

MWCA Best Practices  
WSA: Anoka County Job Training Center  
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## **ANOKA COUNTY MINNESOTA FAMILY INVESTMENT PROGRAM WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAM**

### **Overview of Program**

In October 2007 the Anoka County Job Training Center successfully launched a paid work experience program to serve Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) participants. This transitional program is one service component on a continuum of job search services offered to MFIP participants. It is designed to match MFIP participants who have not been successful in securing unsubsidized employment to a community work experience site. The job counselors refer participants who have either exhausted their six week job search requirement or have had little or no recent work history.

A specialized team of staff work directly with MFIP job counselors, area employers and participants. This team is responsible for conducting outreach, weekly participation orientations, development of community worksites, supervisor orientations, assessment of participants' skills and interests and personal job matching to worksites, processing of payroll, monitoring of worksites, job coaching, follow-up and evaluation of the placement. The team serves as the first point of contact if there are issues at the worksite.

To ensure that participants and employers understand program expectations the staff have designed special materials that cover workplace expectations, job keeping strategies, payroll and time card processes, workplace safety, and other work related issues. The goal is to provide each participant the opportunity to have a meaningful work experience, develop marketable job skills, and to build their resume and gain references that will support them in their transition to private sector employment.

Operating a complex program of this nature requires good communication and team work and the ability to connect across County departments and establish collaborative working relationships with community non-profits and public sites throughout Anoka County. As a result, the team has been successful in spending Anoka's entire allocation for supported work activities for the period ending June 30.

### **Job Seeker Impact**

Since the start of the program a total of 156 participants have been placed at various community work sites. Participation in this structured work opportunity provides parents the opportunity to gain valuable skills that prepares them for the competitive labor market. Additionally, paid work experience is a countable activity making it easier for participants to meet the work requirement rules. Participants with significant barriers to employment are realizing success as they are in a structured environment with supports that enable them to develop work skills and balance work and family in a very real work setting. Often the site supervisors serve as mentors which lends toward mastery of work tasks and fosters personal growth in managing work and family demands.

As of June 30, 2008 a total of 59 participants have transitioned to unsubsidized employment and are earning an average hourly wage of \$9.25. Some of these job placements have actually occurred at their assigned work experience site and others within the private sector. In addition, 29 of these job placements have resulted in the closing of cash benefits with average hourly wages of \$8.99.

Feedback from the participants has been positive; it builds their confidence and self-esteem. Many indicate that without the opportunity to refine their work skills they would have not been able to readily compete for private sector jobs. They may have been screened out because of their lack of work history or perhaps because of some challenges due to mental health or cognitive concerns. In addition to developing a recent work history they believe they are contributing to the community while developing a skill base. They are also developing financial literacy skills and opening up bank accounts for direct deposit of their paycheck.

### **Community Impact**

There has been widespread community support for this program and area employers have welcomed the opportunity to partner with the Anoka County Job Training Center in this endeavor. There is an array of host agencies participating and the team has developed over 100 job opportunities through their community outreach efforts. An illustrative list of participating agencies include local area school districts, Anoka County, Anoka County Community Action Program, Salvation Army, Goodwill, Metro North Adult Basic Education Center, Community Emergency Assistance Program, city government offices, Crest View Senior Communities, Mercy and Unity Hospitals, Volunteers of America and Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity.

There is a mutually beneficial arrangement; the worksites are able to mentor participants to gain new work skills and positive work habits while gaining additional assistance with completing specific work assignments. Several worksites have been able to hire participants based upon their available revenues. Participants feel more connected to their local community as many of the work opportunities are within their community. And for some the chance to work in a social service environment reinforces their interest in playing a helping role.

### **Key Collaborators**

The successful implementation of this program is the result of a team of Job Training Center staff including the Work Experience Program Staff, MFIP managers, MFIP Job Counselors, and the array of host employment sites. As previously mentioned there are numerous community nonprofit, education, and government partners and their support and continued interest in providing meaningful work opportunities remains essential to the success of this program. Their cooperation in outlining the job responsibilities and providing site supervision allows the staff to carefully match participants to a work assignment that allows for further development of marketable job skills.

### **Leveraging Resources**

A special funding allocation from the Department of Human Services for this effort coupled with MFIP consolidated block grant funds has enabled Anoka County to implement a comprehensive program. Partnering worksites provide the work and site supervision therefore the majority of the special funding is allocated to pay participant wages.

### **Lessons Learned**

The team has developed effective outreach and recruitment strategies for participants and worksites including a specialized data base to manage participant records and site locations. The weekly

participant orientations have proven to be an effective strategy in communication critical aspects of the program. The team has automated processes in place to ensure participants are referred to the orientations in a timely manner. There are defined processes for ensuring the collection of required paperwork for payroll processing and time card collections. Additionally, there are participant handbooks and site supervisory orientation materials that can be modified to meet other local area needs. The team has also identified effective communication protocols among other Job Training Center programs that offer paid work experience opportunities serving youth and older adults.