

Lifelong Learning Initiative for MFIP Families Ramsey County Workforce Solutions

Overview describing the innovative practice

The Lifelong Learning Initiative (LLI) offers a new approach to help families onto long-term career paths with sustaining wages. The current TANF/MFIP system was designed on a “work first” tenant; where getting any job, regardless of wage, interest, or aptitude, was theorized to be the best method to get families off long-term public assistance. Yet 20 years later, research shows the work first approach did not stabilize families long-term. Instead, families cycle on and off cash assistance as they move through low-pay and low-skill jobs.

The Lifelong Learning Initiative weaves together research-based modalities on how adults learn (i.e. self-determination, life application, task orientation, and reflection), develop executive functioning skills (i.e. decision making, priority setting, and life management), employment services, new tools, and advanced counselor training, to place families back in the center of their career goals.

The Lifelong Learning Initiative is not a program, rather it is a holistic reboot in how we deliver services and encourage families to partner with us. Below are highlights of some of the most significant changes.

- **Orientation:** From the moment a person walks into a LLI office, they will notice a significant difference from other employment services programs. At orientation, and throughout the very individualized services, adult learning principles are used to help families visualize their goals and what it will take to get there. We share the supports available and allow the person to determine which supports would best support their goals. Participants leave orientation with a self-determined mini road map, not a weighty list of compliance rules and regulations.
- **Intensive Counselor Development:** Counselors received significant training in (a) executive skills assessments and goal setting frameworks, including how the effects of long-term poverty impact the development of these skills; (b) Motivational Interviewing (MI), a research based, interview technique adapted from the mental health field, including hours of peer to peer MI skill development, and (3) advanced coaching techniques developed through a series of system-wide trainings.
- **Tool Development:** New tools that help families visualize and plan out their short and long term goals were developed in collaboration with expert partners in the fields of goal setting frameworks, employment services and executive function.
 - **My Bridge of Strength:** Developed with the guidance of EMPATH, formerly Crittenton Women’s Union, out of Boston. This visual self-assessment helps families identify where they currently reside on multiple life dimensions (family stability, well-being, education, financial and legal, employment) and chart out where they would like to be.
 - **Executive Skills Profile:** This self-assessment identifies strengths and weaknesses in regards to executive skills. It looks at various dimensions on how people organize things, react to things, and get things done. This information is used by to help a person understand how they can use their strengths and work through weaknesses to reach their employment goals.
 - **Action Plans, Task Plans, and Task Reviews:** These tools help families set SMART goals, break them into doable tasks and provide opportunity for reflection.
 - **Career Pathways Maps:** Developed with the guidance of our education partners and WIB, these career maps chart out how to stack education to create long term careers in our selected industries of hospitality, healthcare and manufacturing.

Jobseeker impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for jobseekers)

Mathematica Policy Research, a national, non-partisan research institute dedicated to improving public well-being, partnered with us to develop and evaluate the implementation of LLI through a process called Rapid Cycle Learning (RCL). RCL is an iterative approach that allows us to gradually roll out a complex intervention over the course of 20 weeks, which included opportunities to learn and adapt implementation based on

formative feedback. Mathematica, with our internal Ramsey County evaluators, will continue to evaluate LLI and incorporate learnings into a continuous improvement framework. The evaluation measures job seeker improvements in our four performance outcome areas: Engagement, Education, Employment and Employment Retention. The evaluation will utilize a randomized control experimental research design, allowing all stakeholders and policy makers to learn from the impact of the study over a one-year enrollment period beginning September 1, 2016.

Early observations from the RCLs indicate increased overall engagement, with more focused and meaningful sessions occurring between the family and employment counselor. The employment plans show families taking advantage of the new tools and approach to drive their goal-development process, while being coached and motivated by trained and skilled counselors. Increases in follow-through related to established goals is also being observed through the RCL process. A fidelity review and toolkit is being developed as part of the overall evaluation plan, so that consistency in implementation is achieved and maintained as long as LLI used.

Employer/Community impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for non-jobseekers)

The LLI approach benefits the community as the whole. Skills gains in decision making, priority setting, and planning, increase a family’s ability and confidence to also manage their health, children’s education, personal finances, and more. It creates a more stable families, and hence, more stable communities.

Employers have increased access to a prepared workforce with a high quotient of executive and “soft” skills, industry recognized credentials in high demand jobs, and who have goals for career advancement, creating a more stable workforce for employers.

Identification of those involved, including collaborators

Collaborator	Role
Workforce Innovation Board of Ramsey County	Oversight and support, career pathway connectors, employer connectors
Ramsey County Workforce Solutions	Administrator, convener, trainer, policy and tool developer, employment coaches
Ramsey Count Health & Wellness	Program development and evaluation
Mathematic Policy Research	Program development and evaluation
Goodwill/Easter Seals	Employment coaches, collaborator, feedback and input into service design and effectiveness
Lifetrack Resources	Employment coaches, collaborator, feedback and input, into service design and effectiveness
Families receiving supports from MFIP	Goal setters, decision makers, feedback and input into service design and effectiveness
EMPATH	Guidance and tool development

Leveraging/alignment of outside resources

Outside resources have been used over a three-year period to develop the Life-Long Learning Initiative. Think tanks, policy analysts and developers, non-profits, research institutes, and governments have been convening to develop better ways to work with families to improve their employment outcomes, achieve self-sufficiency, and family stabilization. Over this same time, Ramsey County has been working closely with experts in each of these fields, including those outside of workforce development such as brain science, toxic stress, racial equity, and historical trauma experts to build better programs for improving the lives of families.

Ideas for replication/lessons learned

1. All tools developed can be replicated for any populations or workforce program.
2. The LLI toolkit is in the public domain so it can be used by anyone interested.
3. The evaluation will run through 2017, but lessons learned will be shared throughout the process.