

ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

A Case Study of New Jersey's WIOA Planning Process

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SUMMARY

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) provides an opportunity for states to pursue strategies that grow regional economies by helping workers and businesses get the skills they need to succeed. State plans required under WIOA are an opportunity to chart key skills strategies such as sector partnerships, career pathways, job-driven training, and cross-program measurement.

In order to have a plan that leverages the opportunity provided by WIOA, states must develop planning processes that are focused on key skill strategies and that authentically engage a broad set of stakeholders who will implement and be served by the strategies discussed in the plan.

The State of New Jersey embarked on a robust WIOA planning process shortly after WIOA was signed into law in 2014. This case study describes how New Jersey is using WIOA to advance the state's vision for its workforce development system. It explains how New Jersey has structured its planning process to focus on sector partnerships, career pathways, job-driven training, and cross-program data, among other key issues. It also details the different mechanisms that New Jersey has used to engage key stakeholders throughout the state. New Jersey's WIOA planning process provides an example that should be of interest to other states looking to embark on a skills-focused, inclusive WIOA planning process. Using New Jersey's process as a model, the case study outlines steps that states can take to develop a robust WIOA planning process.

I. STATE PLANNING: REALIZING INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY IN WIOA

WIOA provides a variety of new opportunities for states and local communities to close skill gaps and help workers and businesses succeed. In particular, WIOA requires state and local areas to advance key skill strategies such as sector partnerships, career pathways, job-driven training, and cross-program data and measurement:

- Sector partnerships address the needs of employers and workers in a particular industry by bringing together multiple employers, education and training providers, and other stakeholders.
- Career pathways integrate basic education, skills training, and supportive services to help more people earn postsecondary credentials, find jobs, and increase their earnings.
- Job-driven training approaches like apprenticeship and work-based learning prepare people for jobs available in our economy.
- Common metrics provide accountability for the workforce system by reliably measuring the same set of outcomes across multiple education and training programs.

Under WIOA, a state must create a plan that describes its overall strategy for workforce development and how it will be implemented to meet the skill needs of workers, jobseekers, and employers. As described in our [Playbook for Creating Effective State Plans](#), the planning process provides an opportunity for states to envision the workforce system they truly want and to describe the key strategies that will enact that vision. States should use their plans to explain how WIOA's core programs, along with other state and federal programs, will work together to support sector partnerships, career pathways, and job-driven training. State plans should also describe how they will use common metrics to develop policies to close skill gaps.



States should provide multiple opportunities for authentic input from a broad variety of stakeholders to ensure that their plan is informed both by those who will implement it and by those intended to benefit from it. Indeed, the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on state plans proposed by the federal Departments of Labor and Education explains that state plans should be developed “in consultation with representatives of Local [Workforce] Boards and chief elected officials (CEOs), businesses, representatives of labor organizations, community-based organizations (CBOs), adult and youth education and workforce development providers, institutions of higher education, disability service entities, youth-serving programs, and other stakeholders.”¹ The general public should also have the opportunity to provide input.

State plans must be submitted to federal agencies by March 3, 2016. Over the coming months, states should engage in the process of creating a visionary state plan supported by a wide range of stakeholders.

II. THE NEW JERSEY WIOA PLANNING PROCESS

USING THE STATE WIOA PLAN TO ADVANCE A VISION FOR NEW JERSEY'S WORKFORCE SYSTEM

New Jersey is using the WIOA planning process to create a blueprint for achieving its workforce vision and goals. New Jersey envisions a workforce system that helps all New Jerseyans build the skills, abilities, and connections they need to find a job and a career, and that builds an innovative, skilled workforce to drive the state's economic growth. New Jersey endeavors to fulfill this vision by advancing the following goals:

- Increasing the number of individuals with an industry-valued postsecondary degree or credential
- Increasing the number of people who are on a path to economic opportunity
- Reducing the amount of time during which people are unemployed
- Using cross-program data to ensure that investments are effective and to hold its workforce system accountable.

These goals build on New Jersey's existing efforts to align training programs and resources with the needs of employers and leading industries.

THE PLANNING PROCESS:

New Jersey's State Employment & Training Commission (SETC), which serves as the state's workforce board, is leading the planning process in partnership with the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (LWD). LWD administers the six core programs authorized by WIOA's four titles², as well as the employment and training programs for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and other state programs.

