



Reality Check: Promoting Self-Sufficiency  
in the Public Workforce System

# Working with Women, Youth and Ex-Offenders



**Wider Opportunities for Women**

Building pathways to economic independence for women and girls since 1964.

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## Purpose of this Guide

In 2006, Wider Opportunities for Women released *Reality Check: Promoting Self-Sufficiency in the Public Workforce System – A Promising Practices Guide for Workforce Boards*. The report described ways Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) from around the country have changed programs and systems to move their customers out of poverty and towards economic self-sufficiency. The strategies described in that report are:

- Choosing a High Definition of Self-Sufficiency
- Counseling Customers About Income Goals, Career Paths and Work Supports
- Employing Sector Strategies
- Negotiating On-the-Job-Training (OJT) Contracts and Customized Training Services
- Increasing Access to Work Supports
- Assessing Outcomes Through Data Collection and Benchmarking Goals
- Responding to the Demographics of a Community

This follow-up report deepens the exploration around the final strategy area described in *Reality Check*: "Responding to the Demographics of a Community." In this analysis, we take a closer look at promising practices aimed at serving three demographic groups of Workforce Investment Act (WIA) customers who have pressing and unique needs: women, youth and ex-offenders<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This report summarizes programs in select workforce investment boards around the country, and is not meant to be an exhaustive investigation of boards.

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## Practices in this Report

For the purposes of this research, we specifically explored promising practices designed to achieve the goal of helping women, youth and ex-offenders move toward economic self-sufficiency. We administered a request for information to local workforce boards across the country and interviewed select WIBs that utilized a self sufficiency standard (or related tool) in programs designed specifically for women, youth and ex-offenders. We also discussed with them how their use of industry "sector strategies" benefit these populations.<sup>2</sup>

## Why We Wrote this Report

Wider Opportunities for Women undertook this research to highlight what a public workforce system can do for underrepresented groups. Our underlying premise is that local workforce boards have great capacity to bring together the community members needed to design an effective employment, training and economic development system that works for the local area. "Self-sufficiency" strategies within a WIB require the political will to put the needs of families on the same level as the needs of business or government, and using a "self-sufficiency lens" is simply a way to align the work of the agency to make decisions focusing on the income level required for local families to make ends meet.

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<sup>2</sup> For further definition of self-sufficiency standards and sector strategies, see page 2.

In this report, we extend the conversation about self-sufficiency to focus on the following:

- **Women:** In order for women (especially single mothers) to successfully enter, remain and move up in the workforce, they often need tailored services like child care and access to higher wage employment and training. How are WIBs addressing the needs of women to ensure they have access to services and training that will put them on the path to self-sufficiency?
- **Youth:** WIBs are well positioned to help tomorrow's workforce set a course towards self-sufficiency. What are WIA funded youth programs doing to successfully prepare young people for self-sufficiency in adulthood, and what are the challenges facing those programs to be able to effectively deliver services?
- **Ex-Offenders:** People exiting the prison system often require services and opportunities to become productive, self-sufficient members of society. How are WIBs dealing with ex-offenders' challenges, like getting a job with a criminal record, or moving back to their home environment without immediate income and withstanding the temptation to re-offend?

## Report Highlights

- Workforce boards are finding that using a self-sufficiency standard is an effective way to move their customers toward economic independence. WIBs are using these measures in many different ways, including client career counseling, initial and ongoing eligibility for services, as well as overall program design and policy.
- WIBs are developing innovative programs that turn client barriers into opportunities — for example, by helping students rejected from nursing school find other health careers; using time in prison to develop complex skill sets; or creating a whole new computer distance learning program for busy low-income working mothers. The key to these programs is that the WIBs conform their programs to address customers' life demands, instead of trying to get customers to conform to rigid program rules that do not reflect today's realities.
- WIBs are realizing that to help customers move toward economic self-sufficiency, the workforce board must actively seek out employer-supported training for high-wage/high-demand occupations. WIBs must also recognize that for customers to succeed, the WIB must actively partner with community groups to help fund and deliver tailored services like transportation and child care.
- In sector projects that involve "nontraditional" jobseekers (women, youth and ex-offenders) WIBs are finding that their role as intermediary between client and employer is vital; WIBs can and do play a very important role in helping jobseekers get "a foot in the door" with potential employers.
- Many WIBs are broadening the breadth of influential stakeholders to include learning from employers about the skills needed for high-wage occupations in a particular industry, and then developing programs to teach those skills to women, youth and ex-offenders who wouldn't otherwise have access to those jobs.

## Definitions

**Self-Sufficiency:** The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a measure of how much income families need to cover their basic costs, depending on where they live and who is in their family. The Standard adds up the costs of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care and taxes and subtracts out tax credits to calculate the income a family would need for economic self-sufficiency — assuming no public or private supports or subsidies. The Standard takes into account the cost differences associated with the number and age of children and **Self-Sufficiency:** The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a measure of how much income families need to cover their basic costs, depending on where they live and who is in their family. The Standard adds up the costs of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care and taxes and subtracts out tax credits to calculate the income a family would need for economic self-sufficiency — assuming no public or private supports or subsidies. The Standard takes into account the cost differences associated with the number and age of children and where the family lives. The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a useful tool for workforce policymakers at the local, state and federal levels because it is both geographically specific down to the county level, and is calculated using a consistent methodology — allowing state and federal policymakers to compare outcomes across the state or across the country. More information on how the self-sufficiency has changed communities is available at: <http://www.sixstrategies.org/files/Changing%20Communities%20FINAL.pdf>.

