

## Introduction

*I nervously entered the building and immediately was greeted by a large sign that read “STOP! EVERYONE MUST CHECK IN AT THE COUNTER.” I waited in a line behind three people, and when it became my turn I sheepishly told the receptionist, “I am here for the reemployment seminar.” Without even looking at me, she said, “Straight back to room 104.” I entered the room, where I saw at least twenty-five adults sitting classroom style in silence, nervously trying to avoid eye contact with each other.*

*Finally the instructor entered the room. He greeted us by saying, “Welcome to the reemployment seminar; you are all required to be in this seminar because the unemployment office thinks you will have a really hard time finding a job in this economy.”*

. . .

This experience marked the beginning of my six-month journey going undercover at a public One Stop Career Center<sup>1</sup> during one of the deepest recessions in modern history. In December of 2007, the United States entered an acute stage of economic distress. Unemployment reached levels that had not been seen in decades, and the underemployment of workers increased at record rates. From December 2007 to early 2010 the nation lost 8.7 million jobs and left fifteen million workers unemployed. And an overwhelming majority of Americans—73 percent—either knew someone who lost his or her job or were themselves among those fifteen million workers trying to survive unemployment during the recession.<sup>2</sup> The unemployed can learn quickly that the One Stop Career Center is intended to be their first stop on their way to reemployment. Mandated by the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA), One Stops house a

collection of employment and training services—including programs that are part of the Wagner-Peyser Act, vocational rehabilitation, and assistance for veteran's affairs. One Stop Career Centers are currently the centerpiece in this country's workforce development policy and were ground zero in the response to the economic recession. The U.S. Department of Labor reports that there are 1,757 comprehensive One Stop Career Centers and 988 affiliate centers throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> So slightly fewer than 2,750 One Stop Career Centers make up the front lines of the nation's workforce development system. Yet while occasionally a photograph would appear in the *New York Times* or another media outlet that showed unemployed workers in the One Stop Career Centers looking for jobs and using the available services, there surprisingly has been little attention or deep inquiry into these centers during the recession.

As the economic crisis wore on, I would listen to members of Congress, various state governors, and even the president talk about the nation's policy response to the massive unemployment in the recession—suggesting what was working and what was not working. Yet they never really posed some of the questions that nagged at me during this recession. What was it like to be among the millions of unemployed workers who entered the One Stop Career Centers during the recession? Or to be one of the thousands who worked in the field each day? What activities actually went on in those centers? Were individuals being matched to available jobs? Did these jobs provide economic security for those individuals and their families? And did economic security even matter in the field, or is it really just about job placement? I could not help but wonder if the people who were located on the front lines of the recession—the many unemployed, along with the workers staffing the One Stop Career Centers—had insight to inform the nation's employment and training policy. As an ethnographic sociologist, I set out to investigate and chronicle the experiences of unemployed workers, and in particular unemployed women, as they used public workforce services and struggled to survive unemployment.

What drew me to this work is that very little is known about One Stop Career Centers and workforce development policy from a critical

policy standpoint.<sup>4</sup> The WIA, like many social policies, is typically evaluated with quantitative performance measures. For instance, the number of clients served at different levels of service (although some states do not break down the levels of service within demographic categories<sup>5</sup>) is known, as are the number of people placed in jobs, the number of those placed in training programs, and the number of those referred to other services.<sup>6</sup> What is not known, and often may not even be questioned, are more qualitative assessments of success such as, “Did the right person get the right training or education?” “How were clients treated?” or “Were women placed in nontraditional jobs?”<sup>7</sup> In addition, there is a bit of “sloppiness” around workforce policy in some circles. For instance, it is sometimes assumed to be synonymous with welfare policy, on the basis of an incorrect assumption that all the clients served in the One Stop Career Centers are similar in characteristics to those served by welfare. And misconceptions about these centers are themselves quite abundant. Many assume that the One Stop Career Centers are simply the unemployment offices—a place where one goes only to complete their forms to apply for unemployment insurance or troubleshoot why their unemployment check was not processed. And for some Americans, the One Stop Career Centers are not often on their radar screens; they simply do not know they exist!

My goal is to explore and critically evaluate the lived experiences of the individuals, and in particular women, who are served by and working in the One Stop Career Centers, in order to challenge mainstream understandings of workforce development policy. In doing so, I engage a framework that is intended to uncover and highlight the lived experiences of the individuals who are standing on the ground floor. I ask questions such as the following:

1. How is policy implemented and practiced in One Stop Career Centers at the local level?
2. What are the lived experiences of clients, and specifically female clients, along with the workers serving them? How are women served in the workforce system, and how is that experience gendered?

3. How can workforce policy be configured around the lives and social practices of the people most affected by that policy?

