Summary results from interviews with program managers

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# Methodology

We requested interviews with a targeted list of 25 program managers, chosen for their regional and organizational diversity. Twenty managers agreed to participate. We interviewed managers at eight of the state’s 16 workforce service areas and at ten independent workforce agencies around the state which have contracts with DEED. In addition, we spoke with one manager within the WorkForce Center System and one manager in Adult Basic Education. Two program managers included some members of their counselor staff in their interview, and those counselor responses are also included here.

Eleven program managers we interviewed are located in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area; three are located in southern Minnesota, one is located in central Minnesota, and five are located in northern Minnesota. We recorded, transcribed, and qualitatively coded all interviews, which ranged in length from one to two hours.

The program managers we spoke to are not a statistically representative sample of all program managers in the state. We provided our interview questions to all interviewees a day or two in advance of our meeting, so the interviews reflect varying levels of prepared responses. While all interviews covered the same questions, the interviews were not driven by a consistent script.

**For these reasons, these results are not representative of the opinions of all workforce development program managers in Minnesota. The ranking of ideas according to how many program managers expressed them cannot be generalized into statements about what the average program manager in the state would think.**

Instead, these results can be used to generate ideas and start conversations.

# Results

## Common barriers faced by participants

We asked program managers what barriers to employment and barriers to training their participants face.

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| Common barriers faced by participants | Suggested by this many interviewees | What interviewees said |
| Limited transportation options | 15 | Participants may not have a car, may have a suspended license, or may need car repairs. These problems are exasperated in rural areas with limited public transportation options. |
| Criminal background | 12 | Participants with a criminal background have difficulty not only finding employment but also finding housing. This also compounds social isolation in smaller communities where neighbors are aware of the criminal record. |
| Limited child care options | 10 | Participants' job search is constrained by childcare hours of operation, and many areas face a very limited supply of childcare providers. Although the cost of childcare is also a concern, availability of childcare was mentioned much more often. |
| Overwhelming family commitments | 10 | Participants may face a family illness or a death in the family. Participants may also have a family that is not supportive of pursuing education over earning an income. |
| Lack of confidence | 8 | Participants may face feelings of fear, insecurity, and low self-esteem, whether because of a sudden job loss or because of a poor work history, criminal record, or poor experience in the school system. |
| Limited basic skills | 8 | Participants with low reading, writing, or math skills face a basic skills barrier into training and into jobs that require those skills. This is true for participants who never finished high school as well as for participants with higher levels of education. |
| Poor mental health | 8 | Mental health issues may be aggravated by the stress of job loss or low income. |
| Limited computer skills | 7 | Participants who do not own a computer or otherwise have limited computer skills face a barrier in today's job market, which is largely online. |
| Limited financial support | 7 | Participants with limited financial support, whether because their family lives in poverty or because their unemployment benefits have expired, face difficulty in taking time out of the job market to engage in training. This barrier feeds into having limited transportation options. |
| Lack of stabile housing | 6 | Participants may face homelessness, whether because of regional housing shortages or limited financial resources to afford stabile housing. |
| Chemical dependency | 5 | Participants may have, or have had in the past, a drug or alcohol addiction, which could be exacerbated with the stress of job loss or low income. |
| Limited English skills | 5 | Participants who are immigrants or refugees may face language barriers. |
| Racial discrimination | 5 | Participants of color may face outright discrimination in the hiring process and from healthcare, training, or other service providers. They may also be dealing with less obvious forms of discrimination in the form of internalized oppression and stress from microaggressions. |
| Limited soft skills | 4 | Participants may lack the soft skills needed to keep a job, from showing up on time to resolving conflict in a work setting. |
| Domestic violence | 3 | Participants may face violence in their relationships or home. |
| Class discrimination | 2 | Participants of a low socio-economic status or class may face discrimination in the hiring process. |
| Lack of anonymity in rural MN | 2 | Participants in rural Minnesota may face social isolation if they have "burned bridges" with employers in town. |
| Lack of social employment network | 2 | Participants hoping to enter a job that is dominated by family ties, such as at a family business or construction company, often lack the job network and lack the trade skills that are passed down to children in families in those circles. |
| Lack of work experience | 2 | Participants may not have much work experience, whether because of long term unemployment or unstable work history. This is a unique barrier that results from other barriers. |
| Poor personal hygiene | 2 | Participants with limited financial support may not be able to afford the level of personal hygiene required by many jobs, such as dentistry. |
| Poor physical health | 2 | Participants may face poor physical health, which could impede a job search or training. |
| Age discrimination | 1 | Older participants may face age discrimination in the hiring process. |
| Foreign credential | 1 | Participants who are immigrants or refugees may have earned a credential in their home country which is not recognized by employers or industries in Minnesota. |
| Limited access to healthcare | 1 | Participants may not be able to afford or otherwise access the healthcare they need, which could result in poor physical health. |
| Long term unemployment | 1 | Participants may have been unemployed for a long period and lack the soft skills needed to find or retain work. |
| Mistrust of or unfamiliarity with institutions | 1 | Participants may have a mistrust of institutions for a variety of reasons, which can be a barrier to seeking employment and training services. |
| Unplanned pregnancy | 1 | Participants may face an unplanned pregnancy, which is related to the barrier of overwhelming family obligations. |

