CHICAGO JOBS COUNCIL

Summary: Youth Ready Chicago Hub Feedback Sessions
December 2009

In November 2009, the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC) conducted two feedback sessions with the Youth Ready Chicago (YRC) hub agencies. CJC believes that the information gathered is valuable, both for helping DFSS to shape the summer 2010 YRC program, as well as to inform state and federal advocacy for establishing a permanent, designated funding stream for youth summer employment programs. CJC conducted feedback sessions, inviting all 34 hubs to share constructive feedback on the YRC program and provide recommendations for the 2010 program. The summary below represents the opinions and recommendations of 27 individuals, representing 21 hubs. Hubs were informed that all feedback shared will be presented using non-identifying, aggregate information.

CJC encourages DFSS to use the information gathered to help shape the 2010 summer youth employment program, and to join CJC and others in advocacy to establish permanent, designated funding for summer youth employment programming.

Key Recommendations for a 2010 Program

➢ Enable hubs to start program preparation earlier (in terms of eligibility documentation and verification process) and extend the length of work placements, so, once programs are operating, hubs can focus their efforts on a quality work experience and work readiness training.

➢ Ensure that YRC trainings are consistent across hubs, and that each hub is receiving consistent information from their DFSS liaisons. DFSS should conduct one comprehensive hub orientation, at which hub responsibilities are clearly explained. In addition, hubs should receive a YRC handbook that provides all essential program and reporting information.

➢ Eliminate reporting redundancy, since identical information is required for the data systems (IWDS and City Span) and DFSS paperwork. At the state/federal level, push for decreased administrative demands. The overwhelming administrative demands made it challenging for hubs to focus their attention on serving youth and positive outcomes.

➢ Provide clear communication and documentation about youth eligibility requirements at the start of the program. This will enable hubs to clearly communicate eligibility and documentation requirements to youth and parents upfront in order to avoid disappointment, as well as repeat visits by youth to complete the registration process.

➢ Improve the work readiness assessment tool. Choose a tool that is appropriate for youth with barriers to employment; age and culturally appropriate; and is coupled with work readiness training to improve youth engagement.

➢ On both the YRC website and YRC marketing materials, provide specific information about WIA eligibility criteria and clear information on how to access summer employment programming for both WIA and non-WIA youth.

➢ Provide hubs with information about year round WIA services (Adult/Youth) and how youth can access these services post-summer. This will enable hubs to assist youth with transitioning to the appropriate employment services.

➢ Ensure that youth wages are exempt from the calculation of household income when determining TANF benefits.

I. DFSS Program Administration and Communication

General Comments
- DFSS did a good job with communication and providing assistance, given the time constraints to develop and implement YRC.

- "DFSS worked their butts off and I commend them."; "I applaud DFSS for their hard work this summer. 7800 youth were served and many of our summer placements resulted in long-term employment."

- Communication and program support needs much improvement. Poor communication led to many challenges, especially regarding WIA eligibility and the work readiness credential, which negatively affected hubs and youth.

Liaisons
- Assignment of liaisons was effective, as liaisons were responsive to calls from hubs. Hubs were provided three liaisons to contact with questions, and most hubs reported that one liaison would respond in a timely manner. Also, hubs valued the support provided by liaisons through site visits.

- Other hubs reported that it was difficult to connect with their liaison in a timely manner when they had questions.

- Liaisons were learning program requirements at the same time as hubs, which made it challenging for hubs to receive clear and consistent information. This caused hubs to 'back track' in order to obtain necessary documentation for eligibility, which was frustrating for hubs and youth.

WIA Eligibility
- Communication regarding WIA eligibility was unclear and inconsistent. Some hubs reported that answers to administrative and program questions, including eligibility questions, changed frequently. ("One day a particular youth was eligible and the next day they were not".)

- There is a need for clearer guidance and enhanced support on WIA eligibility requirements and documentation, so hubs can better inform youth and parents.

- It was time consuming and challenging for hubs with no WIA experience to learn WIA eligibility requirements and the verification process. Hubs recommended that WIA

eligibility determination and registration be centralized at WIA agencies, and other providers be contracted to work with youth and worksites after the WIA registration process.

- Update DFSS materials, such as WIA eligibility documents, reporting requirements, and financial documents. Also, create forms that are specific to the YRC program. This will provide clarity for hubs, especially those without WIA experience.

Other Areas of Communication and Administrative Support
- Hubs cited the need for YRC trainings that are consistent across the hubs. It was strongly suggested that there be one comprehensive hub orientation, at which hub responsibilities are clearly explained. In addition, DFSS should develop a detailed handbook/website that includes information on all program components, reporting requirements and mechanisms, and required forms.

- Entering duplicate data into IWDS and City Span, as well as information requests from DFSS for identical information, was time consuming for hubs.

- Improve administrative coordination related to the program review and audit review. Participants cited that identical information was requested during both processes, which was burdensome for all parties.

- The requirements around the work readiness credential weren't clearly articulated to hubs. Although, hubs recognized that DCEO's late role out of the tool played a part.

- Technical assistance provided by TEC Services for IL WorkNet work readiness tool was insufficient. One hub that brought their youth to TEC Services to be trained on and use the work readiness tool reported that the session was brief and insufficient for youth to learn.

II.   Youth: Eligibility, Recruitment, Participation

Recruitment and WIA Registration of Eligible Youth
- The hub model was successful overall, in terms of recruitment.

- YRC marketing materials should include specific information about WIA eligibility criteria, and how to access summer employment programming for both WIA and non-WIA eligible youth.

