**WorkforceGPS**

**Transcript of Podcast**

**State Plan Podcast**

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LAURA BEETH: Good morning everyone. My name is Laura Beeth from the great state of Minnesota. I currently serve as the chair of the state workforce investment board as well as the chair for the National Association of State Workforce Boards.

Today I have the honor of facilitating an awesome conversation between Mark Schultz, acting Assistant Secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services and Rehabilitation Services Administration Commissioner; Scott Stump, Assistant Secretary, Office of Career Technical and Adult Education; Clarence Carter, Director of the Office of Family Assistance at the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families; and John Pallasch, Assistant Secretary, Employment and Training Administration.

We will be discussing the importance of a unified and combined state plans required by WIOA. These plans communicate the state's vision for the state workforce system and serve as a vehicle for alignment and integration across federal programs. Now, let's begin the conversation.

First, I'll direct this question to Mark Schultz. What does a WIOA unified or combined state plan really do and what's the purpose?

MARK SCHULTZ: First and foremost, thank you, Laura for facilitating this podcast. So I understand this is a first for our departments under WIOA that we’re joined by a state leader to share a vision and priorities for state plans. I'm excited about that because as a former state leader in Nebraska, these plans are all about states and your partnership of us reinforces our department's commitment to support states in implementing WIOA.

WIOA state plans do a lot of things and have many purposes, but most importantly, I believe state plan should do two things. First, they should lay out how the state will meet the needs of its customers, job seekers, workers, and businesses in a way that is unique and tailored to the state.

Second, they should align the state's workforce development system to help all Americans, especially those with barriers to employment, achieve their educational and career goals. WIOA state plans, memorialized partnerships. Partnerships that should be customer centered, mutually beneficial, and focused on outcomes.

MS. BEETH: Would others now like to add any additional comments?

Scott Stump: Yeah. Yeah. Laura, this is Scott Stump with the Office of Career Technical and Adult Education and Mark teed up a great – yeah. Thought there that this is really about putting all of the different programs to one focus.

And I will tell you, learners and business owners, employers really don't care about the fact that we have different service areas between our workforce board and our community colleges and our school districts or economic development zones. Yeah. They just care that the work gets done.

And so any way that we can use these combined plans to get past our own institutional systems and really look to and put the learners and the job seekers and the employers make the system centric to them, the better we're going to be able to meet the needs.

And I was just in Texas. And one example of a good change that I'm seeing is the Texas Department of Education with the Perkins grant has really moved to using the workforce center alignments for where – how they're going to do the regional planning for Perkins. And so whether or not a state fully combines their plans, absolutely that coordination still needs to take place to, again, to meet the needs of job seekers, learners, and employers out and across the country.

MS. BEETH: Very important comment and recommendation of looking at that alignment and partnership. Okay. Well, thank you all and we'll go to the next question. And this one I'll start with John Pallasch. Why should state workforce development boards, workforce development programs, and other stakeholders spend time doing all this planning?

JOHN PALLASCH: I think that's the key takeaway from this planning process. As much as anything, I hope that at the state level the planning process bring together partners who may not interact on a daily basis, may not report to the same director or secretary or whatever the title may be in their given state.

But it allows under the auspices of workforce and serving customers that allows those partners to come together and plan and talk about their strategies and their visions and their policies, and putting them all in the same room with an eye towards that conversation and that back and forth and figuring out how we on the government side can leverage the resources we have to better serve the customers.

Like Mark, I draw from my state experience in Kentucky. And when I started in Kentucky, we were disparate. The adult education program was in another cabinet, the apprenticeship program was in another cabinet. But over my time in Kentucky that the governor took some proactive steps to bring those programs together to try to consolidate workforce under one secretary under one cabinet.

And that was hugely helpful as we sat down and we talked about where we were going with WIOA and what the folks in Voc Rehab were seeing and some of the challenges they had and ~~T~~rade and the issues associated with ~~T~~rade. And how do we bring those partners together and plan and set out that vision for workforce?

So as important as the document is itself, I think equally as important are the conversations that take place as the state begins to draft and compile that document. They're talking about labor market issues, they're talking about issues with their customers, they're talking about referrals, they're talking about resources.

Those are all the things that behind the scenes we as government need to make sure that we've got smoothed out so that the outward facing appearance to the customer is – to Scott's point, they don't much care about our internal operations and our organizational structure and who's who's boss and are you a WIOA person or a Wagner-Peyser person, they come to us for help and we in a unified way have to provide that help back to them.

