Northern Area Local Workforce Development Board

**Identifying and Implementing Best Practices for Youth Services
Under the Workforce Investment Act**

**Final Report
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Background

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 was a systemic response to growing needs in the workforce development system for state and local flexibility, customer input and preparation of the nation's workforce for a new economy. Members of northern New Mexico's workforce development board, and especially those involved in its youth employment system, have responded to the WIA challenge by bringing together a vocal Youth Council and working with with training providers who specialize in service delivery to youth.

The Northern Area Local Workforce Development Board contracted with Education and Workforce Consultants to facilitate two meetings of Youth Council members and training providers in order to devise a locally-driven definition of "best practice" for its youth employment providers. The purpose of these two meetings was to develop this definition, research and share some nationally-recognized practices and identify practices currently employed by youth training providers. Information gathered as a result of these research efforts was intended to help Youth Council members and staff of the NALWDB prepare a model Request for Proposal for the area's training providers.

Training was provided to the area's youth training providers on the topics of the Workforce Investment Act, youth development, workforce development, evaluation and management principles. The consultant provided detailed information on using and gathering self-assessment data from the Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet) principles of the National Youth Employment Coalition. The consultant employed the services of the Executive of the National Youth Employment Coalition to provide detailed information on the Workforce Investment Act reauthorization.

Youth employment, youth development and WIA policy implications at the national, state and local levels were discussed at the first meeting in a way that was meant to elicit responses from best practice efforts underway in the northern New Mexico area. The training and discussions were also focused on ways in which to concentrate on locally-driven practices with special attention to rural needs.

Organization of Report
This report is divided into two sections: Part I includes a proposed definition of "best practices" as a working definition advanced by the local training providers. This section includes the results of a first meeting of the Youth Council members and training providers.
Part II of this report highlights local providers' practices around workforce development and youth development. This section includes the findings from the surveys and self-assessments that were conducted over the short course of this work.

The consultant acknowledges the input and guidance provided by Frank Carrasco, Adrian Ortiz, Mike Mier, Mary Jean Christensen and especially the training providers of the NALWDB including, Eight Northern Indian Pueblos Council, Home Education Livelihood Program (H.E.L.P.), SER, Siete del Norte, Future Foundations Family Center, Connections Consortium, Job Corps and the Pueblo of Zuni.

Part I - Development and Definition of Best Practices

Training and discussion during both meeting sessions focused on training providers' understanding of the elements of an effective system of youth employment. Training content emphasized youth workers' understanding of youth development, workforce development, evidence of success and management and organizational issues as ways to advance their own skills as well as those practices within their organizations.

As a result of the two meetings, the group of training providers (which also included as many as four Youth Council members at one meeting) developed the following statement. This constitutes NALWDB's training providers' **working definition of Best Practice**:

> ** Enrich the education and abilities of youth and provides opportunities to further their future in the workforce;*
> ** Focused on development of youth in the workforce and which are sustainable, replicable, measurable, responsive and customized for communities and individuals involved; and*
> ** Demonstrate evidence of success through the shared use of comparative information.*

The definition was actively guided by an understanding of the PEPNet principles of effective youth programs (including nationally-recognized rural examples). The PEPNet criteria were discussed among the providers and efforts made to draw forth those practices employed by the NALWDB training providers.

PEPNet criteria, used as a foundation for the development of the working "best practice" definition, includes the following key points:

- Purpose and Activities. The organization or initiative understands its mission and accomplishes that mission through its activities.

- Organization and Management. Strong, stable and competent management operate the organization or initiative.

- Youth Development. There is a conscious and professional reliance on principles of youth development[1] in identifying activities and shaping the program environment, structure and operations.

- Workforce Development. Participants develop knowledge, skills and competencies that will lead to jobs and/or education, careers and self-sufficiency.

- Evidence of Success. The organization or initiative collects and makes use of credible data that reflect sound goals, operational outcomes and ability to achieve desired outcomes.

Throughout the training and the two facilitated discussions, these principles were reiterated and served as a foundation from which to approach the work of understanding best practice and improving on current practice.

Part II Survey Results and Training Providers' Practices

Doing Well: Results of the objective self-assessment and subjective questionnaires led to enlightening results. Overall, training providers have a positive view of their delivery of the following service components:

- Youth Work Experience. Providers state that work experience is an important aspect of the contribution they make on behalf of young people's development. Training providers understand that work experience is a way for young people to develop self-knowledge, gain employability skills and better understand the workplace and employers.

- GED Preparation. Providers generally agree that GED preparation is essential to their task of preparing youth for the world of work. Providers also self-report that their organization deliver this service component well.

- Tutoring/Mentoring. Training providers report that, through work experience or other program components, they deliver a positive experience for youth's development through tutoring and/or mentoring. The tutoring/mentoring component includes foster grandparent programs and creative use and work experience supervisors.

- Occupational Skills Training. One provider reports that the organization effectively delivers occupational skills training especially well. Related employability skills training built around communications skills, competencies and career interests is a particular strength of this provider. This assessment, coupled with work experience opportunities for youth, engages the business community and promotes career awareness among youth.

