- **The goal for most customers was to leave their job and move into a new career.**

Though it is clear that focus group participants from San Diego, Dayton, and Bridgeport were all attracted to the WASC program because of the opportunity it could provide to help them advance in their jobs or careers, advancement could mean many things, including taking on more responsibilities in one's current job, increasing one's work hours or going from part time to full time, and being promoted up the career ladder in one's current place of employment. However, the vast majority of focus group participants did not like their jobs and wanted the opportunity to move into something different, particularly jobs that required more skills.¹³ Career coaches in all three sites have confirmed that most of their customers wanted to leave their current job and move to a new employer or into a new field:

For me, I want to better my education. I'm a nursing assistant. I've been working for over, like, four or five years; there's nothing changed. And so this Move Up Program will help me to change or get my education.

I wanted the same type of job, but I wanted to work for a different company. 'Cause when I started, I was working for [company name]. But they only pay \$6.75 an hour. And you worked 32 hours — a little under 40 hours a week — so that they didn't give you benefits. You didn't get sick time, personal time, or anything.

I was doing housekeeping in a nursing home. And then I heard about this program. And I got into it and got my STNA [State Tested Nursing Assistant certificate]. And it's, like, you know, it's alright. I love my job [now].

Many spoke about wanting to be in a job that would bring more personal satisfaction than their current job provided:

I don't even know about the money wise, but just to see, you know. . . . I mean, maybe I should look at it as being as for money wise. But I want to get into something that I'm happy with. Because I know myself. I won't stay in that job [if I don't like it]. So I don't care if it pays well. I mean, even though, you know, I'm saying I should advance. But you know, as long as in the sense my heart would be fulfilled. You know, that's what really counts for me.

In Dayton, where many customers were already enrolled in an education program, the goal for many was to complete their program:

I came into the program, I only had, like, two quarters left [in college]. But it still seemed so, so far away for me. You know, working, and just having all of these other issues. And you know, my child. And so when I came into the

¹³Holzer (2004) discusses how low-wage workers have more opportunities to advance by moving to new employers with better opportunities (job mobility) than by working their way up with a current employer (job retention).

program, even though I was almost done for school, it really gave me reason to start thinking I really was going to do it, you know. 'Cause even though I was so close, I came even closer to quitting.

Some customers were in jobs with little or no opportunity for advancement, and so they wanted to move into a different field:

Because I work for [a car rental agency] and what I do is a straight-up part-time job position, I can't work more than 35 hours; there are no benefits. They offer 401(k) — that's about it. The people who work at the front desk that you talk to about renting a car, all of them have college degrees. You have to go to college to have that position, and the position I have you don't have a college degree. So my job is pretty much what it is.

Chapter 5

Advancement Coaching

After meeting the challenge of recruiting eligible low-wage workers into the Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) program, the next challenge faced by staff was to engage them in services that would set them on a path toward career advancement. As a program designed to enable a broad cross-section of low-wage workers to advance and increase their incomes in both the short and the long term, WASC has been challenged to provide a broad range of services that would meet the needs of its diverse participants. With a varied group of participants — some of whom have a clear vision of how they want to advance and some of whom do not — no single method of advancement coaching, and no uniform type of service delivery, would be suitable for everyone. WASC career coaches are expected to draw from a variety of “tools” at their disposal and work with each customer individually to develop a successful advancement plan.

At the same time that coaching services need to be tailored to customers’ needs, the full complement of WASC services also needs to be consistent; in other words, all WASC program participants should receive roughly the same set of services or should at least have the same types of services available — services akin to a “franchise.” The WASC model had certain assumptions behind the approach to advancement coaching that were expected to be delivered in all the sites and for all customers, including:

- Every interaction with a customer should leave the customer with a tangible benefit or a specific next step in realizing his or her advancement plan.
- Staff need to be available to meet with customers on a more flexible schedule, taking into account customers’ work schedules.
- Staff need to be supportive and encouraging and need to be able to break down both short- and long-term goals into achievable action steps.
- To help a customer map out an advancement plan, staff need to think strategically and to use all available tools (among others, labor market information, career assessment tools, and the Work Advancement Calculator described below in this chapter and in Chapter 6).
- Staff need to take the initiative to stay in contact with their customers; for example, they should follow up when appointments are missed and should call customers on the phone if they haven’t heard from them.

This section discusses how advancement coaching differed depending on whether the customer was self-directed and motivated or not; how incentives were used by career coaches in Dayton to encourage customers to participate in the program, complete education or training, and achieve their advancement goals; and how tools and training that coaches received were used (or not used) with customers.

- **Among customers who wanted to leave their jobs, many knew what they wanted and had a clear vision of how they wanted to pursue advancement. Their self-direction strongly influenced the type of services that they received.**

Early findings suggest that the type and timing of advancement services that WASC provides varies by the participant's stage in career planning as well as by how self-directed the participant is. For participants who know what type of advancement they want to pursue — particularly those who are interested in education or training programs — WASC advancement services are focused on procedures. For example, there is a protocol that some WASC staffers have used previously, in WIA, for applying for funding, selecting a training program, and completing all necessary forms for getting started with training. Aside from these tangible procedures and services, interviews with staff and focus groups with customers indicate that what such motivated customers most valued from their career coaches was the role of “cheerleader” — participants appreciated that someone was checking on their progress, encouraging them, and rooting for them to achieve their goals.

Not surprisingly, participants' reactions toward the services they received, and the components of the program that they particularly valued, varied depending on what they were looking for from the program. Participants who wanted to pursue education or training and primarily needed their coach to facilitate the paperwork and funding reported being highly satisfied with the services they received:

I was in an education program for teacher certification. I got assistance with tuition and books and technology fees. I don't know if you're familiar with their practices — the state-mandated exam that you have to take before you're certified. There's two of 'em. All the tests were \$165. And [the program] helped, you know, pay [for] those tests. So I got assistance from every angle — the books and everything.

It may be self-evident that the WASC participants who were most motivated and self-directed were the easiest to serve and were the most satisfied with the services they received. The challenge for WASC staff with these types of participants was adding value to what the participants were already pursuing on their own, such as facilitating the enrollment in training programs, providing funding for training or helping the participant obtain work supports to ease financial pressures while in school, and providing incentives and support-

Box 3

Carlos Vega: Job Loss Leads to New Career Path

Carlos Vega (not his real name) enrolls in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, moves up in his current job, and finds a better-paying job.

The Customer

In the fall of 2006, Carlos Vega signed up for the WASC program. Forty-six years old, he was working full time in the stockroom of an entertainment company for less than \$9 per hour. He earned a little too much to be eligible for food stamps; since he and his partner had no children, he was also ineligible for Medicaid and the Child Tax Credit (CTC); and the combination of full-time earnings and having no children left him ineligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

His Advancement Goals

Although Carlos wanted to advance, he wasn't sure how to do it. He knew that he wanted to improve his English skills, but he saw few promotional opportunities at his current job. His coach encouraged him to ask his supervisor what it would take to get promoted, and he suggested that Carlos look into an ESL program and do some research on jobs that were in demand in the area.

His Experience with WASC

Within the month, Carlos enrolled in a Level 2 ESL program and took the difficult step of asking his supervisor what it would take to be promoted. His coach congratulated him, issued participation incentives, and encouraged him to return the following month. At the next meeting, Carlos explained that he was voted "Employee of the Month." Again his coach congratulated him and gave him additional participation incentives. That month, Carlos fixed a machine on the job when no one else was available, and he earned a merit increase of \$1 per hour.

Carlos continued to check in with his coach at least once per month. Early the next year, he completed Level 2 of his ESL studies and moved on to Level 3, an important step toward qualifying for vocational training classes. He also enrolled in a plumbing course.

