Expanding Agency Partnerships to Improve Reporting and Participant Services: A State Case Study and Resources

Introduction

Multiple agencies and organizations serve participants under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). To serve these participants effectively, agencies and organizations need to coordinate effectively—and one of the keys to doing so is collecting data regarding common customers. Why? Because:

- Better coordination and stronger partnerships enable WIOA programs to leverage resources to serve participants, and

- Accurate, timely data on the disability status of WIOA program participants enables frontline staff to better understand participants' needs, provide accommodations, and enhance accessibility.

This case study provides state and local workforce staff with resources to improve collaboration with key partners and to improve reporting to funders and among partners, which in turn can improve provision of service overall. The case study also showcases a collaborative effort implemented in Wisconsin that exemplifies the power of partnership to improve outcomes for job seekers with disabilities.

Resources

Broader partnerships and improved reporting of disability-related data can help states and localities leverage and fund additional program resources, resulting in more inclusive service provision to a full range of individuals seeking employment. The LEAD Center, a WIOA Policy Development Center funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, has created the following resources to help agencies expand and improve reporting through better collaboration.

Best Practices and Data: Serving Customers with Disabilities and Collecting WIOA Disability-Related Data Elements

Interactive WIOA-Related Disability Data Visualization Tool

LEADCenter
WIOA POLICY DEVELOPMENT

In addition, steps taken in Wisconsin provide an excellent example of collaboration in action. The following case study describes Wisconsin's efforts to better align its state workforce and its departments of education, health, human services, and corrections, among other partners, to improve outcomes for all. The case study also summarizes key lessons and offers useful resources for other states interested in promoting agency partnerships, integrating data systems, and providing more comprehensive customer services.

The Wisconsin Case Study

[Example MOU: Employment and Training, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Unemployment Insurance](#)

America's workforce system aims to cultivate professional and economic growth among a dynamic and diverse constituency of job seekers, workers, and employers. The agencies that make up each state's workforce system have historically evolved in an isolated and parallel fashion, despite having several overlapping constituencies and areas of focus. As Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development (DWD) found, such siloing of agencies—workforce, health, human services, public instruction, and others—each with separate and distinct administrative departments but serving many common customers, results in data redundancy, administrative inefficiency, inaccurate measurement of outcomes and program impacts, and poorer quality service.[1] This patchwork organization of services means that agencies cannot easily (or ever) determine whether the workforce system effectively supports an equitable and inclusive workforce or demonstrably benefits all.

Why Wisconsin Forged Partnerships

When Congress adopted WIOA, Wisconsin began to view formal agency service and data partnerships as critical to the state's long-term economic and social resiliency.[2] In 2018, DWD leadership began to promote more formal cross-agency partnerships. The DWD secretary advanced [the message](#) that better designed, coordinated, and delivered services within and between schools and workforce agencies would result in future benefits, including reduced costs for health and long-term care services and overall improvements to public health and well-being. Data-sharing agreements, many first crafted in the late 2010s, now enable siloed agencies to better understand the impact of their own programs, improve management of department budgets, and respond to community needs.

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[1] Virtual interviews with WI stakeholders in August and September 2022.
[2] Ibid.

Below are Wisconsin's state agency collaborative partners, by agency and subagency.

State Partners	Subagency	Subagency	Subagency	Subagency	Subagency
Department of Workforce Development	Employment and Training	Vocational Rehabilitation	Unemployment Insurance	Equal Rights	Worker's Compensation
Department of Children and Families	TANF	Child Welfare	-	-	-
Department of Health Services	Medicaid	SNAP (FoodShare)	-	-	-
Department of Corrections	Reentry Programs	-	-	-	-
Department of Public Instruction	State Longitudinal Data System	Career Readiness/ Career Pathways/ Career and Technical Education	Special Education	-	-
University of Wisconsin	Institute on Research and Poverty	Center for Education Research	-	-	-
Technical College System	WIOA Title II	Career Pathways	-	-	-

How Collaboration Bloomed

State agencies across Wisconsin's workforce system have a history of collaboration. Prior to WIOA, however, only limited relationships existed. Since WIOA's enactment in 2014, the state has used three broad strategies to encourage—and sometimes mandate—more robust partnerships between required and non-required WIOA partner agencies: legislative action, external financing, and intra- and interagency advocacy.