Title I and Title II of WIA and the federal regulations make several references to self-sufficiency. The most significant and most utilized self-sufficiency reference defines eligibility for intensive services. Federal regulations make clear that state or local workforce boards must set the criteria for determining whether employment leads to self-sufficiency. While many areas utilize the WIA-established minimum threshold, a growing number of local boards have established higher standards than set by the federal law and have used them in a number of innovative programs and practices as reflected in this guide. All states have access to a self-sufficiency standard or similar measure.

**Industry Sector Strategies:** For many years, workforce development agencies have engaged in what some call "train-and-pray": developing training programs in industries that seemed to have job openings, and then trying to place trainees with employers after the training was completed. As an improvement on this program model, industry sector strategies grew out of a desire to work with employers to fill high-wage jobs with newly trained individuals who otherwise might not have access to those occupations. A sector strategy seeks to develop training for jobs that are both high-wage and high-demand in the local economy, and if those jobs don't exist, to find ways to create them. These strategies begin by bringing industry representatives to the table, along with community groups, labor and workforce agencies, to identify particular occupations that meet these criteria. In a typical sector project, the group collaboratively plans training processes, industry outcomes and career ladders, with the goals of ultimately transforming the industry so that it continues to create opportunities for individuals to learn skills and move to self-sufficiency wage jobs, as well as helping the industry become more competitive and profitable. For more information about sector strategies, go to [www.nedlc.org/nnsr](http://www.nedlc.org/nnsr) or [www.sectorstrategies.org](http://www.sectorstrategies.org). where the family lives. The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a useful tool for workforce policymakers at the local, state and federal levels because it is both geographically specific down to the county level, and is calculated using a consistent methodology — allowing state and federal policymakers to compare outcomes across the state or across the country. More information on how the self-sufficiency has changed communities is available at: <http://www.sixstrategies.org/files/Changing%20Communities%20FINAL.pdf>.

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# Promising Practices for Women

Over the last several decades, the economic status of women in the workforce has changed significantly; many women lead corporations, government agencies, universities and organizations. However, we still have a long way to go before economic self-sufficiency is more often the rule than the exception for women. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, women's earnings were still only 81% of men's incomes in 2005.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, women are underrepresented in the highest-paying occupations and overrepresented in the lowest-paying occupations.<sup>4</sup> Women in the low-wage economy face overwhelming challenges to achieving economic self-sufficiency. Mothers who are caring for children as single parents and women who have only low-wage employment available to them are especially in need of assistance from today's workforce system.

The majority of adults served by WIA programs are women (56.1%), and girls make up a majority of youth WIA consumers (52.4%).<sup>5</sup> With the exception of TANF<sup>6</sup> and Displaced Homemaker programs, minimal federal workforce funding exists to specifically address the needs of female customers, despite the fact that women have identifiable characteristics associated with their gender (i.e., women have overall lower earnings, women are frequently concentrated in low-wage jobs, and are most often primary caretakers of children and other family members).

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/QF-ESWM05.htm>

<sup>4</sup> "Women Still Underrepresented Among Highest Earners," U.S. Department of Labor, *Issues in Labor Statistics* (Summary 03-06, March 2006); <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ils/pdf/opbils55.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Gwen Rubinstein and Andrea Mayo, *Training Policy in Brief: An Overview of Federal Workforce Development Policies (2006)* (The Workforce Alliance, 2006, pp. 14-15).

<sup>6</sup> Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) is the federal welfare program for parents with children, most of which are women. State and county governments utilize TANF dollars in a variety of workforce programs for low-income customers who are eligible for the program.

## Overall Findings

While most WIBs in our survey do have program elements that address the needs of their women customers, the most common WIB services likely to be used by women were: referrals to child care, TANF funded work programs, and efforts focused on achieving self-sufficiency that included career counseling for self-sufficiency wage jobs, program eligibility levels that take self-sufficiency into account, benefit counseling, and/or outcome measurement using a self-sufficiency standard. Only a few agencies had job training programs that were specifically for women

A number of WIBs operate sector projects that involve or focus on women. WIBs varied as to their opinion about why a sector project helps women succeed, but many agreed on the following three reasons:

- Customers stay engaged because they see concrete, immediate connections between training and career goals;
- Wraparound services help fill gaps (e.g., transportation, child care) so customers can stay in the program; and

- Coordination with employers helps women enter and remain in jobs they might not otherwise access.

Workforce practitioners should note that sector initiatives may need to be designed differently for men and women. For example, of the six occupations identified as growth areas for low-wage workers, with earnings over \$25,000 per year and short training periods (i.e., prime occupations for sector projects), four are in industries dominated by men.<sup>7</sup> As a result, for women to succeed in these occupations, workforce programs must pay careful attention to providing support services and employer interventions that help women remain in those positions.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Crandall and Surabhi Jain, "New Directions in Workforce Development: Do They Lead to New Gains for Women," research paper draft on file with author, (Crittendon Women's Union, 2007), citing Susan Goldberger, Newell Lessell, and Radha Roy Biswas, *The right jobs: Identifying career advancement opportunities for low-skilled workers* (Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future, 2005). The six industries identified by Jobs for the Future are: nursing (including registered nurses and licensed practical nurses), customer service representatives, computer support specialists, commercial heavy truck driving, automotive and truck technician, and the building trades (including plumbers, carpenters, and electricians).