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[1] There is no one definition of the term "youth development." To this writer it includes an intentional focus on positive views of young people as a starting point and the recognition that all youth need a variety of opportunities, safe places and the active involvement of caring adults and peers as they grow and develop.

- Leadership Development. This program component was reported by two training providers as a key aspect of the program that effectively enhances youth's personal development. Examples of leadership development among the providers are inclusion of youth in job fairs, at small fundraisers. One of the meetings with training providers included a discussion of ways that youth could be engaged as spokespeople for the organization and as leaders in policy development within the organization.

Additional program areas that training providers are conducting well, according to the training providers themselves, include:

- Supportive Services. One of the training providers notes that the organization does especially effective work at determining the needs of a young person and then arranging additional services (transportation, child care) the customer needs.

- Organization and management. Nearly half of the training providers report that they are led by competent, professional leaders, and that these leaders, in turn, are led by an interested and engaged Board of Directors. One organization reported that the organization is further strengthened by monthly reporting and holding of regular management meetings to discuss customer service delivery and performance.

Needs Improvement: Self-reports of effective practices are balanced by those practices the organizations could do a better job at providing. Training providers state they need to improve their organizational practices in:

- Youth programs tailored to meet individual needs. Providers state through the self-assessment that their organizations could do a better job at developing, offering or approaching their program components in ways that are age- and stage-appropriate according to each young person's needs.

- Engaging employers. Providers self-report they could do a better job at engaging employers in their programs and hooking employers on the services offered by the organization.

- Documenting and communicating competencies. Training providers were asked whether their organizations document competencies gained by youth and then whether they communicate these gains to the public, especially potential employers. Providers recognize they could do a better job at documenting then communicating the employability and competencies gained by youth.

- Follow-up services. All training providers have difficulty with this required element of WIA. There are two sides to the provision of follow-up services: a currently-funded program should be expected to provide follow-up services to all youth in the previous year's program, a requirement that is burdensome to those not receiving program funding in the current year. In addition, the likelihood of a young people's long-term success is greater if he/she is also benefiting from follow-up, check-in and re-entry if necessary in the program to regain supportive services.

- Attracting stable and diverse funding. Providers self-report that, although their organizations are staffed with competent leadership, the organizations have difficulty attracting funding that will carry them through difficult and transitory periods.

- Improving management through staff development. All training providers report that their organizations would benefit through staff development and professional development efforts aimed at increasing their skills and knowledge of youth employment and management practices.

- Community outreach and presentations. Finally, there are differences among the providers although most report that staff of their organizations present to school board members, local officials and representatives of community-based organizations only rarely or as-needed. It is clear that training providers could communicate with other community leaders about their programs. As stated in one of the training sessions: "There are two audiences in your community. Those who are interested in youth programs and those who **should be** interested in youth programs."

Providers agreed at the end of the second meeting to continue to meet and to share effective practices and to engage in discussions that help solve organizational problems—individual and collective. They also agreed to undertake more discussion on conducting community resource-mapping of youth programs in their own communities. Specifically, training providers agreed to:

- Use every opportunity to advocate for youth's employment
- Convene to discuss common issues to better serve youth
- Provide a synopsis to Youth Council members of what each of the training providers' programs offers youth
- Use required customer satisfaction surveys to improve their practice

Summary

Training was provided to the area's youth training providers on the topics of the Workforce Investment Act, youth development, workforce development, evaluation and management principles. The consultant used self-assessment data from the Promising and Effective Practices (PEPNet) principles of the National Youth Employment Coalition, prepared and administered a second survey and used this information to develop a working definition of "best practice."

The training emphasized youth workers' understanding of youth development, workforce development, evidence of success and management and organizational issues as ways to advance their own work and the youth field in northern New Mexico. The consultant sought to advance the role of the Youth Council in creating the environment for staff to excel, learn and, thereby serve customers effectively—this being one of the functions of the Youth Council.

Recommendations are as follows:

** Given the level and depth of discussion that has occurred as a result of the two meetings, it is recommended that the training providers continue to meet with Board staff to work through issues requiring resolution. Several of the issues raised during the two meetings around "best practice" might be somewhat easily resolved with a few face-to-face meetings. Effective practice is achievable given a mission that all can agree upon and that all providers and Youth Council members push forward.

** Program improvements also will be made region-wide if the strengths of one program can be built upon by other providers. For example, an effective life skills or mentoring program of one of the training providers in the region might be a tool that other providers could adapt for use in their area. All training providers have particular strengths, skills and audiences that each of the other providers can work with and learn from. Examples of strengths to be cultivated include involving parents and peers, engaging employers, marketing to education officials and other community organizations, holding focus groups for youth, conducting a community resource mapping.

** The best practice definition as stated on page 2 should be reviewed by members of the Youth Council and agreed upon by all members as guiding definitions for its work in the coming year. This definition could be used to draw together workforce boards from around the state as a discussion tool for solving common problems at the board level and for communicating with the state Department of Labor those service delivery issues that affect youth. Issues concerning follow-up and documentation should be discussed with officials from other local boards around the state.

