

**“Growing To Work Enterprise”
Enhanced Client Empowerment Accomplished via
Innovations in a Local Welfare-To-Work Program
A Case Study**

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Growing To Work Enterprise

Introduction

In February, 2005 a small workforce development organization located in a primarily rural area in the State of Michigan introduced a new pilot welfare-to-work initiative labeled: “Growing To Work Enterprise (GTW-E)”. The Thumb Area Michigan Works! Agency drafted the “Growing To Work Enterprise” pilot as a logical response to the need for a revised employment training program for work ready public assistance recipients. “The Growing To Work Enterprise” innovation was proposed to replace the State’s ”Work First” program. The ”Work First” program (also first pilot tested by Thumb Area Michigan Works! in the early 1980’s) operates just as it’s title suggests. In other words, people wanting and receiving public benefits must make a documentable effort to try and find “work first”. It was logical to assume that in a good economy, making client-customers seek out real work was an appropriate objective. However in a poor economy with high unemployment, persistent job searches resulted in client-customer frustration, loss of initiative and a growth of questionable participation recordkeeping. Hence, the creation of the “Growing To Work Enterprise” initiative was a timely and “economy-flexible” alternative to “Work First”.

The GTW-E pilot takes client-customer empowerment to an innovative, expanded and diverse new level. First at the onset of GTW-E participation, empowerment begins when client-customers are asked to “Need Scale” themselves as a means of making service delivery more effective and efficient. Operationally defined, Need Scaling requires that each client-customer be afforded the opportunity and responsibility to personally identify and numerically rank issues that are barriers to attaining employment. This service targeting initiative greatly improves eventual human development investments. Second, in addition to the basics of taking ownership of their own professional workforce development plan, GTW-E client-customers are personally responsible for maintaining their own computerized program participation log. This mandate to require a minimum level of computer literacy as part of service delivery is not common in most public sector human service endeavors. Each of these unique client-customer empowerment opportunities will be further explained within the context of this article.

The goal of this case study writing will be to expose new innovations of client-customer empowerment as part of a review of “live” workforce development programming and offer alternative learning’s for public sector practitioners engaged in expanding personal responsibility as part of all public service initiatives.

The Setting

The Thumb Area Michigan Works! Agency’s service region is the east-central portion of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula and includes Huron, Lapeer, Sanilac, and Tuscola counties. The four counties comprising the Thumb Area encompass a total of 3,264 square miles. Sanilac County leads in land mass with 964 square miles, with Huron County following with 830 square miles. Tuscola County encompasses 812 square miles, and Lapeer County contains 658 square miles. Although the bulk of the land mass is agriculturally related, there is also an abundance of land area available for seasonal and recreational/tourism related activities.

Geographically, Saginaw Bay borders Tuscola and Huron counties on the east, while Lake Huron borders Huron and Sanilac counties on the west. The Thumb Area’s easy accessibility to both Saginaw Bay and Lake Huron has provided the Region with a natural transportation system. This easy accessibility enhances the Region’s agricultural, industrial, and commercial activities. The Thumb Area plays a leading role in Michigan’s agricultural activities and is considered to be one of the State’s most fertile farm regions. As a multi-county region, the Thumb Area’s economy is based on a strong mixture of industrial, commercial and agricultural activities. Although industrial and commercial activities are widespread throughout the area, Lapeer County’s larger industrial/commercial mix provides much of the basis for regional economic growth. There are also a wide range of community oriented plazas and retail outlets that have been developed to meet the needs of the Area’s various neighborhoods and rural populus. Approximately 10-12% of the Region’s property base is derived from commercial establishments.

The Thumb Area’s population in 2004 totaled 230,932, whereas the 2000 Census indicated that the Region’s population as 226,796, which represents a less than 2% increase. Of the four counties that constitute the Thumb Area, Lapeer experienced the only major expansion in

population at an estimated 5.2 percent rate of growth. Huron County recorded the only reduction in population with a 3.1 percent drop, while Tuscola and Sanilac Counties posted increases at a slower rate of .7 percent and .6 percent, respectively. Overall, the Region's marginal population increase can be attributed to the Region's declining industrial base in Huron, Sanilac, and Tuscola counties. Recent double-digit unemployment rates also continue to plague the Region. This trend of marginal Thumb Area population expansion is expected to continue, as more residents are moving out of the area than are moving into the Region.

