



Joint Newark & Essex County Welfare to Work Committee

Tuesday, February 9, 2016
50 S. Clinton Street, East Orange, NJ
Meeting Minutes

Attendees:

Mary Alexander, Maritza Arauz, Kelli Bell-Taylor, Linda Brodie, Anna Chavarria, Joseph C. Epps, Danny Denise Gonzalez, Angela High, Gregory Hodne, Davetta Lane, Wendy Melendez, Betty Mirda, Julius Montford, Morris Murry, Samuel Okparaek, Curtia Orr, Janine Schaeffer, David Weiner, Nicole Vazquez-Wise

Meeting Called to Order, Co-Chairperson Danny Denise Gonzalez

PART I

Ms. Gonzalez made a Motion to approve the minutes; motion approved.

This year, the Welfare to Work Committee has committed to being more instrumental in the RFP process. At the January meeting, Mr. Okparaek suggested that having vendors come before the committee would help to address barriers in language/ terminology, expectations, uncertainty between the parties and aid in the understanding of vendors' role in the RFP process. During the first half of the last committee, La Casa de Don Pedro and F.O.C.U.S., were invited to present. During this time, vendors discussed the following:

- Background of their organizations
- they provided details on the population that they service
- they discussed some of the barriers that they face

La Casa de Don Pedro- Welfare to Work service provider for about 20 years. They started off getting state issued contracts called Family Development Programs. The organization provides services to do remedial education, high school equivalency, low literacy, job search. The clients that they service range from a 2nd grade level up to high school. They provide a 16 week program, 15 hours are spent in class while 20 hours is spent doing volunteer work. They are equipped to handle 40 to 50 students at a given time. Among the challenges that they experience, is the inconsistency of the referral system. On any given day, they can have one referral while on another day they may get 30 referrals. The vendor suggested that managed enrollment could possibly be a solution to this issue. The benchmarks required by the contract make it difficult to track students and it has an adverse effect on the academic progress of students who are further along in the training. Another obstacle that this agency has faced is getting clients to stick through the program and complete the mandated community service hours. She expressed that clients have had a consistent unwillingness to comply with the mandated volunteer hours because it isn't being communicated by the Employment Specialists which creates a financial deficit. Mr. Montford went on the record, advising that corrective action will be taken by having clients sign the R3 stating that they are

aware that they must complete the required volunteer hours. Ms. Alexander expressed that this idea was phenomenal because it empowers participants to stop making excuses. It was communicated that policy issues prevent vendors from having the power to change anything. While, referrals and funding continue to be among the most frustrating issues that vendors experience. In response to this, the County of Essex changed the benchmarks so that vendors began being paid monthly. The vendor indicated that the mission of La Casa is to train people and enable them to be able to move on and has never been about the money.

F.O.C.U.S. - Welfare to Work service provider for about 20 years with the County of Essex. The representative advised that they also experience challenges with meeting the class size and the referral system. We were advised that one third of the referrals don't show up for Job Search Training. The same is true for ESL Training. The vendor asked what happens to clients who don't show up for training since they are required by law to attend training in order to receive benefits. Clients are supposed to be sanctioned, but the vendor communicated that the same clients come back to their program after being terminated. The vendor relayed that FOCUS, much like La Casa de Don Pedro, is dedicated to servicing the community.

Clients are usually sanctioned for non-compliance. The County doesn't have the power to sanction so they rely on the Division of Welfare to process sanctions. Mr. Montford stated that the issue comes down to policy. The federal government doesn't allow open enrollment because of the way that they count. Out of 350 sanction referrals, only 74 were actually sanctioned. Increased sanctions breeds lower participation rates. The County has analyzed the sanctioning process and has even proposed that those who have the power to sanction be relocated to 50 S. Clinton Street on the first floor so that sanctions may be walked through immediately. Co-locations make it easier to find out where the holdup is. He suggested that the Division of Welfare should dedicate a unit solely for sanctions to rectify this matter and he can provide supporting referral documentation. Through reauthorization, only the first twenty days of the month count towards the participation rate. He also recommended that the committee should write a letter to Senators Booker, Menendez and Congressman Payne to address this policy issue. Mr. Okparaeke advised that the Division of Welfare is going through a transitional phase and during this period systemic issues, case banking and coding remain a struggle. Mr. Weiner stated that the problem is with case banking, yet he would try to convince the Director of Welfare to assign at least one person to handle sanctions full-time.

Ms. Gonzalez thanked the vendors for their dedication to the community, insight and presence at the meeting. Mr. Montford extended his appreciation to the vendors for their willingness to serve.

PART II

The committee suggested that it might be helpful if clients sign their referral which will eliminate any confusion about serving mandated volunteer hours. Ms. Gonzalez relayed that the common fallback for less accountability is for clients to say that they weren't aware. Mr. Montford expressed that a signed R3 is the best way to handle this situation. Mr. Weiner suggested that the term should be changed from volunteer hours to requisite hours and sharing the form with the TANF population.

Ms. Gonzalez reminded the committee that, at the last meeting, they requested to review the County's RFP. She asked if anyone had questions or suggestions.

Mr. Epps asked if it was mandatory that certain vendors be used. Mr. Montford advised that funds are provided through the Employment Directive Activity (EDA) Training from the Dept. of Labor. This training can only be contracted with agencies that are on the NJ Training Provider List which is sanctioned by a Section J Certification from the Dept. of Education or a certification from a Dept. of Labor Training Provider Program. Many clients are in activities in agencies that don't fall under this

criteria, excluding them from counting towards the participation rate. Mr. Montford mentioned that when Governor Christie took away the Special Initiative Funds, it hurt Essex County because it eliminated the creativity in how activities and funds could be spent. He added that the number of potential vendors is low because of failure to follow guide lined instructions.

Mr. Epps expressed that one of the observations that he made in the RFP review process was that they were not proofread, information was outdated and copies weren't clear. Mr. Montford advised that this year's RFP would include a deduction sheet where points will be taken away for incompliance of the data sheet. This enables everything to be lined up so that recommendations can be justified.

Next Steps

-To prepare a letter to state officials including statistical information to support any shortcomings that might exist.

-Mr. Montford advised that he would schedule Essex County College and Catholic Charities for the next meeting.

Mr. Weiner made a motion to adjourn. Meeting adjourned.