

Recruitment, Outreach, and Engagement of Disconnected Young Adults under WIOA

Lessons Learned from the Evaluation of the Linking Innovation Knowledge Employment (@LIKE) Program

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This is the first of three issue briefs on innovative aspects of the @LIKE program that can help programs implement WIOA requirements. The second in the series will cover best practices in the use of basic skill and psychological assessments to evaluate the skill, self-efficacy, and resiliency levels of target WIOA populations. The third will summarize findings on the use of dedicated Life Coaches to help disconnected young adults become more skilled, confident, and resilient when confronted with employment and educational obstacles.

IMPAQ International evaluates and enhances public programs and policies. Strumpf Associates is a small cadre of training and consulting experts, headquartered in Washington, DC.

OVERVIEW

Since the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) passed in 2014, there has been a breadth of literature related to effective strategies in serving youth and young adults through the public workforce system, yet stakeholders still need proven strategies to reach the expanded WIOA youth target population requirements.

This issue brief describes the unique and intensive recruitment, outreach, and engagement strategies of the Linking Innovation, Knowledge, and Employment (@LIKE) program based in Southern California, which serves disconnected young adults, age 18 to 24. It explains what worked best in outreach, recruitment, and engagement of disconnected young adults.

As the public workforce system implements the updated 2014 WIOA Youth requirements, the findings from IMPAQ's qualitative evaluation of the @LIKE program can help service providers meet the updated youth service provisions required under WIOA.

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Questions and comments can be directed to IMPAQ International. For more information visit www.impaqint.com or call (443) 259-5500.

THE @LIKE PROGRAM

In July 2012, the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL), through the Workforce Innovation Fund (WIF), awarded a grant to the Riverside County Economic Development Agency (EDA), in Riverside, California.

The grant began in November 2012, and is scheduled to be completed by September 2016. It has two main purposes:

- Implement the @LIKE program in Riverside, San Bernardino, and Imperial counties, and
- Rigorously evaluate the program design and services provided to disconnected young adults.

The program provides employment and training services, with specific attention paid to recruitment and engagement, to disconnected young adultsⁱ between the ages of 18 and 24 who have been unemployed and out of school for at least 90 days, and who are any one of the following: low-income; gang-involved or ex-offender; receiving public assistance; or a recently separated veteran.

The @LIKE program has two main goals:

- Build upon the traditional Workforce Investment Act (WIA) employment and education services through intensive engagement of participants that focuses on sociological and psychological elements of resiliency and self-efficacy via designated and professionally trained Life Coaches for each participant.
- Test service delivery strategies that reconnect disconnected young adults to educational opportunities, employment, and their communities and that can be replicated in other areas and used to improve the lives of other disconnected young adults throughout California and the United States.

INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

In October 2012, Riverside EDA contracted with IMPAQ International to conduct an independent third-party evaluation of the @LIKE program, and IMPAQ designed an evaluation with qualitative and quantitative aspects.

The evaluation of @LIKE consists of quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative component, currently underway and expected to be completed by August 2016, is using a quasi-experimental methodology to estimate whether the program had a significant effect on employment and education outcomes of disconnected young adults when compared to the traditional Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Youth program participants.ⁱⁱ

The qualitative evaluation includes the implementation study (completed in and the process study. IMPAQ completed the qualitative evaluation component of @LIKE in March 2015. Qualitative evaluation was informed primarily by in-depth site visits to each of the three participating counties. During the site visits, the research team conducted interviews with key program staff, gathered information from participants through focus groups, and reviewed relevant documents, including program guidelines, marketing materials, and implementation manuals. The process evaluation comprehensively documented the challenges and best practices of the program with respect to implementation and service delivery at the 2-year point of the program. [You can read the full report here.](#)

THE UPDATED WIOA YOUTH TARGET POPULATION

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, commonly referred to as WIOA, governs the nation's public workforce development system that is delivered through the network of nearly 2,500 One-Stop Career Centers across the country.