Carlos was still working at the entertainment company in the spring. His wage had gone up an additional \$0.50 per hour, but he was looking for a better-paying job. That summer he lost his job and wanted to find work and training to become a custodian. He found a temporary job and, by the fall, he found full-time work as a custodian, which paid \$4 per hour more than he had earned when he signed up for the program a year earlier; the job also offered benefits. He explained to his coach that he enjoyed the work and that his employer offered to send him for training if he stayed on the job for a year. Meanwhile, Carlos expressed interest in a training program that would certify him to work as a school custodian in a district that paid \$16 per hour.

ive services to help participants complete their programs. A key difference for this population with respect to other low-wage workers like them who are not part of WASC — who may also be motivated and equally likely to pursue advancement steps — may turn out to be the degree to which WASC provides resources and support to help participants complete their training programs and find employment in their new fields.¹⁴ “Completion” in this sense means not only to find employment but also to begin working sooner than they would have — and initially adding more in weeks or months of earnings than they would have earned — in the absence of WASC.

To facilitate the completion of education and training programs, and perhaps make a difference for WASC participants over and above what they would have accomplished on their own, the Dayton WASC site put together a particularly generous package of cash incentives.¹⁵ Anyone who is employed and engaged in one other activity (such as skills training, college courses for credit, or General Educational Development [GED] classes) is eligible to receive an incentive payment structured as follows:

- A participant who enrolls in training and completes with a C-plus grade point average or higher can receive up to \$800 per year for the two years of the WASC program period.
- Such a participant can also receive up to \$300 for completing this training with a credential.
- A participant who subsequently earns a job promotion as a result of the training and completion could receive an additional \$250.

If a participant enrolls in a two-year certificate program, completes the program, and is promoted as a result, she could receive a total of \$2,150 in payments. In addition to these incentive payments, Dayton also offers everyone who maintains work a stipend of \$65 per month to defray the cost of child care copayments, as well as an \$80 monthly gas card for those who are working and in training. If such a participant has children in child care, she would therefore receive another \$1,560 (\$65 per month for 24 months) and be eligible for \$1,920 in gas cards (\$80 per month for 24 months). In total, a participant could receive

¹⁴MDRC’s Opening Doors project, which is looking at retention in and completion of community college programs, has found that many people who start community college never finish and never obtain their degree (Web site: http://www.mdrc.org/project_31_2.html). If WASC can improve completion rates of education and training programs, this would be considered a success.

¹⁵These incentives were unique within WASC and were not expected as part of the WASC franchise. For other examples of the use of financial incentives in postemployment programs, see Riccio et al. (2008) for the U.K. Employment Retention and Advancement program and Martinson and Hendra (2006) for the U.S. Employment Retention and Advancement program in Texas.

up to \$5,630 in participation and completion incentive payments over two years, which would not count as income against eligibility for work supports.

Dayton managers and staff hope that the offer of incentives and supportive service payments will provide an extra boost, even for those customers who are already pursuing education or training in their chosen field, and will help ensure that they remain engaged in WASC, finish their education program, and move on to find better work than they had at the start of the demonstration. For low-wage workers who are trying to balance work, classes, homework, and family, the cash incentive could make the difference between pushing on or giving up when things become especially stressful, such as around exam time. Career coaches also hoped that having customers come in to pick up their incentive payments would provide ongoing contact and opportunities to check on their advancement plans when such busy individuals might otherwise not remain engaged with WASC, per se. Despite the generous completion incentives, however, only one focus group participant mentioned them:

When I graduated, I got — I got \$100 twice: when I finished STNA [State-Tested Nursing Assistant] and when I got state-tested and passed.

Many more people mentioned the child care stipend and gas cards, but these served as an incentive to come back to see their career coaches, rather than to complete their education or training programs. In any case, customers in education and training programs made it clear that the receipt of incentives, and the coaches' taking care of tuition payments, smoothed the path for them to focus on and complete their studies successfully.

- **Some customers who wanted to leave their current jobs lacked a clear vision and knew only that they were not happy where they were. The services that were provided to them varied a great deal from the services for people who were more self-directed.**

Compared with participants who had set education and training goals, those who had little or no direction but a desire to leave their current job presented more of a challenge to staff. It was necessary to think creatively about the types of career exploration services to provide this group of participants, but staff were limited by the resources available for career exploration and were challenged to create value-added services for a wide range of less directed participants.

According to WASC career coaches, the less directed participants made up a much smaller group than participants who had set goals, and they represented a small proportion among focus group participants. Despite their smaller numbers, however, working with such participants can be more time-consuming for coaches. Furthermore, it is this group for whom WASC could make a key difference. In the absence of coaching and other resources,

it would be reasonable to expect that individuals lacking clear advancement goals might remain in their current jobs, despite being unhappy, or perhaps might even leave employment without a plan for their next steps. WASC potentially could make a significant difference for participants in this situation — whose internal motivation and direction are not apparent — by providing resources, guidance, and “external” motivation.

Across all three sites, advancement services for participants without a set direction closely mirrored the services already available at the One-Stop for unemployed individuals; these were primarily limited to job search services and career assessments. The use of career assessments varied by site, and the usefulness of these assessments in helping shape advancement plans was questionable. Some coaches analyzed the assessment reports with their participants, but, overall, it seems that these assessments were not particularly useful, as they rarely seemed to be incorporated into the participants’ plans. In fact, no participants in the focus groups mentioned completing a career assessment as part of the services they received from WASC.

The WASC design includes using existing services within the One-Stop, such as résumé writing and job search activities, rather than re-creating services that already exist. Accordingly, while the career coaches in all the sites had access to job listings, they instead referred participants to the services available within the One-Stop. Referred participants were often asked to bring job listings to the next meeting with their coach, for review, which allowed coaches to reinforce employment goals like target wages and benefit packages as well as realistic job options. Coaches provided guidance through services ranging from mock interviews (participants came to the meeting dressed in interview clothes), to how to address interviewers and talk about their previous job experiences, to sharing books and other literature on interviewing:

She gave me a lot of information. She gave me interviewing tips, books — some tips on how to prepare for a interview. You know, what to say in a interview, what to expect. So she gave me a lot of material that really helped me when I was interviewing.

Driven by a desire to increase their income, participants without a set direction are often drawn to careers that appear to have higher wages based on limited information from friends or family members. The majority of WASC participants are interested in changing jobs and moving into jobs with higher wages and/or flexible hours. Just hearing that a friend is making a high hourly wage is sometimes enough for a participant to choose that same career path. Unfortunately, such word-of-mouth information is often misleading and masks the realities of the job market. Participants may be drawn to jobs in declining industries, to jobs that need a large amount of skills training, or to jobs that start at wages significantly

lower than what their friend or family member is making. In these cases, career coaches tried to help participants be realistic about their career goals without discouraging them:

So they hear this [and think], “Oh! I’m going to make more money doing this!” and then they want to just drop what they’re doing and start this other job. And then they realize, like these nursing assistants, “It’s, like, I have to do all this dirty grunt work.” You know, they thought it was more like, . . . like being a homemaker. You know: “I’ll go shopping for this person.” They don’t realize they [need] to bathe them and clean them and all this, and then they’re, like, “I don’t like this. . . .” I tell them right off the start, “This is what you’re going to be doing; I’m telling you.” And then some of them, they change their minds right away.

In some cases, to get a realistic idea of what a job entails, career coaches suggested that participants conduct informational interviews or job-shadow with friends or family members, local employers, or contacts of WASC staff working in their field of interest. While the information provided in these assignments would likely vary depending on the questions asked, participants could potentially get a realistic idea of what a job in that field would be like on a daily basis. Participants who expressed interest in a specific education or training program were often encouraged to have similar conversations both with education and training providers and with students attending those training programs.

