

Universal Customer Program
South East Minnesota Workforce Development, Inc

Overview describing the innovative practice:

Over the past four years we have received funding from our local United Way to assist individuals with obtaining and maintaining employment. What started off as a safety net for individuals moving off of cash assistance has branched out into a support services system for low income individuals looking to find work, or who have recently found work.

With the goal of decreasing the number of individuals and families classified as living in poverty, or the “working poor”, we approached the United Way in February of 2015 to request funding for our “Universal Customer” Program.

Anyone who walks into the WorkForce Center will receive assistance from one of the Workforce Development, Inc. (WDI) staff. The assistance ranges from gathering job postings and applications to one-on-one career counseling sessions with interest inventory assessments, resume writing and job interview practice sessions. We found that as wonderful as those services are, people were losing jobs because they couldn’t afford the various items needed before work could begin, they couldn’t get to a job interview in the first place, or they didn’t have a phone number to put down for employers to call them. If a person isn’t eligible for a state or federally funded program (TANF, WIOA, etc.) then there isn’t support funding available to them.

With our “Universal Customer” funding we are able to provide job seekers with gas vouchers and bus tokens to get to interviews, clothing vouchers for interview clothes, two months’ worth of cell phone cards for job search purposes, etc. Once a person has obtained employment we can offer assistance for the first six weeks of that employment, typically in the form of gas vouchers, bus tokens or car repairs to get to work, scrubs, shoes, steel-toed boots, welding helmets, “cold-climate” clothing, etc. to make sure an individual is prepared for work on the first day. We can also provide a month’s rent, car insurance or day care assistance for individuals so they can focus on work and get to their first and hopefully second paycheck.

Jobseeker impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for jobseekers)

This program has been incredibly successful in supporting individuals in maintaining employment. Prior to this funding many of our customers had been offered employment, but have had to turn it down because they didn’t have the right clothing or equipment for the job. Now these customers can do a small amount of paperwork, we verify their identity and income, and we are able to enroll them and write them a voucher for their supplies the next day. We also are able to connect with them to offer job retention services and a person to talk to through the first few stressful weeks of a new job. We have been able to support individuals in keeping their employment when they become frustrated (new jobs are tough!) by counseling them through their challenges. We also encourage them to work with us on a new resume, present options to hone their job search skills, and identify potential learning opportunities to advance them along their career paths.

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

Our employers benefit by having lower turn-over with the individuals we work with. Families are also greatly impacted by the job retention of their family members/moms and dads. When individuals come in for support services we offer them our core services as well, which allows them to further their job seeking tool-kit, identify areas of interest for employment and refer others to us for those services as well.

Identification of those involved, including collaborators

The Mower County United Way is our funding source and greatest supporter. They have allowed us to change lives. Workforce Development, Inc. (WDI) executes the program and provides the career counseling services, grant management, case noting and tracking.

Leveraging/alignment of outside resources

When we meet with our customers we are able to identify other potential supports through programs like WIOA (when training is desired). We can also refer them to other support services in the community whether it be through other United Way programs, the Welcome Center, The Salvation Army, etc.

Ideas for replication/lessons learned

The greatest hurdle to a program such as this is finding a funding source for support services which isn't attached to a formal program or training.

We were cautious in promoting our program in fear of being overwhelmed with requests, so we started talking with people who were in the WorkForce Center and digging deeper into our conversations with them to identify their needs. For example, while reviewing someone's application we may notice they don't have a phone number listed. If we find out they don't have a phone, we can help with that. If a person has an on-site interview with a local employer and tells us how excited they are to have gotten the job, but they don't know how they are going to buy the black pants and no-skid shoes that are required from day one, we can help with that. Many of the supports we have been able to offer come from talking with our clients about their needs and meeting them where they are.