



## MWCA Best Practices

### SUBMISSION FORM

WIB Name/WSA: **Ramsey County Workforce Solutions (WSA #15)**

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#### **Innovation at the local government front-line level: Changing Lives One Bite At A Time**

Supported Work Program October 1, 2007 through June 30, 2008

##### **Overview**

Workforce Solutions is the administrative entity for the jobs and training programs operating under the authority of the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners and is a representation of their investment and interest in workforce development within Ramsey County.<sup>1</sup> In addition to partnering with community-based organizations to provide employment services, Workforce Solutions provides direct services to approximately six hundred Minnesota Family Investment Program participants through the Workforce Solutions Assisted Services unit.

Traditionally, when Workforce Solutions develops resources for the employment service providers (eight different community based organizations or units), the practice has been to do so through the Workforce Solutions Cash Assistance administrative planning unit. For example, in the case of developing new transitional work services, the practice would be for the Workforce Solutions planners to conceptualize, develop the scope of services and then select outside vendors to provide these services to MFIP clients, including Workforce Solutions Assisted Services participants. The result of this process was a menu of transitional work opportunities in production, manufacturing, retail, and customer sales support areas.

Workforce Solutions management was interested in the role of individual-driven innovation initiatives that were conceived and championed by front-line staff as a means of demonstrating that individuals are not powerless in a bureaucratic system. An opportunity was developed by one of the Assisted Services staff members for a transitional work experience that not only accomplished work skill development, but also contributed to life-style and health choice changes.

The question that was considered was: If Workforce Solutions Assisted Services implemented, from the desk of one job counselor (in addition to her other duties), a small transitional employment program placing MFIP participants in a food career industry position but not behind the fast-food counter or grocery store cash register, could it make a difference in the life of the participant and bring new employers into the realm of social enterprise?

Called Changing Lives One Bite At A Time (affectionately termed One Bite by staff), the focus of the Assisted Services transitional work program was to help interested participants gain work experience, knowledge and skills in the produce and grocery supplier environment, particularly, inventory receipt and control; inspection/sorting; quality control; area stocking (from shelves, stores, coolers or freezers); display building; cleaning; ordering supplies from warehouse or supplier; packing customer purchases; supply schedule reading and planning; moving supplies; food prep; food safety; and customer service.

##### **Impact on job seekers**

During the period from October 1, 2007 through June 30, 2008, the majority of Workforce Solutions Assisted Services MFIP participants who were enrolled in transitional work program did so through the services

designed and implemented through the administrative planners. Seventeen individuals, interested in the food industry, enrolled and participated in the \$7.00 an hour, 25-hour a week One Bite program.

Using funds from a Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) transitional work project, One Bite went live in October 2007. Almost immediately, because of the state funding, an opportunity came up that innovatively led to reinterpretation: One Bite adds One Byte. Workforce Solutions Assisted Services was able to place 5 workers at DHS to assist in a file scanning project. This opportunity proved to be fortuitous. Through daily meetings, and participant led discussions about success meeting worksite challenges, the job counselor assisted the participants to build a team for support. Soft skills were developed and strengthened. As individuals were placed, usually individually, in food industry settings, they came first from this team. The length of the DHS project made it possible for almost all of the workers placed to develop comfort and confidence in that setting. Because of the DHS project, we were able to place two people in a similar project at Ramsey County Community Human Services (CHS).

Several core attributes of the One Bite program were coaching, barrier removal assistance, soft-skill education and health and food nutrition education.

All of the seventeen participants worked in the DHS scanning project, some for as little a two weeks before moving to a food industry setting, or making other choices. Some participants only worked in the DHS or CHS project. Thirty-five percent of the total number of participants worked in a food industry setting. Twenty-nine percent of the total number left the project because of other employment. All attributed their positive experience as a reason for seeking and finding other employment. Seven left the project because of personal changes or changes in family (becoming ill or incapacitated, moving out of county, undertaking and successfully completing a GED, reaching sixty-month MFIP limit, etc.). Two returned to job search activities when the DHS project ended in late June. One worker who met federal obesity criterion, after participating in the Ramsey County Extension service nutrition classes as part of the One Bite training, and influenced by the positive food industry work environment, made changes in her diet and exercise routines. As a result, she dropped her weight by twenty percent. In another instance, an employer allowed the worker to each day take home produce that was good but no longer marketable. The worker reports that she is able to feed her children fruits and vegetables she could not previously afford and that they had never eaten. She reports that her kids like fruit!

### **Community Impact**

Fresh and Natural Foods, Hampden Park Co-op, Soluppa All Natural Foods, and Golden's Deli each took on workers from the One Bite project. The commitment of these businesses to the process, and their responsibility to support individuals working their way from public assistance, was evidenced by a willingness to accept more than one worker placement. In a state-wide electronic department newsletter The Department of Human Services, where the scanning project lasted nearly nine months, Monica Crocker, the EDMS Supervisor, stated: "It's been a great fit for Ramsey County and DHS. The workers were productive on Day 1. It's one of those rare cases in which people have the opportunity to put their motivation into action to benefit themselves and DHS."

### **Innovative Impact**

The project, conceived and developed by employment guidance counselor Elizabeth Jackson, was supported and encouraged by Workforce Solutions Director, Patricia Brady and Workforce Solutions Supervisor, Bruce Casselton. The project was enthusiastically embraced by other Assisted Services team members, as well as Workforce Solutions staff not assigned to MFIP services. The concept created enthusiasm throughout the organization and spawned the creation of a semi-formal front-line driven method for promoting, developing and capturing ideas, called the Bright Ideas Forum.

This initiative demonstrated to the local government agency that where imagination, passion, encouragement, and support are tied together, an individual can make a difference, one bite, or one byte, at a time.