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**MERCED COUNTY
WORKFORCE INVESTMENT BOARD**



A Report on Interviews with Board Members

Executive Summary

In mid-April, the Workforce Investment Board and *Barbara Shaw Seminars* entered into a contract to conduct a Performance Improvement Review. A board questionnaire was developed to determine areas of strength and to identify areas of concern. With the results of the questionnaire, we were able to direct the focus of the interviews with the Workforce Investment Board members. This process has allowed us to determine the status of the work of the organization in a very efficient manner.

It was personally my pleasure to meet with each of the board members and have the opportunity to discuss their hopes, concerns, and suggestions for the future. From these interviews, our firm has developed the following report. We have also attached the interview outline and the questionnaire results.

Project conclusions are divided into three key sections:

- ◆ **Areas That Are Working Well**
- ◆ **Opportunities for Improvement**
- ◆ **Recommendations**

As you read the summary of this project, it is important to recognize that this is a healthy organization and the board members are generally very pleased with the current progress of the WIB. The results of the questionnaires were quite positive and the interviews were also. There are always areas that need work but it does appear that the Board and staff are pleased with the direction of the organization and the success of the WIB.

During the interview process, there were several areas that were repeatedly mentioned as strengths of the organization.

System Strengths

- ◆ WIB Staff
- ◆ Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities of the Chairs, Board Members, and CEO
- ◆ Collaboration and Team Work
- ◆ The Marketing Plan
- ◆ The Relationship with the Board of Supervisors
- ◆ Board and System Goals/Mission and Purpose
- ◆ Data, Information, and Analysis
- ◆ Innovative Programs
- ◆ Youth Council Representation and Activities

Areas of Opportunity

Several areas were mentioned as areas for improvement. Board members wish the programs and services were more customer focused. They would like to see the board meetings improved. They wish successes and accomplishments were more clear. Board members would like to have a stronger relationship with the Local Elected Officials. They would like the board to be better oriented and knowledgeable.

It is particularly helpful that one of the strong areas identified in the interview process is the relationship between the Board and the staff. This means any areas identified or any work to be done will have a strong, unified team working on them!

Recommendations

Also included in this report are our recommendations. There are 7 Key Areas:

- ◆ Improving Outreach and Customer Satisfaction
- ◆ Strengthening Tracking, Monitoring, and Follow Up
- ◆ Doing More Board Development
- ◆ Maintaining Good Strategic Planning and Fiscal Management
- ◆ Making Board Meetings More Efficient and Satisfying
- ◆ Capitalizing on the New UC Campus
- ◆ Expanding the One Stop System

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■ **Purpose and Methodology**

This project began in April with the development of a board questionnaire. There were 24 responses to the Workforce Investment Board Assessment Survey. The Summary of Results by Category is attached. Then, the consultant developed an interview format to capitalize on the areas identified in the questionnaire. The interview format is also attached.

One-on-one interviews were scheduled with 22 board members and were conducted on April 30th and May 1st in Merced. In order to speak to all board members, 8 follow-up phone interviews were conducted with board members who could not attend the personal interviews. The consultant also interviewed several of the staff members. The interview comments were summarized and are reported by categories in the first two sections of this report. The third section of this report consists of our recommendations.

In discussions held prior to the beginning of this project, the Chair, the Executive Director, the Program Manager of Special Projects, and the Consultant agreed to very specific project goals.

The specific **desired outcomes** of this project are:

- To identify board functions that are strengths and that are areas to be built upon for the future;
- To clearly identify areas of greatest opportunity for improvement;
- To use the board questionnaires to direct the focus of the interviews;
- To conduct interviews with all of the board members;
- To summarize the information obtained from the interviews and to develop recommendations for the actions that should be undertaken to strengthen and improve the system.

■ Areas That Are Working Well

1. WIB Staff:

Board members give staff very high ratings in terms of board support, timeliness of information, and responsiveness. Board members believe the staff to be hard working, professional individuals who care deeply about the mission of the WIB. Chairs are pleased with the staff that support their committees, and Chairs and the staff appear to work well together in preparing agendas, committee direction, and background materials.

It is widely agreed that the work of the Board is “huge and complicated” and that the staff does a good job of providing the information necessary so the board members will understand the issues. The direction of the Youth Council and the work of bringing together the local youth organizations was mentioned repeatedly. Board members frequently mentioned the importance of the labor market information and local statistical data they receive. The board members also discussed the financial reporting systems, the overviews provided by the Executive Director, and the responsiveness of staff regarding any fiscal questions. WIB members also appreciate the staff calls and reminders for meetings and enjoy the Director’s e-mails and comments in the board materials.

