



Executive Summary

Career Advancement and Work Support Services on the Job

IMPLEMENTING THE FORT WORTH
WORK ADVANCEMENT AND
SUPPORT CENTER PROGRAM

Caroline Schultz
David Seith

APRIL 2011

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Overview

The Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) program in Fort Worth was part of a demonstration that is testing innovative strategies to help increase the income of low-wage workers, who make up a large segment of the U.S. workforce. The program offered services to help workers stabilize their employment, improve their skills, and increase their earnings; it also helped them apply for a range of financial work supports for which they might be eligible, such as child care subsidies, food stamps, and the Earned Income Tax Credit. WASC's designers intended that work supports would increase workers' income in the short term and that labor market advancement would increase their earnings over time. WASC targeted a group — employed, low-wage workers — that had not typically been served by the federal workforce development system. Fort Worth WASC services were delivered within employers' workplaces, rather than in a public agency setting as in the other WASC sites (Bridgeport, Connecticut; Dayton, Ohio; and San Diego, California).

MDRC developed the WASC demonstration and is responsible for its evaluation. Other sites are providing experimental evidence on whether WASC affects workers' employment and incomes. A similar analysis will not be conducted for Fort Worth, however, because the program was not able to recruit enough participants within the time frame needed by the demonstration.

Key Findings

- **Strengths of the program.** Fort Worth was able to deliver WASC services in a workplace setting. Program staff became familiar with each employer's policies and advancement paths, and they incorporated this information into individual job coaching sessions with employees. Employer endorsement of the program may have lent it legitimacy among employees. Group training in English and computer skills was customized to each workplace, and completion rates were high. After WASC ended in Fort Worth, some employers showed an apparent increase in their capacity to train entry-level workers.
- **Limitations of the program.** The number of advancement opportunities available within a company were usually far fewer than the number of employees seeking to move up. The scope of the WASC training was limited, and employers had concerns about their ability to promote trainees or the possibility that trainees might seek better-paying jobs elsewhere. The workplace setting did not always allow enough time and privacy for individual coaching and assistance with work supports. Most workers were ineligible for key supports, such as food stamps and subsidized health insurance, because their family income was too high.

Fort Worth's program provides valuable insights into the unique challenges of operating income support and career advancement programs in small employer settings. Strategies that address these challenges, together with rigorous investigation of the effects of similar employer-based services and their associated costs, would clarify whether the components of the Fort Worth WASC program warrant large-scale adoption.

Preface

A large number of workers in the United States earn wages that are not enough to move their families out of poverty. Although policymakers are focusing more on helping low-wage workers get better jobs and receive available benefits, no public system targets this group. The One-Stop Career Centers around the country, funded by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, have focused primarily on providing employment services to job-seekers and helping employers fill entry-level vacancies.

This report examines a program that combined two types of income-building services for low-wage workers — skills training and connection to work supports — and delivered them in workplaces. Operated in Fort Worth, Texas, from 2006 until early 2009, the program was one of four sites in MDRC’s Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) demonstration. WASC offered services to help workers stabilize their employment, improve their skills through education and training, connect to higher-paying jobs, and get access to food stamps, child care subsidies, and health insurance. Like the other three WASC sites, Fort Worth sought to expand the One-Stop’s activities to serve people who are employed, but at low wages. Unlike the other sites, Fort Worth delivered all WASC services in collaboration with employers.

The experience in Fort Worth suggests that there were advantages to delivering services in the workplace — chiefly, being able to reach people at a convenient time and location, often during paid work hours. Nevertheless, as similar initiatives have found, many lower-wage employees were not eligible for or interested in the work supports, suggesting that outreach via employers is an inefficient way to connect people to public benefits.

The skill-development components of the program may offer more promise, but they failed to overcome challenges inherent in its model. First, advancement in a company can require increases in skills or on-the-job experience that may be more than short-term, general skills training can offer. Second, while WASC aimed to achieve outcomes that are important to employers — such as reduced absenteeism and better performance and retention — there is limited evidence that these will translate into long-term earnings boosts for workers or increased productivity or profit for companies. Also, in companies that participated in the Fort Worth program (as in most workplaces), the number of entry-level workers far exceeded the opportunities for internal advancement. This suggests that coordinated, multiemployer initiatives may offer more flexibility than Fort Worth’s model. If employer-based services are envisioned as part of future iterations of the Workforce Investment Act or other public investments in worker education and training, these basic design issues will need to be addressed more explicitly.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

The Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) demonstration in Fort Worth took the form of a workplace-based, advancement-focused program called “Project Earn.” It would not have been possible without the hard work and commitment of the administrators and staff at Workforce Solutions for Tarrant County. Special thanks also go to Jo Aleshire, Jill Navarrete, Sal Adamski, Debby Kratky, and Judy McDonald; their leadership made Project Earn a reality. Some of them also reviewed earlier drafts of this report. We thank as well the career coaches, business services staff, and other key staff of Project Earn — including Susan Anewishki, Amber Gosser, Frank Kuykendall, Pamela Jackson, Maricela Jimenez, and John Torres — who skillfully recruited employers, implemented the WASC program, allowed us to observe them at work, answered our questions, and provided a wealth of information about how the program played out at the front lines. Thanks also go to Jodie Sue Kelly, a consultant to MDRC, who developed training materials for the WASC demonstration and conducted training of Project Earn staff.

Employers and community college staff were essential to the successful implementation of Project Earn. In addition, several employers graciously provided MDRC with access to Project Earn participants for focus group interviews and other data collection activities. We extend special thanks to Nancy Ross, Carlos Morales, Gracie Vega, La Tanya Lynch, Mary Ellen Miska, and Kay Lee for their invaluable insights about the operation of the program.

MDRC’s capacity to carry out a demonstration with an ambitious learning agenda depends heavily on the ongoing commitment of key funding partners. They are acknowledged at the front of the report.

At MDRC, Frieda Molina, James Riccio, Cynthia Miller, and John Wallace provided important input and guidance on the analysis and early drafts. The report also benefited from reviews by Betsy Tessler and Alice Tufel. Alexandra Pennington programmed the baseline data and conducted its analysis, supervised by Mark van Dok. Nancy Rosas and Senait Tesfai contributed to qualitative research, and Daniel Schlaff assisted with report production. Robert Weber edited the report, and David Sobel prepared it for publication.

Finally, we extend our deep appreciation to the people who participated in the study and gave generously of their time to complete intake surveys and participate in focus groups.

The Authors

Executive Summary

This report describes the design and operation of a workplace-based, advancement-focused program, called “Project Earn,” that was implemented from 2006 through mid-2009 in Greater Fort Worth, Texas. The program sought to increase the income of low-wage workers through a combination of earnings gains and financial work supports (including publicly funded benefits and tax credits) and was operated as one of four sites in the national Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) demonstration.¹

In 2007, one in four workers in the United States earned less than \$10 per hour — a wage rate that left many of these workers and their families poor or near poor.² The WASC program model was designed to increase the incomes of employed, low-wage workers, using a combination of two strategies within a single, integrated program:

- Providing services intended to help workers advance in the labor market, such as skills training and individual career coaching
- Enrolling workers in income supplement programs and other benefits for which they were eligible, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, food stamps (later called the “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” or SNAP), publicly subsidized health insurance, and child care subsidies

WASC brought together services that typically are offered via two separate types of organizations: workforce development agencies, which provide job training and placement, chiefly to unemployed workers; and welfare agencies, which provide many of the benefits targeted by WASC. In addition to providing training and other job advancement services, Fort Worth aimed to connect its participants to publicly funded benefits, or *work supports*. Unlike the programs in other WASC demonstration sites, the Fort Worth program was operated entirely by staff from the workforce development system — that is, without incorporating staff from the welfare system.

¹For a discussion of the WASC demonstration’s rationale and its implementation in sites other than Fort Worth, see Cynthia Miller, Betsy L. Tessler, and Mark van Dok, *Strategies to Help Low-Wage Workers Advance: Implementation and Early Impacts of the Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) Demonstration* (New York: MDRC, 2009).

²U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “May 2007 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates, United States” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). Web site: www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm.

WASC sought to demonstrate that a package of services and supports could be directed at workers who were *already employed* — rather than unemployed — when they first enrolled in the program. In addition to providing evidence about the program’s potential effects on low-wage workers, the demonstration sought to learn whether WASC services could help meet goals that are important to many employers: stabilizing and strengthening the performance of entry-level workers and developing their skills to the point where they would be qualified to fill midlevel positions.