- Hubs recommended that the YRC website feature a 'menu of services' for both WIA and non-WIA programs, as well as a tool (i.e. Survey Monkey) to help youth determine whether they are WIA eligible. Once the youth learns whether he/she is likely WIA eligible, the youth can use the website to learn how to access the appropriate employment or education programming.

- Provide clear communication about youth eligibility requirements at the start of the program. This will enable hubs to clearly communicate eligibility and documentation requirements to youth and parents upfront, in order to avoid disappointment, as well as repeat visits to complete the registration process.

- Provide hubs with sample files to use when informing parents and youth about documentation requirements. This will make the WIA verification process go more smoothly for all parties, and help prevent youth from making several trips to bring in documentation.

- The list of youth who applied on the YRC website should be provided to all of the hubs to assist with recruitment. Hubs reported that this was not done consistently.

- The high recruitment targets led to understaffing at hubs, which was challenging for the hubs, as well as the youth being served. In addition, recruitment targets for some hubs increased mid-program, which also led to staff capacity issues.

- It was challenging to balance hub contract commitments related to the percentage of in-school youth (ISY) vs. out-of-school (OSY) and older youth vs. younger youth they would serve. Hubs suggested that DFSS increase flexibility during the contract process regarding the percentages of ISY vs. OSY and younger vs. older youth that each hub commits to serving. Additionally, the distinctions between these populations should be communicated more clearly to hubs unfamiliar with the WIA Youth program.

- One hub suggested that DFSS form an intergovernmental agreement (IGA) with IDHS in order to check on food stamp eligibility, since food stamp recipients are automatically considered income eligible. The data already exists, so this information could expedite the eligibility process.

- Some hubs were challenged to define "homeless". Whether the youth met the definition of "homeless" depended on who the hub spoke with at DFSS.

Engaging Older Youth: Summer and Post-Summer
- Some older youth were connected with the Adult WIA program post-summer, however this mainly occurred with hubs that are year round WIA contractors, since they either had an Adult WIA contract or were familiar with the WIA system.

- DFSS should provide hubs with information about year round WIA services (Adult/Youth) and explain how they can assist youth with transitioning to appropriate WIA services post-summer. Thus, hubs should make it clear during youth orientations that the YRC program is only for the summer, and discuss available employment opportunities/services beyond the summer. This information is particularly valuable for older youth who would like to continue working. An important opportunity to connect youth to the WIA system year round was missed due to lack of guidance.

- Participants suggested that hubs have representatives from area WIA agencies on site during the last week of the program to discuss services available post-summer.

- The summer program should be extended (increase the length of the placement) for older youth. This would be beneficial for older youth who are not enrolled in school, as well as for those who are interested in maintaining employment while engaged in post-secondary education.

- There were challenges (social issues and discipline) serving 15 year olds and 21 year olds at the same hub. It was recommended that youth of similar age ranges be served at each hub, so that there isn't a large age disparity in one location.

- Some hubs experienced challenges when youth were 24 years old when they started the YRC registration process and then aged out of the program before completing registration. There should be clear guidance on this issue and flexibility.

Work Readiness Tool
- The work readiness tool was not appropriate for the YRC youth. Hubs cited the need for a work readiness tool that is appropriate for youth with barriers to employment, as well as age and culturally appropriate. A different tool should be used with younger and older youth.

- The work readiness tool should be more interactive to enhance learning, and be coupled with work readiness training. Overall, more program time should be dedicated to job readiness.

III. Worksites

Worksite Online Registration and Recruiting Process
- The process for registering as a worksite was not communicated clearly to the hubs. Hubs were informed that potential worksites had to register online in order to participate, even if the worksite had an established relationship with the hub, however this was done inconsistently.

- Establish a mechanism to connect worksites that registered on the YRC website to the hubs in their area. Worksites should designate whether they have a commitment to/ relationship with a YRC hub during the registration process, so the uncommitted worksites can be matched with a hub.

- DFSS provided the worksite registration list to the hubs after hubs had already done significant recruiting on their own. DFSS should provide the worksite list early on, and possibly provide a second list with later worksite registrants.

Work Experience
- The hubs reported, overwhelming, that their youth received quality work experiences this summer!!

- One hub asked potential worksites to do a 'pitch' to the youth at the hub, so that youth could gain a clearer understanding of what each placement entailed and if it fit with their interests. This process was effective for the job matching process and was recommended to other hubs.

Worksite Monitoring
- Some hubs felt uncomfortable doing unannounced worksite visits, especially those hubs that had an existing relationship with the worksite. This created a sense of mistrust. It was suggested that there be flexibility around this requirement.

IV. Other Areas for Feedback and Issues to be Addressed
- The large number of youth served was a positive outcome!

- At the federal level, the definition of family should be changed to account for the various types of families. Family structure questions were a huge barrier to determining eligibility.

- At the federal level, push for decreasing the administrative demands of database entry, paperwork, and eligibility verification process. Hubs reported that they spent the majority of their time on the eligibility process, rather than focusing on outcomes.

- It was very challenging for some hubs to float funds for youth payroll. Lines of credit are an issue, especially in this economic environment. Hubs encouraged the City to reexamine their ability to advance funding.

- Incorporate anticipated costs for the time spent closing out the YRC program into hub contracts (i.e. hubs continued to spend considerable time on YRC reporting and review processes beyond the contract date).

- Increase the cost per unit for each youth so that hubs can provide enhanced support services.

- Hubs reported that some TANF families experienced a decrease in benefits as a result of youth income. This issue should be explicitly addressed to ensure that youth wages are exempt from the calculation of household income when determining TANF benefits.