Legislation

DWD's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), the Department of Health Services (DHS), and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) have a long history of interagency collaboration in serving individuals with disabilities. Before WIOA's final regulations took effect in 2016, they codeveloped a Transition Action Guide (TAG), which served as one of the key mechanisms for collaboration in support of a shared client constituency. The TAG outlines all partners' roles and responsibilities in the transition process.

In 2017, the state legislature passed Act 178, which required DVR, DHS, and DPI to collaborate, with the input of stakeholders, in the development of a joint plan to increase competitive integrated employment (CIE), as outlined by WIOA. The Act also required partners to establish performance improvement targets; describe specific coordination methods to ensure that programs, policies, and procedures supported CIE; and, crucially, collect data documenting partnership outcomes.

Financing

Required and non-required WIOA partner agencies frequently operate with relatively stable funding, such as under a state budget line item or dedicated federal formula funding. However, these funds do not permit agencies to keep pace with cultural or technological change or respond adequately to extreme events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or climate-related disruptions. Over time and under different circumstances, agencies may struggle to fulfill their core service mandate effectively. In Wisconsin, the state successfully pursued competitive (often federal) funding opportunities made available in response to such extreme circumstances. For example, Wisconsin received grant funds from the Living Well and Let's Get to Work projects, funded by the federal Administration for Community Living, and the state's Healthcare Infrastructure Capital Investment grant program, made possible through funding under the Federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

State administrators incorporated cross-agency collaboration as a feature of grant proposals and a strategy to gain a competitive edge.[3] In drafting proposals, they used preliminary data to identify relationships between various programs and people served and indicated that funding would allow further data collection and result in more accurate outcomes data. This strategy can improve programs and benefit users. For example, the ARPA-funded Medicaid Infrastructure proposal argued that increased employment outcomes would have positive downstream effects on health and safety indicators—which the state could then accurately document as a result of formal data-sharing agreements with relevant partner agencies.

Leveraging agency partnerships to acquire competitive funding serves a dual purpose for Wisconsin: 1) an external-facing strategy to engage the Federal Government, foundations, and other large-scale funding sources in investing in the state, and 2) an internal-facing strategy to encourage buy-in from agency decision-makers on new partnership initiatives and subsequently ensure action to meet proposal objectives. This approach creates, in effect, a virtuous cycle of expanding agency collaboration: Preliminary partnership arrangements help secure funding, enabling more robust engagement, which then supports more robust formal partnerships.

Advocacy

Wisconsin incubated its culture of partnership at the leadership level through regular, often informal dialogue.

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[3] Ibid.

> "Having an engaged leader-to-leader exchange is needed. Our [DWD] administrator of employment and training was doing a monthly informal chat with the [administrator of] Technical Colleges. And that monthly touch-base, where they're just talking, opened the door for more formal partnership."
> —*Bryan Huebsch, Data Integration and Governance Manager, DWD*

The willingness of leaders to forge informal professional relationships helped cultivate a collaborative culture in the days after WIOA. These early relationships brought more leaders to the table around system integration and data-sharing opportunities—and ultimately led them to advocate for implementing those opportunities.[4]

Wisconsin did not make strides solely through the advocacy of agency leaders, though. Collaboration helped address well-understood challenges. Prior to WIOA, the administrators and agency staff responsible for documenting program outcomes frequently encountered the difficulty of capturing good data. The tools available to any single agency often proved inadequate or offered an incomplete picture. Cross-referencing outcomes data typically required making individual data requests, which, if approved, could take days or weeks to compile, plus additional time to interpret and reconcile.

More robust and comprehensive data-sharing partnerships required advocates and data experts to illustrate how the lack of collaboration posed challenges and offer tangible examples of how partnership could benefit staff at all program levels.[5] For example, as part of the process of documenting post-education outcomes, DPI conducts a post–high school survey to collect data on former students' employment outcomes. Such surveys yield only a limited percentage of respondents each year, however, resulting in incomplete datasets. Recognizing the limitations of this approach, DWD found a way to supplement DPI's data with the state's administrative wage datasets, which gave DPI a more complete—and more accurate— representation of student outcomes.

Ultimately, intra- and interagency advocates, at all levels, led to Wisconsin's successful workforce agency partnerships.