Ultimately, the less directed participants in WASC, although already working, more closely resembled the general population of the unemployed than they resembled the more advancement-focused WASC participants; that is, they were looking for job placement (to get out of their current job and into a new one) but were not necessarily pursuing career advancement. To move this less motivated group to take advancement steps would require creativity, skill, structured guidance, and the ability to help customers identify their strengths, motivations, and goals. From a career coaching perspective, working with this type of customer is perhaps more challenging, as the approach is likely to be more time-intensive and to require more exploratory work; at the same time, however, the coach has to offer some value during this exploratory phase so that customers continue to be engaged.

- **One of the tools provided to coaches to help them do their jobs — and also parts of their training — were not always used or were not as useful as intended, particularly with customers who were interested in education or training.**

For customers who wanted education or training and for those who wanted to leave their current job, some of the training that coaches received has proved to be less applicable than originally thought. A substantial part of the training that was provided to WASC career coaches to prepare for the demonstration focused on helping participants advance in their

current job, as this was a shorter-term step that seemed more likely to be achievable. This part of the training ultimately was not as relevant for participants — nor, therefore, as helpful to coaches — as was anticipated, since most customers wanted to leave their job. Moreover, it is very difficult to encourage participants to advance, such as by increasing their work hours, if they are unhappy in their current jobs and prefer to work for a new employer or move into a new field.

Likewise, one of the tools designed to assist coaches with advancement coaching — the Work Advancement Calculator — has had limited short-term use for customers pursuing education and training or for others who know exactly which advancement path they want to pursue. The calculator, designed specially for the WASC demonstration, shows how an increase in wages or hours can make a difference in overall income, including changes in work supports and taxes. It was intended to be used by coaches to help participants make strategic choices about advancement options, such as whether to increase hours or wages and by how much, in order to maximize earnings and work supports. This tool has turned out not to be as relevant — yet — for those pursuing education or training, as they are not yet in a position to consider options with regard to wages and hours; this may explain, at least in part, why the tool has not been used as regularly as expected.

To fully engage customers and move them forward toward their advancement goals, career coaches had to tailor the services that they provided to different types of customers and their particular needs. Though most customers in WASC wanted to leave their current jobs, according to coaches and focus group participants, their certainty about their next steps varied: Some knew precisely which training courses they needed in order to reach their career goals; some were already in the midst of training or education when they entered the WASC program; and others knew only that they wanted to leave their jobs but had no idea what they wanted to do next. For those with a clear direction and an interest in education or training, coaches facilitated access to training; for those already in education or training, coaches facilitated access to funding and provided incentives to complete their programs; and for those without a clear direction, coaches used career assessments, labor market information, and job searches and job-shadowing to help customers find their strengths and interests. Perhaps most important, coaches encouraged, guided, and smoothed the way for their customers, allowing them to focus on achieving their goals.

Coaching around short-term steps that customers can take at their current job could prove to be especially effective for people who do not know exactly what kind of advancement options they want to pursue. For someone who is not sure what career path to take, the option of earning more money in the short term — perhaps by asking for more hours or learning what it would take to get a raise — may be more appealing than it would be for someone with longer-term goals. Likewise, the Work Advancement Calculator may have

more use for those who are less directed. In addition to helping such customers identify their true passions and abilities, WASC career coaches could use the calculator to encourage them at least to take steps to increase their earnings in the short term. While those pursuing longer-term training or career paths may not see their advancement options as being defined in terms of wages and hours, those who are still searching for their long-term career path may, indeed, find value in seeing, for example, what an increase in hours could do for their overall income, while at the same time exploring longer-term advancement options.

Chapter 6

Work Supports

The Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) model promotes the take-up of work supports to supplement participants' income while they hopefully work toward their advancement goals. This chapter discusses the work support component of WASC, take-up and resistance to taking up of work supports, and participants' perspectives on the interaction of work supports and advancement.¹⁶ More definitive data about work support take-up will be included in future reports.

The work support component of the WASC model was designed, in part, to address what prior research has shown to be obstacles to participation in work support programs, particularly for working families. Some families do not understand the types and amounts of benefits for which they are eligible. One recent study found that over half of eligible but not participating food stamp households mistakenly believed that they were ineligible.¹⁷ Other families resist taking up work supports — or acknowledging that they do — because of a perceived stigma about welfare; for example, studies have shown that individuals resist enrolling in programs such as Medicaid that are accessed at a “welfare” office.¹⁸ Further, some families are discouraged from taking up the non-tax credit work supports by the high transaction costs in many places of applying for and maintaining them. For example, one recent study reports that over one-quarter of food stamp recipients drop out of the program because of some aspect of the application or recertification process, such as inconvenient hours and locations of human services offices, onerous income verification requirements, and long waiting lines.¹⁹ Finally, according to WASC career coaches and focus group participants, sometimes the amount of the work support someone is eligible for is not worth the hassle of applying; this is often the case for working people with regard to food stamps and Medicaid “spend-down” programs, described below in this chapter.

Regardless of whether they were actually administering the work supports, WASC coaches were expected to inform participants about the work supports available within the WASC unit and to screen for eligibility. In some cases, WASC participants were found to

¹⁶Work supports offered in WASC include food stamps, Medicaid, child care subsidies, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and the Child Tax Credit (CTC).

¹⁷Bartlett, Burstein, and Hamilton (2004); cited in Zedlewski, Adams, Dubay, and Kenney (2006).

¹⁸Stuber and Kronebusch (2004); cited in Zedlewski, Adams, Dubay, and Kenney (2006).

¹⁹Bartlett, Burstein, and Hamilton (2004); cited in Zedlewski, Adams, Dubay, and Kenney (2006).

be either over income for some work supports²⁰ or already receiving them (especially after sites recruited participants from lists of people already receiving at least one work support). Eligibility workers reported that, of the participants who applied for work supports through WASC, most were eligible for work supports that had higher income cutoffs — like children’s Medicaid and child care assistance — rather than food stamps. For these participants and those previously receiving work supports, WASC has offered simpler, easier, and more convenient access to or renewal of work supports, regardless of whether the application process was actually simplified.²¹

- **Though work supports were not the main appeal of WASC for most of the focus group participants, career coaches reported that most customers took up the work supports for which they were eligible, in addition to any that they were already receiving when they enrolled.**

Despite the expectation of stigma, coaches reported that most customers took up most of the work supports for which they were eligible, and this was reflected by focus group participants. This was particularly notable with respect to food stamps, where perhaps the expectation of stigma was highest. WASC staff have found that it has not been difficult to encourage participants who were eligible but not receiving food stamps to apply for them.²² More detailed and precise information about the take-up of work supports will be included in the next WASC report, derived from administrative records data and a survey of WASC participants; yet it is important to note that the perception among both WASC staff and focus group participants was that though work supports were not the draw to the program, there was little resistance to taking them up.

- **Of those who did refuse work supports, WASC staff estimate that most are immigrants; several focus group participants seemed to affirm this.**

²⁰This was particularly the case after the income eligibility threshold for WASC was raised in 2006 from 130 percent of the federal poverty guideline (FPG) to 200 percent, since food stamp eligibility is capped at 130 percent of FPG.

²¹Since the human services agencies in Bridgeport and Dayton had already simplified the work support application process considerably, little or nothing was done to further streamline this process. In San Diego, WASC created a single, 3-page application for all work supports that simplified the 21 pages of applications that were needed at the time to apply for food stamps, Medicaid, and child care assistance. Since then, the state has simplified the work support application to a shorter document. San Diego also deferred the requirement to be fingerprinted, until the participant visited a county food stamp office.

²²This is not to suggest that everyone who is eligible for food stamps is accessing them; rather, interviews with career coaches and focus group participants suggest that most participants who have been engaged in program services and who appeared to be eligible have applied for and received this support. There may be others who are not engaged in services who might be eligible, but they have not been connected to the WASC program sufficiently to learn about their eligibility.