New Jersey intends to submit a unified state plan under WIOA.³ Unified plans must include strategic and operational planning elements. Strategic elements must describe the state's strategic vision and goals for preparing an educated and skilled workforce, as well as strategies for aligning WIOA core programs and other federal and state programs to achieve the vision and goals. The operational planning elements must describe, among other elements, how the state strategy will be implemented through WIOA's core programs. The operational portion of a unified plan does not include federal or

state programs beyond WIOA's core programs; however, states can still use the strategic portion to describe how *all* of its workforce programs inform its strategy for developing a skilled workforce. A broad strategic plan that is inclusive of all major workforce programs can help states coordinate efforts around a common vision.

The strategic portion of New Jersey's state plan will broadly address the workforce system. It will explain how WIOA's six core programs, additional federal programs (like TANF and SNAP E&T), and state programs will each contribute to the state's overall strategy for meeting its workforce goals. This broad strategy will inform the operational portion of New Jersey's plan, thus ensuring that WIOA's core programs are implemented in a way that supports the state's larger vision for its workforce system.

To develop this plan, New Jersey has established a two-phase process:

- During *Phase One* (December 2014- June 2015), the SETC and LWD are partnering in the development of a WIOA Blueprint report, which they will use to guide both the development of the unified state plan and the implementation of WIOA on July 1, 2015. A precursor to the unified plan, this report will be a guide for the implementation of WIOA until the full state plan can be developed. The report will also propose enhanced strategies for the state's workforce system. It will provide a foundation for the strategic portion of the state plan, and it will serve as a framework for developing the operational portions of the state plan.
- During *Phase Two* (July 2015-March 2016), New Jersey will refine its statewide workforce strategies and develop the operational portions of the unified state plan, as required by WIOA.

THE WIOA BLUEPRINT

New Jersey has decided to organize its strategic planning around six key topics, as described below. In December 2014, the state formed six workgroups to conduct strategic work specific to each of the state's planning topics:⁴

- **Governance and Planning:** This work group is establishing a process for regional and local plans; identifying regional planning areas; and developing template criteria that local workforce boards can use to select one-stop operators.
- **Career Pathways and Industry Partnerships:** This workgroup is reviewing state policies, procedures, training investments, and technical assistance to support career pathway development; defining high-quality industry partnerships and identifying opportunities to develop partnerships, including through technical assistance and training; and identifying ways to integrate apprenticeship programs into the workforce development system.
- **Performance and Accountability:** This workgroup is reviewing WIOA's new performance measures and recommending additional state metrics; refining the eligible training provider list process; and making recommendations on how to share data with key stakeholders.
- **One-Stop Operations:** This workgroup is defining roles and responsibilities for one-stop operators and partners; making recommendations for enhanced partner coordination; and looking for opportunities to expand the system's capacity.
- **Services to Individuals with Disabilities:** This workgroup is focused on expanding vocational rehabilitation programs' business outreach; identifying ways to improve coordination with one-stop partners; and enhancing services for youth with disabilities.
- **Services to Youth:** This workgroup is focused on developing strategies for serving out- of-school youth and building partnerships to improve work-based youth activities.

The Blueprint report will summarize the current status of policies and practices in these areas and will present new strategies that require policy or programmatic changes.⁵ If there are issues that arise but are not resolved by the planning process, the Blueprint will lay out different policy or programmatic options and explain their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the resources they require. The Blueprint report will be presented to the SETC as a tool to inform their decisions as they develop the state's unified plan.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholder engagement should be a key element of a state's WIOA planning process. New Jersey knew that broad stakeholder engagement would be essential to developing a Blueprint report that takes advantage of the strategic opportunities presented by WIOA. In particular, New Jersey wanted input on how to strengthen its workforce system from those who implement and use its programs in communities throughout the state. New Jersey developed its Blueprint process to obtain input from a wide variety of stakeholders while performing in-depth analysis and planning in a relatively short period of time.

ENGAGING EMPLOYERS IN WIOA PLANNING

Employers are an important stakeholder group that should be at the table when it comes to WIOA planning. Though employer associations, such as chambers of commerce or trade associations, should be engaged through public forums along with other stakeholders, employers themselves are not often best engaged through broad-format, multi-stakeholder processes. Rather, using employers as a single-stakeholder sounding board on issues specific to their needs may prove the most promising practice. When involving employers, it is important to be mindful of engaging the full range of WIOA's employer-customer base – securing perspectives of small, medium, and large employers, as well as from employers in key industries.

Employers are playing a key role in the development of New Jersey's WIOA planning process. The employer-led and -driven SETC will have the final decision on the adoption of the WIOA Blueprint and of the WIOA state plan. Employers who are members of the SETC's standing committees have participated in joint meetings with the work groups, and have helped to guide the effort and ensure that it aligns with the ongoing work of the SETC.

