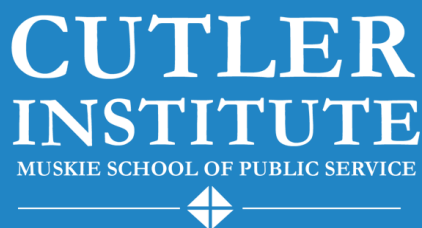


Coastal Counties Region Service Integration

One-Stop Partner Organization SWOT Analysis Summary

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Introduction

Background

Coastal Counties Workforce, Inc. (CCWI)¹ is a nonprofit organization, which oversees the delivery of the workforce system's services for the Coastal Counties region in Maine. The counties (York, Cumberland, Sagadahoc, Lincoln, Waldo, and Knox) are designated Workforce Development Areas under the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA). One of the goals of WIOA is to provide services using an integrated service delivery model. The integrated service delivery model is designed to help enroll job seekers in relevant programs and services through a seamless, integrated process and approach. As highlighted in the Training and Employment Notice (TEN) from January 4th, 2021, "To deliver integrated services, the workforce system partners must work to align and connect their operations and systems. Further, case managers must not feel constrained by the services available in one program, but must have the training and ability to offer customers the services they need from multiple programs."² The ideas outlined in the TEN to advance a *One Workforce* Vision and Strategy is strongly aligned with the goals of CCWI for the region. In fact, this is a primary goal of the Coastal Counties Workforce Board:

Goal 3: Regional workforce system partners align and integrate services and resources to create a "no wrong door" employment and training network easily accessed by workers and employers.³

CCWI selected a partner to serve as the One-Stop Operator (OSO) and oversee the development of an integrated service delivery plan for the region. Through a competitive RFP process followed by sole source selection, the Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine was contracted to lead this work. The primary goal of the OSO is to convene, learn, and gather feedback from partners to better understand how workforce services are delivered in the region, what is working well, and where there are opportunities for improvements. The OSO has been tasked with:

1. Updating the MOU to reflect current partners and service delivery changes due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic,
2. Supporting the development of an integrated service delivery plan for the region, and
3. Developing an implementation plan for the work.

As the first step to achieving these goals, the OSO conducted a set of interviews with all One-Stop Partners to gather insights and feedback. The primary goal of the OSO's approach was to hear partner ideas, concerns, and opportunities from their experience with WIOA service delivery. All of the feedback compiled during interviews will inform a plan for improving integrated service delivery processes and the subsequent phases of work. Additionally, the OSO will work closely with CCWI and other stakeholders to ensure that this feedback is incorporated into the revised Local/Regional Plan.

¹ For more information, see [coastalcounties.org](https://www.coastalcounties.org).

² Training and Employment Notice, No. 13-20, January 4th, 2021, accessed at https://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEN/TEN_13-20.pdf.

³ For more information, see <https://www.coastalcounties.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CCWB-Regional-Plan-2019-Draft-5.20.19.pdf>, page 8.

Methods

Key Informant Interviews

The OSO conducted small group and one-on-one key informant interviews from November to December 2020 with partner organizations. In total, 10 interviews were conducted with 30 one-stop partners representing 23 programs.⁴ Interviews ranged from 1 to 1.5 hours depending on the group size. Interview facilitators used a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis methodology to structure the discussions. The SWOT analysis is a strategic planning model used to help organizations examine both internal and external factors, which may be impacting their business. Facilitators documented the interviews with recordings and detailed notes. Recordings were transcribed and notes were analyzed using qualitative analysis software where notes were coded for themes.

Limitations of This Report

This report provides insights on the experience from the partner organization's point of view. While the perspective of the partner organizations is important and providing the voice of the local services providers is essential, it does limit this report as it does not provide any information regarding the process and experience from the point of view of the jobseekers or businesses.

Findings

In general, interviewees expressed a desire to better integrate and collaborate more with other service providers but cited several challenges to integration. The majority of interviewees felt that they did have some strong relationships and gave examples of existing partnerships; however, they also felt that broad integration was a challenge largely due to system structures and a lack of knowledge about available options. Many felt that while the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has not been without challenges, it has opened up doors such as virtual meetings, which reduce systemic barriers such as access to reliable transportation, and thus presents an opportunity to re-think process and service integration going forward. Overarching themes of the interviews included:

- Collaboration as a strength, weakness and opportunity;
- A need for better understanding of other partners' services, and staff cross-training;
- Better systems for sharing data and making referrals;
- Uncertainty due to the impact of COVID on the economy;
- Inadequate or inconsistent funding as a threat to service integration and delivery.

The table below summarizes the key findings from the SWOT analysis.

⁴ Two partners did not respond to requests for interviews.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships • Program delivery • Commitment to mission/shared goals • Resource sharing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information sharing • Referral processes • Service duplication • Role confusion • Limited employer participation
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared referral process • Better understanding of partner services • Cross-training and promotion • Virtual services and processes • Serving more clients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding instability • Federal/State mandates • Uncertainty due to COVID • Political and economic environment • Data security • Client barriers & engagement

Key Discussion Highlights

Collaboration and integration enables partner organizations to serve community needs more efficiently.

