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Job training fails to reach many in need

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Some of Chicago's most skills-deficient residents have been unable to get job training in recent years because of a strict interpretation of federal law that required them to look for a job first.

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 was designed to give job seekers the choice of getting help finding work or job training.

But a "work first" philosophy left over from welfare reform and strict performance measures that tie funding to whether people get jobs have made case managers hesitant to recommend training for people perceived as hard to place.

As a result, Chicago--home to a large population of job seekers with literacy and child-care issues, language barriers, criminal records and little or no job experience--has trained fewer people under WIA programs than in any other part of the state.

Chicago has trained fewer than 30 percent of people registered in the adult program and is tied for last with southern Cook County for the number of dislocated workers trained, just more than 30 percent.

By comparison, most other areas within Illinois have trained 60 percent or more of those who were registered, according to a state study done last year.

"Performance requirements work against people with barriers to finding a job," said Whitney Smith, associate director of the Chicago Jobs Council, a membership agency consisting mostly of community-based organizations that provide employment and training services.

"There is so much pressure on providers to meet standards to get money. They have to decide who they register and who they don't," she said.

Now in an election year, the shift is moving back toward training, as a campaigning President Bush last week vowed to double the number of workers trained to 400,000.

That has local career-service agencies asking how they are to accomplish such an ambitious goal, given that no more money is being allocated and performance criteria remain restrictive.

"The problem is that the substance of what the administration is proposing is not nearly as exciting and encouraging as the rhetoric," said Andy Van Kleunen, executive director of the Workforce Alliance, which advises policymakers and advocates for more education and training.

Nationally, WIA funding has been cut every year since the law replaced the Job Training Partnership Act in 2000. In Illinois, the number of people trained under WIA fell dramatically that first year.

In the adult program, the number of new registrants declined to 1,774 in 2000 from 4,960 in 1999, according to the state study. The number of dislocated workers fell to 4,074 from 7,093.

Some service providers blame the "work first" philosophy, which involves a time-consuming process job seekers must go through before they can get a training voucher.

First, they must try to find a job through core services, which includes help writing a resume and searching Internet job banks. If unsuccessful, they can apply for intensive services, which includes counseling and skills assessment.

If they still don't have a job, then they may be eligible for a training voucher of up to \$5,000.

In the early days of WIA, Smith said, the mayor's office issued a strong message that job training should be the last resort, and encouraged providers to register only clients they felt would be good performers.

Jackie Edens, Chicago's workforce commissioner, defended the city's interpretation of the law, given the poor instructions from Washington.

When WIA was implemented, it was months before the Labor Department provided any guidance. Only recently, Edens said, has the Bush administration pushed for job training.

"The Labor Department keeps moving the target of exactly what we're supposed to accomplish," Edens said. "Early on, it was 'Get them a job.' Then, last year, they started asking, 'Why aren't you putting more people into training?'"

One hurdle is that the Labor Department requires that training match the skills sought by area employers to fill jobs.

Chicago also has a large number of residents with significant barriers to finding work.

"The reality is, with the performance measures we have, it is slanted more toward better-educated people. It is very difficult to serve the most in need," said Richard Crawford, deputy commissioner for the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development.

WIA reauthorization bills approved by the House and Senate provide a softening of the work-first mandate but do not eliminate the layered process that WIA clients must go through. The bills have been delayed by intense partisan debate.

Meanwhile, Therese McMahan, head of workforce development for the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, said the state is working with providers to improve delivery of training services, starting with less emphasis on work-first philosophy.

"We're defining that interpretation, so I think a lot of organizations are being more flexible," McMahan said.

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