Finally, in terms of the Thumb Area population distribution for 2004, an estimated 65 percent of area residents were concentrated in Lapeer and Tuscola Counties, representing 40 percent and 25 percent, respectively. Sanilac County at 20 percent and Huron County at 15 percent are relatively smaller, but still comprise significant portions of the Region's population. None of the counties are considered highly populated areas statewide.

“Growing To Work Enterprise” (GTW-E)

As described in the Introduction section of this article, the Thumb Area Michigan Works! Agency, in full partnership with the Huron, Lapeer, Sanilac, and Tuscola County Departments of Human Services (DHS), recently launched an innovative alternative to Michigan's traditional "Work First" (welfare-to-work) program. The new approach, known as "Growing To Work Enterprise", was made possible through receipt of a waiver from both the Michigan Department of Human Services and the Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth beginning in February, 2005.

Client eligibility for GTW-E ("Work First") participation includes:

- U.S. Citizenship
- Michigan residency (and the intention to remain in Michigan and not be receiving cash assistance from another state.)
- Limited or no income
- Those receiving Family Independence Program cash assistance, non-cash assistance (Child Day Care, Food Stamps or Medicaid) or those who are referred by the Friend

of the Court based on child support arrearages or who are in imminent danger of becoming in arrears on their child support payments due to the lack of employment or being underemployed.

The “Growing to Work Enterprise” pilot is a derivative of the “Work First” program, which was designed to encourage client-customers to pursue permanent job placement. While both programs share a common goal of client self-sufficiency, the road to achieving that goal is quite different under the two approaches. In general, “Work First” emphasizes job-search activities while GTW-E emphasizes addressing the multiple barriers to employment. The two programs differ in terms of how allowable activities are defined and documented. In the “Work First” program, client-customers are required to spend up to 40 hours per week seeking employment, including activities like searching for job openings, preparing resumes, submitting applications, and taking part in job interviews. “Work First” participants are also thought to be responsible for submitting documentation to substantiate their job search activities.

A comparison chart of “Work First” & “Growing To Work Enterprise” Program requirements reports major client-customer participation differences.

Program Requirements	”Work First”	“Growing To Work Enterprise
<i>Hours of participation</i>	<i>Up to 40 hours</i>	<i>Full Time 40 hours</i>
<i>Basis for participation</i>	<i>Planned hours</i>	<i>Actual hours</i>
<i>Allowable Activities</i>	<i>Multiple restrictions</i>	<i>Few, if any, restrictions</i>
<i>Level of client/customer involvement in selecting activities</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Documentation of activities</i>	<i>No ongoing individual logs</i>	<i>Computer-based individual logs</i>
<i>Performance measures</i>	<i>Entered employment and case closure</i>	<i>Entered employment, case closure, plus secondary measures of success in addressing barriers (e.g., child care, GED, transportation.</i>

Structurally, the GTW-E project expects customers to devote 40 hours per week to workforce development activities, however, client-customer also receive credit for activities that address any personal barriers that interfere with job placement and retention. Each personal challenge-related activity, such as finding childcare, dealing with transportation problems, addressing health issues, and participating in short-term training, is allotted a maximum amount of time per week, and the client-customer cannot claim time and activities spent in excess of these. The client-customer is also required to document participation in each allowable activity per week in both a hard-copy and on a computerized log. The purpose of the two logs under the GTW-E is to allow staff to identify patterns of action or inaction and discuss alternative strategies with the client-customer. The log also provides client-customers a reference tool for tracking the history of their job-search activities and personal achievements. Overall, the GTW-E program is designed to build a foundation of personal responsibility/client-customer empowerment that will prepare them to maintain long-term employment or find employment in a higher-paying occupation.