## Ways to address specific barriers

We also asked program managers whether the program can assist with the common barriers they identified.

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| Strategies used to address certain barriers | Suggested by this many interviewees | What interviewees said |
| Address age discrimination: targeted workshop | 1 | They provide an experienced worker workshop that helps participants frame their experience as an asset. |
| Address criminal background: educate employers | 1 | They provide information on the Work Opportunity Tax Credit and the bonding program to employers. |
| Address criminal background: frame in positive way | 1 | They counsel participants with a criminal background on how to emphasize rehabilitation in an interview. |
| Address criminal background: occupational choice | 4 | They counsel participants with a criminal background on which occupations and fields are more open to them. For instance, healthcare and social service are largely restricted to applicants with a clean background. |
| Address criminal background: re-entry services | 4 | They refer participants to a re-entry services provider, or provide that level of tailored programming in house. |
| Address criminal background: targeted workshop | 2 | They provide the New Leaf workshop aimed at participants with a criminal background. |
| Address limited computer skills: help buying a computer | 1 | They provide a buyer's guide for computers and make referrals to a nonprofit used computer store. |
| Address lack of confidence: increase confidence | 9 | They focus on increasing confidence with participants. One interviewee termed this being the participant's cheerleader; another said they celebrate small successes, such as resolving barriers; another spoke about counselling for cognitive change; and another spoke about paying for a haircut and manicure. Multiple interviewees spoke about this in terms of having conversations around planning for the future. |
| Address limited soft skills: subsidize employment | 5 | They use on-the-job training, work experience, or other forms of subsidized employment to get participants a foot in the door or a leg up over other applicants for a position. |
| Address limited soft skills: targeted workshop or education | 2 | They provide a workshop or one-on-one counsellor instruction on various workplace norms. |
| Address lack of stabile housing: partner with shelters | 1 | They partner with local shelters and other temporary or supported housing agencies to place their participants into safe housing. |
| Address limited transportation options: budgeting | 1 | They assist participants in budgeting for transportation costs. |
| Address limited transportation options: help with license reinstatement | 5 | They assist participants reinstate a suspended or revoked license. |
| Address limited transportation options: offer transportation | 2 | They offer transportation, whether by facilitating carpools for participants, by providing a bus system, or by personally picking up a client in the area. |
| Address limited transportation options: pay for bus or car | 6 | They provide financial assistance to pay for a bus pass, necessary car repair, or even for buying a car. |

## Effective strategies in adult workforce development

We asked program managers what program strategies stand out to them as being especially effective.