The Fort Worth WASC Model

In Fort Worth, WASC recruited low-wage workers solely through employers, and it delivered services primarily within the workplace.³ There were several reasons to attempt this approach. First, recruiting WASC participants through the workplace could mean gaining access to certain low-wage workers who might not otherwise be reached via WASC marketing efforts within the wider community — in particular, workers who had not already established connections to publicly funded work supports or employment services. Second, developing the services in collaboration with each WASC employer could mean increasing the relevance of career coaching to WASC participants’ current jobs and workplaces — which, in turn, might yield better results for both the employer and the employees. WASC sought out employers that had second-tier job openings that could be filled by their own entry-level workers, if given the right skills training. Third, it was hoped that employers would endorse WASC in order to establish its credibility among employees — thereby motivating employees to take part in WASC activities. Perhaps most important, offering services at the workplace — preferably on company-paid time — was a way to make WASC more convenient for workers. Participants would not need to make an extra trip to a One-Stop Center to receive WASC services.

MDRC developed and managed the WASC demonstration and is responsible for its evaluation.⁴ An experimental study was designed to determine whether providing WASC services led to changes in earnings, income, and other outcomes for participants and their families. Ultimately, however, due to challenges encountered in recruiting enough participants for an employer-based study, the Fort Worth program was not included in the WASC impact analysis. Nevertheless, its implementation provides insights about the delivery of work supports and advancement-focused services in the workplace and about the capacity of public workforce development agencies to provide such services.

³Four sites were identified to test WASC. In the other three — Bridgeport, Connecticut; Dayton, Ohio; and San Diego, California — WASC program offices were housed within the One-Stop Career Center system created by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998. This was considered to be the primary WASC model, and these three sites are included in the evaluation of the impact of WASC services.

⁴Current and past funders of the WASC demonstration are listed at the front of this report.

The Fort Worth WASC program consisted of three components:

- **Skills training.** WASC group training was provided on-site at employers' locations, usually with paid release time — although not always during employees' regular shifts. In each workplace, the training was intended to address a set of employee skill gaps that were identified by the employer. Most of the classes consisted of basic skills training in computer applications and/or English language instruction, tailored to day-to-day work tasks and communications that employees would encounter on the job. Fort Worth contracted with community colleges to help develop the curricula and deliver the instruction. In order to maximize the number of participants served using the WASC project funding, training in most workplaces was delivered on a one-time basis (usually for a period of four to eight weeks), not as a continuing program.
- **Job and career coaching.** Individual coaching was a core element of the WASC demonstration, and Fort Worth provided on-site coaching to employees at each workplace. Participating employees were asked to identify specific goals for their job, career, and income and to meet individually with a coach before, during, and after taking part in group skills training. Coaches also connected participants with additional opportunities for education, training, and supportive services, and they encouraged participants to contact their coaches if they needed help resolving work-life conflicts or difficulties on the job. Job advancement coaching was constrained to focus on advancement openings found at the current employer. Employees were encouraged to move up at their existing employer by building tenure, increasing skills and certifications for more advanced positions or assignments, making advantageous transfers to other departments, or increasing their work hours.
- **Income supports delivered via employers.** In helping to bring work supports to employee participants, WASC had two objectives: (1) to make work pay by supplementing earned income, bringing total income to a level that could sustain a basic family budget, with the idea that participants would eventually increase their earnings to the point that the supports were no longer needed; and (2) to facilitate participation in education and training, by offering to cover employees' training-related costs, such as alternative transportation or child care (for employees who attended training outside their regular work shifts). For several key WASC-targeted benefits, including food stamps and subsidized health insurance, Fort Worth staff did not directly issue the supports; instead, they made participants aware of supports for which

they might be eligible and helped them to navigate the application processes required by the public agencies that administered these benefits.

In combination, and directed to a population of low-wage workers, these three components made up an approach that was different from existing services for employed workers, as had been previously provided by the Fort Worth workforce investment board.

The Fort Worth WASC program was managed by the local workforce development agency, which administered publicly funded job-seeker and other employment services, along with child care subsidies. Fort Worth paid for its WASC services primarily by using a combination of discretionary WIA dollars and direct site payments from MDRC. There were two teams of WASC staff in Fort Worth. First, the responsibility for engaging employers was assigned to Business Services representatives and managers, who marketed the project to local companies, identified potential employer partners, and extended the initial invitation to participate. Once employers agreed to participate, they were assigned to a second group of project staff, who had responsibility for designing and delivering a specific set of WASC services for each workplace setting. In turn, this team identified instructors from local community colleges to provide group training for participants.

Between early 2006 and mid-2008, Fort Worth was able to engage seven employers and to enroll more than 200 of their employees — most earning \$11 per hour or less — in the project. Employer recruitment began in 2005, and an initial pilot round of skills training classes was held at two employers in mid-2006. The full package of WASC services — including training, career coaching, and work support screening — was delivered at five additional employers, beginning in late 2006. Once enrolled, most WASC participants received four to eight weeks of skills training and one year of individual coaching and work support screening. The final round of WASC skills training classes was held in summer 2008, and follow-up meetings between participants and WASC coaches continued through early 2009. A final participant-coach meeting typically included review of the participant’s job and career plans but no formal transition plan.