Client-Customer Empowerment Unlimited

The GTW-E uses an agricultural metaphor to highlight the developmental nature of the process of moving program participants from dependence upon public assistance to self-sustaining employment. By **weeding** out personal road blocks, **planting** basic skills, **growing** workability development, and **fertilizing** education, participants are positioned to enjoy the **yield** of their efforts, i.e., employment.

One of the first client-customer empowerment actions initiated via GTW-E participation is the “Need Scaling” function. As part of program orientation each GTW-E client-customer is asked to Need Scale themselves and self-determine what personal and/or professional development issues they feel are most important. An example of the actual Thumb Area Michigan Works! GTW-E Need Scaling form is as follows:

THUMB AREA MICHIGAN WORKS!

Growing To Work

ENTERPRISE Need Scaling



No Need (1) Low Need (2)

Medium Need (3) High Need (4)

ENTERPRISE Areas

1. Personal Road Blocks: When need scaling your Personal Road Blocks, think about daycare or parenting problems, transportation (getting to and from anywhere) concerns, managing your money, and/or substance abuse issues.

Need Scale #: _____ (Self)

Need Scale #: _____ (Case Manager)

2. Basic Credentials: Need Scaling your Basic Credentials means do you need a high school diploma or G.E.D., can you read and do math at an employment acceptable level, do you need English language help, and/or do you need to work on a learning or other disability to prepare for work?

Need Scale #: _____ (Self)

Need Scale #: _____ (Case Manager)

3. Workability Development: Workability development is a critical area of Need Scaling, so again be honest. Are you weak in completing job applications, preparing an on-line, or paper resume? Have you gone through an interview lately, attended a professional development workshop, or visited local employers?

Need Scale #: _____ (Self)

Need Scale #: _____ (Case Manager)

4. Education Plus: Life-long learning should be part of everyone's employment plan. Are there areas of job training that you are lacking? Would tryout employment or unpaid work experience be helpful? Have you started down a higher education degree path and not finished?

Need Scale #: _____ (Self)

Need Scale #: _____ (Case Manager)

5. Employment: Need Scaling your Employment status should be easy. Do you have a full or part-time job? Does it pay well enough to move you off public assistance? Could some form of customized training help you...think about it?

Need Scale #: _____ (Self)

Need Scale #: _____ (Case Manager)

At this time it is important to note that in addition to the non-traditional empowerment aspects of requesting client-customer input into the initial program assessment process, for the first time county based Michigan Department of Human Service workers are also asked to supply Need Scale data on each GTW-E participant. Typically Thumb Area Michigan Works! Agency staff and Department of Human Services staff form their own separate opinions and observations on client-customer needs and weaknesses. The GTW-E Need Scaling component expands the opportunity of empowerment to include the insights and suggestions of all involved in the Thumb Area GTW-E pilot: i.e. the Client, Department of Human Services case workers, and the Thumb Area Michigan Works! Agency front-line service staff.

A second but equally important client-customer empowerment strategy blended into the GTW-E pilot is the mandated involvement of each GTW-E participant in the design and implementation of their own individual workforce development service strategy. This is accomplished through the use of another major Thumb Area program innovation. In 1996 the Thumb Area Michigan Works! Agency introduced a voucher-based service delivery system known locally as the: Job Success "Tool Chest". This public sector innovation has a number of unique features:

1. It creates a block-grant design for assisting eligible client-customers.
2. The "Tool Chest" system facilitates client-customer empowerment and ownership in their workforce development process.

3. In encourages a comprehensive program eligibility process to maximize the amount of training/training support funds available to each client-customer.
4. The “Tool Chest” system downplays the historic negative stereotype applied to eligible client-customers. Based on its scholarship-style of delivery, less focus was/is placed on why funds are received...but rather what is going to be done with them.
5. The “Tool Chest” enables client-customers to preserve a portion of their training funds to assist later during their first months of employment.

The integration of the “Tool Chest” service philosophy into the GTW-E pilot has greatly enhanced the cooperative operational function of the entire GTW-E project. Moreover, the client-customer and front-line case management staff level of empowerment in the pilot is extremely high. This factor has enhanced the ownership taken by client-customers in their own workforce development process.