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| Effective program strategies | Suggested by this many interviewees | What interviewees said |
| Intensive case management | 19 | Intensive case management includes ideas of hand-holding, relationship-building, meeting people where they're at, actively tailoring advice to each person. It also means addressing the whole person in their social situation (i.e. addressing the family and community situation they live in and issues not directly related to a job search, such as health or domestic violence). Intensive case management may often but doesn't necessarily include 'connect to other services'. |
| Connect to other services | 13 | Connect to other services means the organization connects participants to mental health, chemical dependency, transportation, child care, and other services to ensure the participant's holistic needs are being met. These services could be offered within the interviewee's own organization or at another organization. |
| Partner with education institution | 11 | Partner with education institution refers to collaboration between workforce agencies and educational institutions, whether Adult Basic Education or postsecondary. This could refer to either co-developing a new training program or referrals between workforce agencies and educational institutions. |
| Partner with employers | 9 | Partner with employers means engaging employers on behalf of participants, whether through job fairs, individual hiring events, educational workshops on workplace diversity, or involvement in the development of training programs. |
| Cultural relevance | 8 | Cultural relevance means having staff who reflect the culture and speak the language of the program's target audience. It also refers to program approaches that tie in a given culture's history and traditions. |
| Financial literacy | 7 | Financial literacy means providing information around successful budgeting to participants, whether in a formal workshop or in a one-on-one conversation. |
| Flexible scheduling | 7 | Flexible scheduling refers to program flexibility in either the hours or location of programming. For instance, this could mean scheduling classes around bus schedules or work shifts or offering classes at a work site. |
| Client satisfaction surveys | 5 | Client satisfaction surveys assist program managers by gathering participant feedback and suggestions for program improvements. It also refers to secret shopper evaluations. |
| Cohort programming | 5 | Cohort programming involves facilitating peer networking and support. It also refers to efficiency gains by grouping together clients who need the same training, orientation, or other program service. |
| Credential attainment | 5 | Credential attainment refers to paying for the training and/or exam fees necessary for the participant to earn an industry-recognized credential. |
| Direct work experience | 5 | Direct work experience refers to an internship or any form of subsidized employment that allows participants to gain experience in their chosen field. |
| Learn from coworkers | 5 | Learn from coworkers means concertedly sharing success stories, assisting coworkers with their own cases, and otherwise sharing resources across staff. |
| Career pathways | 4 | Career pathways refers to the FastTRAC program or, more generally, to any program that integrates Adult Basic Education with postsecondary instruction or involves contextualized education and results in a credential. |
| Partner with other agencies | 4 | Partner with other agencies refers to collaboration between workforce agencies, whether by attending join conferences, by jointly developing new programs, or referring participants rather than duplicating programs. |
| Counselor professional development | 3 | Counselor professional development refers both to supported continuing education and to formal mentoring programs. |
| Intensive retention assistance | 3 | Intensive retention assistance refers to a continuation of intensive case management after the participant has found employment, a point at which most federal programming officially ends. |
| Training | 3 | Training refers to any training program that increases the participant's skills and employability, whether it results in a credential or not. |
| Contract with providers | 2 | Contract with providers refers to a workforce agency partnering with service providers to deliver programming, resulting in a variety of programming approaches, which would increase participant options, and reducing duplicate or overlapping programs. |
| Entrepreneurship assistance | 2 | Entrepreneurship assistance refers to providing training and consultation for participants to open viable businesses. |
| Facilitate job mentors or shadowing | 2 | Facilitate job mentors or job shadowing means setting up these opportunities for participants to explore careers. |
| Labor market tools | 2 | Labor market tools refers to data or assessment tools that can inform either demand for certain occupations or the occupations that match the participant's aptitude and interest. |
| Maintain network of former clients | 2 | Maintain network of former clients refers to keeping in contact with former clients who found employment and advanced into hiring positions. These former clients may be more likely to hire current clients. Both interviewees referred to this strategy in relation to clients with limited English skills. |
| Allow local control of programming | 1 | In the context of effective strategies for funders, allow local control of programming means setting the desired outcome rather than the strategies of any given program or intervention. |
| Incumbent worker training | 1 | Incumbent worker training refers to training provided to a cohort of workers at a single employer, focusing on upskilling into higher-paid positions with that same employer. |
| Learn from other programs | 1 | Learn from other programs means incorporating effective strategies developed by other programs. |
| Partner with unions | 1 | Partner with unions refers to engaging unions in the referral of participants to union apprenticeships. |
| Resume help | 1 | Resume help means assisting participants in developing a polished resume. |
| Setting small attainable goals | 1 | Setting small attainable goals refers to highlighting pre-employment successes for participants struggling with the length of time needed for training before seeking employment. |
| Target occupations in demand | 1 | Target occupations in demand refers to designing training programs around labor market research of high-demand occupations. |

## Program success not captured by performance metrics

We asked program managers to speak about how they view program success for participants. Many said that the standard metrics for these programs (participants earning a credential, getting and keeping a job at a given earnings level) are good representations of success. Those that had additional ideas around program success are represented below.