2. Roles and Responsibilities:

The roles of the Chairs, Board Members, and the CEO seem to be quite clear. Be sure to note the response to Questionnaire Question #42. There was a very high response rate to the question of clarity of governance and roles of the Chair and CEO. The new committee structure also seems to be working well.

Board members feel people are there for the right reasons and are very dedicated to the mission of making sure residents are served. Board members were very positive about how well voting members handle any possible appearance of conflict of interest. It was often said, “even if people have contracts with the organization, they are able to put that aside, step out of their agencies, and vote for the good of the system”.

The strategic planning process helped people clearly identify their “Big Picture” goals for the WIB and for the Youth Council. Even though discussions and issues at the full board meeting are complicated and interrelated, board members said they are pleased that people seem to understand what they are there to do.

3. Good Collaboration and Team Work:

The board members feel quite comfortable with the level of cooperation and collaboration. There were many examples of good collaborative efforts provided by board members. The specific areas mentioned were: seven agencies worked together on the Out-of-School Program; the Youth Council actively involves all the local youth organizations and programs; Merced College works hard to obtain business input; ROP is well connected in the business community; the Nursing Program required good cooperation between the WIB, the Health Department, the Community College, and the hospitals; the Tech Grant required good cooperation and small business collaboration; the development of the Youth Employability Card was excellent; the Worknet certification process and creation of the Worknet Team have been helpful; and there are good ties with economic development.

The way the Board and staff work together was also cited as a good example of the teamwork that exists in the organization. Board members are also very proud of their regional efforts. There is an eleven member WIB regional group and the Merced WIB has been very open to including partners in their training and staff sessions.

4. Marketing Plan:

The board members like the marketing plan and the current activities proposed. In March and April, the number of people served at the One Stops has increased dramatically. Obviously, outreach and marketing efforts are working well. All members wish there were more exposure for the WIB, the One Stops, and the programs, but people do recognize that funding is an issue.

5. Relationship with the Board of Supervisors:

The relationship with the Board of Supervisors is strong. One of the board members is a voting member of the WIB and is quite active. This is rather unique in the system and is very helpful. To date, there have been no serious challenges of the decisions or votes of the WIB.

6. Board and System Goals:

The mission, purpose, and goals of the WIB are clearly spelled out and the goals of the Youth Council were developed when members were brought together to establish the Council. I found the WIB members and the staff to be very dedicated to serving the unemployed and to helping employers find a good job match. Board members seem to take very seriously their responsibilities for overseeing fiscal, performance, and program goals.

There is a long history of strong leadership in Merced County. A strong bond exists between agencies as the local employment issues are fairly severe. Unemployment rates are high, skill levels are somewhat low, and the respective issues are enormous. This has caused local leaders to network and use their connections and relationships to help people in need. Leaders know each other, see each other often, and can meet relatively easily.

7. Data, Information, and Analysis:

The information the board members receive is quite extensive and appears to be helpful in the decision making process. Local census and demographic data, labor market data, and hard-to-serve population data is readily available and is used when needed for good decision making.

8. Innovative Programs:

The Merced County WIB has developed some very innovative programs and services. Of particular note are the Youth Employability Card, the Nursing Program, the Youth Council measures for attendance, drug use, and teen pregnancy, and the Youth Council Conferences and Retreats. I am also very impressed with the Tax Program in the One Stops; having the IRS train volunteers and providing support help on site is a very creative One Stop service. The Worknet certification process was well developed by the WIB.

9. Youth Council Representation and Activities:

It is very unique for youth to participate as they do on your Youth Council. Students are highly involved and the Vice Chair was originally a student representative. The Youth Retreats and the State Youth Representatives Conference are an outstanding approach for improving the coordination of youth activities and information sharing. These are wonderful “Best Practices”.

The three performance goals for youth programs – to increase attendance, to decrease drug usage, and to reduce teen pregnancy rates – are good benchmarks for youth goals and activities. The Youth Council appears to be strong, active, and very focused on their goals. The amount of “cross-over” between the WIB and the Youth Council (6 members) also seems appropriate.

Again, I would like to remind all of you to pay particular attention to the high ratings reflected in these nine areas on the questionnaire. The results of the questionnaires and the input from the interviews are very consistent.

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■ Opportunities for Improvement

1. Customer Focused:

While the Board is comfortable with the marketing plan, the group is less than satisfied with how well recognized the programs and activities are in the community. Board members would like the business community to think of the One Stops as their first source for support. They would also like stronger business input and connections to make sure programs satisfy the needs of local employers.