Interviewees discussed a number of key strengths of their organizations and the current service delivery methods. Most notably, interviewees mentioned examples of collaboration between their organization and various partners. They noted the shared goals and commitment to helping their common clients as strengths among the various partner organizations. For example, one interviewee discussed a partnership between Portland Adult Education, LearningWorks, and the City of Portland as part of an English Language Collaborative where the City has pulled together all providers that teach English. Another interviewee was excited about new opportunities to partner on virtual workshops and events that has led to efficiencies in service delivery all across the state. While collaboration and relationships were cited as strengths by many interviewees, it was also noted that it would happen on a project-by-project basis and thus, broader integration and collaboration was simultaneously mentioned as a weakness and an opportunity for improvement.

Many interviewees discussed their commitment to integration and the many benefits they have seen from current collaboration efforts. One participant mentioned how helpful it was to be part of a larger agency with shared performance measures statewide. Others noted the fact that collaboration allows them to share costs, making program delivery much more cost effective. Many cited the quality of program delivery and the successes they have had in helping clients and how integration allows them to connect to more people. There was a clear commitment among partner organizations to serving the target population under WIOA and a strong desire to meet community needs.

Partner organizations expressed a strong need for improved information sharing systems and practices in order to better operate under an integrated service delivery model.

The majority of interviewees expressed a need to improve the referral processes, eliminate information silos between organizations, clarify roles, and reduce service duplication. In particular, interviewees discussed a lack of staff knowledge about services offered by other partners as the primary challenge to integration. Many felt that they could better refer clients if they had a deeper understanding of partner offerings. Some mentioned staff training or informational resources such as a shared database as ways to improve their understanding of partner offerings, however, it must be sustainable long-term and take into account staff turnover. In addition, role confusion and service duplication were concerns for many partner organizations as well. A number of interviewees expressed a concern over service duplication as a key challenge to integration, as well as a need to clarify various organization's roles in order to improve the process and reduce the potential for service duplication.

The referral process was discussed as a primary challenge and an opportunity to improve. Many interviewees expressed confusion over the referral process, and were concerned that it was not efficient, or reciprocal. For example, one interviewee mentioned that they refer people to a specific partner when the person could benefit from WIOA services, however, they see very few referrals back to their organization and thus it does not feel like a reciprocal partnership process. Another interviewee also said that while they feel they have a good relationship with one-stop partners, including Workforce Solutions, and have made many referrals, but they have not received one referral back in the other direction. Other interviewees mentioned that the intake process is cumbersome and time consuming for the clients across organizations; it was cited that it can take 4-6 weeks to complete the intake process for WIOA enrollment with limited understanding as to why. Many interviewees were concerned that the intake process was causing clients to get lost in the system, and that the burden should be on the individual organizations to connect more intentionally. Some mentioned that there needs to be a consolidated database system for intake, and one interviewee cited an example of having to use 25 different mandated service databases. Another mentioned that there had been work to create a shared referral form for over a year; however, they are not using it. Many expressed a desire to have a shared referral form and a searchable database system, which would allow them to easily complete the intake process and find all potential services for their clients in one place.

The integrated service delivery plan is an opportunity to improve partner collaboration, more effectively share information, update systems, and streamline processes in order to better address jobseeker and business needs.

Interviewees expressed a commitment to integrated service delivery and a desire to improve partner collaboration, information sharing, systems, and referral process to better serve the community, and the needs of jobseekers and businesses. Many interviewees discussed the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the ingenuity of their organization and partners to adapt to a virtual environment. While the pandemic has not been without challenges, many interviewees saw it as an opportunity to re-think processes for the future. For example, one participant mentioned the fact that the federal government lifted restrictions on providing services virtually versus in person and thus they have been able to conduct virtual meetings. This has eliminated the transportation barrier for many of their clients, while also reducing resource strains such as staff time and travel, allowing them to serve more clients in less time and without geographic restrictions. Many expressed a desire to continue utilizing virtual processes even after the pandemic ends and some excitement at rethinking how and in what ways brick and

mortar sites will remain necessary. Some interviewees also discussed other virtual opportunities such as virtual hiring events, online job counseling, and mock interviews, which could all continue to be offered post pandemic and are particularly important for a rural state like Maine where transportation has historically been a major access barrier. In addition, the move to more virtual services has highlighted an opportunity to invest in and upgrade digital systems, intake processes, and database systems in order to streamline the internal processes and improve data security.