WIOA replaces the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and amends the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, the Wagner-Peyser Act, and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. WIOA strengthens the One-Stop systemⁱⁱⁱ by aligning and streamlining federally funded education, employment, and training resources.

UPDATED PROGRAM ELEMENTS

WIOA represents a renewed commitment to workforce development and is aimed at increasing opportunities, particularly for out-of-school youth. Some of the most important reforms to the WIA Youth program^{iv} contained in WIOA include:

- **Refocus on Out-of-School Youth** – WIOA increases the minimum out-of-school youth expenditure rate for WIA Youth program funds from 30% to 75% for a given Program Year (PY). The requirement applies to local workforce development areas and will require service areas to recruit additional out-of-school youth to meet this new requirement. In PY 2011 and PY 2012, 57% of formula WIA Youth funds were spent on out-of-school youth.^v
- **New Programmatic Elements of WIOA Youth Program** – WIOA adds five new program elements to the original ten, including: financial literacy education; entrepreneurial skills training; labor market information about in-demand industry sectors or occupations available in a local area; activities that help youth prepare for and transition to post-secondary education and training; and education offered concurrently with and in the same context as occupational training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster.
- **Emphasis on Work Experience for Youth** – WIA requires local areas to spend at a minimum 20% of WIOA Youth funds on work experience activities, including paid and unpaid work experiences such as: summer and other employment opportunities throughout the year; pre-apprenticeship programs; internships and

job shadowing; and on-the-job training opportunities.

UPDATED ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

In addition to new programmatic elements, WIOA also makes changes to the eligibility requirements for WIOA Youth participants. WIOA makes a new distinction in eligibility for services between out-of-school youth and in-school youth, which was not made under WIA.

WIOA also expands the age range for out-of-school youth from 21 to 24, presenting an opportunity for youth service providers to meet the unique needs of this older young adult population.

Exhibit 1: Comparison of WIA and WIOA Youth Eligibility Provisions

WIA Youth	WIOA Out-of-School Youth	WIOA In-School Youth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Between the age of 14-21; ▪ Low-income; and ▪ Any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Deficient in basic literacy skills b) A school dropout c) Homeless, a runaway, or a foster child d) Pregnant or a parent e) An offender f) An individual who requires additional assistance to complete an program, or to secure and hold employment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Between the age of 16-24; ▪ Not attending any school; and ▪ Any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) A school dropout b) Not attended school for at least the most recent complete school year calendar quarter c) Secondary school diploma holders or its equivalent who are low-income and either basic skills deficient or an English language learner d) Subject to the justice system e) Homeless, runaway, or subject to the foster care system f) Pregnant or parenting g) Has a disability h) Low-income individual who requires assistance to complete education or obtain employment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Between the age of 14-21; ▪ Attending school; ▪ Low-income; and ▪ Any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Basic skills deficient b) An English language learner c) An offender d) Homeless, runaway, or subject to the foster care system e) Pregnant or parenting f) Has a disability g) Low-income individual who requires assistance to complete education or obtain employment.

The expanded eligibility provisions for out-of-school youth go beyond the increase in age, as WIOA allows young adults who have not necessarily dropped out of high school, but have not attended for the most recent quarter of the school year to be eligible for services.

By adding this additional eligibility provision, youth service providers are better able to reach young adults who are on the path to become disconnected rather than waiting the for individual to dropout.

Similarly, youth service providers are able to serve out-of-school youth who are low-income and have high school diplomas or its equivalent, but are basic skills deficient or an English language learner.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM @LIKE

The @LIKE program successfully enrolled 664 disconnected young adults between the ages of 18-24 over the past three years (target was 675), using

multiple strategies to attract this difficult-to-reach-and-engage population.

The strategies described below provide a number of lessons for local youth service providers looking to meet the new WIOA requirements of serving more out-of-school youth and keeping them engaged in program services.