2. Board Meetings:

Some concern was expressed regarding the board meetings and attendance. On occasion, it has been difficult to obtain a quorum, which is very frustrating for those who have made the effort to attend. Board members wish all members consistently came prepared for the meeting so that discussions and decisions could proceed more rapidly. There is a great deal of “rehashing” when people have not thoroughly reviewed their materials. It was also suggested that the materials and the board packet be e-mailed a bit earlier so members would have more time to prepare.

Currently, workforce boards in the system are quite large as is the Merced County WIB. This makes discussion at board meetings difficult at times. It is hard to hear everyone and to keep the discussion on target and focused. It is difficult for staff and the Chairs to satisfy everyone in the time allowed on the agenda. All board members wish that information would be taken back from meetings and distributed more widely throughout respective partner organizations.

The size of the Board also effects the education and orientation process. The level of understanding and knowledge is quite different among board members and that complicates the ability to make good decisions. Board members would like new members to “come up to speed” as quickly as possible but they know orientation sessions are hard for members and staff to schedule.

3. Measurable Results:

This is an area that is rarely rated high by workforce boards. All board members wish there were better ways to benchmark success and to determine the real level of customer satisfaction. Board members would like goals and targets to be

tracked more effectively and would like to briefly review performance, financial, and committee reports on a more regular basis. They would like to see the progress on the strategic plan and do more analysis of how to make things better. As you will note, the responses to Questions #9, 10, 11, 31, 38, 39 could be improved.

4. Relationship with Local Elected Officials and Community Leaders:

Most board members would like to strengthen the relationship with local cities and county officials. They feel this would be an excellent way to obtain more support for the programs and for extending the programs to the community so the services are better known. Board members also felt this would be a good way to bring community issues to the table. They would like to build stronger relationships with key organizations and local leaders.

5. Board Member Education and Development:

Members would like to raise the overall knowledge level of board members. They would like to track progress more regularly, be more aware of successes, look at planned vs. actual data, look at “Best Practices”, and be more educated about programs. The “15 minute” education sessions at meetings are helpful and should be continued – it is just difficult to find time for all of the agenda items and business when the group only meets once every two months. The general consensus seemed to be that meeting every other month saves time but it makes the meetings hectic. If a member misses a meeting, discussions and information can be four months old and hard to follow. These issues mean committees need to be very informative and operate like “mini boards”.

■ Recommendations

Merced County has a long history of high unemployment and the inherent challenges of a rural based economy. The high school drop-out rate is high, teen pregnancy rates are high, and the incidence of seasonal workers is also high. These employment issues combine to create a most difficult situation for the leaders and professionals involved in this program.

In addition to these challenges, the WIB has experienced a major reduction in funding for Program Year 2003-04. This reduction in funding was the third largest cutback in

the State and will require skilled decision making by this Board. However, the Board and staff are strong and work well together. I have a lot of confidence that this group will work through these issues during the ensuing months. Discussions and decisions will need to be focused, sound, and always done with an eye on the budget.

The following are our recommendations for ways to strengthen this organization over the next number of months.

➔ **Improving Outreach and Customer Satisfaction:**

- The **Program Planning & Development Committee** should consider targeting the top 50-100 businesses in the area; this could be done with the support of the Chambers, presentations, visits, and the economic development organizations. Members would like a coordinated approach, a message for each business contact, and the utilization of Industry Cluster interviews.
- The **Executive Committee** should develop a plan for how to strengthen the relationship with Local Elected Officials from the cities within the county. Many of the contacts already exist and just need to be “tapped” or expanded.
- The **Staff and the Board** should try to develop some strong contacts and connections with the newspaper, radio, and television folks to see if exposure could be improved.
- The **Chair and the Executive Director** should have as much contact with the CEO and the Chair of the Board of Supervisors as possible.
- The **Chair** might consider a panel presentation on business needs, skill requirements, and placement issues. Several current board members could make up the panel as these members come from the kinds of organizations that can bring good information to the WIB members.
- It would be healthy for the board members to be more aware of the successes of the WIB and the One Stops. **The Chair and the Executive Director** should identify strategies that would improve this area. More frequent updates and reviews of WIB goals and accomplishments is one place to start.

➔ **Strengthening Tracking, Monitoring, and Follow Up:**

All projects and programs need to be more frequently evaluated and improved. Some specific suggestions are:

- The committee structure was new as of January and the current feedback is good. The **Executive Committee** should formally evaluate the success of the new structure within the next 2-3 months.