MS. BEETH: I absolutely agree as a business leader and an executive in human resources. What you're saying is we're putting the customer first in that work that needs to be done with partnership and kind of back office to get that alignment together as a one-stop for our customers. That will be key. Mark, would you like to add a comment?

MR. SCHULTZ: Yes. I would. I really want to build off the alignment because particularly when there are limited resources, the planning is so critical to us coordinating so that we're maximizing the benefits with those limited resources for our job seekers and our employers. That because each of the partners bring something to the table in planning, so it's to identify our strengths and to – if a workforce system, I think it's more effective and it can be more efficient and actually ends up then providing a better experience and more importantly, I think better outcomes for our customers.

MS. BEETH: Well, thank you . I'm going to direct this next question to Scott Stump. It's been almost four years since states submitted their first WIOA state plans. From your perspective, what kind of things do you want to see states tackling in these plans? And what would this administration like to see that is different? Scott?

MR. STUMP: Laura, thank you for that question. And I think it's one of the most important questions that we need to be asking. And ultimately we do expect states to be bold in their planning and to be innovative and to think differently. You know, the workforce and economic landscape has changed significantly since WIOA was reauthorized.

And this new landscape requires new approaches and greater collaboration between the partners. It requires brand new plans. We can't just dust off the old ones and say, hey, we're going to continue as is. It asks us to think differently about the way we do business. And as a part of that, it causes a rethinking of our approaches. And our Secretary here at the Department of Education has asked us to rethink, not just education, but the – all will be grants and other programs that we do.

And as a part of that, it is that the process has been questioning everything to ensure that nothing limits a learner, a job seeker, or another client from being prepared for what's next. And our challenge to the states is to create and pursue a vision that will equip the learners and job seekers with the right knowledge and skills and the right opportunities at the right time to fill the current and future skills gap.

And we hope to see approaches that are learner- and client-centric rather than program or institution centric as we've been talking about through the front end of this conversation. And I would say to build on what Mark's comment from the last question about really collaborating to leverage all of the limited resources to get the greatest effect. We would recommend the states use these plans to break down those barriers between programs and incentivize collaboration.

You know, we long have the opportunity for co-enrollment in programs. So a student could be both in a WIOA youth program, but also co-enrolled in an adult education program to earn their high school equivalency to get those and expand those measurable skill gains that really set that client up for success in the long term, but we only have less than five percent of students that are co-enrolled.

How do we make sure that we're putting them in not just the program but the right set of programs to truly get them where they want to go? You know, only 15 percent of working adults – or not only, but 15 percent of working adults have a little literacy skills. How do we make sure that the whole system comes to bear on that to make sure that they have the ability to upskill and get into the next step in their career and extend their productivity in the workplace for employers?

So the other one that I think is a key area that we've got to look at for change is with disconnected and opportunity youth. You know, we need new ideas from state and local providers to get to the millions of students that are ages 18 to 25 that are sitting along the sidelines that need to be re-engaged.

And how do we leverage Perkins and WIOA youth and the youth component of adult education programs to move that needle forward and get them back into the growing economy? So with that, I would just say that there's a lot that we're hoping for on states and do you know that all of our agencies are here to help brainstorm with them of ways that we can increase that collaboration and that co-enrollment and using all of the programs to most effectively meet the needs of those individuals that we serve.

MS. BEETH: Thank you, Scott. You can tell just with all of you, how much collaboration is already underway. Would others like to also comment on this?

MR. SCHULTZ: Yeah. I was just going to add and just put an emphasis on the continued emphasis involving individuals with disabilities in those employment opportunities. You know, that's one of the lowest – one of the highest unemployment rates in the country for individuals with disabilities.

We want to continue to see the discussion about individuals are going to be integrated into those plans in terms of services for all individuals and that the VR programs are cross country should be there at the table willing partner in working to how to maximize services and benefits for individuals with disabilities as well as part of this statewide workforce development system.

MS. BEETH: What opportunities does the WIOA state plan process present for states such as Perkins, TANIF, and other partners may be included in a combined state plans? Clarence?

MR. CARTER: Laura, thanks for the question. To me the opportunity that it provides for states is to be able to think about the issue of employment very much across different dimensions.

Well, from the perspective in which I come, we are trying to look at the issue of employment from the perspective of people who have economic and social challenges and in many instances don't have good work history; okay? Mark just explained in his instance he's looking at the issue of employment from a disability perspective.

But what becomes the important opportunity here is to bring all of that together so that the state can convene around a full context of employment. Employment means different things across these different platforms, but at the same time it is all the same objective. And so WIOA state plan development provides this seminal opportunity for a state to come together and think about employment as a whole for that state.