@LIKE's outreach, recruitment, and engagement efforts of disconnected young adults were wide-ranging. @LIKE's recruitment and outreach was conducted through a number of activities, including outreach at local governmental facilities, non-profit and faith-based organizations that provide support services to disconnected young adults; word-of-mouth referrals; and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

EFFECTIVE OUTREACH

IMPAQ's evaluation found that word-of-mouth referrals from participants and from WIA Youth participants were the most effective means of recruiting program participants. Site Directors, Life Coaches, and Case Managers focus on leveraging word of mouth not only between program participants and other disconnected young adults, but also through relatives and friends of program participants and staff members.

One of the key elements that makes word-of-mouth referrals successful is the intensive "boots on the ground" approach @LIKE staff take to recruit each participant that include activities such as visits to local parks, tattoo parlors, smoke shops, homeless shelters, and other hangouts known to be places with disconnected young adults.

@LIKE staff also had some success going into low-income communities and neighborhoods, knocking on doors, and speaking to friends, families, and young adults about the opportunities available through the program.

Given the fact that disconnected young adults, especially those in the 22-24 age range, do not necessarily congregate in one location like schools or other social organizations, @LIKE staff found that by getting out of the office and going **to** the places where disconnected young adults hang out and speaking to them one-on-one in their environment, and on terms they were most comfortable with, was highly effective.

MESSAGING

Program staff emphasize how easy it is for individuals to start the program. A one-page application and self-attestation remove administrative hurdles and to make the process as simple as possible for individuals interested in the program.

By allowing applicants to self-attest and proceeding directly to services without validating application information, program staff are able to quickly engage participants with services so they see the value and are encouraged to continue.

Staff are given 60 days to ensure that, to the degree possible, documentation such as social security cards, birth certificates, etc. are obtained to validate application criteria. Data validation is also done quarterly by Local Workforce Development Board staff to ensure documentation

SOCIAL MEDIA

Program staff use text messaging and social media platforms such as Facebook^{vi} and Twitter to communicate in ways disconnected young adults are comfortable with.

While the use of text messages and social media was not a highly effective recruitment strategy, it was the most effective strategy in keeping participants engaged and reconnecting those who had disconnected from the program.

TAILORING STRATEGIES BY AGE GROUP

@LIKE's recruitment strategy is tailored to the specific needs and interests of two different age groups within the target population, those 18-21 and 22-24. Younger participants were more ready to enroll in the program when compared to the older participants.

Young adults in the 22 to 24-year-old age group were more likely to have been unemployed or separated from educational institutions longer than those aged 18-21. The older group required more resource intensive outreach and recruitment efforts.

Perception was also a contributing factor. Those in the overall target population of 18-24, and even more so the 22-24 age group, considered themselves as adults

and were not interested in a “youth” program. To overcome this, @LIKE uses the term “young adult” to refer to all @LIKE participants and emphasized work experience and employment services available through the program rather than the educational and basic skill building component.

KEEPING PARTICIPANTS ENGAGED

The challenges and life obstacles that many disconnected young adults face result in cycling in and out of @LIKE program services. These challenges include periodic homelessness, ongoing issues with the criminal justice system, pressures to provide for their families, and substance abuse.

Recognizing these unique challenges and the fact that many disconnected young adults have not had the opportunity to develop the “habit of engagement,” @LIKE’s program design expects extended periods of absence and does not punish individuals who may go missing as in the traditional WIA Youth model.

“Accommodate activities to what participant needs, finds ways to be accessible and available.”
-@LIKE Life Coach

This is different from the WIA Youth program, where participants are exited if they have been “out of service contact” for 90 consecutive days. Instead, @LIKE works to establish trust between participants and staff that is respectful of life obstacles preventing regular attendance, and creates an atmosphere where participants feel staff are invested in their success and that they are always welcomed back to the program once they are able to and don’t have to restart services from the beginning.

COMMUNICATION

Once a participant is enrolled in the program, a key component is regular and effective communication with participants that explain the services available, expectations of participation, and support needed to keep participants engaged. Staff reach out to participants on a frequent, or as needed, basis to determine participant’s progress in achieving program goals.