WIB respondents across the board indicated that their women customers continued to face basic challenges including child care, transportation, housing, mental health issues, violence at home, lack of GED and low basic skills. Several of the projects highlighted below found unique ways to address some of these barriers.

## Promising Practices for Women in Local Workforce Systems

### Promising Practice #1: Provide concrete ways for women to enter high-paying construction trades.

A number of WIBs we surveyed have programs of varying intensity that encourage and/or train women to enter nontraditional occupations. In general, nontraditional ("nontrad") programs focus on occupations and industries where women represent less than 25 percent of the workforce, such as construction, law enforcement, fire departments, or trucking/transportation. Many nontraditional occupations require no more than a high school diploma, and are aligned with apprenticeship training programs and established career ladders. These nontrad programs are usually designed to overcome the gender barrier and pave a way into these often very demanding but lucrative careers. Further, in some areas these occupations tend to be unionized positions which can ensure the provision of benefits.

- Since 1990, **Sacramento Employment and Training Agency (SETA) and Sacramento Works, Inc.** have consistently focused attention on promoting non-traditional employment opportunities for women by training staff, funding direct services and infusing the concept into their One Stop delivery system. In 2003, the governing board of the SETA WIB decided to focus its overall training dollars on high-wage and/or high-growth areas. Construction was one of the areas chosen as a critical industry because it was both high-wage *and* high-growth, and helped the agency build on their previous non-traditional program to

bring even more women into construction occupations. Because of their multifaceted efforts, SETA has helped to achieve a stunning 24% female participation rate in preapprenticeship programs.

The agency currently employs two full-time case management staff to coordinate services and training in the construction industry. These staff members focus on outreach, recruitment, job placement and follow-up case management of women entering the skilled trades, as well as engaging with unions and construction employers to open doors for women jobseekers. For example, when SETA finds a woman interested in going into the construction trades, staff may arrange for her to first attend a preapprenticeship program, where the client can learn about various trades, tools and requirements of a construction career (in fact, SETA directly funds a local preapprenticeship program). SETA staff then work with apprenticeship programs in a variety of industries to help their female customers begin the apprenticeship process, and then staff continue to support the women so they can remain in an often demanding and difficult training program. Finally, SETA works with Northern California Construction and Training, a consortium of construction employers, to help locate job openings for their female customers.

To expose TANF recipients to these high-paying occupations, SETA offers an intensive career development program (6 hours a day for one month). The program includes a number of experts who speak about various aspects of the construction industry. Participants could be accepted into an apprenticeship program prior to the conclusion of the 6-month preapprenticeship program (which many are), at which point they will receive pay for employment as well as classroom training. An important component for recruiting TANF recipients is that the local welfare department has currently recognized preapprenticeship as an authorized "work activity" for TANF recipients.

- **The Bay Area Workforce Development Board in Green Bay, Wisconsin** encourages women to move into nontraditional occupations, and away from lower-wage jobs. Staff noticed that many women first opted for more familiar (and lower-paying) occupations like cosmetology or child care, before learning about other career and training options available to them. The WIB encourages women to go beyond what they know, and look into higher-paying occupations including construction, health care and advanced manufacturing. Helping women train for nontraditional occupations also allows the WIB to achieve its state-mandated WIA performance goals. The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development recently instituted significant requirements for WIA training expenditures, restricting the type of training the local WIB can authorize, so only growth occupations that pay higher wages are allowable. The WIB currently has a number of tools they use to encourage women to enter nontraditional careers and anticipates training case management staff further on this area.
- **The Heartland Workforce agency in Sebring, Florida** used a statewide initiative called "Florida Rebuilds" to open construction training to women. When the local agency started the program, it was an ideal time to bring women into this field, as the region was experiencing a building boom and industry worker shortage. Furthermore, many of the women living in this rural area already had at-home experience working with tools and building materials. As part of the 10-week high intensity program, participants can get safety certified on jobsite hazards and requirements under OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration), as well as learn skills necessary to be a roofer, roofer assistant, carpenter, carpenter's assistant, painter, drywall installer, or general laborer. The program does experience challenges in providing adequate support services for the women participants, but works with

local churches to secure gas cards and food. In its first year, the program successfully graduated 15 participants, and the average starting wage was \$9 to \$15 per hour.