Box 4

Pedro Morales: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Pedro Morales (not his real name) completes General Educational Development classes and earns a GED certificate.

The Customer

Early in 2007, Pedro Morales signed up for the WASC program. Twenty-eight years old, he was living with his wife and three children and was working for his father-in-law for approximately \$600 per month. As a two-parent household with one parent providing full-time child care, the Morales family was ineligible for a child care subsidy, and Pedro refused food stamps and Medicaid because he worried that they might affect future opportunities for citizenship or sponsorship.

His Advancement Goals

Pedro's advancement goals were to decide on a career and to complete his classes to earn a GED certificate.

His Experience with WASC

Within the first month, Pedro's coach gave him \$40 in participation incentives and \$100 to complete the battery of GED tests. Meanwhile, his father-in-law had to let him go when business slowed down, and he found employment as an industrial painter, which doubled his monthly earnings.

By spring, Pedro passed four of the five exams required for a GED certificate. His coach encouraged him to try again to complete the fifth exam, in Science, reminding him of the importance of completing the course and offering a \$50 incentive. When Pedro returned in July, he had earned a GED certificate and expressed interest in training to become a security guard. Pedro's coach congratulated him with a \$50 grocery card and also issued a check for \$200 to pay for a security guard training program.

But Pedro postponed the training, and returned the check, having found a temporary job in the banking industry that offered a \$2 per hour increase. When that job ended in the fall, he got a job in the transportation industry. Then Pedro fell out of contact with WASC for a few months, although his coach tried to reach him at home, at work, and at the phone numbers of relatives whom Pedro had listed on his application. When Pedro reestablished contact four months later, he explained that he was in the middle of a difficult divorce and was working full time in a restaurant for \$8 per hour.

Like most participants, the majority of immigrants accepted work supports, but some refused because they were worried that taking a government subsidy would affect their citizenship status or their ability to sponsor relatives:

I only have work permit. I thought that if I continue asking for the Government [assistance], when the time comes to get the [Permanent] Residence [card], maybe they would say “No, you owe us this much.”²³

Career coaches also reported that some immigrant families refused to apply for work supports because of cultural pride; they did not want to be seen as accepting a “handout.”

- **Participants who applied for work supports generally appeared to be interested in health insurance and child care.**

Because one of the strategies to recruit participants to WASC was to reach out to lists of people who were already receiving one work support, a group of participants were already receiving some work supports when they entered the program. In Dayton, for example, where one recruitment strategy involved targeting people who received food stamps, 36 percent of enrollees were receiving food stamps at the time of enrollment.²⁴ Another group of participants was likely ineligible for food stamps after WASC increased its income eligibility cap from 130 percent of FPG — the cap for food stamp eligibility — to 200 percent.²⁵ In Dayton, 23 percent of enrollees had a family income over 130 percent of FPG. Of the remaining participants, most applied for the work supports for which they were eligible, especially for children’s (and, in some cases, adults’) health insurance and for child care, which have higher eligibility caps:

We had health insurance at my job, but I found that we were eligible for my kids, anyway, for a secondary insurance. So we actually picked up Care Source, and that one covers the prescription fees and stuff like that.

²³U.S. immigration law requires an immigrant’s sponsor to sign an Affidavit of Support, indicating the acceptance of “legal responsibility for financially supporting this family member.” There are very few situations in which a sponsor may have to pay back to the government benefits received by the person(s) he or she is sponsoring or benefits that the sponsor received previously; however, there is much confusion about this aspect of immigration law, which seems to lead to resistance to taking up public benefits. See the following U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Web site:

<http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.5af9bb95919f35e66f614176543f6d1a/?vgnextoid=6a096c854523d010VgnVCM10000048f3d6a1RCRD&vgnnextchannel=4f719c7755cb9010VgnVCM10000045f3d6a1RCRD>

²⁴For selected baseline characteristics of sample members in all three sites, see Appendix Table A.1.

²⁵However, since food stamp eligibility is based on household income, as well as assets and other criteria, and WASC eligibility was based on family income, it is impossible to know definitively how many WASC participants were ineligible for food stamps at the time of enrollment.

Bridgeport staff found that the one exception to the general take-up of public health insurance was adults who were eligible only for “medical spend-down,” a program that lets participants reduce, or spend down, their excess income to bring it under the “medically needy income limit.” Medical bills are deducted from income; if one’s medical expenses are large enough that they bring the income below the medically needy income limit, the participant is then eligible for Medicaid, which covers any further medical expenses. Since in most cases the medical expenses required in Bridgeport to bring most people below the income limit were applicable only to major surgery, staff found that most participants who were eligible for medical spend-down would not apply or did not recertify to continue receipt, as the benefit was not worth the effort:

I got accepted for the medical, but you had to do a spend-down or something, and it was too much. I was, like, no, it’s not even worth it.

- **Often, participants were not sufficiently informed about changes in their work supports and, thus, in their overall income, that would result from advancement.**

On taking a new job at a higher wage or more hours, some participants experienced changes in their work support allocation. All three sites were equipped with the Work Advancement Calculator — an interactive, Web-based tool that was a key component of WASC services. Though it incorporated an eligibility tool, its key feature was its “advancement discussion” tool, which helped staff inform customers about how changes in earnings would affect changes in work supports and, thus, in total income. For example, if someone earning \$9 per hour was considering increasing work hours from 20 to 35 per week, the calculator would show how earnings and taxes would increase, how work supports would change (usually food stamps would decrease; child care payments would increase; and tax credits would increase or decrease, depending on the level of earnings), and therefore how total income would change. Staff were trained to use this tool so that customers could make informed choices about advancement opportunities as well as anticipate any reductions in work supports. Even though the calculator allowed career coaches to compare work supports at different hours per week and different hourly wage rates, it was rarely used to demonstrate this early in WASC participation. In San Diego, where it was used most consistently in the beginning of the demonstration, the calculator was used primarily to determine initial eligibility for work supports and was not used to demonstrate the effects of advancement on eligibility.

While it may be that the calculator was not used because participants were not at a point in their advancement plan where discussing the implications of increased earnings was appropriate, the lack of discussion meant that participants were sometimes caught off guard by changes in their job situations. Providing participants with information about “eli-

gibility cliffs” — income limits at which a person becomes ineligible for certain work supports, such as child care assistance or Medicaid — would give them a chance to re-budget or find other sources of income in preparation for changes to come. Such information might also help participants focus on a longer-term advancement plan that would allow them to get through the difficult advancement phase when the “take-home rate” from additional earnings — the amount of each additional dollar earned that one gets to keep, considering increases in taxes and decreases in work supports — is low.²⁶

- **According to career coaches, a change in work support eligibility was not a reason to avoid advancement for most participants. In Bridgeport, staff noted that participants receiving housing assistance were an exception to this overall pattern.**

I’m up to \$9.50 now. So I’m, like, okay. They get ready to — ’cause I already know they’re [work supports] going down. I’m prepared for that. I already know. And I’ll still be alright. You know, I just have to come [up with] more out of my pocket. But you know, that’s what we strive for.

While there has been some resistance to losing work supports, career coaches across all three sites reported that this is not the norm.²⁷ Since the cost of living is much higher in Bridgeport, coaches there reported that participants are particularly sensitive to losing their housing assistance. Among WASC enrollees in Bridgeport, 9 percent are receiving a Section 8 voucher or paying reduced rent, and an additional 16 percent are living in public housing; thus, 25 percent of enrollees are potentially affected by changes in their earnings and their housing expenses. The Work Advancement Calculator did not incorporate rent or rental assistance into its calculations, and so coaches could not use that tool to understand how increases in earnings would affect rental assistance and expenses. Perhaps because of this, in most cases, coaches did not help participants anticipate higher rent in their advancement plans. Rather, participants who were approaching the eligibility limit for housing assistance tended to resist any further advancement.

