

Program/Initiative Name: Karen Outreach and Job Search Instructor
WSA NAME: Workforce Development, Inc.

Overview describing the innovative practice

For the past few years we have seen a dramatic increase in the amount of Karen refugees in the Austin and Albert Lea communities. Many of these individuals originally settled in the Minneapolis and St. Paul areas but a large number have migrated south due to the lower cost of living, number of available jobs, and quality of the school system.

The number of available interpreters who speak the Karen/Karenni/Burmese and Thai languages are limited in our area and we weren't able to meet the needs of these customers in regards to applications for assistance, employment counseling and job searching. As WorkForce Centers we were hiring interpreters from our local Welcome Center to sit in on our appointments which worked well when the interpreters were available. However, interpreter availability has been limited and interpreters were only available for in person appointments; when we needed assistance setting up appointments, and making follow-up phone calls as well we didn't have a way to access such supports. The Language Line was another option that we utilized, but we found the interactions to be much more impactful when the interpreter was available for a face to face orientation and meeting.

In April of this year we hired a Karen Outreach and Job Search Instructor. Eh Mwee has had an amazing impact on our customers and across the greater Austin and Albert Lea communities during the three months she has been with us. Eh assists our Career Counselors in setting up meetings with their customers and sits in on meetings to interpret and support our customers with paperwork. She also serves as an educator and resource to our Career Counselors and staff on the Karen community.

Eh was born in Burma/Myanmar but was orphaned at a young age. She was adopted and raised in Thailand. Before working with us she served as a Success Coach for the local school district and prior to that, as an employee for a food processing plant in our area.

Jobseeker impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for jobseekers)

In the past three months Eh has assisted 19 individuals in securing employment in the Austin and Albert Lea communities. Ranging in age from 21 to 57, some of these individuals are on the caseload of our Career Counselors (i.e. they're participating in a state or federal funded program) and some are universal customers who have come to us to get support from Eh.

In addition to securing employment for those 19 individuals, Eh has worked with numerous other individuals on the applications, resumes, interviews, and even some employment orientation. In her conversations with our job seekers she also directs them to other community agencies and support systems to make sure all of their needs, and the needs of their families are being met.

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

We have assisted in filling some of the hiring needs of 9 different employers in the two communities, which has also resulted in a more diverse worksite for these companies and organizations. Our hope is that employers will see the amazing work ethic and contribution of these individuals and be willing to hire on additional members of this specific community of individuals.

Eh has worked with our local Placement Specialists in both communities to reach out to employer's and go on site visits. She has been able to assist employers in identifying positions that individuals with limited English could find success in.

Identification of those involved, including collaborators

Area businesses (Hy-Vee, Trails Travel Center, Bellisio Foods, Select Foods, Quality Pork Processors, Cargill, King Maintenance, AmericInn, Audi).

Local Adult Basic Education Centers- Austin Area Learning and Albert Lea Basic Education
The Austin Welcome Center and The Albert Lea Resource Room

Leveraging/alignment of outside resources

We have made good use of the partnerships and relationships we have with the businesses in our area. They have been very invested in this opportunity because of the need for a larger workforce. We have also worked with the school district and local Adult Basic Education providers to identify and refer individuals to our services. In addition, Eh has met with the Welcome Centers in our two communities to encourage the referral of their participants to our extensive services.

The funding for this innovation has been solely through Workforce Development, Inc.

Ideas for replication/lessons learned

This project wouldn't be as successful if we didn't have the right staff member. Eh is incredibly passionate about her position and the role she holds within the Karen community. We have found that having Eh tour different employers really increases the employers knowledge of the Karen community, and has created some opportunities for jobs that wouldn't typically have been identified as something an individual who is learning English could do.

We have also found that having Eh talk with the Karen community members about jobs has increased their self-confidence. The Karen people are very respectful, reserved, and tentative to speak up for fear of speaking the English language incorrectly. We noticed a lack of confidence in our customers to apply for some positions until Eh could explain to them what they would be doing. However, once explained, or better yet shown the work, they were eager to take on new tasks.

We believe this is a process which can successfully be replicated in other areas for other populations with the right staff person in place.