To gather the information to answer these questions, I not only conducted interviews and focus groups with unemployed workers and front-line staff but also went undercover and attempted to navigate the public workforce system as an unemployed woman. This way, I was able to delve deeply into the processes of the workforce system, to identify what practices were working well and where challenges existed. This participant observation perspective also afforded me the opportunity to share what it means and feels like to be among the clients in the workforce system. To the best of my knowledge, while “secret shopping” is sometimes used as an evaluation tool for One Stop Career Centers, such an ethnographic sociological analysis with this level of depth has never been conducted.

### What Is Workforce Development?

Since the implementation of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act, the term *workforce development system* has been used ubiquitously to describe a vast and somewhat all-encompassing system. Although One Stop Career Centers—centralized organizations that co-locate public services and programs related to employment and training—have been part of the workforce system in some form for over three decades,<sup>8</sup> they became the primary service delivery approach in the 1990s. The piloting and eventual institutionalization of One Stop Career Centers represents a key structure of the current workforce development system, which was based on the tenet that services should be streamlined, so that all employment and training programs for all people could be brought together and be easily accessible. To accomplish this, programs and job services are grouped together into a tiered sequence of services. One Stop Career Centers include a variety of services from lower-cost core services<sup>9</sup> such as computerized job listings, basic labor market information, and self-service job assistance tools, along with higher-cost intensive services<sup>10</sup> such as individualized career counseling and training.<sup>11</sup>

The One Stops—in both physical and virtual formats—have become a central part of the United States’s workforce development system.

One key aspect of the development of One Stop Career Centers is that they are mandated to serve all workers. This includes the unemployed and the underemployed, along with individuals from all ages, educational levels, occupations, and industries. This is often referred to as the “universal access” component of workforce development. However, this mandate, in both policy and practice, does not translate into a universality of all services for all individuals. On average, while nearly fifteen million people are served annually by One Stop Career Centers, it appears that the bulk of these workers receive core services.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the universal access component mandates that any individual is entitled to go into a physical One Stop Career Center, or online in a virtual format, to access core services. These resources are often geared to assist individuals in making decisions about careers to pursue available labor market information and job search tools (such as online listings). No such mandate exists for intensive or training services. Instead, eligibility thresholds—such as income, unemployment status, and multiple individual-level barriers to employment (including literacy levels, incarceration status)—serve as filters for these services. Core services then appear to have the largest number of clients accessing services, and in contrast only about 3 percent of individuals receive intensive services each year.<sup>13</sup> And because the end goal of workforce policy is that an individual is placed in a job, if one can be placed in a job with a revamping of a resume or access to online job postings, then WIA policy is interpreted to be understood that there would be no need for additional services.

The usage data points highlight both the policy that currently grounds the workforce development system and the tension that is embedded in that policy. Workforce development is currently a work-first system, and like any system that is directed to immediate job placement, it often exists at the expense of training and career development.<sup>14</sup> Workforce development has taken on the characteristics of welfare reform in many ways—in which getting an individual a job is what is needed, often

with less consideration paid to the quality of that job. Today's One Stop Career Centers, and the public workforce system they are part of, have evolved out of employment policies that guided the system over the past century. These policy changes shifted from a climate in which workforce development traditionally served disadvantaged populations by providing access to short-term training and skills development to a current system that is supposed to serve multiple partners, roles, and targets.<sup>15</sup> However, the reality is—whether by necessity or tradition—the workforce system has maintained a particular emphasis on individuals facing obstacles in the labor market. These include men and women with prison records, along with those with little formal education, low literacy, and little work experience. These individuals often need a comprehensive approach of case management, including the time and resources to “assess [their] need and abilities; referrals to resources and supports; education and training; coaching; referrals to jobs and post-employment services.”<sup>16</sup> Yet with the tiered sequences of services and work-first performance goals, the ability to receive such a comprehensive approach is questionable. And immediate placement in a job can become more of a weak band-aid fix—often dooming workers to a lifetime in the low-wage labor market with few opportunities for advancement.

This reality is grounded in a policy framework that insists the workforce development system is not just about workers needing services. While workers are an important focus of the workforce development system, there is also a significant role that is performed by employers. Employers are expected to serve as full partners in the WIA by identifying skill needs, codeveloping training programs, leveraging public resources, and creating a pipeline through which skilled workers can advance. Ideally, this is conceived as a symbiotic association that results in a “workforce development [that] is the coordination of school, company, and government policies and programs such that as a collective they enable individuals the opportunity to realize a sustainable livelihood and organizations to achieve exemplary goals consistent with history, culture, and goals of the societal context.”<sup>17</sup> Given that, programs and services for employers—such as identifying and prescreening po-

tential employees to customized training—have been a significant part of the workforce system.