New Jersey is currently planning a broad effort to seek input from employers during the development of the WIOA state plan. While the details of this effort are currently being finalized, New Jersey plans to engage employers in the planning process by building on strong relationships with key business and industry groups and on the existing employer partnerships established by the state's seven industry-focused Talent Networks. The Blueprint report will be widely disseminated through the state's business and industry associations and through the Talent Networks and will form a foundation for further employer input.

SETC and LWD created multiple mechanisms for engaging stakeholders. The state created workgroups for each of its six key topics, planned and hosted a two-day WIOA conference attended by nearly 300 individuals, and created a [website](#) with a host of WIOA resources, including a place for stakeholders to submit feedback electronically. The workgroups, described below, meet for nearly two hours at a time every other week and include individuals who could spend the necessary time to become familiar with the detailed provisions of WIOA and to actively participate in meetings. The webinars, conference, and website were all designed to obtain input from a much broader group of stakeholders.

Workgroups

Each [workgroup](#) is led by an SETC or LWD employee with responsibility for programs relevant to the topic. For example, the workgroup on governance and planning is led by the SETC's Executive Director and Policy Analyst. The workgroups are composed of eight to 12 individuals, including local WIB directors, LWD staff, SETC staff, and other key stakeholders, including workforce service providers. The workgroups have been charged with conducting an in-depth review of relevant WIOA provisions, conducting stakeholder outreach, and making key policy and programmatic recommendations.

Workgroups are taking several actions to carry out this charge, and meet biweekly to keep the work moving forward.

- **WIOA Analysis:** Each workgroup analyzed WIOA and identified some of the major changes and opportunities under the new law.
- **Webinars:** Each workgroup hosted webinars for stakeholders throughout the state, covering topics such as changes under WIOA, workgroup priorities, best practices, and the planning timeline. The webinars also provide an opportunity for stakeholders to ask questions and offer input. Recordings of each workgroup's webinars are posted on the state's [WIOA Blueprint website](#).
- **Meeting with SETC's standing committees.** The workgroups have held joint meetings with the SETC's standing committees, including committees focused on governance, adult literacy, and performance, to ensure a connection to SETC members.
- **Working Sessions at WIOA Conference:** Each workgroup leader facilitated stakeholder conversations regarding their group's topic at the state's March 2015 two-day WIOA conference. To ensure that participating stakeholders came to sessions with a shared understanding of key issues, each workgroup prepared a one-page fact sheet summarizing an overview of the topic area, significant changes under WIOA, key action items, and discussion questions.

Workgroups will synthesize ideas and input from webinars, the state's WIOA conference working sessions, and other stakeholder engagement into recommendations made in the Blueprint report.

WIOA Conference

This spring, New Jersey hosted a two-day [WIOA conference](#) attended by nearly 300 people representing community colleges, disability service providers, community-based organizations serving youth, literacy and training providers, WIB directors, WIB members, one-stop operators, the state's seven industry-focused Talent Networks, and academic experts.

The conference provided state-specific and national perspectives on WIOA. SETC's Executive Director, LWD's Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner, and the Secretary of Higher Education's Chief of Staff explained the state's workforce goals and how WIOA provided an opportunity to achieve them by building on existing efforts and accomplishments. A panel of professionals from different sector partnerships in the state also highlighted effective partnership practices. (*See sidebar.*)

PARTNERSHIPS, PATHWAYS, AND PERFORMANCE ACCOUNTABILITY EMPHASIZED AT NJ'S WIOA CONFERENCE

Partnerships. New Jersey's WIOA conference illustrated how sector partnerships work on the ground with a panel of experienced practitioners. President Ray Yanuzzi of Camden Community College explained how the college works with multiple employers in advanced manufacturing to identify opportunities for developing industry-specific training, and then invests in the infrastructure necessary to do it. It's important to have ongoing engagement with employers rather than a one-time meeting, he emphasized. Regina Barbosa of Career Works, Newark Alliance described how her organization blends public and private dollars to support industry partnerships in healthcare and transportation, logistics, and distribution.

Pathways. Discussions of career pathways were among the best-attended working sessions at the conference – with so many attendees wishing to join them that they had to be moved to a larger room. Major themes included how to build on New Jersey's existing strengths, such as the Talent Networks, to further develop industry partnerships and career pathways under WIOA.

Performance Accountability. Discussions on performance and accountability were led by LWD's Tiffany Smith. Workgroups discussed how to share data across public programs and across information systems, how to make better use of existing data being collected, and how to ensure that stakeholders, such as service providers and prospective participants, have access to outcomes data.