Key Findings on Program Implementation

WASC’s employer-based approach had clear strengths:

- **By using flexible streams of funding, Fort Worth was able to target a working population and customize services that incorporated WASC’s core strategies and were generally compatible with workplace settings.**
- **Employees noticed that their employers had invested time and other resources in making WASC services available; employer endorsement of**

the program may have lent it legitimacy in employees' eyes. Moreover, by spending considerable time with employees, supervisors, and managers, WASC coaches became familiar with workplace-specific advancement paths, company policies, and human resource policies — and were able to incorporate this information into coaching sessions with participants.

- **In some sites, employers showed increased capacity and commitment to the training of entry-level workers, even after WASC services ended.** Standard basic skills curricula were customized to particular workplaces, although not perhaps to the greatest degree that might have been possible with a larger investment of time and resources.

WASC's employer-based approach also had important limitations:

- **The Fort Worth staff sometimes found it difficult to balance service obligations to both employees and employers — to treat both as clients — when their respective interests diverged.** Importantly, the number of advancement opportunities available within a company were usually far fewer than the number of employees seeking to move up. Employers were understandably reluctant to generate widespread expectations for advancement, and, as a result, some declined to participate in the project.
- **The training was limited, and employers had concerns about their ability to promote trainees or the possibility that trainees might seek employment elsewhere.** This related problem had serious implications for the career advancement prospects of participants. The training did not lead to portable skill certifications or other industry-recognized credentials for the employees who completed the classes. Employers sometimes were reluctant to allow outside (community college) instructors to learn too many proprietary details about the employer's work processes.
- **Although offering services in the workplace meant that employees did not (usually) have to travel to off-site locations to meet with WASC staff, the workplace setting did not always allow sufficient time and privacy to accommodate individual coaching and work support assistance.** Some employees simply found it difficult to step away from their duties during paid work hours or were reluctant to use their limited break times to meet with a coach. In some workplaces, barely more than half of Fort Worth participants met at least monthly with a coach.

- **Most of the low-wage workers recruited by Fort Worth turned out to be ineligible for key work supports, such as food stamps and subsidized health insurance.** This is a fundamental problem in conducting work support outreach through employers: employers do not know the total family incomes of their workers, and many low-wage workers live in households that are not low-income.
- **To develop and implement services in each new employer site in Fort Worth required considerable effort and was costly.** It is unclear whether Fort Worth's WASC model could be replicated at a larger scale.

Conclusion

The experience of implementing the employer-based version of WASC in Fort Worth raises valuable questions about how best to design a model for delivering these services to employers and low-wage employees in their workplaces and about whether public workforce development systems are positioned to do so. Several key issues would need to be addressed in order for a similar model to be offered on a larger scale.

Fort Worth's program was unable to resolve a fundamental difficulty of implementing advancement-focused services in the workplace. Many employers simply do not have a large number of promotional, second-tier, or career-building opportunities for entry-level workers, although incremental wage increases are available. In such settings, training and coaching that focuses on individual worker advancement may not be justified, unless employers explicitly agree to — and have strong business reasons to — function as a temporary station for workers who are headed for more advanced positions in other firms or industries. For these firms, a retention focus — rather than an advancement focus — may make more sense.

The training offered in Fort Worth was the most attractive component of the program, both for employers and for employees. However, while many employees were satisfied with the basic skills training that WASC provided, others requested training in more technical skills leading to work-relevant certifications. Along these lines, future advancement programs could focus on training that explicitly leads, at least incrementally, to an employer- or industry-recognized credential. However, either for personnel management reasons or for competitive reasons, employers may be reluctant to train large numbers of entry-level employees in technical skills that would be required for higher-level positions — particularly if the skills involve proprietary work processes. For many employers, skill needs would be met if they hand-selected candidates to receive more advanced vocational skills training, while still offering to

other entry-level workers basic skills training — aimed at enhanced performance of current duties.⁵ Skill development training could target a small set of advancement openings by using an existing model — on-the-job training — to subsidize wages for advancement trainees. The scale of this approach would be limited by the number of short-term advancement openings that the employer could offer. Alternatively, an advancement project could explicitly include negotiating with employers to pool job opportunities across firms and backfill entry-level positions, as is done in some existing sector-based initiatives. While employers in high-growth industries might have a natural incentive to implement something like WASC, other employers might require tax credits or other incentives to participate in any initiative that might mean advancing workers up and out of their companies. Such incentives could help offset the cost of paid release time and compensate for the cost of replacing employees who leverage their newly acquired skills to find better-paying jobs in other firms.