- **Participants deeply valued the convenience of getting work supports in one office through a team they knew.**

²⁶For a thorough discussion of this concept and of the Work Advancement Calculator, see Tessler and Seith (2007).

²⁷Since interviews for this report were completed, staff in Dayton have reported that, with increased use of the calculator, they are encountering more examples of customers hesitating to advance because of the potential loss of work supports. The final WASC report will explore this more thoroughly using additional data.

WASC was designed to make the receipt of work supports easier for working people in a number of ways, including designating one staff person, or a team of staff people, to handle all work support applications and recertifications in one location, outside the “welfare office,” and with hours that accommodate working people:

I think it’s way-easier [handling all the work supports at the WASC unit]. It alleviates a lot of paperwork and a lot of having to go back and forth.

I think it’s better for it to be all here because when you go [to the welfare office], there is a lot of people, and it takes too long. But here they immediately ask you if you need help to be qualified. So it’s better like this; . . . it’s faster here.

Participants who had work supports before entering the program had the experience of working with a different caseworker every few months and going to different offices for different work supports. Even those who got work supports from a staff person who was not their advancement coach appreciated the convenience of getting all services within the same unit. In Dayton, focus group participants were upset to hear that they would have to return to the larger One-Stop system to receive their work supports at the end of their two years in the program — the change would mean returning to long lines, multiple caseworkers, and multiple recertification processes. Some participants expressed appreciation that a coach tried to get work supports for them, even if they were not eligible for them in the end:

[After I was assigned to the WASC program,] the next day they offered me everything that I wasn’t even thinking of. So I’m feeling pampered right now. I feel good. They tried to give me everything like food stamps, medical. But they said I made too much money and all of that stuff, but just the offer made me feel happy because that wasn’t coming from anywhere else. So I think this is a good program so far.

The WASC demonstration always intended for the work support component of the program to be secondary to advancement; advancement was the primary goal, and work supports were intended to be a short-term way to ease financial stresses so that participants could focus on advancing. Focus group participants and career coaches indicated that, in fact, the program played out the way it was intended, for the most part. Advancement was the primary draw and remained the primary focus for participants, though they did take up the work supports for which they were eligible. When faced with advancement opportunities that would cause them to lose some supports, they usually took the opportunity anyway, though some may not have been prepared for the loss of income from work supports. Being able to deal with all work support issues in one location was deeply valued by this working population. According to coaches, a proportion of participants in each site use WASC only as a convenient way to get and maintain their work supports, but these people are in the minority. For most WASC participants, the eased access to work supports was a valued part of the program that helped to keep them engaged, but their focus remained on advancement.

Chapter 7

Sustained Engagement

Helping low-wage workers to move up in their careers is a lot harder than helping them to find jobs, which is what the workforce system has focused on for years. In the midst of this population's serious obligations, mistakes, and missed opportunities — including parenting demands, family conflicts, and gaps in skills and experience — the stamina required to keep climbing can seem disproportionate to the risk or return of the next small step. Often it is not even clear what the next step should be. To help motivate and guide that next small step when the fatigue sets in, career coaches in the Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) program have to keep participants engaged for the long run.

The first generation of employment retention programs, targeted for the most part to welfare leavers, proved that it is possible to engage customers in postemployment services, but it is much harder to sustain engagement over time.²⁸ Rates of participation in career counseling, work supports, and referral services often decline precipitously after the first six months.²⁹ Likewise, studies of community college programs have shown that few who begin two-year college programs go on to complete them.³⁰

Building on these lessons, the WASC demonstration established rigorous expectations for staff, requiring career coaches to engage at least 75 percent of the caseload in a substantive dialogue about their advancement plan every month. Moreover, surveys fielded to small groups of both WASC participants and control group members in 2006-2007 suggest that a substantial proportion of control group members participated in some type of career counseling or education and training program since random assignment. Thus, in order to get even better results for WASC participants, WASC career coaches were aware that sustaining engagement was a critical challenge.

This chapter discusses customers' appreciation for how they were treated in WASC, how WASC career coaches tried to keep customers engaged, why some customers stayed engaged and others dropped out, and the balance of rapport and guidance that coaches strove to offer.

²⁸Bloom, Hendra, and Page (2006).

²⁹Rangarajan and Novak (1999).

³⁰Golonka and Matus-Grossman (2001).

- **WASC customers felt that their coaches knew them personally, believed in them, and treated them much differently than case managers in other programs.**

WASC customers in each of the focus groups who had met with career coaches spoke very highly and appreciatively about the way their coaches treated them. They felt that the coaches knew them personally, took an interest in their success, treated them better than case managers in other programs, helped them overcome barriers that arose, believed in them, and gave them good advice:

All the staff that I came across [in the program], they have a different compassion than some of the regular caseworkers. They don't act as though they feel that, "This is just my two hours. This person is trying to get something extra." They treat you like you would like to be treated. And that makes a big difference.

She was trying to help me to excel. And even if I couldn't make it for an appointment, if something happened, she would come to my house and work with me there. Whereas other workers are, like, "Okay, you have to be here within this half hour." And, like I said, I have three children.

Evaluations of earlier retention and advancement programs suggest that personalized attention and positive regard are essential but insufficient elements of the coaching relationship, which posed four significant operational challenges, three of which could be addressed through the program design.³¹ WASC hired personable and motivational coaches. WASC strove to keep caseloads smaller than in traditional work supports or workforce systems — ideally, fewer than 100 customers per coach. WASC encouraged career coaches to meet working participants after normal business hours and, at times, in off-site locations. WASC staff were expected to be proactive in their outreach to customers, to get them engaged and keep them engaged. With these structural elements in place, the final challenge was for coaches to build a good rapport with customers in practice.

- **Tangible participation incentives, such as gas, grocery, and gift cards — as well as work support recertification meetings — often provided opportunities for face-to-face conversations about advancement.**

³¹A systematic review of many mandatory welfare-to-work studies serving close to 70,000 participants altogether shows conclusively that case managers' assessments of the degree to which they are able to offer personalized case management is one of the most important predictors of program success (Bloom, Hill, and Riccio, 2001). At the same time, postemployment job retention programs for welfare recipients show that high levels of initial engagement and personalized case management are often not enough to make a difference in job retention (Rangarajan and Novak, 1999; LeBlanc, Miller, Martinson, and Azurdia, 2007).

Box 5

Douglas Wilson: A Second Chance at a Better Future

Douglas Wilson (not his real name) finds a second chance in WASC after 10 years in jail, earns a commercial driver's license, and positions himself to double his earnings within the year.

The Customer

Early in 2007, Douglas Wilson signed up for WASC. He was looking for a program to help him to get back on his feet after serving 10 years in prison, but one program after another kept turning him down. He was 37 years old and had been working for several months in the stockroom of a major food company for \$9 per hour.

His Advancement Goals

Douglas entered the WASC program with the clear goal of earning a commercial driver's license so that he could get a good job driving a truck. He knew that truck-driving jobs were available and that they paid well — well enough that he could afford to bring his two children from an aunt's house to live with him again as soon as he completed probation. He had even visited the commercial driver's training program that he hoped to attend.

His Experience with WASC

Douglas's coach gave him a training request form to be signed by the training provider. The next day, Douglas returned to speak with a work support specialist. Although he was over-income for food stamps and family Medicaid, he did qualify for Medicaid spend-down, a public health insurance program that helps to cover large medical expenses after a substantial deductible.*

Within the week, Douglas returned the completed training request form. Within two weeks, he began the training program, which he attended on weekends and occasional days off. He checked in with his coach every few months.