Another conference panel featured representatives from National Skills Coalition, National Governors Association, the National Association of Workforce Administrators, and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation sharing their views on opportunities for New Jersey to use WIOA to better align its workforce development with employer needs. As discussed earlier, the conference offered working sessions to solicit stakeholders' ideas and input on the state's six planning topics. Multiple sessions were held on each topic, enabling conference attendees to more easily provide feedback on more than one topic.

DEVELOPING THE WIOA UNIFIED PLAN

In June 2015, New Jersey will begin to transform the Blueprint's strategy and recommendations into its unified state plan. The process, which is currently being finalized, will include mechanisms for obtaining significant feedback from employers, the continued work of the workgroups, and additional planning and conference sessions to engage a broader number of stakeholders. In accordance with WIOA, New Jersey will publish the draft unified plan for public comment in early 2016 and submit the plan to federal agencies in March 2016.

CONCLUSION: CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATES

New Jersey offers a useful example for states looking to implement a robust WIOA planning process. First, states should **set a vision** for the workforce development system they truly want and develop strategies that support that vision. These strategies should then be used to drive the operational elements of the state plan. New Jersey did this by starting its planning process with the development of its WIOA Blueprint. The Blueprint report will serve as a framework for developing an actionable unified plan.

Second, states looking to focus their planning effort on key skills strategies might consider **organizing topic-specific workgroups** as New Jersey did. Such workgroups can help states concentrate their planning efforts on key strategies. Workgroups also provide a vehicle for states to solicit stakeholder input as key strategies are developed. In addition to including local stakeholders, New Jersey's workgroups conducted webinars and facilitated in-person working sessions for stakeholders.

Finally, states should use **multiple and varied mechanisms for engaging diverse stakeholders** in the development of their plans. In addition to webinars, a website, and social media, New Jersey's two-day WIOA conference gave state leaders the chance to share their workforce vision and goals in person with nearly 300 stakeholders and provided an opportunity for the state to collect input and feedback from local workforce boards, community colleges, labor organizations, community-based organizations, and others.

By starting with a vision, focusing planning efforts on key skills strategies, and developing multiple ways to authentically engage a broad range of stakeholders, states can develop plans that can be used to realize innovation and opportunity under WIOA.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; Joint Rule for Unified and Combined State Plans, Performance Accountability, and the One-Stop System Joint Provisions; Notice of Proposed Rulemaking Page 20577.
- ² The six core programs are WIOA Title I services for adults, WIOA Title I services for dislocated workers, WIOA Title I services for youth, WIOA Title II Adult Education and Literacy, WIOA Title III Wagner-Peyser Employment Service, and WIOA Title IV Vocational Rehabilitation.
- ³ WIOA allows states to select which of two types of state plans they will submit: either a “unified plan” that includes strategic planning elements and operational planning elements for WIOA’s six core programs, or a “combined plan” that also includes one or more additional federally funded programs.
- ⁴ Descriptions are based on key action items outlined for each workgroup at <http://lwd.state.nj.us/labor/wioa/workgroups/>
- ⁵ See Slide 8 at <http://lwd.state.nj.us/labor/wioa/documents/webinar/WebinarGovernancePlanning2-12-15.pdf>

ABOUT NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION

National Skills Coalition is a non-partisan, broad-based coalition of employers, unions, education and training providers, and public officials working toward a vision of an America that grows its economy by investing in its people so that every worker and every industry has the skills to compete and prosper. We engage in organizing, advocacy, and communications to advance state and federal policies that support these goals — policies that are based on the on-the-ground expertise of our members.

National Skills Coalition was founded in 1998 as The Workforce Alliance in response to a series of federal policies that signaled the end of national investments in the skills of America's workers at a time when skill gaps were growing in key U.S. industries. Since then, we've demonstrated that investments in skills work. We've shown that diverse stakeholders can find agreement around specific reforms that will improve a variety of workforce education and training policies. And we have documented that the American public is strongly supportive of a deeper investment in the skills of America's workers. We continue to mobilize support for a new national skills agenda that cuts across public policies, and simultaneously serves a wide range of U.S. workers and industries.

National Skills Coalition is governed by a Board of Directors and advised by a national Leadership Council drawn from the ranks of business, labor, community colleges, community-based organizations, and the public workforce system.

More than 8,000 members, representing more than 3,000 organizations in all 50 states, comprise the broad-based membership of National Skills Coalition.

Learn more at www.nationalskillscoalition.org.



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