Similarly, in addition to continuing virtual processes and services, there was a clear desire to develop a more cohesive and efficient shared referral process among partner organizations. Many interviewees expressed frustration and confusion with the intake and referral process for WIOA services as well as for services with other one-stop partners, and indicated a need to develop a clear set of guidelines to streamline the process for both the partners and the clients. The idea of a universal intake form to help identify services across partner organizations was discussed by many interviewees. One participant used the example of the HEAP program, where a client applies for assistance through a Community Action Agency and their information is loaded into a central database, which helps connect them to applicable services. Many expressed a desire to see a centralized website, which would allow the client to apply in one place, and then identify all the applicable services and share their information with those providers.

In order to strengthen the collaboration among partner organizations, many interviewees discussed the need for regular partner meetings to build relationships, and cross-training for staff on the various system offerings. Interviewees expressed a desire to develop a common vision and goals for the integrated system and a need for guidelines on protocols for working together to meet those goals. Many discussed the opportunity to clarify and define roles for each organization within the integrated system. At the same time, interviewees also mentioned the need to be adaptable and that their roles may vary depending on the location and local needs in a particular community.

Funding, COVID-19 uncertainty, and service duplication threaten the success of an integrated service delivery plan.

The majority of interviewees discussed three primary threats to an integrated service delivery model including funding, the uncertainty of the pandemic, and service duplication. Many discussed the instability of grant funding and that they have to compete for grants in order to continue operating. Some were concerned that funding was getting more difficult to find due to the pandemic and the fragile economic environment. Some organizations, like the Maine Department of Labor, have had to increase staffing due to an increase in claims caused by pandemic job loss, however, the future staffing levels and funding needs are uncertain. Many had concerns about competing with partners for limited funding streams. Others cited examples of partnerships being developed in the past but then scaling back because of budget cuts.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, current political environment, and the unstable economy have created an environment of future uncertainty not only in regards to funding, but also contributing to concerns about future jobseeker and business needs, market shifts, and practices for service delivery. Nobody knows how long the pandemic will last and which practices will be maintained. Will they continue operating under a virtual or hybrid model, or will they be required to revert back to in-person only? At the same time, the political and economic environments are uncertain and changing as well, which could vastly impact client needs, funding streams, and available services. The uncertainty presents a threat to the success of integrated service delivery plans and makes long-term visioning more

difficult. The Local/Regional Plan must take into account the instability of our current environment and plan for potential changes to help ensure services remain available and accessible.

Preliminary Recommendations

The next step for the OSO will be to work with one-stop partner organizations and CCWI staff to develop integrated service delivery recommendations for the Local/Regional Plan. The following initial recommendations will be added to and expanded upon as this work continues with one-stop partner feedback.

- **Advocate for continued virtual or hybrid models-** The pandemic has created an opportunity to offer virtual services which reduce client and resource barriers. This has made the process easier for both clients and staff and allowed many organizations to serve more clients. Not only should these processes be continued, they present opportunities for organizations and systems to upgrade their digital systems to streamline practices, improve data sharing capabilities, and improve data security.
- **Commit to regular partner meetings open to frontline staff to provide updates and strengthen relationships-** In order to work as partners, organizations need to have relationships developed with the other organizations. The newly reestablished Quarterly One-Stop Partners meeting is a great first step. Regular partner meetings at varying levels from frontline staff to organizational and agency leadership would allow for professional networking, information sharing, build trust, and help identify cross-training opportunities, which would enhance collaboration.
- **Create a centralized web-based platform for searching and recommending services to clients-** A lack of knowledge about available services was one of the primary referral challenges. A central, web-based platform with easy navigation to find potential services for eligible clients would help reduce this challenge. This could be a client-facing website, which makes recommendations automatically based on the intake form, or it could be a staff-facing database depending on available technology and resources.
- **Outline the vision, goals, roles, and implementation guidelines-** The integrated service delivery recommendations for the Local/Regional Plan should clearly outline the shared vision of the partner organizations, the goals of integration, clarify roles of each organization, and include best practice guidelines for implementation and operation under an integrated service delivery model. The revised MOU for the region is a good first step, but more detailed information that is accessible to staff at varying levels may be needed.
- **Finalize and implement a streamlined, universal referral process-** In order to streamline the process for both the clients and the partner organizations, the referral process needs to include a universal form and process so that clients can complete it once and receive referrals to any eligible services within the entire network.

Conclusion

The WIOA integrated service delivery model will allow job seekers to enroll in needed services and programs with one streamlined approach. Partner organizations are committed to the improved collaboration, resource sharing, and the ability to serve more clients that comes with integration and many have had successful partnerships in the past. However, many are concerned about process and practice as well as the uncertainty of the current economic environment. In order to operate under a successfully integrated system implementation plans must outline the goals and clarify roles of each organization. In addition, it must provide guidelines on process and procedures when referring clients

and develop ways to better share information with the network of partners. In order to integrate the process must be universal, but it must also be adaptable in the changing climate and allow for flexible practices like online and virtual services. The OSO will continue to work with partner organizations to develop recommendations and ideas to incorporate into the Local/Regional Plan.