In June, WASC paid the \$4,000 tuition for the training program. By August, Douglas completed the program, earned his commercial driver's license, and received an increase of \$4 per hour at his job, having now qualified to drive the company's delivery trucks. When he was interviewed in October, he had been working more than a year and a half at his current job, and he was much happier driving than working in the stockroom. His next step was to start a new job driving large, Class A tractor trailers. He had already spoken with the supervisor of a trucking company where his brother worked, and he would start there in March, at \$18 to \$19 per hour. In Douglas's own words:

I was in jail for, like, 10 years. When I was in there, I was thinking that I would like to better myself, you know. So when I came home, I tried to go to different programs, but [none of them could help me because of my earlier mistakes]. Finally, a friend told me about this program. . . . I went to the WASC program, and it really changed my life, and I'm happy with it,

(continued)

Box 5 (continued)

and I'm really, really grateful . . . for people like me that don't have much, [it helps us to secure] a better future. . . .

It's something that really changed my life. . . . I was trying to get the license, and they really helped me. They did everything so quickly. I know other places you have to wait months and months. Some people wait a year in other programs. I went there, and a couple of weeks later I was already in school. . . . I took every advantage of it. . . . The program that you're doing is beautiful. The people have to take advantage of it. . . . People have to want to change their lives. . . . The Career Academy program was the only program that gave me a chance. They helped me out, and I'm grateful. . . .

*In Connecticut, the deductible is equal to six times the amount by which monthly income exceeds the income limit allowed by Medicaid.

Career coaches in San Diego and Dayton had access to a range of participation incentives and issued them generously. Coaching, they explained, like any relationship, begins with a series of small, tangible gestures to build rapport. To receive gas vouchers, customers had to submit mileage statements showing the distances that they drove between job interviews or work and training. And these small gestures — the coach's offering a voucher and the customer's returning with a statement — provided a pretext for a quick face-to-face conversation about some of the greater challenges of advancement.

Coaches and project coordinators valued the participation incentive resources, as long as they were offered as simple good-faith gestures to build rapport, to support efforts identified in the advancement plan, and to celebrate milestones and accomplishments. They cautioned, however, that, if overused, the payments could be distractions from more important goals.

In principle, the incentives were designed to encourage participation, to make it easier for customers to follow through on advancement goals, and to reward them when they did. However, career coaches sometimes failed to use the incentives as an opportunity to revisit advancement plans.³² In these cases (which seemed more common among staff accustomed to managing work support payments), the participation incentives were treated like a kind of a work support payment — an end in themselves — forfeiting the opportunity to get to the heart of advancement planning and diluting the message to participants that WASC, unlike other employment or work support programs, was primarily about advancement planning.

³²For example, later in the program in Dayton, customers could come in and drop off their gas receipts at the front desk and did not necessarily visit their career coaches.

As in all WASC services, participants who took the greatest advantage of the participation incentives were those who were most actively engaged with their career coaches in following through on an advancement plan. Participants who never quite “clicked” well enough with their coaches to keep in regular communication about their plans and progress were apt to receive less in discretionary incentive payments and supports. Some focus group participants only realized the extent to which they missed out on some of the incentives that were available as they compared notes with their peers. Naturally, some of these customers regretted that they were not aware of all the potential incentives from the beginning. Less visible, but perhaps much more valuable, were all the career coaching and planning conversations that they missed along the way. As subsidiary services, the range and amounts of available participation incentives varied with operating budgets, and their disbursement was intentionally left to the discretion of the career coaches.

- **Participants who disengaged from their own advancement plans often fell out of contact with their career coaches; many became disengaged because they felt constrained by family obligations or were overwhelmed by the effort required to overcome past mistakes.**

As described above, participants enrolled in WASC in the hope that one of the services offered by the program would help them to enhance their incomes or careers in tangible ways. But customers who were not successful in completing incremental steps and achieving rewards often settled back into the inertia of everyday demands. Coaches noted that even one missed appointment or lapse in communication could be a telltale sign of a customer who was at risk of disengaging from his or her own advancement plan:

All I can say is that if they miss an appointment or something, then you better keep up with it, because you’re going to be losing this person. . . . Sometimes . . . it’s just a matter of getting back in touch with them. . . . [I say:] “You’re still a participant. We want to continue to help you out. What’s your current situation? Well, here’s what I can do for you. And on top of it, maybe I can give you a gas card, this time, for your effort in coming back here.”

At focus groups and in interviews, customers often explained that caregiving obligations — sometimes to older as well as to younger family members — limited the time that they could devote to advancement activities, even though they recognized that more consistent meetings would help them advance:

And when you’re juggling a lot of different things. . . . Like in my place, I have my children. I have a teenager. I have a 22-year-old. I have my husband. I have my mother, who has dementia. And she’s 78. And I have to take care of all of her caregiving. I do her grocery shopping and all of her medications, take her to the doctor, get her hair done. It’s a lot. And then, in addition, I work 30 hours per week. . . . But you know, if you really wanted to

[succeed], you would need to meet more often . . . because you really need that motivation. You need things to keep continually stirred up to stay interested in your goals and what you want to accomplish.

Some customers were unsure about next steps or felt ill-equipped to follow through on some of the initial career exploration assignments suggested by their coaches:

If you can help me to find the training school, I can look in the newspaper. He told me to look on the Internet, but I do not have the Internet at home. So it's very difficult for me to look for schools. That's the only thing that you guys can help me with.

Maybe if we could look up schools, maybe call a few. . . . The schools are calling me to ask me to call the program to sign up for a Medical Billing [class]. . . . Maybe we could look up how to e-mail them or something.

Career coaches explained that some of the most difficult advancement barriers were long-term limitations, like basic skills deficiencies, and earlier mistakes, particularly criminal offenses. Some customers struggled for weeks or months to improve their basic math skills in order to qualify for training programs:

I'm not good at math at all. . . . So the program kind of moves fast. You only have a limited amount of time to get everything taken care of. And like with taking care of your child, work, school, all that. And still, I'm just not even done with my tutoring yet. So it's like time is moving so fast. I've got to get done with all of this, and it's stressful.

In other cases, customers' earlier mistakes — such as falling behind in child support or having a prior conviction — limited their advancement opportunities.

- **The key ingredient of successful career coaching appears to be a balance of strong rapport and insightful career advice; while a few coaches displayed both motivational skills and technical knowledge to help customers advance, most leaned more toward one approach or the other, and some customers responded better to one approach than the other.**

Recognizing that career coaching would be guided more by principles than by scripts, the demonstration articulated a “franchise model” of WASC services, which consisted of a series of core messages, coaching tools, and talking points delivered by site teams in response to local needs. The WASC model challenged career coaches to achieve a balance of strong rapport and insightful career advice, without being distracted by longer-term employment barriers or crises that are simply too large to be addressed within the purview of the program.

Of course, the challenge of any human service work is to identify with customers well enough to understand their current situation and to know enough about the opportunity structure to help customers reach the next step. Career coaches in WASC, like case managers in any program, approached the coaching relationship with different styles, based on their life experiences and skills, and different customers valued different coaching styles.

Some coaches emphasized the motivational and mentoring aspects of the role. Their help was particularly valued among two types of customers, often women: one group who were at risk of burning out in a current training program and another group who were falling behind in the face of employment barriers. Motivational coaches conveyed a welcoming sense of acceptance and grace, in some cases reinforced by the credibility that comes from experience — the experience of raising children their customers' ages, the experience of knowing discrimination firsthand, and, in some cases less immediately obvious, similarities of career aspirations and experiences:

She gave me a lot of encouragement. She seemed to have a spirit to want to see me do good. You know, just like she's keeping her thumbs up for me. . . . She's always, like, "You're young. You have enough time to do it. Don't ever think you don't have enough time. Cause time is on your side. Don't make it on the other person's side. You've got to take your time and figure things out." And I really appreciate that she gave me a lot of words of wisdom, being that I'm a young, single mother.

