



## ***Joint Newark & Essex County Welfare to Work Committee***

Tuesday, January 12, 2016  
50 S. Clinton Street, East Orange, NJ  
Meeting Minutes

### **Attendees:**

Mary Alexander, Kelli Bell-Taylor, Allyson Carvajal, Joe Epps, Jr., Ethel Gilbert, Danny Denise Gonzalez, Angela High, Tolu Lanrewaju, Julius Montford, Curtia Orr, Janine Schaeffer, Safanya Searcy, Nicole Vazquez-Wise, David Weiner, Howard Weiss

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### **Meeting Called to Order, Co-Chairperson David Weiner**

Mr. Weiner greeted the committee members and initiated a round table roll call. He then called a motion for the minutes to be approved; minutes were approved and accepted.

### **Welfare to Work Participation Rate**

In the month of November, Essex County's participation rate was 25.0 % (9<sup>th</sup> in ranking) while the State of New Jersey's rate was 25.9%. General assistance and TANF decreased by almost half, while the SNAP enrollment increased. Ms. Carvajal explained that this suggests that clients who haven't acquired sustainable employment were able to take advantage of their financial eligibility of SNAP benefits. There are 680 clients who are in an approved activity in Essex County. There are 2941 who are in an activity for the appropriate number of hours that counts toward the rate statewide. The number of people who need to be in an activity in Essex County is 22, 717; the statewide number is 11, 361. Ms. Carvajal revealed that TANF Block Grants like job search, subsidized/unsubsidized employment, streamlined communication, timely data entry and proper coding are some of the factors that may negatively impact optimal participation rates. Low participation rates can ultimately result in a decrease of funding. She further communicated that since Essex County serves a massive volume of the state's clients, it is important that tight partnerships are maintained so that our participation rates don't negatively impact statewide programs for clients as a whole.

There have been talks about the federal government imposing penalties on states who do not meet the required 50% participation rate. The committee expressed concern of the stance that a new federal administration might have on participation penalties being enforced.

### **DEDTE/ Newark Works Program Year 2015 Training Contracts**

Mr. Weiss drafted a chart to be completed quarterly by Newark and Essex County staff; it reflects various programs available in Essex County and Newark (in-house and vendor programs). It includes vendors, activities, slots, referrals, participants enrolled, completed and placed (people employed). Mr. Weiss communicated that an issue that has persevered for decades has been that clients start programs then drop out. The vendor paying system has been revised about 22 times in attempts to hold vendors accountable for providing services. Mr.

Montford advised that vendors are evaluated and tracked through the billing and MIS ratings. The current instruction of the RFP in terms of the vendors' responsibility includes client placement prerequisites for payment.

How do we, as a committee, ensure vendors are providing accurate information? At the County of Essex, vendors bill for placement and must show proof. The billing unit randomly calls placement sites and monitors go out to verify that paperwork is accurate. Thirdly, clients submit pay stubs to vendors. For Newark, a Placement Information Form is used so that a provider may state the placement agency, rate of pay and full/part-time. This information is verified with the employer or pay stub. Many vendors complain that they are not always able to retrieve the pay stub. Although the city gets credit for the vendor, thy city won't pay out if they can't verify employment. After the quarter, the verification can be checked through another system that issues a vendor report card.

Mr. Montford expressed that employment verification has been and continues to be a problem in the State of New Jersey. He communicated that it would be wonderful if the state would give Welfare to Work access to LOOPS, even though it's not in real time. Mr. Weiner suggested that the cross- pollination of information between the DEDTE, Newark, and the Div. of Welfare is available through client social security numbers.

The committee approve the Welfare Activity Chart.

### **Vendor Presentations**

Mr. Okparaeke asked the committee to decide when they would like vendors to present. The group decides to start by inviting three vendors for the upcoming February 9<sup>th</sup> meeting. Statistical information for each vendor will be provided about a week before the meeting. He will identify all the vendors of Essex County and Newark and the committee can determine how to schedule the following vendor presentations. It was suggested that having vendors to come before the committee will also help to address any barriers in language/terminology, expectations and uncertainty.