**Promising Practice #2: Tailor programs and create customized services that help women overcome barriers.**

- In **Maricopa County, Arizona, the Workforce Development Division of the Human Services Agency** had been receiving client referrals from a local organization called Center For Hope, a group home for pregnant women with addictions to drugs and/or alcohol. Many of the women from the Center use the WIB's program to get their GED, and the WIB also helps the women to find employment. The Center for Hope and the WIB learned that some of these women were having trouble successfully getting to and from GED class, job training and employment because they didn't have cars, and the public bus system was not working well for them. The Workforce Development Division decided to address this problem by collaborating with an existing county program called WorkLinks. WorkLinks provides transportation vouchers to anyone who works within the county. The WIB then secured funding to pay for an even more specialized solution, a door-to-door van that takes the women from the group home to child care, training and employment instead of merely handing out bus vouchers. This door-to-door van is more convenient than a traditional bus system because it allows the women to make multiple stops and waits for each mom while she drops off her child at child care, allowing the young women to get to their jobs or training programs on time.
- The **Lancaster County Workforce Investment Board in Pennsylvania** built a general work-readiness program that can be paired with specialized case management to meet the needs of different special populations, including women. In response to employer requests for work readiness

skills, the WIB created a core program for all customers that includes a literacy assessment, labor market information, and determining the client's skill assets/deficits. This is followed by literacy training (if necessary), online training on work etiquette, and very basic safety training. After this general core training, the WIB gradually adds in skill training, sometimes in very short courses. For example, they offer a 2 week course in assembling electronic components, resulting in a career readiness certificate. The WIB also works with employers beforehand and makes an arrangement that the employer will guarantee an interview if the client present these skills. The WIB addresses women's needs by utilizing caseworkers who help female customers get supportive services, so they can stay in training and employment. The case workers focus on outreach and support for various populations, including displaced homemakers and women on welfare.

**Promising Practice #3: Provide technical assistance to help community organizations meet resource needs.**

**South Central Michigan Works!** staff noticed that many of their female Work First customers couldn't find the child care they needed to remain in the workforce. The agency knew that it was to their advantage to create more high quality child care slots in the local area, because without child care, their customers would not be able to meet the work requirements of the program. The source of the problem was traced to the fact that several local child care agencies simply didn't have the resources to add more slots for children. In response, the WIB donated staff expertise to help six or seven child care agencies write grants and do supporting statistical research for the grants. Consequently, some child care centers that had been in jeopardy of closing were able to stay open, and continued to provide child care for the WIB's customers.

**Promising Practice #4: Use distance learning for higher retention in health career ladder programs.**

In an effort to help low-income, single-mom customers more easily finish prerequisite coursework required for nursing and allied health careers, the **Metro South West Regional Employment Board in Framingham, Massachusetts** is developing a unique online health care distance-learning program called the Health Care Learning Network.

Before the agency embarked on developing a distance learning component, it had been offering in-person training at health care facilities to employees who wanted to move up a career ladder in the health field. The courses were taught by local community colleges and ranged from English as a Second Language to college prep math and science. These courses were on-site at the workplace during work hours, to address the fact that the target population (entry-level employees) often didn't have the financial resources to attend school full-time. Additionally, in the WIB's local area it was very difficult to get financial aid for remedial courses.

In offering these classes, the agency started to notice that attendance was spotty even though the classes were offered at the jobsite. They learned that in the complex lives of low-wage health care workers, balancing work, school and family responsibilities can be overwhelming when there is no "down time," and the demanding schedule the WIB had set out was unrealistic for many parents. If participants missed more than a few classes, they would drop out and have to start all over. Even with perfect attendance, students would need 2-4 years to complete the prerequisites. Additionally, the agency noticed that the courses were not very well connected to the skills required on the job, and wanted to upgrade the coursework so it was more contextual to the work that students were doing each day.

## Promising Practices for Youth

To address these issues, the WIB decided to explore a computer distance learning model, but could not find one on health care that met their needs. Thus, over the past year they have convened over 150 people to develop their own model and are currently seeking funding to execute it.

The program they have developed would allow students to complete their prerequisites and enroll directly into college. The concept is a modularized curriculum that any person could access online at any time, but which also includes face to face classes, career coaches and live tutors. Students could progress at their own pace, which would allow students to better balance work, family and educational pressures.

### Recommendations for WIBs to Improve Services to Women

- Maintain funding for support services that help women enter and remain in the construction trades (specifically, early morning child care and transportation assistance).
- Allocate WIB staff for tradeswomen outreach, recruitment, placement, case management and relationship-building with employers and apprenticeship programs.
- Experiment with new modes of door-to-door transportation tailored to the needs of single parents.
- Utilize staff skills to provide technical assistance that helps community organizations expand their resources.
- Use caseworkers to address women's needs if training programs are not gender-specific.
- Use web-based distance learning to help customers bridge training gaps and enter higher-wage occupations.

With the passage of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) in 1998, youth workforce development shifted from short-term interventions to programs that help youth prepare for and succeed in the workforce over the long term. Now WIA provides that every WIB must include ten program elements for youth, which generally focus on improving educational achievement; preparing for and succeeding in employment; providing supportive services; and youth leadership development. WIA also requires each local area to create a Youth Council to develop coordinated youth policy and strengthen connections between organizations that serve youth.

For youth workforce programs, however, achieving economic self-sufficiency is generally viewed as a future goal. Researchers have found that many different types of youth programs can lead to self-sufficiency in adulthood, including programs that encourage advancement to postsecondary education, and/or job training programs that fill in gaps between traditional high school curricula and the skill needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. Additionally, youth programs that encourage soft skills like working in groups, using a computer and making clear presentations can help youth prepare to succeed in the future economy.<sup>8</sup>

In almost all the self-sufficiency-focused youth programs we surveyed, outcome goals tended towards building leadership, and cultivating academic and job skills that prepare young people for careers in high-wage industries, without a primary emphasis on increasing immediate earnings.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Jekielek, Stephanie Cochran and Elizabeth Hair, *Employment Programs and Youth Development: A Synthesis* (Child Trends, May 2002). Available at [http://www.childtrends.org/what\\_works/clarkwww/employ/employrpt.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/what_works/clarkwww/employ/employrpt.pdf)

### Overall Findings

Among the WIBs we surveyed, we found that the most common type of youth program offered by WIBs are GED; career education and counseling; job training; mentoring; and youth leadership development.