Participants who disengage from the program are called, texted, visited, and messaged on social media to determine why they left the program and to let them know they can come back at any point once their life circumstances lend themselves again to program participation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOALS

Staff engage with program participants to build their sense of self-worth and empower them to accomplish their goals. When participants begin the program, they set early goals, such as basic skill building, including interview preparation or resume development, and finding entry-level employment.

By helping individuals find immediate employment, especially among older young adults, relieves the pressure of having income and providing for their families, removing a potential obstacle to participation. Accomplishing these early goals provides positive self-reinforcement for the participants, increasing the likelihood that they will continue to progress and remain engaged with the program.

LIFE COACHES

In addition to the traditional Case Manager who ensures participants are meeting programmatic requirements as under the traditional WIA model, @LIKE also provides dedicated and professionally trained Life Coaches for each participant.

Across the nine service areas there is variation in the division of responsibilities between Case Managers and Life Coaches, with some sites having two separate individuals fulfill each role, while other sites had one individual for both. The qualitative evaluation and response from @LIKE participants found that having two individuals fulfill each role was more effective than having one individual perform both roles.

The @LIKE Life Coaches have a key role in keeping participants engaged with the program. They communicate with participants via phone, text, and social media—platforms that disconnected young adults are comfortable using.

PEER ENGAGEMENT

Another key element in keeping participants engaged are the relationships that develop between individuals and their peers. @LIKE participants are placed in cohorts where individuals are able to move through the program and receive services with each other, allowing participants to often become friends and gain a sense of togetherness.

Peer relationships frequently have the effect of encouraging individuals to remain engaged with the program in order to maintain these friendships. The participants also hold each other to certain standards in working toward educational and employment goals.

“We were like a little family. We had interactions with other participants when I was there, and I was there all the time. We kept each other on track. Other participants were experienced with finding work, and they would help other participants. It was a warm environment to share with other participants about life issues

-@LIKE Life Coach

In another successful strategy, staff demonstrate their belief in participants' abilities by providing opportunities to lead, such as tutoring other participants or giving presentations.

SUPPLEMENTAL SUBSIDIES

Accommodations are also made to help remove any barriers that would prevent participants from continuing with the program, including transportation subsidies and child care. Staff work with social services programs such as Temporary Assistance For Needy Families (TANF) to recognize the activities that participants are engaged in, so that they remain eligible for income assistance.

ENCOURAGING RE-ENGAGEMENT

If an individual leaves the program, the Case Manager and Life Coach remain in contact with that person and encourage re-engagement through phone calls, texts, and social media or in-person visits at their hangouts or homes.

@LIKE has kept absent young adults enrolled in the program for extended periods while they try and locate them. Periods of disconnectedness for individuals who ended up coming back to the program varies by county and site.

Approximately 30-40% of all participants experience periods of absence of at least 45 days while enrolled in the program, with an average period of absence of approximately 133 days. These individuals returned to @LIKE to continue to receive program services, picking up where they left off prior to becoming disengaged from the program.

In some of the program sites staff provide small incentive payments up to \$25 in gift cards to encourage participants to return and complete certain program activities.

CONCLUSION

Workforce practitioners can draw upon the lessons learned by the @LIKE program.

By leveraging word-of-mouth referrals, providing intensive individualized recruitment services, and continually engaging disconnected young adults in achieving their educational and employment goals, workforce practitioners can improve the career prospects of low-income youth and provide a pathway to stable and sustainable employment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

IMPAQ INTERNATIONAL



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TIMOTHY GRIFFITH



Timothy Griffith (B.A., Political Science, Ohio State University), is an Analyst at IMPAQ International, with four years of experience and expertise in workforce development and unemployment insurance programs at the state and local level. Prior to joining IMPAQ, Mr. Griffith served as an AmeriCorps member in Washington, D.C. teaching adult literacy classes. He also worked at the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA) providing legislative and programmatic analysis on a variety of state and federal workforce development legislation, including the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Currently, Mr. Griffith is working on a number of U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) funded evaluations, providing qualitative and quantitative analysis of program implementation and impacts. In addition to his work at IMPAQ International, Mr. Griffith is currently pursuing a M.S. in applied economics at Johns Hopkins University.