When I first met her, I was thinking she's an older lady; I'm somewhat younger. . . . She appeared white. I consider myself black. And I thought we had nothing in common. But we followed the same path and really clicked.

For motivational coaches, one of the key coaching strategies was to help customers achieve a sustainable life and work balance and to develop a sense of self-efficacy, self-reliance, and an internal locus of control. As one career coach put it:

For many of our people it's like pushing a loaded wagon uphill. . . . So a big part of my job is to determine when is a good time to add more bricks to that load. We don't want to overload people and run the risk of the whole wagon breaking down. . . . Before we talk about training, [we ask,] "Is this even a good time for them to go?" . . . Now might not be the time to try to add yet another brick to the load.

For customers who were ready to take on the additional responsibilities of training, another key motivational strategy was to develop a team advancement plan, with a genuine sense of shared purpose and a clear conception of how the coach could continue to help, provided that the customer continued to manage the balance. Motivational coaches were eager to demonstrate that their commitment to their responsibilities in the team advancement plan was not simply rhetorical.

Some have argued that this sort of transformative mentoring, rooted in trust, is an essential element of effective service work.³³ They point out that human service work is as challenging as human motivations are complex. More art than science, in service work there are no proven strategies — only good performances of guiding principles and convincing offerings of common sense.

But for coaches who secured this deeper level of trust, the most difficult part of career coaching was learning to empower customers to help themselves, by offering questions instead of advice and suggesting a few next steps that customers could take on their own. For example, one coach had faithfully taken bus passes to a customer at his employer each month and often intervened with his employer when a series of missed Mondays disclosed his otherwise private struggle with alcoholism. For this coach, the hardest part was not interceding on his behalf when the employer called “one last time” before letting him go.

Other career coaches agreed that it was important to establish a good rapport, but they tried to keep an unwavering focus on the customer’s next step. They feared that an emphasis on motivation, past experiences, and crises that were too big to be solved through this program alone might distract customers from incremental steps within their control. These “planning” coaches made referrals, when necessary, to partner agencies that could focus on more acute and longer-term employment barriers, but they tried to keep the conversations within their own offices focused on the advancement plan:

Well, it’s difficult because a lot of customers will try to tell you all of their personal problems. What I try to do is, I listen and empathize, but then I just tell them: “Hey, look — Life goes on, and this is what we need to do. Those things are past, and we’ve got to move on.” I try to listen and to empathize, but it’s really, like, “Okay, well, I heard your problem, and now it’s time to advance.”

Some customers deeply appreciated this incremental, behavioral approach, as much as others appreciated the motivational approach:

Ms. [coach’s name], she was really extra, extra helpful to me. She went to the same university. So she even let me know which professors to talk to. . . . She had an inside track on just about everything I was doing. She helped me when I was graduating and getting my résumé together. . . . She let me know about which steps to take — the free resource center on campus to help me to build a résumé.

From the outset, WASC’s designers and staff recognized that helping customers to move up in their current jobs would require career coaches to keep customers engaged

³³Hasenfeld (1992).

much longer than job placement programs did. WASC's designers made the structural changes that they could to facilitate sustained engagement — hiring the best available coaches, maintaining small caseloads, offering flexible hours and meeting locations — but the rest depended on coaches' performance. Over time, the career coaches who appeared to be most successful learned to build a motivational rapport while offering clear incremental advice about career planning steps. They strove to use participation incentives to create opportunities for substantive, face-to-face dialogue about accomplishments, setbacks, and next steps. Reflecting on their experiences, WASC focus group participants reaffirmed the importance of developing a trusting relationship with one's coach, and WASC career coaches pointed out that sometimes the hardest advancement barriers are mistakes that customers made and opportunities that they missed in the past.

Chapter 8

Next Steps

While previous reports on the Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) demonstration have focused on the startup and operations of the program — largely based on observations and the perspectives of WASC program staff — this report provides some insight into the perspectives and experiences of the participants themselves. The focus group participants in Dayton, San Diego, and Bridgeport displayed a variety of characteristics, motivations, and goals; as expected, their experiences varied depending on what they wanted and expected from the program, whether or not they had clear goals when they began, how motivated they were, and the nature of their interactions with program staff. Despite these varied experiences, however, the overall expression from focus group participants was that their experiences with the WASC program were positive.

WASC program services are in their final year in all the sites. By March 2009 in Dayton and by July 2009 in San Diego and Bridgeport, sites will have completed delivering WASC services, and all WASC participants will have exited the program. In Fort Worth, services will continue through June 2009, though there may be an additional 12 months of services beyond that, if local funding resources allow.

An implementation report, scheduled for publication in 2009, will focus on Fort Worth's efforts to recruit employers and their employees into WASC and to deliver WASC services at the workplace. Based on interviews with staff and on interviews and focus groups with employers and employees, this report will explore the operational challenges and successes in implementing employer-based advancement services, and it will present the experiences of employers and employees who were engaged in the program.

An interim impact report, scheduled to be published in 2009, will look for evidence of the effectiveness of the program after one year — both for the complete group of enrollees in Dayton and for a partial group of enrollees in San Diego — in terms of employment stability, employment duration, earnings, and job characteristics. MDRC will determine whether the WASC participants performed better in these areas than they would have without the program during that one-year period — or, in other words, whether the program had impacts. This report will also discuss WASC's effects on participants' take-up of food stamps, Medicaid, the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), child care subsidies, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Additionally, it will include a more complete story and analysis of the implementation experiences of the WASC program in Dayton, San Diego, and Bridgeport. A subsequent report will examine impacts for the full group of enrollees in Dayton, San Diego, and Bridgeport over a longer period of time.

Appendix

Selected Characteristics of Sample Members

The Work Advancement and Support Center Demonstration

Appendix Table A.1

Selected Baseline Characteristics of Sample Members Randomly Assigned
from October 17, 2005, Through March 31, 2008, by Site

Characteristic	Dayton	San Diego	Bridgeport
<u>Demographic characteristics</u>			
Gender (%)			
Female	80.8	72.1	66.6
Age (%)			
18 - 24	35.6	18.8	26.5
25 - 34	35.9	29.1	32.4
35 - 44	18.1	24.9	22.7
45 - 62	10.5	27.1	18.4
Average age (years)	30.2	36.3	33.4
Race/ethnicity (%)			
Hispanic	1.1	71.2	23.1
White	27.0	9.4	8.1
Black	67.7	10.7	60.6
Native American	0.3	0.2	0.1
Asian	0.4	6.0	1.1
Other	0.3	0.4	3.9
Multiracial	3.1	2.1	3.0
Citizenship (%)			
Born in United States	97.0	49.7	81.6
Naturalized citizen	1.6	22.1	8.4
Noncitizen	1.4	28.2	10.0
English proficiency (%)			
Speaks English very well	98.8	66.2	85.3
Speaks English well	1.2	18.7	14.0
Does not speak English well	0.0	13.1	0.7
Does not speak English at all	0.0	2.1	0.0
Languages spoken ^a (%)			
English	100.0	81.9	99.6
Spanish	3.5	66.4	25.5
Tagalog	0.1	4.1	0.0
Vietnamese	0.1	0.0	0.3
Other	4.1	7.3	5.8
<u>Family status</u>			
Marital status (%)			
Single, never married	70.4	47.2	72.2
Married and living with spouse	9.6	21.4	10.7
Married but living apart from spouse	5.8	13.4	8.5
Legally separated	2.4	2.8	1.0
Divorced	11.2	14.3	6.7
Widowed	0.7	0.9	1.0

(continued)

Appendix Table A.1 (continued)