On the surface such a framework makes some sense. If jobs are needed, then clearly employers must be part of the process. However, when one digs a bit deeper, some questions emerge. Is the workforce system, in ways similar to the welfare system, serving as a feeder to employers for low-wage workers? There is actually much discussion about the ways that the WIA is expected to meet the needs of employers and workers simultaneously. The rhetoric in the WIA recommends that central to creating a system that can meet the needs of workers and employers is the development of a flexible and customized system that addresses job needs and shortages, labor market changes, and the learning and skills training gaps of existing and potential workers in concert with the skills demanded by employers. This policy led the National Governor's Association to note that "in this version workforce development policies no longer address the 'second chance' system as they have in the past, but they are customized to the needs of individuals and employers."<sup>18</sup> To do this it seems as if the workforce development system must provide a coherent, easily accessible, and high-quality lifelong learning system. Skill demands are continually evolving, and workers need both occupationally specific and flexible skills in order to adapt and thrive. There is quite a wide pool of workers in need of these services: individuals who are looking for first-time employment; those who are currently employed full or part time but want to advance in the labor market; men and women who are undergoing transitions in their employment; individuals who were employed at one time, but are no longer currently employed (those in prison and retirees); and even workers who have been recruited from other locations for employment (such as guest workers and immigrants).<sup>19</sup>

And as the policy exists now, it appears that the dual customer approach of workers and employers may not be benefiting each group equally. Policy researchers Kathleen Shaw and Sara Rab noted that the training needs of employers may not be the same as those of workers. Their case study of the Florida workforce system found that employers

often need short-term, non-degree-bearing training for the immediate filling of their labor needs. However, for workers, research clearly shows that they receive higher economic returns by completing degree- and certificate-bearing programs. This led Shaw and Rab to emphasize that “the student consumer is generally not well served by the existing type of programs. Instead the customer that benefits here is the business community, which in Florida’s economy in particular sustains a demand for a supply of workers willing to work for low wages.”<sup>20</sup>

A goal of full customer satisfaction in workforce development—when customers are both employers and employees—would be a true symbiotic relationship, which would require a rethinking and strong commitment to understanding what can truly benefit both groups. Employers need workers and workers need the jobs that employers provide. However, what appears to be missing in this understanding is that employers needed skilled workers at all levels, and workers need not only jobs but good-quality jobs. This requires investment in workers via skills training and education, something that requires funding and time resources. Yet, unlike with many other social service programs or income transfer programs,<sup>21</sup> the benefits of workforce development programs are not often immediately evidenced to either individuals or employers, but instead occur over time.

Center for Law and Social Policy researchers Neil Ridley and Elizabeth Kenefick’s review of quasi-experimental evaluations of the WIA since 2000 have demonstrated that the value of training and workforce services can be evidenced in the long term. For instance, a review of adult participants in twelve states found that while individuals who completed training services had lower initial returns, they caught up to others within ten quarters, ultimately registering total gains of \$800 for women and \$500 to \$600 for men per quarter. The researchers also note that training programs have the impact of lowering business employers’ costs over time, by improving a business’s ability to find and retain qualified workers and increasing the productivity and skills of existing workers. They share an example of a hospital participating in a health care initiative. Through that training program the hospital docu-



mented \$40,000 in savings as a result of lower turnover and reduced hiring costs. There is increasing evidence that workforce development for adults has the ability to have an impact on the life chances of future generations.<sup>22</sup> Further, Ridley and Kenefick, citing University of Wisconsin social work professor Katherine Magnuson's research on adult education of mothers, suggest that when mothers with low education levels complete further education, their children appear to have improved language and reading skills.<sup>23</sup>

Studies such as these highlight what is currently the smallest portion of workforce development—investing in the human capital of individuals via the formal degree and certificate system. Of course, as with any investment that will pay off in the future it has an element of risk to it. The United States Conference of Mayors in 2002 equated the investment in workforce development programs to the investment that high school seniors make in college. As they note,

Students enroll in college and incur substantial costs both in terms of tuition, books, and fees as well as forgone earnings. . . . However, most of the benefits of a college education will occur after college is completed, and the earnings gains will occur over the entire work life. But like all investment activities considerable uncertainty attends the college investment decision because the expected benefits will only occur in the future well after the costs have been incurred and, for some high school graduates, college will prove to be a failed investment. . . . Nonetheless, changes in the job content of the American economy have sharply increased the economic returns to a four year college degree.<sup>24</sup>

This highlights a key aspect of the tension in workforce development that I was interested in exploring more—immediate job placement versus investments in human capital development. At a time with high levels of unemployment and pressure for immediate labor market attachment—from both policy performance measure standpoints and unemployed clients—investments in human capital via the workforce system are increasingly less likely. That tension of putting the unemployed back to work as opposed to investing time and resources to provide skills training that could support longer-term economic security is particularly pronounced with low-wage workers.