SONAM GUPTA



Dr. Sonam Gupta (Ph.D., Economics, University of Arizona) is an applied economist with expertise in Applied Econometrics, Labor Economics, and program evaluation methods. Dr. Gupta has significant

experience in conducting randomized control trials, employing diverse advanced econometric techniques for data analysis and managing large databases. She has studied policy relevant problems using both primary and secondary data. Her current research projects are based in the US and India, and are unique in part because of her focus on collecting micro level primary data. She has worked with several databases - National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), Canadian Census Public Use Microdata File, Compustat, and EPA databases such as Toxics Release Inventory (TRI), and Integrated Data for Enforcement Analysis (IDEA). In addition to her quantitative skills, Dr. Gupta has experience gathering qualitative data through key informant interviews. She has also designed and tested survey instruments.

ZACHARY MILLER



Zachary Miller (MPA, Nonprofit Management, George Washington University; CLSSGB) is a Research Associate at IMPAQ International with over twelve years of programmatic experience throughout the public, private, and nonprofit sectors and over five years of research and evaluation experience. He has expertise with workforce and community development, process assessment and improvement initiatives, program implementation and evaluation, youth development, and building organizational capacities. Mr. Miller specializes in providing technical assistance, working with underserved populations and facilitating

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STRUMPF ASSOCIATES: CENTER FOR STRATEGIC CHANGE



Strumpf Associates is a small cadre of training and consulting experts, headquartered in Washington, DC. The Principals in Strumpf Associates have decades of experience helping organizations manage change, build systems, build leadership teams, and improve program quality and customer satisfaction. The Center provides organizational change management consulting and executive coaching to leaders in schools, workforce organizations, and welfare organizations. Strumpf Associates: Center for Strategic Change has been in business as for the last 30 years.

LORI STRUMPF

Lori Strumpf has over thirty years in the field of organizational development and change management in human services and workforce development organizations. She is a nationally known expert in organizational management, training and design for education, training, and human resource development systems. Prior to moving to Washington, D.C. to work on the Vice President's Task Force for Youth Employment, Lori was the Assistant Director to a project for court diverted delinquent youth. She also worked at Florida State Prison, counseling prisoners. As a consultant to Riverside County's Workforce Development Board, she has served as the Project Director to @LIKE since its inception.

ⁱ The terms “disconnected young adult” is a more appropriate description of the service populations targeted by @LIKE. WIOA use of the term “out-of-school youth” for services targeted to older individuals between the ages of 16-24 is a legacy from WIA that describes individuals older than 18 as “youth.” @LIKE has found greater efficacy with participants in referring to them as “young adults” versus “youth” in the initial marketing and recruitment of individuals and also to keep these individuals engaged with program services.

ⁱⁱ Provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth program became effective July 1, 2015, however for IMPAQ’s quantitative analysis, historical data on WIA Youth participants will be used for comparison due to data availability.

ⁱⁱⁱ The One-Stop Career Centers were established under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Job seekers receive full range of assistance at these centers including employment-related services, training referrals, job listings, and career

counseling. See

<http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/training/onestop.htm> for more details.

^{iv} The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 enacted a formula-funded youth program serving eligible low-income youth, ages 14-21, who face barriers to employment. Funds for youth services are allocated to state and local areas based on a formula distribution. Service strategies, developed by workforce providers, prepare youth for employment and/or post-secondary education through strong linkages between academic and occupational learning. Local communities provide youth activities and services in partnership with the WIA American Job Center System and under the direction of local Workforce Investment Boards.

^v http://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEGL/TEGL_23-14_Acc.pdf

^{vi} [@LIKE Participant Promotional Video](#)