The majority of youth programs we surveyed used the concept of self-sufficiency to counsel youth about career paths that lead to high-wage jobs. This finding is especially interesting because the Self-Sufficiency Standard itself was not specifically developed for youth career counseling, but the field is now utilizing the concept to help young people make good choices. The second most common use of a self-sufficiency framework was that WIBs used it to inform their agencies' overall policies.

The majority of WIBs we surveyed also operate a high-wage/high-demand industry sector project that includes youth. Survey participants indicated a number of equally important reasons that a sector strategy helps youth succeed:

- Youth job training experience and goal setting motivate them to stay in school;
- "Out-of-school" youth have improved options to get good jobs;
- Coordination with employers ensures higher placement rate;
- Youth stay engaged because they see concrete, immediate connections between training and career goals.

Workforce programs across the board identified numerous barriers to success for their young customers, including the need to earn income rather than engage in unpaid/stipend training; low basic skills; incarcerated parent(s); involvement with foster care/child welfare system; learning disabilities; addiction/mental health issues; violence; in trouble at school or with law enforcement; lack of motivation; transportation; child care issue and dysfunctional home and family environment.

Under WIA, "youth" are defined as individuals between the ages of 14 and 21, who are low-income with at least one of the following characteristics: deficient in basic literacy skills; school dropout; homeless; runaway; foster youth; pregnant/parenting; offender; or someone who requires additional assistance to complete an educational program or to secure and hold employment.

## Promising Practices for Youth in Local Workforce Systems

### Promising Practice #1: Expand job training for youth under age 18.

A number of surveyed WIBs highlighted the need for more funding to engage youth in job training and more specifically training that would provide youth a “jump start” towards self-sufficiency occupations. While WIA funding will support many different types of youth programs like GED or leadership development, under-18 youth are not eligible for Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) under WIA. This prohibition has been frustrating for some WIBs that have little youth funding but want to train youth in self-sufficiency wage industries.

The **Workforce Connection of Central New Mexico**’s answer to this frustration was obtaining a Department of Labor waiver to allow them to use Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) for out-of-school youth between 16 and 21. Although the waiver is new at this time, it moves to expose more youth at an earlier age to three targeted high-growth industries: manufacturing, construction and health care. With the help of businesses and economic development agencies, the WIB has identified occupations within these industries that are most in need of workers, and will use youth training resources to train youth to enter these high-wage/high-demand occupations.

### Promising Practice #2: Use Employer Learning Networks to identify the industry-wide skill sets needed by youth.

The **Center of Workforce Innovations in Valparaiso, Indiana** uses a tool called Employer Learning Networks (ELNs) to help plan their youth programs. In the WIB’s local area, small and medium size businesses dominate the economy. The WIB’s Youth Council helped develop ELNs as a way to bring together these businesses and pool their training needs. As part of the ELN dialogue process, a group of similarly situated small and medium employers agree on a series of

classes, coursework or even a degree that their respective businesses have in common. Then the WIB brings in an educational institution that customizes and offers the classes locally. In this way, each employer uses one or two needed slots in the program, instead of taking on a whole training project just for their business.

Another way the WIB uses ELNs is to identify training needs across a targeted industry cluster that has been identified by the WIB as a focus for the agency. The WIB staff facilitate focus groups and surveys of the employers in each cluster to determine the required industry skill set that transcends individual businesses, and that facilitates upward mobility within the cluster. For example, thirteen employers in Advanced Manufacturing and Logistics came together and identified five courses in common that would meet their training needs: Internet and Computing Core Certification (or “IC3”); motor controls; welding/burning; electric repair; and English. The English class evolved into a contextual learning experience, and included concepts and skills from the other four courses. WIB staff indicated that this type of Employer Learning Network allows them to meet employer-training needs, create career paths, as well as the skill development that allows workers to move through industries as part of a career path by using transferable skills.

With regard to youth programs, the WIB has used ELN information about transferable skills to develop an “e-camp,” or entrepreneurial camp for youth. The WIB also developed a camp that includes a high-school level diesel mechanics program, and an introduction to manufacturing course. The agency created these programs because diesel and manufacturing are demand occupations in their local area, but young people do not see them as viable careers. Because of this barrier, the WIB realized that they needed to do more to attract young people to these occupational opportunities, which was difficult to do in the schools and during the school year. By using a camp atmosphere,

youth can be immersed in these areas but also have some creative experiences as well. The programs allow youth — in a very focused and concentrated way — to learn new skills, and see how advanced these careers can be.

The WIB used information from the ELN’s in a series of colorful, youth-friendly summaries of different occupations in the regional economy, which talk about each job in terms of transferable skills. The Center has also used the ELN’s to learn about soft skills that employers want, and translated that information into curriculum as well as a widely distributed poster called, “What Do Employers Expect of Me As An Employee?”

