

Executive Summary
Fiscal Year 2008
Metro North Workforce Development Plan

Current Economy and Special Challenges. The Metro North region has the second largest labor force in Massachusetts, with about 404,000 workers; as of April 2007, about 14,400 of these workers were without jobs. Of these, about 6,690 were receiving unemployment benefits while seeking work, making Metro North the region with the fourth highest number of claimants in the state, down from second highest last year at the same time. Even though the economy has improved, there is still a substantial volume of unemployed, and in combination with the state policy mandating claimant attendance at career center seminars, the number of customers using career centers continues at the same high level as last year. In FY 2000, Metro North career centers were seeing 10,000 customers; in FY 2007, it is anticipated that over 20,000 will be served, while staffing levels have only slightly increased. With declines in core funding over the previous years, career centers have had to generate funds from other sources, e.g., competitively procured state and federal grants, foundations, and fee-based income in order to achieve these staffing levels.

In FY'08, unexpected increases in WIA funding will help to compensate for the loss of other regional funds, resulting from the end of the Customized Employment Program and the Re-employment Assistance Program, reductions in Connecting Activities funds, and the lack of significant National Emergency Grant funding on the horizon. On the plus side, some additional state line item funds appear likely to be approved for the career centers (potentially bringing funding up to FY'07 levels), and if the final welfare allocation reflects performance for the current year, Metro North could receive more funds than currently planned. However, before these potential additions, the career centers show a loss of \$420k compared to current funding. Projected career center staff have been reduced from FY'07 levels by 5% to 61.7 full-time equivalents; compared to two years ago, this represents a reduction by 10 staff, despite similar, high customer service levels. The centers face the continued challenge of providing the same quality and range of services with significantly declining resources.

In an attempt to more efficiently use resources and ultimately to move more resources to the field, the Metro North region will be restructured as of July 1, with the Metro North Regional Employment Board becoming the WIA Fiscal Agent. Most workforce development funds for career centers and training providers will now flow through one organization, the REB. Although effective July 1, the transition process will involve space changes (either the addition of space or a move) that cannot be implemented until the fall. Additional staff will be added as of July 1 in support of the expanded responsibilities.

Current Initiatives of the Workforce Development System in Metro North. In addition to core funding supplied by Wagner-Peyser employment services funds, DTA job search, education/skills training, and post-placement, DOE adult basic education, Workforce Investment Act (WIA) adult, dislocated worker, and youth programs, and state line item funds, Metro North career centers have sought funds from other sources. After the Customized Employment Program ended in September 2006, The Career Place was awarded a small grant to continue services to people with disabilities, and customers with disabilities served by both centers will continue to benefit from the Program Navigator grant.

Metro North received two Pathways to Success by 21 (P-21) grants, one for a series of youth forums, and the other to implement a Youth Transition Center, which recently opened at the Somerville Housing Authority. With supplemental WIA Youth funding, the center will remain open at least through June, 2008. In other youth efforts, The Career Place anticipates operating an MCAS Pathways program again in FY'08, and Career Source hopes to continue providing supplementary services to an Academic Support program for youth operated by the City of Everett.

In the years prior to FY'06, both centers served hundreds of customers through National Emergency Grants (NEGs) serving laid-off employees of specific companies from around the state. However, in

FY'06, as a result of federal funds being diverted to services to Katrina victims, existing NEG funds were reduced, and because of increased defense costs, probably in conjunction with an improved economy, few new NEGs have been funded. In FY'07, Metro North centers enrolled only 98 laid-off workers in NEGs, compared to almost 300 new enrollees two years before. Currently, NEG participation is limited to enrollments in a Federated Department Stores NEG.

Both centers market their skills development programs to the general population, in order to generate additional income. In addition, The Career Place is currently operating a Customer Service program designed for TAFDC recipients at the Malden DTA Office, which is funded by the Executive Office of Community Colleges. The Career Place is also doing a brisk business in high-stakes testing (over 900 will have been tested by the end of FY'07), including testing for certification as teaching paraprofessional or social worker.

The REB is partnering with eight other regions in a Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) proposal to DOL. If funded, Metro North will participate in two initiatives under this grant, Lift², which is focused on linking business, higher education, and K-12 constituencies through the provision of teacher externships in math and science areas. The second initiative, Curious Minds, focuses on career exploration in the fields of science and engineering at middle schools and high schools.

The REB will continue to support the BioTeach pilot project activities at Somerville High School, focused on integrating biotechnology career exploration within the guidance and science departments. A REB staff person recruits speakers for lunchtime presentations to students and also participates on the Somerville BioTeach Team, which coordinates in-school and field trip activities.

The career centers and the REB are partners in the federally funded Radio Frequency Identification Program operated by Middlesex Community College, which will train technicians in this innovative and growing technology. Career centers are also assisting in the recruitment for the National Grid program for training utility workers, also funded by a federal grant to Middlesex Community College. The REB also regularly reviews and comments on Workforce Training Fund proposals; the Workforce Training Fund is designed to provide funding to businesses to improve the skills of incumbent workers.