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| Program success not captured by performance metrics | Suggested by this many interviewees | What interviewees said |
| Pre-employment program success | 7 | Participants who are able to overcome employment barriers with the help of the program are seen as being successful, from securing stabile housing, escaping domestic violence, or staying out prison. |
| Job satisfaction outside metrics | 6 | Participants who have job satisfaction and job benefits not reflected in performance metrics are seen as being successful. This would include working no more than 40 hours a week, getting benefits, having a fulfilling job, and earning enough to support their family out of poverty. |
| Educational advancement | 3 | Participants who pursue further education without the assistance of the program are seen as being successful, even though they may be reflected as a negative outcome for not having employment. |
| Job seeking self-sufficiency | 2 | Participants who learn effective job seeking strategies from the program and would no longer need assistance in their next job search are seen as being successful. |
| Accessibility of program | 1 | The program is seen as successful if it is accessible and effectively reaching out to its target population. |

## Ideas to address racial and class disparities

We asked program managers whether they have ideas regarding how DEED can address participant disparities. Not all program managers had recommendations for DEED, while some had multiple ideas. Note that these ideas have not been evaluated by the research team for their feasibility.

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| What DEED can do to address disparities | Suggested by this many interviewees | What interviewees said |
| Educate employers | 8 | DEED can educate employers around hiring and retaining a diverse workforce, partly to support local workforce agencies already doing this work and to bring their work to a wider audience. |
| Start a conversation around disparities | 7 | DEED could start a conversation around disparities and structural racism, including but not necessarily focused on employers. A handful of these interviewees noted that DEED has a larger platform and more power in state politics than local workforce agencies do, and that where they feel unable to start this conversation, they would welcome DEED doing so. A couple of interviewees in greater Minnesota noted that no one is talking about disparities in their sphere. One interviewee in the Twin Cities metro noted the "One Minneapolis" campaign as a potentially exciting communication strategy. |
| Examine disparate impact of policies | 5 | DEED can examine the potential disparate impact of its policies, including but not limited to its grant review processes or contracting goals. |
| Implement flexible performance | 5 | DEED can investigate the potential for flexible performance strategies to better serve participants with barriers, and can promote current performance strategies around credentialing on-the-job training, promoting CLIMB to Dislocated Workers, and taking US DOL-approved exclusions from performance. |
| Involve local providers in developing strategies | 4 | DEED could involve local providers in developing strategies, whether by requiring workforce agencies to have a disparities plan, by partnering with workforce agencies serving communities of color, or by seeking guidance and feedback from workforce agencies on policies it creates to instill local ownership in the process. |
| Provide dedicated funding for serving people of color | 3 | DEED can dedicate funding for serving people of color, to help build lasting partnerships between workforce agencies and community organizations serving specific populations and to ensure competitive processes fund some organizations that specifically target people of color. |
| Provide transparent data | 3 | DEED could provide transparent data on disparities in its programs, as well as a transparent methodology on calculating disparities that workforce agencies could replicate using their own data. DEED could also provide transparent data on rates of service to different communities, to ensure equitable access to programs. |
| Restore trust in institutions | 3 | DEED could work to restore trust in institutions, trust which can be low among people of color and low-income people. This strategy refers to the need to reach out to these communities in particular to address disparities. Interviewees mentioned ways to restore trust, including by making operations transparent, by open communication, and by partnering with organizations which already have the trust of these communities. |
| Provide culturally appropriate services | 2 | DEED can ensure that DEED staff and DEED-funded programs are providing culturally appropriate services, especially in regard to hiring staff that reflect the target population. |
| Evaluate licensure | 2 | DEED can evaluate licensure policies that may be having a disparate impact on people with barriers to employment and can investigate possible solutions. |
| Leverage economic development | 2 | DEED could assign the same priority of addressing disparities to its business development programs as well as facilitate a connection between workers receiving training assistance and employers receiving business assistance. |
| Ensure diversity in government contracts | 1 | DEED could assist other state agencies with meeting their contracting quotas for hiring people of color. Often, these quotas are in the field of construction. |
| Research best practices | 1 | DEED could research best practices in addressing disparities that may not have been implemented in Minnesota yet. |