### Promising Practice #3: Use industry-focused learning and job-shadowing in school curricula.

**South Central Michigan Works!** runs a unique combination teacher-training and industry job shadowing program in collaboration with a local high school. Instructors in K-12 programs can become “Business Fellows” and earn college credit during their summer break by working with businesses on projects. Through this experience, teachers can see what kinds of skills are necessary in that employment sector, and they then carry that information back to their classrooms. The program also focuses on the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders who are being taught by some of those teachers. In coordination with the “Business Fellow” teacher, the students are given the opportunity to shadow a working person within their area of career interest. The “Business Fellow” teachers who have gone through the summer program prepare students for the job shadowing, and then help them debrief after the experience, think about what was new and different, and how has it impacted the students’ views on academics. The program has seen outcomes that include significant growth in the development of student career plans; many more 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders are focused on careers of choice, and

are planning their educational program based on a career goal.

## Youth & Health Care Careers

A number of the WIBs surveyed described how they were helping youth enter the growing field of health care. Here are a few of their programs:

### Promising Practice #4: Incorporate nursing into high school curricula.

The **Workforce Connection of Central New Mexico** collaborated with a health care provider to set up health care training on-site at a local high school. The agency developed curriculum complementary to the rest of the school’s requirements. As part of the health care program, young people can graduate not only with their high school degree, but also with a certification for Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), and be job-ready after taking the state exam. After graduation, many students choose to continue their training up through Registered Nurse, and are able to get support services through the WIB (e.g., child care, transportation). This program is unique because it helps youth get a head start in a high-demand industry, as well as establishing the educational foundations early so youth can more quickly move up to higher-wage employment within the health care field.

The **Southwest Florida Workforce Development Board’s Youth Council** targets its activities in response to local industry needs/projections. The Youth Council’s priority industries are Construction and Architectural Design, Healthcare (including Long Term Care), Aviation, and Business/Technology Service Industries. The WIB maximizes its funding for self-sufficiency by strategically prioritizing occupations in these sectors that pay a minimum of \$10 per hour after 6-12 months of training. As part of its industry-cluster strategy, the Youth Council developed a high school CHOICE (Career High — Occupational Institutes for Career Education) Academy that joins the secondary and post-secondary systems for

# Promising Practices for Ex-Offenders

occupational certifications via dual enrollment. This means that a traditional high school student is being taught utilizing high school, technical school and community college level curriculums. For example, the CHOICE Academy's health care program allows students to graduate from high school with clinical credits and the ability to sit for the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) test.

## Promising Practice #5: Connect youth to health care opportunities when they are turned away from nursing programs.

The **Atlanta Regional Commission Workforce Development Division** decided several years ago to dedicate staff to learning everything about the healthcare industry, including the types of demand occupations and the training required to get into those jobs. The WIB learned that because the number of qualified students applying to nursing school significantly outnumbered those who are accepted, thousands of talented applicants are turned away each year. Although they have been thwarted from pursuing a nursing degree, these students

have completed a substantial set of courses related to the health care field, which need not go to waste. The goal of the project is to work with these students to find them other opportunities within the allied health field, and in some cases help them use that work experience to return to their goal of becoming a registered nurse. The WIB's staff members speak at initial orientations when students apply to nursing school, to let students know that in case they aren't accepted into the nursing school, they have other options. Information about the program is also sent out to the thousands of people who are notified each year that they were not admitted to nursing school. The program provides occupational training in various allied health occupations including radiology; Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) with guidance about working up the career ladder; physical therapy; and doctor's office support staff. The program also counsels participants about how to use their presence in the health care field to get back to becoming a registered nurse.

Although the Workforce Investment Act does not require it, there are many WIBs that provide specialized services to adult ex-offenders. Under WIA, ex-offenders are allowed to receive core and intensive services, as well as training services through Individual Training Accounts (ITAs). In addition, the federal WIA law creates an exception to the use of ITAs, so that local WIBs can set up contracts to serve populations with barriers to employment, specifically including ex-offenders.

In the programs we surveyed, a little more than half indicated that their WIB had some kind of program specifically for ex-offenders. The most common types of programs offered were:

- Career counseling
- Job Training
- Referrals to support services
- Job Placement
- GED

## Overall Findings

Of the WIBs that indicated they use a "self-sufficiency" perspective in their ex-offender programs, the two most common uses of self-sufficiency tools were: providing career counseling for self-sufficiency wage jobs; and engaging in long-term career goal setting with customers. Some agencies were also using self-sufficiency tools to work on household budgeting or as an outcome measurement for client wages.

A significant number of WIBs also told us that they operate a high-wage/high-demand industry sector project that includes ex-offenders, some of which are described in detail below. These programs indicated the most common ways the use of a sector strategy helps ex-offenders succeed included:

- WIB coordination with employers allows ex-offender customers to "get a foot in the door" or retain employment;
- Post-training counseling on how to fill out job applications helps customers get jobs;
- Customers stay engaged because they see concrete, immediate connections between training and career goals, and
- Placing customers in industries where ex-offenders are allowed to work helps customers succeed.

The WIBs we surveyed were consistent in selectively training their ex-offender customers in industries where they knew their customers could get hired with a criminal conviction. In many of these cases, these industries and occupations were identified through personal relationships with employers who indicated they would be willing to hire ex-offenders who were trained by the WIB. Some WIBs did focus on higher-paying industries, including construction (which in warmer climates can be year-round work), particularly electrical helper, carpentry and welder. Other industries that WIBs have focused on included commercial truck driving (which does require a clean driving record and drug test), HVAC, industrial mechanic, retail/service jobs, and apartment maintenance.