Proposed Initiatives for FY'08. This spring, the REB met twice to discuss strategies for addressing significant workforce development issues. In addition, REB staff met with training providers, Department of Education program operators, and community-based organizations to collect input on plans for FY'08. The following focuses resulted from these meetings:

1. Encouraging the use of vacancy survey results to assist in addressing the skills gap. Specifically, providing training to career center and community-based organization staff so they can educate customers on job and training opportunities related to vacancies, and offering information sessions to training providers on vacancy survey results in order to encourage development of training programs in areas where high levels of vacancies exist.
2. Promote the development of ESL programs to address the widespread need for these services. Specifically, collaborate in an ESL demo project that brings together employers in the same geographic area who wish to upgrade the skills of their employees and/or prepare job applicants for work in their industry, and encourage and provide technical assistance to businesses preparing ESL proposals.
3. Explore employer interest in an FY'09 summer jobs program that would be employer-funded, possibly with supplemental foundation support, in order to promote early work attachment for youth.

4. Provide training to career center and community-based organization staff on how to work with customers/constituents who have criminal records (CORIs) and assist them with accessing jobs.
5. Focus on cross-regional initiatives, including partnering with other regions on special projects, such as the WIRED Initiative or large-scale job fairs.
6. Continue the commitment to community involvement and customer access, through on-going sponsorship of the Career Center Access Workgroup and training provider meetings, which foster collaboration among career centers, community-based organizations, and training and education providers and promote a well-integrated workforce development system.
7. Assist workers of retirement age in accessing employment that meets their needs for supplementary income, while also educating employers on the impact of the expected wave of baby boomer retirements and the value of accommodating experienced older workers (through flexible scheduling, job-sharing., etc.) as one means of addressing the labor market shortage.

In addition, the region plans to continue working toward further implementation of projects/operations related to broad, ambitious goals established in FY'05:

Job Seekers.

1. Ensure Effective Use of Career Centers
2. Enhance Quality/Breadth of Career Center Services
3. Enhance Skills Development Options at Career Centers

Businesses.

1. Increase Center Capacity through Business Connections
2. Develop Substantial Relationships with Businesses
3. Improve the Link between Skill Sets and Business Needs

Youth.

1. Strengthen Connection between Youth Programs and Business
2. Promote Post-Secondary Education
3. Encourage Program Integration
4. Revitalize Youth Programs by Implementing a New Youth Service Delivery Model

Maximizing Training Options. In an effort to maximize training funds available to WIA/DTA participants, a total of \$1.87m has been set aside for training providers. With the addition of funds allocated for short-term skills development programs at the career centers, this figure increases to \$1.99m. This represents 114% of last year's amount, with 50% of WIA/DTA funds (51% of WIA Adult funds and 42% of DTA Skills/Education funds) and 47.3% of dislocated worker funds allotted to training. The use of skills development funds to supplement longer term training options dramatically increases the number of customers who can be served with some form of training, since about 5.5 customers can be served in skills development for the same amount of funding as a longer term training slot. The availability of skills development activities to address specific gaps in customers' resumes means these customers do not have to be enrolled in longer term training when they only need a subset of skills being taught. This more efficient use of funds maximizes the number of customers served overall and ensures that more expensive training is provided to those who need more comprehensive services.

For youth programs, 61.5% of all funds are allocated to program providers, with an additional 3.4% set aside for participant wages for the summer employment program. Wages for some Cambridge youth are being provided through Governor's Summer YouthWorks funds awarded to the City of Cambridge.

For the first time since the implementation of WIA, Metro North plans to increase the training caps to the following new levels: \$4,000 for education programs, \$6,000 for occupational skills training programs, \$8,000 for concurrent education/occupational skills programs, and \$10,000 for a sequential education/occupational skills activities. Increasing the cap will allow programs to build in costs essential to delivering a quality program and will also relieve the burden on those customers who must supplement WIA funding in order to cover the costs of a chosen training program whose cost is in excess of the cap.

Summary. In the coming year, Metro North plans to increase emphasis on strategies that will help address the skills gap, including sponsoring trainings on the use of vacancy surveys and encouraging the development of new ESL programs. The region will also sponsor staff development activities related to CORI issues. In addition, the region plans to explore launching an employer-supported summer jobs program that will assist in early work attachment for youth. Metro North plans to continue its efforts to: create deeper relationships with business; enhance the capacity of career centers to provide focused services tailored to the needs of job seekers that are delivered at the right point in time; ensure access to career center services by customers with barriers to participation; foster communication among employers, training providers, education providers, community-based organizations, and career centers; and expand the horizons for youth most in need. At the same time, the region is committed to an all-out effort to maintain the quality and range of services that have made Metro North career centers outstanding in their ability to assist a large volume of customers in achieving their goals of initial attachment or reattachment to the workplace.