> "You can have all the bosses say 'Go,' and then have another group [such as legal counsel or data administrators] say, 'We don't know how,' or 'We don't want to do this.' And it can shut initiatives down. The DVR-DPI-DHS collaboration ultimately came from advocates at multiple levels." —*Ellie Hartman, Chief Evaluation Officer, DWD*

Beyond data-sharing initiatives, Wisconsin cultivated partnerships through the creation of intra- and interagency committees and workgroups. Examples include steering committees, budget committees, and research oversight groups. The state makes efforts to include all agency partners. Beyond ensuring that every stakeholder has a voice, these structures nurture personal

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

relationships, which help sustain interest and foster long-term culture change. They also offer a natural forum to advocate for additional changes and further collaboration.[6]

Key Lessons

Involve legal and privacy stewards early when developing partnership agreements, particularly for data sharing.

Early on, Wisconsin underestimated the time it would take for legal and data security departments to develop data-sharing agreements. The learning curve was steep. The state's data integration team learned to alert these critical stakeholders of important changes at the outset to address concerns early on.

Build in sustainability practices for a data integration team.

In addition to developing the state's Workforce Data Integration System, Wisconsin managed to support a data integration team within the Department of Workforce Development (DWD). The team helps the state increase research and program evaluation efforts, in turn enabling more efficient evidence-based policy making and service delivery. The state initially funded this data integration team largely through grant awards. However, recognizing that such funding is often temporary, agency partners revised partnership contracts to incorporate a cost-sharing agreement that would fund these valuable positions if their initial funding ended. Wisconsin now funds its data integration team through such an agreement.

Engage representatives from many agencies to foster an integrated governance structure.

Wisconsin actively recruits representatives from across the various workforce agency partners to participate in the Workforce Data Integration System workgroups, research and budget committees, steering committees, communications and messaging subgroups, and other councils, workgroups, and boards that govern the state's assorted grant programs. These internal governance structures serve multiple functions above and beyond governance; they serve as channels for working through hurdles in collaboration, uniting around shared goals and messaging, and cultivating cross-agency professional relationships between individuals.

Highlight the specific value-add to cross-agency messaging.

Cross-agency partnership requires significant amounts of time, funding, and staff resources. Personnel involved often already have full workloads. As workloads grow, staff tend to focus on their most essential tasks. Wisconsin's data integration team learned to be cognizant of how much it asks of staff and actively worked to demonstrate the results of their efforts and their continual progress toward project goals. In one example, a team hosted "Performance Fridays," highlighting the tangible outcomes that resulted from collaboration across agencies.

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[6] Ibid.

A Lasting Impact

Wisconsin's collaboration and partnership efforts represent elements of a broader push to foster cultural change across the state's workforce system, particularly with data collection and sharing. In recent years, the state built a longitudinal data system and developed new data quality standards, with the aim of accurately and comprehensively capturing outcomes at the local level. Achieving this level of cultural change and skill development—and persuading partner agencies to adopt these new tools and standards—requires sustained effort over time.

> "The key to collaboration began with decision-makers being open to collaboration and making a point to foster dialogue. The state's efforts have, in part, been successful because this has not been a one-time or occasional exchange, but a standing and consistent exchange." ***—Bryan Huebsch, Data Integration and Governance Manager, DWD***

Thus, a data integration team within DWD continues to lay a foundation for a shared understanding of data and ways to use it effectively and responsibly to improve DWD policy and programs. At the policy level, the state works to align data definitions across programs, a practice critical for creating a shared language to enable analysis and comparison of program outcomes. At the staff level, cross-program conversations continue among managers and frontline staff who work directly with participants and supervise data collection. These conversations look beyond mere program compliance and toward improved services and data that inform policy and decision-making while developing common program terminology. Ultimately, these ongoing discussions help staff understand how they benefit from high-quality data and help motivate them to improve data collection and use.

Cultural change within an organization often takes place over years, rather than days or weeks. Capturing robust data and putting it to use effectively allows Wisconsin to take a critical step toward building a broader commitment to evidence-based decision-making and improved services. To support this change, Wisconsin developed a robust learning agenda and evidence plan—to establish an anchor for evidence-based policy and research across agencies concerned with education, workforce, and human development—accompanied by training and capacity-building projects.