For customers who want to clean up their "rap sheet", one workforce board (**Sacramento Employment and Training Agency**) gives their ex-offender customers access to legal advice. The WIB partners with a local legal aid organization to provide expungement clinics in every One-Stop. The clinics are once a month, all-day sessions (supported by Community Services Block Grant funds), and the WIB reports that the clinics are completely full, all the time. By holding the legal clinics at the One-Stop, people seeking expungement (who may not know about the WIB) are also exposed to the services of the workforce system.

## Recommendations for WIBs to Improve Services to Youth

- Fund more foundational skills training for youth under age 18 to prepare for self-sufficiency wage careers.
- Survey employers to identify transferable skills sets across an industry and incorporate those into youth programs, to help young people become job-ready for multiple occupations.
- Bring schoolteachers into targeted high-wage industry environments, and support those teachers in working with students to learn about new careers.
- Work with high schools to set up on-site job training programs for high-wage, high-skill occupations.
- Identify untapped pools of trained individuals (e.g, nursing school applicants) to develop creative ways to meet employer demands.

WIBs that had an ex-offender program also told us about other barriers faced by customers. Among survey respondents, the most frequently identified barriers to success for ex-offenders were: lack of stable housing; transportation (including drivers' license issues); low basic skill level (e.g., reading and math); need help on soft skills (e.g., timeliness, work culture); and customers' need to earn income quickly rather than engage in unpaid training.

**Note:** For the purposes of this report, we include in the category of "ex-offender" any adult leaving incarceration in the criminal justice system.

## Promising Practices for Adult Ex-Offenders in Local Workforce Systems

### Promising Practice #1: Align ex-offender program with overall WIB self-sufficiency goals.

The **Lancaster County Workforce Investment Board in Pennsylvania** used the Self-Sufficiency Standard as a reference to decide on the seven target industries for all the WIB's programs. In making this decision, the WIB identified average wages for occupations in each industry, and asked themselves questions like, "Does this industry create good-wage jobs? Are these jobs growing in general? Is this industry competitive compared with the nation?" The seven industries chosen were written into the WIB's strategic plan, and each program within the WIB – including the ex-offender program – follows these industries.

One of the industries chosen was construction, which provides the basis for the ex-offender program. The WIB piloted an ex-offender pre-employment training program for two summers, and then received a grant to expand the program. In response to employer input, the program focused on skill assessment and workplace readiness. After screening out customers with more serious issues, the WIB started 110 people in an eight-week skills training to prepare them to enter a

carpentry apprenticeship. The WIB partnered with a community organization that did case management. The extended outcomes were as follows: 78 of 110 customers graduated; 40 found jobs immediately; and at least 12 or 15 of these have been accepted into industry apprenticeship. Twenty others were going to vocational trade schools. One of the benefits of this model is that most of the customers earned an income while in training because they were engaged half of the time in class and half of the time on a job site.

### Promising Practice #2: Incorporate ex-offender job placement into WIB business services.

- The **Heartland Workforce agency in Sebring, Florida** has incorporated their ex-offender program into the work of the business services team, which is in constant contact with employers for job listings. The agency staff talk about their ex-offender program as part of their "stable of services" to employers, and include these employers and customers in their job fairs.
- In the **Maricopa County Human Services Workforce Development Division in Arizona**, the business services unit routinely asks employers if they are willing to hire ex-offenders and if so, which convictions they would *not* consider. Using this type of employer recruitment, this agency holds regular job fairs for ex-offenders, resulting in many successfully finding jobs. Employers know about and continue to sign up for these events, and the ex-offenders are counseled about occupations that will yield higher wages.

### Promising Practice #3: Use a self-sufficiency standard as eligibility criteria for continuing services to ex-offenders.

One of the challenges of helping ex-offenders to achieve economic self-sufficiency is that they have so many barriers to overcome first: avoiding a violation of parole conditions/re-arrest, finding a place to live, and just securing a stable income

(much less a self-sufficient one). Two of the WIBs surveyed actually work with ex-offenders until the customers reach self-sufficiency.

- **Workforce Solutions Brazos Valley in Texas** uses the Federal Poverty Line as one initial eligibility criteria for intensive services. However, once an ex-offender customer is determined eligible, the agency's workforce staff can continue to work with that customer until s/he reaches 150% of the Federal Poverty Line, which the WIB has designated as a self-sufficiency measure. Specific case managers are designated to work with ex-offenders, unless the customer returns to prison or no longer wishes to participate in services. The WIB, however, places no time limit on the individual achieving self-sufficiency or receiving services. The customer can use agency services until s/he reaches self-sufficiency. Once a customer's income is above self-sufficiency, the customer is normally no longer eligible for services which involve financial supportive assistance. However, as part of the universal population they can still access the WIB's resource room services at any time.

