

The new Federal-State workforce information system

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) was signed into law August 7, 1998, capping a 7-year effort to consolidate and streamline the Nation's employment and training programs. Virtually every strategy mandated by WIA—from the development of annual strategic plans by local Workforce Investment Boards to the empowerment of system customers in making career development choices—will require high-quality labor market information. To that end, section 309 of the Act calls for the development, maintenance, and continuous improvement of a nationwide system of employment statistics. The Secretary of Labor will oversee the new system, managing it cooperatively with the States through the joint development of an annual plan to improve system performance in meeting customer needs, with particular attention to needs for State and local data.

Implementation of section 309 of the WIA began with the official designation by State Governors of their "employment statistics directors," followed in January 1999 by the election of 10 such officials to represent the States in cooperative management activities for the employment statistics system. These elected State representatives were joined by senior officials of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Employment and Training Administration. The joint body held its first meeting in February 1999 and adopted the name "Workforce Information Council." The Council presented its first annual workforce information system plan to Secretary of Labor Alexis M. Herman the following October. This report is largely excerpted from *New Directions for the Workforce Information System*, a summary of the Council's first annual plan.¹

In a message introducing the approved plan, Secretary Herman wrote, "Section 309 of the WIA establishes a national employment statistics system. In length, this section is a tiny portion of the WIA. But its importance cannot be overstated. Achieving the goals of the Workforce Investment System requires timely and accurate information about the world of work. The businesses, planners, jobseekers, and others whom we serve need to know, for example, the occupations and industries that are expanding and declining, the earnings and benefits associated with different types of work, the locales where workers are available, and where the jobs are. They should be able to compare the employment, earnings, and unemployment experience in States, cities, and towns across the Nation. And this information should be easily accessible to them."

The vision and goals adopted by the Workforce Information Council in its first annual plan are summarized below. The annual plan will be the Council's mechanism for achieving cooperative management of the nationwide workforce information system and the State systems it comprises.

Vision

In constructing their vision, the Workforce Information Council carefully considered the customers of the workforce information system, the status of the system today, and the environment in which the system functions. In the end, the Council adopted a three-point vision statement:

- The workforce information system will provide quality information that its customers can easily access and use to make informed choices.
- The nationwide system will provide comparable data for all States and be responsive to customer needs for local, State, and national information.

- The system will anticipate and meet the changing needs of customers, support analysis and research, and use customer feedback for continuous improvement.

Goal orientation

Bringing such a vision into clear sight will be an imposing challenge. The Workforce Information Council has established seven broad goals that will be instrumental in meeting that challenge. To ensure meaningful, attainable progress, the Council also has identified for each goal specific objectives and timelines for fiscal year 2000 to fiscal year 2004.² The seven goals are defined below.

Goal 1: Develop a comprehensive set of accurate and timely data to support workforce investment customers at local, State, and national levels.

The workforce information system must have at its core high-quality data at the local, State, and national levels. "High quality" means that the data must meet statistical standards; they must also be timely, comparable across States and areas, and relevant to customer needs. Finally, the data must be organized in standard database formats to facilitate analysis and dissemination. Achieving this goal requires building on the current BLS Federal-State cooperative statistical programs and the ETA-funded products and systems, as well as establishing new programs for data collection in key areas.

Goal 2: Improve analysis to transform data into useful workforce information.

Analysis adds meaning and contexts to the data in the workforce information system, maximizing its usefulness to jobseekers, students, planners, employers, and other users. Achieving this goal requires improving staff analysis skills, providing analysis tools and methods, and carrying out analysis of key topics,

Workforce Information customers

- Employers making decisions about recruitment, compensation, and training
- People making choices about careers, education, and job search
- Public officials making laws, policies, budgets, and regulations
- Planners refining workforce and business development programs
- Educators developing academic curricula and occupational training programs
- Parents, counselors, mentors, and others helping individuals choose career opportunities
- Researchers studying the workings of the labor market and the nuances of policy

resulting in products that are meaningful and provide added value to customers.

Goal 3: Deliver useful information on a timely basis.

The success of the “One-Stop” system mandated by WIA, as well as other workforce development services, rests on the timely delivery of information about the labor market, using media and formats that are accessible to customers who have varying levels of expertise and access to technology. These customers must also have access to technical assistance in using workforce information. Achieving this goal requires providing tools to simplify and speed up data delivery, developing customer-focused delivery systems using the Internet and other emerging technologies, and providing a variety of innovative approaches for universal access to workforce information.

Goal 4: Use local, State, and national customer feedback to continuously improve and enhance the system.

Continuous improvement of the workforce information system depends on input from its customers through a comprehensive customer satisfaction and outreach program. Achieving this goal

requires building on the experience of individual agencies and States in gathering customer satisfaction information and using other customer feedback strategies; it also requires incorporating customer feedback in planning, budgeting, and implementing system improvements.

Goal 5: Conduct research and development activities that continuously improve and create workforce information.

Research and development is needed to improve the quality of workforce information and to add critical new information sources. Research should focus on data collection methods, statistical procedures, and application of technology to reduce cost, increase timeliness, and improve quality. In addition, investments are needed in tools to increase the speed and efficiency and reduce the cost of labor market transactions. Achieving this goal requires setting priorities and creating and implementing a research and development plan.

Goal 6: Continuously invest in training, technical support, and capacity building.

The skills of the staff who develop, analyze, and deliver workforce informa-

tion must be maintained and improved through training in data collection methods, analysis, use of technology, and customer support. Training and assistance must be provided to customers in the uses and limitations of workforce information. Achieving this goal requires expanding the system’s capacity and better coordinating existing resources.

Goal 7: Jointly guide and manage the nationwide workforce information system through a Federal-State partnership.

The Workforce Information Council will oversee the system through the continued full partnership of State and Federal representatives and expand the partnership to incorporate the views of many Federal, State, and local entities with strong interests in, and needs for, information on labor markets. The annual plan will be the mechanism for describing the cooperative management of the nationwide workforce information system and the State systems that it comprises.

AS SECRETARY HERMAN OBSERVES, “This is the first annual plan required under section 309 of the WIA. It is the product of the Workforce Information Council, made up of ten State employment statistics agency representatives elected by their peers, and representatives of the Department’s Bureau of Labor Statistics and Employment and Training Administration. I applaud them for embracing the spirit of Federal-State partnership described in the WIA. I believe that this inaugural plan puts us on a course toward an efficient and effective Workforce Information System.” □

Footnotes

¹ To obtain a copy of *New Directions for the Workforce Information System*, contact John M. Galvin, Associate Commissioner, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2 Massachusetts Avenue, NE, Suite 4945, Washington, DC 20212.

² For a complete listing of these objectives and timelines, see *New Directions for the Workforce Information System*.