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- The **Program Planning & Development Committee** should develop a Priority of Service Plan and strategies for the impending cutbacks.
- The **Finance Committee** should bring the current budget to every WIB meeting; board members would like to see a plan versus actual column.
- The Nursing Program is a model program and should be monitored closely. This is a program that can have a major impact on careers and is a wonderful example of collaboration. The **Quality Assurance Committee** should conduct a formal evaluation of this program.
- The **Program Planning & Development Committee** needs to do some work with the Youth Employability Card Program. The concept is excellent and the program is a good example of how to work on soft skills development. Job readiness programs are only good, however, if employers are fully utilizing participants and are willing to acknowledge the value of the program. The employer component of this program needs to be strengthened.
- The **Youth Council** needs to look closely at their coordination efforts with the schools. The Merced County demographics show the number of young people 5-15 years of age is approximately 35%. It is critical to make sure all youth programs are as effective as possible – job readiness, career exploration, attendance, teen pregnancy, literacy, and all school-to-career type programs. The program with the Merced County Office of Education to extend the hours of the One Stop so students have a “homework location” is an innovative way to better serve youth.
- Board members seem to be craving feedback on “how is it all working” and “where is the big huge report card”. I would like to see the **Quality Assurance Committee** review the North Bay Employment Connection process for benchmarking to see if these performance systems would provide some help in this area.

➔ **Strengthening Board Development:**

- **Staff and the Chair** should continue to schedule 15-20 minute presentations at the board meetings to help educate, orient, and develop the board members. There are a number of experts around the State that could be invited depending on the topics considered most important.
- The **WIB** might consider using a buddy-mentoring system to help orient and educate new board members.
- The current representation on the WIB is excellent. As there are vacancies, the **Chair and the Executive Committee** should work hard to find 2-3 prospective members who are major employers.

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- **Board members** need to develop strong relationships with city and county officials; this will improve exposure and will also breed some good referrals for board membership.
- Some WIBs develop a four part orientation process. There is an initial, executive summary; there is a follow up formal orientation; there is a tour and One Stop orientation; and there is a buddy system for new members. **Staff**, with input from 2-3 board members, should refine the current process.

➔ **Maintaining Strategic Planning and Fiscal Management:**

- As cutbacks occur, **Board Members** need to be careful about requests for data and background materials. There is a lot of time and money spent on WIB support so be sure all requests are necessary, efficient, and effective.
- The **Finance Committee** should develop an actual vs. planned column for the presentation of the budget. Board members would be more comfortable if they were able to see comparisons related to spending.
- Because of the reduction in funding, the **Executive Committee** should work hard to maintain a “strategic focus”.
- The group might consider a combined **Executive Committee and Finance Committee** meeting to look at options for dealing with the funding levels.
- I would like to see the full board participate in the next Strategic Planning Meeting and Process. It is a good time for the WIB to reach full consensus on the direction of the Board and the WIB programs. The **Chair and the Executive Director** should schedule a time in the fall to revise the plan.

➔ **Making Board Meetings More Effective and Efficient:**

- The **Staff** needs to deliver (e-mail) board meeting materials and backup materials a couple of days earlier so there is better lead time for board member preparation.
- **Board Members** need to work harder at reading all materials in advance of the meetings so discussions can be high level and focused.
- **The Chair and the Executive Committee** need to work on keeping board discussions focused and lively. There were some concerns expressed that “some people get off on a tangent or harp on a message”.
- **Staff and the Chair** need to try to eliminate “walk in” items; it is very difficult for people to assimilate handouts and materials when they are delivered on the spot.

➔ **Capitalizing on the New UC Campus:**

- **Staff and the Program Planning & Development Committee** need to develop a plan for how to capitalize on the opportunities that will be available with the development of the new University of California campus. Relationships and program connections should be made as early as possible.

➔ **Expanding the One Stop System**

- All One Stops in the state and federal system could be so much more! Few of our One Stops have much in the way of partner funding. To me, receiving some amount of money from each key partner is the basis of truly being a partner. The commitment to the One Stop is what counts and a portion of that commitment needs to be in hard dollars at whatever level partners and/or agencies can manage.
- It would be nice if the legislature and/or federal law had made this clear for local areas so the importance of this role had been acknowledged and clarified. In the absence of this, local One Stops need to look seriously at their governance process.
- In the Merced system, the partners would like to see the One Stop services expanded. They seem to be willing to embrace any ideas or practices that would advance the One Stops and make them even more responsive to local businesses.