- The **Bay Area Workforce Development Board in Green Bay, Wisconsin** defines self-sufficiency as: "the individual has the training and experience to support themselves and their family without public assistance and knows how to access training and job placement services to advance their employment status." When the ex-offender customer enters the program, case managers establish a self-sufficiency plan with the client, which is updated annually as the client progresses through training. The plan includes long term and short term personal and professional goals, as well as the steps needed to achieve each goal. WIA services continue until the individual is marketable in the local labor market. The services are provided through a contracted case management system and vary based on the assessed needs of the individual.

### Promising Practice #4: Develop partnerships with employers in high-wage/high-demand industries.

The **Bay Area Workforce Development Board in Green Bay, Wisconsin** is located in Northeast Wisconsin, which has a uniquely high demand for all types of welders. For example, shipbuilding is especially prevalent on Lake Michigan, and one local company is one of the few worldwide that retrofits oil tankers with double hulls (now a requirement on tankers). Another local company has \$1 billion in back-ordered construction cranes, requiring welders. In addition, hundreds of small and medium businesses in the area employ welders. As a result, welders are in high demand, and can also make a relatively high wage (\$12 to \$25 an hour depending on experience and expertise).

Because of these trends in the local economy, the WIB identified welding as a high-wage/high-demand occupation and partnered with a local crane company to train ex-offenders in welding while they are still incarcerated. The WIB found that employers will give an ex-offender a "second look" when the prospective employee has specialized training in a skill that is in such high demand. The extensive training provided by the WIB reduces the significance of a criminal conviction, and because of this, the employer is willing to interview the trained applicants from the prison. In addition, the program has helped to develop a good relationship between the on-site prison welding trainer and the crane company employer; the prison welding class teacher has begun to tailor his curriculum to the needs of this particular company, and the company has begun to donate extra materials to the class for the students to practice on. In addition, the self-sufficiency outcomes for the customers are significant; most of the program participants start welding jobs at about \$16/hour.

# Workforce Investment Boards Profiles in this Report

## Promising Practice #5: Connect inmates with employers and training prior to release.

- At **South Central Michigan Works!** the WIB works with several prison programs that contain a job training element, including metal construction (furniture); shoe repair; self-employment (developing a business plan to begin upon release); and automotive repair (they have a 100% passage rate on the auto repair certification test). The WIB gives employers a chance to give input into the type of training offered in the prison, which creates a potential hiring relationship. Additionally, the WIB automatically reviews inmates' records four months before they are released to find out skills, and allows employers to interview the inmates while they are incarcerated via virtual conferencing, which has the effect of "putting a face" on the concept of hiring previously incarcerated individuals.
- Additionally, the timing of the training in relation to release is important. At the **Atlanta Regional Commission Workforce Development Department**, they believe their on-site occupational training inside the prison is successful because it gives inmates skills and a specific occupational purpose to pursue after release. The program is timed so that the inmates are released right after the conclusion of their training, to keep the motivation and momentum going.

## Promising Practice #6: Use support services and employee bonding as a way to make ex-offenders more attractive to employers.

Several WIBs surveyed inform potential employers about the support services ex-offender customers receive, such as housing assistance, drug/alcohol treatment,<sup>9</sup> and neighborhood support groups. This extra help can make the employer feel that the ex-offender applicant is less of a "risky hire" and shifts the burden of crisis management from the employer to the service provider. This type of strategy requires that the WIB remain connected with local services tailored to the needs of ex-offenders, and that the case manager keep track of whether the referrals actually resulted in the client getting the services.

Additionally, some WIBs use employee bonding to encourage employers to hire their customers. Bonding is a process where the government provides reimbursement to the employer if an employee causes damage (e.g., stealing, dishonesty, theft, embezzlement, etc) during his/her employment. The U.S. Department of Labor runs the Federal Bonding Program, which provides Fidelity Bonds to ensure honesty of "hard-to-place" workers, at no cost to the employer or jobseeker (for more information, go to [www.bonds4jobs.com](http://www.bonds4jobs.com)).

<sup>9</sup> The records of individuals who receive federally funded addiction treatment have special confidentiality protections at 42 CFR Part 2. Release forms are required.

## Recommendations for WIBs to Improve Services to Ex-Offenders:

- Use the Self-Sufficiency Standard to identify target high-wage/high-demand industries for the entire WIB, which then helps focus the ex-offender program on these occupations.
- Cultivate relationships with employers in high-wage/high demand industries to identify occupations where ex-offenders are more likely to get hired, and involve those employers in coordinating training.
- Use a self-sufficiency measure to maintain ongoing services to ex-offenders as they move out of low-wage work.
- Connect ex-offender customers to supportive services and bonding, and communicate those services to prospective employers as appropriate.

Section

Section

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**Section Key:**  
W=Women  
Y=Youth  
X=Ex-Offenders

## Next Steps

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### Contact Wider Opportunities for Women

If you are interested in exploring any of the practices profiled in this guide, please contact WOW for additional support. Through the Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Program (FESS), WOW works with several national workforce development organizations for this guide. Further, we have extensive networks of state FESS Project partners to assist state and local Workforce Investment Boards with the adoption and implementation of economic self-sufficiency policies and programs.

WOW staff can help you consider particular practices of interest to your board. In addition, we can link you with local stakeholders in your area and other national organizations with complementary expertise in workforce development.

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### Disclaimer

The conclusions and opinions contained within this document of Wider Opportunities for Women, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of others involved in the design of Reality Check. Any errors are the responsibility of Wider Opportunities for Women.