MS. BEETH: Thank you. Very comprehensive. Are others wanting to add to what Clarence just shared?

MR. PALLASCH: Yeah. Laura, I think what Mark and Clarence are espousing is something that states could really learn from, this idea of trying not to be myopic, try not to think about what is just my program and how does my program serve customers? But how does the broader workforce community and that – as I like to say, not just WIOA, not just Voc Rehab, not just SNAP, not just TANF, but how do we all come together and how do we understand each other and understand the challenges of each other's plans and each other's missions and visions and how do we help support that?

How do we leverage each other? How do we work with our partners, whom the law is very clear we're supposed to be integrated with, we're supposed to be implementing this law together. How do we work with them? How do we understand their strengths and weaknesses? How do we share with them our strengths and weaknesses so that we can help each other.

MS. BEETH: Totally agree. Any other comments?

MR. SCHULTZ: So this is Mark. I would just add, I think real opportunities comes – and just building up of what John and Clarence had said, just discovery. And I think as I recall in the past, the greatest matter of it was just learning about each other's programs. And as we learned about those, we saw opportunities occur for more collaboration for cross training the staff so that we could better serve individuals.

And that all led to not just better services, but I think we were able to start a greater candidate pool for employers and looking at individual skills and not the things that differentiated people. So I think through that discovery process, the opportunities that I hope other states can continue to build off of as well.

MS. BEETH: I'll move on to our final question for John Pallasch to begin with the response. How do you envision that states should use this opportunity to implement innovative ideas and strategies to improve the workforce system? John?

MR. PALLASCH: Thank you, Laura. So this is where the rubber really meets the road in terms of what the states are going to decide to do with their plan. There are any number of issues that we as a workforce system have struggled with, any number of initiatives that we here at the Department of Labor are trying to encourage states to embrace the idea of multiple pathways to employment.

That this idea that there are any number of ways for any number of customers to interact with our workforce system and end up with a job at the end. Some of that is through a two year associate degree. Some of that is through credentials, some of that is through an apprenticeship program. Making sure that states understand that, that it's their job to meet the customer where they are, determine the best path forward for that individual, assess any barriers they have and then move them down that path.

This idea of skills-based hiring that we talked so much about not focusing on educational requirements for a job and not trying to define someone simply by the position that they'd held or the degrees that they have, but what are the skills that they have? How do we understand the job that they had, but more importantly, the underlying skills that it took to be successful at that job.

And what's the crosswalk to jobs that they're looking at and how do we determine where those skill gaps might be? Providing training, up-skilling for those specific skills that are lacking and then moving those individuals on.

Another area that I would hope that states would be a little bit more aggressive and bold in is the idea of priority of service. I've already started to talk to states all across the country on our regional calls, telling them that priority of service is something that ETA is going to be focused on going forward. The law is very clear that we're supposed to serve those most in need and there's a priority of service requirement.

MS. BEETH: Thank you. Any other comments?

Scott Stump: This is Scott. And the conversation went on and as both John and Clarence shared there, it dawned on me also that as states are going through this process, and John and I've talked about this before, we would hope that they would come up with and get into such a deep, rich conversation that they would bump into a barrier that we might've created at the federal level.

So an approach to it or something in legislation or in rule that they're going, it doesn't allow us to work together between these two entities. And so that they could have a conversation with us about it of either being able to seek a waiver from that so that they can better serve students and learners and clients.

So as a part of this envisioning a new future, it's our hope that they push hard enough that they're actually identifying places where we might need to change some of the aspects of the program to ensure that they have the full latitude locally to meet the needs of all of the customers they serve and the employers that they work with.

MS. BEETH: If there are no more comments, I'm going to move on. This has been a very enlightening discussion. As we begin to wrap up, I would like each of you to leave the audience with one takeaway. I'll start with Mark Schultz, who is the acting assistant secretary of Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services and Rehabilitation Services Administration, commissioner. Mark?

MR. SCHULTZ: Thank you, Laura. I think I just want to wrap up with a couple of thoughts about partnership because the partnerships that we outline in the state plan, they're only as strong as the reality of the relationships in that partnership between the core programs and many of the partnering programs.

So just looking back in my experience, I think some of the most effective partnerships were built at the local level where resources are well often limited and success was only possible when they started to work together.

And that typically happens in the American Job Centers in the schools and in the community. And the workforce and educational professionals come together and they work to solve a problem that helps their shared customer.

