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# Coordinating Regional Workforce Development Resources

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What exactly makes up the workforce development system? Previous studies of the system, including one published in a previous Federal Reserve book on workforce development, suggest it is a patchwork quilt of programs, organizations, policies, and activities that help workers access skills and supports that get workers into jobs (Good and Strong 2015). In an effort to define it, former Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen described workforce development as a “catchall phrase to encompass different types of initiatives that help prepare people for jobs by providing them with training, placement assistance, and other support” (Yellen 2017).

The difficulty in framing a definition of the workforce development system is partially due to the large number of efforts engaged in preparing people for jobs by providing job seekers with training, placement, and other supports. Organizations ranging from those that help stabilize people’s lives and provide basic supports like housing, health care, and transportation to those that provide highly specialized technical training are engaged in workforce development. Similarly, even “traditional” workforce development efforts are funded and administered through a number of different federal, state, and local agencies and organizations. Navigating this patchwork is a challenge for job seekers and businesses—and communities and organizations that are able to braid together the various support systems likely provide better services to both their job seeker and business clients.

Limited understanding of what organizations and supports are available can lead to job seekers dropping out of services at transition periods or workers never accessing services because they arrived at the “wrong front door” when they were searching for services. Similar challenges happen in engagement with businesses who do not understand

why different efforts may or may not be able to support their needs, why there are different levels and types of administrative burdens and limited understanding of the goals of the different organizations involved in workforce development.

Many programs are developed and funded at the federal or state levels but are administered through some type of local government or regional entity. It makes intuitive sense that federal and state workforce development programs happen at the regional or local level, since workforce development and job seeking is something that is inherently based in place—labor markets and economic activities are local. Yet many of the organizations involved in this work, since they have different funding mechanisms and goals, have different definitions of what constitutes the local area or region. For example, workforce development boards, funded through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), are defined as regions—but the core 10 counties of the Atlanta metropolitan area (which includes over 20 counties in total) have five WIOA-funded workforce development boards. Coordination between these boards is critical because workers and businesses seek jobs or offer goods and services across the entire local economy and may not understand the services they can receive from one of the boards versus another. Similarly, the job seeker or business may not understand why an organization not involved in the WIOA system can offer different services but never reaches as large a scale as other organizations, such as WIOA boards or community and technical colleges. The Atlanta example is not unique; similar challenges exist in communities across the nation.

The “patchwork quilt” of workforce development is seen as one singular system or entity by its job-seeker and business consumers, but there remain opportunities to improve the operations of the many disparate entities in the quilt. As workforce development becomes increasingly critical to local economic development efforts, investing in ways to make the system able to be more easily navigated and understood by businesses is critical to positioning workforce development organizations as key partners in economic development efforts and business services. Other chapters in this book explore how to demonstrate value to new partners like economic development organizations and businesses: investing in regional workforce development systems is really about

positioning the workforce development industry, system, or patchwork quilt as a viable and high-quality partner.

While some may quickly turn to suggesting changes in the overall operation or policy environment of workforce development systems to make them less disparate, investing in coordination and navigation is often done under the premise that there is significant value in the work that is done at the various entities that make up the quilt. Smaller organizations can work within a community context and design interventions to fit those specific community needs. A local workforce development board can understand and catalyze local leadership, but the broader inefficiencies that exist because decentralized decision making has been incorporated into the workforce development policy arena need attention at a regional scale. This regional approach can help identify priorities, lift up local successes and bring them to full scale, raise awareness and market workforce development services, and create a singular “face” for workforce development partnership in a community.

Collective impact models focused on education policy are one example of how workforce development entities might coordinate efforts. Collective impact models like the Strive Partnership and other organizations in the Strive Together network are good examples of how multiple efforts can align, prioritize, and create a platform on which to discuss community priorities. A number of communities across the nation have pursued this work, particularly focused on workforce development—the Chicago Jobs Council is one of the longest-standing examples of this type of organization focused on workforce development, but certainly not the only. Collaboratives across the nation have begun to invest in regional coordination and collaboration because of the value that it may hold for job seekers and in economic development efforts. These groups help inform workforce development service providers and funders about important strategies that they may need to explore to be more effective. The following chapters elucidate some of those questions.

In a case study of the Atlanta workforce development system, Raphael Bostic and Ann Carpenter highlight challenges that job seekers face in accessing training. Although numerous researchers have studied housing and job “spatial mismatch,” there have been fewer studies of a similar spatial mismatch involving housing and training, despite

a regional workforce system collaborative in Atlanta having identified this as one of the major challenges that workforce development organizations face in recruiting participants. Bostic and Carpenter highlight this as a major challenge. Regional collaboratives focused on workforce development can help navigate these types of investigations and identify root causes of problems in the workforce and in local labor availability that go beyond what may be seen as simple skill or soft skill deficiencies.

Regional workforce development system collaboratives not only help identify root causes of challenges in the local labor pool, they also help keep workforce development organizations nimble, provide critical data and business intelligence to training organizations, and address hiring challenges in local industries. Tucker Plumlee describes how healthy regional workforce development collaboratives help collect both qualitative and quantitative information on business needs and economic trends. Both types of information provide critical information to training organizations—and collecting this information is often best administered through an intermediary organization, which can then share this with the multiplicity of workforce development organizations across a region. Similarly, these intermediary workforce organizations can help workers understand their career path in a local labor market—important information as workers and job seekers make decisions about training and careers they will pursue.

Many studies of workforce development policy and practice question whether it is an industry that can operate in either a “wholesale” or a “retail” business model. Local communities often discuss how to merge and combine organizations to create a more cohesive and singular workforce development organization or operator that can better interface with the demand side of the labor market. While there are often opportunities for mergers between workforce development organizations, absent a wholesale change of federal and state government policies on workforce development as well as significant shifts among the funding community, workforce development systems will often have a number of organizations all serving a local market. The appropriate question is how these organizations can collaborate to serve unique and local needs while scaling up to a level that is responsive to employers and that is also able to identify areas in which groups outside traditional workforce development organizations can help improve eco-

conomic opportunities for workers. Many communities across the nation have embarked on this work, but in many places the efforts are still in the offing or are reaching a critical point where long-term success and sustainability of collaboration are uncertain. There are few definitive answers on how to sustain these efforts, but communities that are able to are likely to continue to attract investment from businesses and to expand opportunities for workers and job seekers.

## References

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