** Members of the Youth Council and staff of the Board should encourage training providers to complete a PEPNet Self-Assessment for national recognition and/or for internal program improvement. The Self-Assessment is an excellent tool for understanding what is present, what is needed and serves as a starting point on how program can improve practice. The PEPNet Self-Assessment exercise is attached and may be adapted by members of the Youth Council.

Questions on this report should be directed to Adrienne R. Smith, Education and Workforce Consultants at 505.867.6046 or AdrienneRsmith@aol.com.
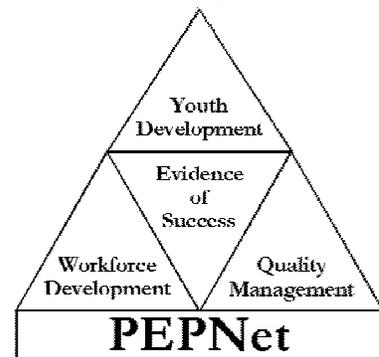
NATIONAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT COALITION

PEPNet Self Assessment Exercise

This following Self Assessment Exercise was created to help you start thinking about how you would proceed with a full PEPNet Self Assessment of your initiative.

The PEPNet Self Assessment Exercise (available electronically at www.nyec.org/pepnet/reports) may be downloaded and modified, to fit the needs of your organization. You may use this in any way that helps you. One common approach employs the exercise as a way to begin the self assessment process with staff members. Each individual may complete a separate document, then share and compare results. The exercise is an excellent way to get initial input from a large number of staff and other stakeholders. After completing the Self Assessment Exercise, you'll be ready to plan your approach for a thorough process of examination and self-reflection by using the complete PEPNet Self Assessment.

For more information on PEPNet

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PURPOSE AND ACTIVITIES Effective initiatives have clear and well-understood aims and a coherent, well-organized set of components and activities to attain them. *Selected PEPNet Self Assessment Questions*	No Evidence	Addressing minimally	Doing good work	Fully integrated
PA1 Mission: The initiative presents a clear and consistent mission.				
PA2 Target Youth: There is a logical and visible relationship between the initiative's mission, activities and the youth it serves.				
PA3 Activities: The initiative's mission shapes its structure and offerings.				

ORGANIZATION and MANAGEMENT *Effective initiatives are well managed, work in collaboration with others and are committed to continuous improvement* *Selected PEPNet Self Assessment Questions*	No Evidence	Addressing minimally	Doing good work	Fully integrated
OM1 Leadership: The initiative maintains a strong, engaged, continuous and competent leadership.				
OM2 Staff Development: The initiative incorporates staff development as a management strategy.				
OM3 Collaboration: The initiative leverages resources through collaboration.				
OM4 Continuous Improvement: The initiative is committed to a continuous improvement strategy.				
OM5 Funding: The initiative attracts stable and diverse funding.				

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS *Effective initiatives collect appropriate and credible data that enable them to document their operational effectiveness and their ability to achieve desired outcomes.* *Selected PEPNet Self Assessment Questions*	No Evidence	Addressing minimally	Doing good work	Fully integrated
ES1 Descriptive Data: The initiative collects information on its current operations, services and participants.				
ES2 Outcome Data: The initiative establishes measurable objectives that reflect its goals and collects solid information about the results of its activities.				
ES 3 Comparative Measures: The initiative seeks sources of comparative information and data.				

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT *Effective initiatives consciously rely on youth development principles to identify activities and shape the program environment, structure and operations.* *Selected PEPNet Self Assessment Questions*	No Evidence	Addressing minimally	Doing good work	Fully integrated
YD1 Youth/Adult Relationships: The initiative nurtures sustained relationships between youth and caring, knowledgeable adults.				
YD2 Youth Responsibility and Leadership: The initiative engages youth in their development and sets high expectations for them.				
YD3 Individual Focus and Age/Stage Appropriate Outlook: The initiative tailors the program experience for each youth and also provides age and/or stage appropriate services for its participants.				
YD4 Family and Peer Support: The initiative encourages positive relationships with family and peers.				

	No Evidence	Addressing minimally	Doing good work	Fully integrated
YD5 Supportive Services and Opportunities: The initiative provides youth with supportive services and opportunities beyond education and training.				
YD6 Building Sense of Self and of Group: The initiative helps youth develop a sense of group membership while fostering a sense of identity and self.				

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT *Effective initiatives emphasize the development of knowledge and competencies that lead to careers and self-sufficiency and stress the connection between learning and work.* *Selected PEPNet Self Assessment Questions*	No Evidence	Addressing minimally	Doing good work	Fully integrated
WD1 Career Awareness, Planning and Readiness: The initiative nurtures career awareness and embeds career planning and readiness throughout the program.				
WD2 Employer Engagement: The initiative ensures that employers are actively engaged in the initiative.				
WD3 Work and Learning Connection: The initiative relates academic learning to real-life work issues and situations and stresses active learning.				
WD4 Competencies Emphasis: The initiative documents and communicates competencies gained by young people.				
WD5 Extended Follow-up: The initiative provides extended services and support.?				