The logistical challenges that the Fort Worth team encountered suggest that individual career coaching as designed in WASC may not be cost-effective to deliver to employees in a workplace setting. To explore whether the extra effort and expense are worthwhile, rigorous research is needed to understand the value of individual coaching, either by itself or when coupled with skills training. Similarly, work supports outreach via employers may also be too inefficient. Future efforts would need to focus on supports with simpler or higher-income eligibility cutoffs or would need to find better ways to target a pool of workers who are likely to be eligible. Also, for those who do appear to be eligible for work supports, simplifying enrollment processes — and directly involving the agencies that administer those supports — could make signing up more attractive to low-wage workers.

The local workforce board that implemented WASC reported that taking part in the project meant expanding its capacity to design and deliver skills training to entry-level workers within their workplaces. Participation also meant that the board had to increase its expertise in the area of services provided to individuals after they have found jobs. Much of this was made possible because the site used flexible, discretionary WIA dollars to fund WASC. For several reasons, operating WASC-like services on a wider scale would be difficult under existing WIA formula funding, which designates no earmarked funding stream for *employed worker services*. Changes to the next iteration of the Workforce Investment Act could address at least some of these issues, as could continued innovation through competitive federal initiatives and, eventually, a dedicated stream of funding for low-wage, incumbent-worker programs and/or federal matching of state-sponsored initiatives.

⁵Several employers noted that the random assignment design of WASC enrollment gave them little control over who would participate in the program. This problem would not be encountered under nonresearch conditions.

Overall, the experience of implementing the Fort Worth program points to unanswered questions about WASC's employer based-model: Is there sufficient demand for these services, *for entry-level workers*, on the part of employers? And, if so, would there be sufficient benefits — both to employers and to low-wage workers — for offering such services widely? This descriptive study did not explore the effects of WASC employer-based services on outcomes that employers value (such as productivity and workforce turnover rates) or its effects on participants' earnings, receipt of work supports, or subsequent employment patterns after their participation in the project. Although some participants were able to move into higher-paying jobs at their initial employers or at other employers, it is not clear whether WASC services were the primary cause of these advancements — or whether participants would have advanced, on average, in equal numbers in the absence of WASC services.

The other WASC demonstration sites, based in One-Stop Career Centers, are providing experimental evidence on whether these types of services have measurable impacts on workers' earnings and total incomes — but not in a workplace setting. Likewise, data from other employer-based programs can provide some indication of the outcomes associated with certain service components that were present in Fort Worth's program, but they do not encompass WASC's full package of coaching, training, and work support assistance. Given the considerable policy interest paid to employer services and employer-based interventions, further investigation into the effects of employer-based services, and their associated costs, would help clarify which are truly worth replicating on a larger scale.

EARLIER MDRC PUBLICATIONS ON THE WORK ADVANCEMENT AND SUPPORT CENTER DEMONSTRATION

“Does Easier Access to Food Stamps Increase the Food Stamp Error Rate? Evidence from the WASC Demonstration.”
2010. Mark van Dok.

“Helping Low-Wage Workers Access Work Supports: Lessons for Practitioners.”
2009. Policy Brief. Kay Sherwood.

Strategies to Help Low-Wage Workers Advance: Implementation and Early Impacts of the Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) Demonstration.
2009. Cynthia Miller, Betsy L. Tessler, and Mark van Dok.

*Moving from Jobs to Careers:
Engaging Low-Wage Workers in Career Advancement.*
2008. Betsy L. Tessler, David Seith, and Zawadi Rucks.

*From Getting By to Getting Ahead:
Navigating Career Advancement for Low-Wage Workers.*
2007. Betsy L. Tessler and David Seith.

“A Vision for the Future of the Workforce Investment System.”
2007. John Wallace.

*A New Approach to Low-Wage Workers and Employers:
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2006. Jacquelyn Anderson, Linda Yuriko Kato, and James A. Riccio with Susan Blank.

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Improving Services for Low-Income Working Families.*
2004. Jennifer Miller and Frieda Molina.

“Work Support Centers: A Framework.”
2002. John W. Wallace.

“Work Support Centers: A Concept Paper.”
2001. John W. Wallace.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.