And so while there are partnerships at the highest level of the state, among the leadership, I think the state plans have to create systems that allow those partnerships to take root at the local level, too, where the services are delivered by the workforce practitioners and teachers will be our counselors, the ones that actually have the frontline ground on the ground experience.

So in short, I would say that strategic planning shouldn't just document those partnerships at the highest level at the state capitol, but at the planning needs to foster partnerships at all levels of the system in order for us to truly be successful.

MS. BEETH: Thank you, Mark. Next, then I'm going to move on to Scott Stump, who is the Assistant Secretary, Office of Career Technical and Adult Education. Scott?

MR. STUMP: Thank you, Laura. And you bet. And I would just reinforce a statement that I made earlier that in rethinking and actually digging in and preparing these new state plans, absolutely hope that across the board we question everything.

And it's time to take a look at some of the sacred cows and the ways that we've consistently done business and question them to ensure that we are leveraging the wide way of resources from all of the different agencies best at the local level to ensure that we're getting the widest impact for those individuals that we're serving.

And as a part of that, if we do that, and we question that, with the mindset and focus that the overall end goal is a nimble, demand-driven talent development system that serves individuals of all ages, but ultimately sets them up with the right skills at the right time for the right next step in life. And I think if that becomes our goal, then it gives all of the agencies a chance to come in and form that collaborative spirit because they know and have a clear sense of a shared target. So I wish everybody well in that process.

MS. BEETH: Thank you, Scott. Next I'll ask Clarence Carter, the director of the Office of Family Assistance at the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. Clarence?

MR. CARTER: Laura, thanks for your guest moderating of our engagement here. And I want to also thank my colleagues for developing and participating in this opportunity for us to showcase the kind of collaboration that we hope is followed at the state and local level. We approached this with a belief that everyone who can work should work and the only way that we will achieve that objective is by us approaching this issue collaboratively.

While each of the populations that we serve have different challenges, our objective is the same. WIOA state planning process provides that opportunity for us to approach this issue of employment collectively, it should not be taken lightly. It's not simply a bureaucratic process. It is how do we strengthen our states and communities by employing every possible individual with that next best opportunity. Been my pleasure to be a part of this today.

MS. BEETH: Thank you. John Pallasch, assistant secretary, Employment and Training Administration. Your final closing remarks?

MR. PALLASCH: Certainly, and I personally, I want to thank you, Laura for moderating and bringing us together and I want to thank the gentlemen on the call for humoring me as I try to kind of break a few eggs from my side of the WIOA fence. So I appreciate their partnership in this. We've had any number of conversations about not just state plans but about WIOA integration, and what that means going forward and the idea of the federal community speaking with one voice. So I did want to – I wanted to say that. I also want to – for the state's listening, we're in a unique time. The strength of the economy is such that we are now at our 20th consecutive month with less than four percent unemployment, a little bit over 7.1 million available jobs, just over 5.8 million job seekers.

So we're unique in the sense that the economy is strong and the message that I've been sharing with the likes of NASWA and NAWB as I'm out talking to those groups, is now is the opportunity for us to make real systemic change and do something bold and innovative, because we all know that at some point the economy will not be as strong.

Let's make some real changes to the workforce system so that if and when that economic downturn happens, the changes we've put in place can blunt that. They can mitigate the impact of that and they can pull the country out of any economic challenges because of the things that we've done because of the collaboration that we've undertaken and the partnerships that we've built and actually fixing some of those things that maybe we knew weren't functioning as well as we needed them to.

I had the opportunity to be up at a prison in Chester, Pennsylvania yesterday, talking to about 350 inmates about what lies ahead for them and how the workforce system can help them while they're currently incarcerated and as they're moving out of that system. Those are just 350 of those 34 million folks that we at Labor kind of wake up every day saying, okay, how do we get them back into the workforce? How do we help them?

And Mark and Clarence talked about some of the other populations of folks who are challenged and aren't served by the workforce system fully. So that's my takeaway message is let's take advantage of this opportunity, let's take advantage of the strong economy, and let's really do something that's going to leave a lasting impression on workforce going forward.

MS. BEETH: Thank you, John. I would first like to thank each of you for participating in today's podcast. You've all shared great advice to strengthen our states and communities through collaboration, collective work, and putting our customers first.

This information will help the states to better align federal investments in job training and education to integrate service delivery across programs and to improve efficiency in service delivery into ensure that the workforce system matches job creators with skilled individuals.

Again, thank you very much. This concludes today's state plan podcast. Have a great day.

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