### **Reports on Training Programs**

Mr. Weiner asked for clarification of WIOA requirements regarding participation of the Welfare to Work Committee. Mr. Okparaeke expressed that it isn't stated in the RFP or the process that the Welfare to Work Committee will review, but it does require the WIB's participation. Mr. Weiner then asked, "Who, specifically, would be responsible for reviewing?" Mr. Okparaeke expressed, that he welcomed the Welfare to Work Committee to review RFP's and committee members may participate in the review process as long as they were not vendors. The RFP's must be reviewed then scored. Scoring is done based on how many individuals are on the review committee. The committee consists of county employees at every level and any eligible WIB Committee Members. If a vendor scores 70 or higher average, they are considered for a contract. In cases where the vendor provides a needed activity, but doesn't score an average of 70 or better, the whole scores are accepted. The recommendations are reviewed, prepared and sent down. Mr. Weiner asked how much weight is given to minority contractors. Mr. Montford advised that the RFP process is based on scoring, not weight.

Mrs. Orr invited the committee to the City of Newark's Technical Conference and invitations to serve on Newark's Review Committee, but no one responded.

Mr. Okparaeke expressed that he is available for support and the committee may ask questions and request information that will help in the review process. He would like to see this committee review RFP's and provide recommendations, ultimately driving up participation rates. He encouraged the group to come to the monthly One-Stop Partners Meeting so that they can have a broader understanding of the programs. Mr. Montford asked for a minimum of seven people to volunteer to review one specific area of the 2017 RFP's.

### **Recap of Accomplishments, Co- Chairperson Danny Denise Gonzalez**

The group met more than in past years and conducted meetings at alternate locations. We attended the WIB Retreat, finalizing our mission statement. We made recommendations for customer service training at the retreat, which was implemented by the County of Essex. We toured the One Stop Center. We were involved in Essex County's RFP process for PY2015.

### **Overview of Goals for 2016**

Mr. Okparaeke voiced that he wanted us to be involved in the RFP process for Essex County. Mrs. Orr expressed that she believes that the same goal should be extended for the City of Newark. Ms. Searcy gave feedback from Essex County's RFP Process. She loved the fact that the package was dropped off at her home and included everything that she needed to complete the process. She challenged the committee to add RFP reviews to the agenda for upcoming committee meetings. If a review is done in July, it should be on the agenda for discussion in August. This enables those who are unable to sit and review to be well informed. It also provided a way for the committee as a whole to participate. She added that staff of Newark and Essex County should continue to make things convenient and provide information as early as possible.

### **RFP Construct**

The construct of the RFP is expected to change this year. Mr. Okparaeke said that he felt there was room to be more creative and look at things with a broader view. He anticipates a better selection of vendors next year because of the new input. Mr. Okparaeke voiced that since the Dept. of Labor wants people to get employed, there is no harm in communicating our thoughts and needs to the decision makers in Trenton.

Mrs. Orr shared a scenario involving Essex County College in which "innovation" within the RFP has the possibility to come back and bite participants due to coding restrictions. Mr. Okparaeke said there has been an issue of stagnation because the lack of pushing the boundaries. Despite coding issues, Human Services has been forced to work with the Dept. of Labor. Mr. Okparaeke feels that the position is perfect to converse about our experiences and gain guidance from the state.

Last year's RFPs will be up for discussion at the next meeting. Ms. Orr told committee members that they should already have a copy of Newark's RFP for PY2015 that was attached on the invite to Newark Works' Technical Conference and encouraged them to attend. March is the goal for Newark's RFP. Ms. Carvajal expressed her enthusiasm to answer any questions and provide assistance in whatever way possible.

### **Closing**

Mr. Weiner complimented everyone for their attendance and participation. This concluded committee business. Meeting was adjourned.