Characteristic	Dayton	San Diego	Bridgeport
Living with a partner (%)	6.1	5.9	5.8
Number of children (%)			
0	37.0	34.5	43.8
1	22.8	22.0	23.3
2	21.5	21.3	18.6
3 or more	18.7	22.1	14.3
Average number of children	1.3	1.4	1.1
Age of youngest child ^b (%)			
0 - 2	33.2	29.5	31.1
3 - 5	26.4	23.2	25.8
6 - 12	27.1	28.5	28.5
13 - 18	13.3	18.8	14.6
Average age of youngest child (years)	5.6	6.6	6.0
Family size (%)			
1	35.6	32.1	41.1
2	21.7	21.0	20.4
3	19.9	19.6	18.3
4 or more	22.8	27.3	20.3
Single-parent household (%)	50.6	43.0	42.0
Two-parent household (%)	11.8	22.4	14.1
<u>Education status</u>			
Highest grade (%)			
Grade 9 or less	2.0	13.2	5.1
Grade 10 or 11	6.5	8.9	8.6
Grade 12, no high school diploma or GED certificate	1.4	3.2	2.8
GED certificate	6.6	5.7	9.6
High school diploma	25.4	17.5	37.0
Some college or advanced training courses	47.8	36.8	30.2
Associate's degree	5.9	5.2	3.0
4-year college degree or higher	4.6	9.6	3.7
High school diploma, GED, or above (%)	90.2	74.7	83.4
Currently enrolled in education or training program ^a (%)	35.0	20.5	13.1
ESL	0.9	4.2	0.7
Adult Basic Education (ABE)	1.1	1.0	1.6
High school/GED preparation course	2.2	1.5	3.5
Vocational training	4.7	5.4	1.7
College course toward associate's/two-year degree	20.9	6.2	5.0
College course toward bachelor's/four-year degree	7.4	5.3	0.8
Other	1.6	1.1	2.0

(continued)

Appendix Table A.1 (continued)

Characteristic	Dayton	San Diego	Bridgeport
<u>Labor force status</u>			
<u>Current employment</u>			
Number of jobs (%)			
1	95.9	96.6	95.6
2 or more jobs	4.1	3.4	4.4
Number of months in current job (%)			
Less than 1	2.6	7.8	3.6
1 - 3	20.5	20.6	26.6
4 - 6	14.0	11.2	15.2
7 - 12	17.3	15.4	13.9
13 -24	17.6	16.5	15.5
25 or more	28.0	28.6	25.3
Average number of months in current job	23.1	24.8	21.7
Hours per week of work (%)			
1 - 19	20.3	18.9	22.2
20 - 29	26.4	24.5	35.0
30 - 34	15.6	12.6	9.1
35 - 39	12.4	10.7	7.1
40 - 72	25.1	33.3	26.6
73 or more	0.3	0.0	0.0
Average hours per week	28.4	29.1	27.6
Working full time (35 hours or more) (%)	37.7	44.0	33.7
Work schedule (%)			
Fixed	61.7	56.2	51.1
Hourly wage (%)			
Less than \$ 5.15	2.3	2.5	1.0
\$5.15 - \$6.99	18.2	9.1	1.1
\$7.00 - \$8.99	32.9	36.6	34.9
\$9.00 - \$10.99	28.5	32.0	33.5
\$11.00 - \$14.99	17.2	19.0	27.9
\$15.00 - \$19.99	0.9	0.8	1.6
\$20 or more	0.0	0.0	0.0
Average hourly wage (\$)	8.79	9.14	9.83
Weekly earnings (%)			
Less than \$100	8.6	8.3	7.2
\$100 to less than \$200	28.8	25.1	22.8
\$200 to less than \$300	29.6	25.7	28.4
\$300 to less than \$400	20.4	21.9	24.5
\$400 or more	12.6	19.1	17.0
Average weekly earnings (\$)	251	268	273

(continued)

Appendix Table A.1 (continued)

Characteristic	Dayton	San Diego	Bridgeport
Fringe benefits from employer ^a (%)			
Time off with pay	46.9	37.3	54.4
Health plan offered	50.6	38.3	55.7
Dental plan offered	40.3	28.4	48.7
Retirement plan	35.8	24.2	46.2
Other	16.9	3.0	5.5
Enrolled in employer-provided health or medical insurance plan (%)	20.2	17.8	17.8
<u>Circumstances that may affect job retention or job change (%)</u>			
Has driver's license	81.5	83.5	72.9
Has access to a car to drive to work	77.7	76.0	65.5
Currently receiving help finding new or additional job	6.5	7.7	15.2
Physical or mental health problem that limits work	4.2	6.8	3.8
<u>Dislocated Worker status</u>			
Became a Dislocated Worker during previous 2 years ^a (%)	19.4	26.3	13.5
Certified or participating in Dislocated Worker program	8.5	5.6	12.6
Laid off, unlikely to return to previous industry or occupation	7.3	8.7	8.9
Laid off as part of plant closure or mass layoff	9.4	7.8	4.8
Business failure because of local economy or natural disaster	4.2	2.4	0.7
Displaced homemaker	4.3	13.4	2.6
Current wages compared with wages at pre-layoff job ^c (%)			
A lot less	51.8	55.6	47.7
Somewhat less	13.3	16.0	29.2
About the same amount	28.9	12.3	9.2
More	6.0	16.0	13.8
<u>Income and work supports</u>			
Average monthly family income (\$)	1,218	1,373	1,367
Family income exceeds (%)			
130 percent of federal poverty level	24.2	28.8	38.5
200 percent of federal poverty level	2.7	1.6	2.3
Currently receiving income or work support (%)			
Earnings from spouse or partner	6.5	10.8	7.9
Food stamps	36.3	14.5	23.1
Child support	14.8	11.9	9.3
Child care subsidy	17.6	5.9	5.4
Other types of assistance	1.4	2.3	2.4
Received tax credits (%)			
Filed tax return during past 12 months	85.7	76.3	79.3
Aware of Earned Income Tax Credit	76.1	46.3	58.2
Claiming Earned Income Tax Credit	51.5	35.0	32.8

(continued)

Appendix Table A.1 (continued)

Characteristic	Dayton	San Diego	Bridgeport
Aware of Child Tax Credit	41.7	36.3	19.2
Claiming Child Tax Credit	26.5	31.1	12.0
<u>Medical coverage</u>			
Sample member has coverage (%)	68.5	48.8	65.3
Employer-provided or other private health plan	34.6	25.8	18.4
Publicly funded coverage	37.0	25.4	62.7
Sample member's children have coverage ^b (%)	89.4	68.4	88.8
Publicly funded coverage	74.2	52.3	85.2
<u>Housing status</u>			
Current living arrangement (%)			
Owns home or apartment	11.4	7.2	9.6
Rents home or apartment	61.6	59.0	57.2
Lives with family/friends and pays part of the rent	12.0	20.4	28.1
Lives with family/friends and pays no rent	13.5	11.8	1.0
Lives in a group shelter	0.8	0.6	3.1
Other housing arrangements	0.6	1.0	1.0
Lives in public housing (%)	9.8	9.4	14.7
Receives Section 8 rental assistance (%)	6.6	5.1	9.5
Pays reduced rent because of low income (%)	4.7	3.6	0.9
Sample size = 2,917	1,185	971	706

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from WASC Baseline Information Form.

NOTES: Sample sizes vary because of missing values. In order to assess differences in characteristics across research groups, chi-square tests were used for categorical variables, and t-tests were used for continuous variables. Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = 1 percent, ** = 5 percent, * = 10 percent. Sample members who were randomly assigned before January 12 in Dayton and before February 14, 2006, in San Diego were not asked to report Dislocated Worker status. Sample members who were randomly assigned before November 22, 2005, were not asked to report their monthly family income.

^aThis item can sum to more than 100 percent because sample members can record more than one response.

^bChild-related measures were calculated for sample members who had children.

^c“Current wages compared with wages at pre-layoff job” was measured among Dislocated Workers.

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MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Child Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.