Another significant area of client-customer empowerment facilitated within the GTW-E pilot is the responsibility for maintaining a computerized program participation log. As was described earlier, every GTW-E participant is required to dedicate forty (40) hours each week to personally and professionally improve their workability. A true record of these activities must be maintained and provided to the Thumb Area Michigan Works! Agency each week. Traditionally this record-keeping process had been hand-written, haphazardly assembled, loosely organized and lacking of structured accountability. Additionally, in most circumstances the major focus of personal responsibility in participation record-keeping fell upon the Thumb Area Michigan Works! front-line staff. There was limited data quality expectations placed at the feet of the GTW-E participant.

The introduction of a computerized GTW-E logging system changed all of that. Not only did the computer system provide much needed structure to the entire participation hour recording process, it also empowered every GTW-E client-customer to become computer literate... at least at an elementary level. Simply stated, GTW-E participants became responsible for maintaining

their own participation log. Each week client-customers return to a Thumb Area Michigan Works! Service Center and enter their personal and workforce development information into a GTW-E computerized log system. The GTW-E system maintains a cumulative, comprehensive tally of each client-customer's progress (or lack of it). This personal responsibility client-customer empowerment component is a very successful innovative aspect of the GTW-E pilot.

An added value GTW-E empowerment component that is closely linked to the achievement and logging of appropriate participation hours is the availability of program "Seed Packets". All GTW-E enrollees are provided a Seed Packet of specialized educational and human service opportunities offered in the Thumb region. Each "Seed" contains basic contact and service information which may assist in eliminating a child care, transportation, literacy or other barriers to employment. The GTW-E Seed Packet component also provides all human service and educational institutions a continuous opportunity to participate in the pilot. This inclusive public service aspect is another unique, innovative, client-customer empowering GTW-E feature.

The final area of client-customer empowerment encouraged through implementation of the GTW-E pilot is the usage of a personal achievement "Measuring Stick". As was discussed in the Introduction section, the GTW-E pilot allows for personal and professional growth for clients no matter the local economy. In other words, if an appropriate employment opportunity does not present itself, the GTW-E project allows for and has a methodology to record intermediate achievements on every participant. Whether it is obtaining a high school diploma, securing a licensed day-care provider, completing a substance abuse course, and/or arranging for good transportation, the GTW-E pilot encourages and highlights all of these non-employment achievements. As a result, clients are more empowered to pursue any and all personal and professional development opportunities as they "grow themselves to work".

Conclusion

Today more than at any other point in history, governments are challenged to be more effective and efficient. The tax-paying public wants all that it expects...and possibly more. As a result, the funding for experimentation in public sector program service delivery has become more common and more oversight allowable. These freedoms have sparked innovation in many areas of governmental programming. Likewise those willing to employ an entrepreneurial and co-operative approach when serving the public have often found both encouragement and support from those working in multi-governmental levels of grant management. All of this allows for the logical expansion of public program, client-customer empowerment opportunities. The Thumb Area Growing To Work Enterprise is a pilot example which promotes and intertwines a number of new client-customer empowerment opportunities.

The GTW-E project has also brought forth a new companion innovative concept, practioner learning and contributor to GTW-E success: Infused Leadership. Infused leadership is defined as leadership being made inclusive within each group involved in the operation of a public service system. This means that empowerment and leadership responsibilities (within the GTW-E pilot) are appropriately required of program administrators, record keepers, fiscal agents, front-line service people and yes even those receiving the public service. Infused leadership goes beyond shared leadership and is different than just assuming personal responsibility. Instead infused leadership ensures that all involved in the successful outcome of a particular public service will at different moments and in different ways step-up and lead the delivery/operation of the program. Infused leadership appears to facilitate personal empowerment at all levels. For example, Thumb Area Michigan Works! Agency service staff are able to take a lead negotiator role in procuring human service and/or training programming for eligible client-customers. Even service provides and educational institutions are empowered to consider innovative options in building customized client-customer training opportunities. It (infused leadership) also builds ownership in the GTW-E program and processes undertaken. Finally, infused leadership seems to ignite a need to be and/or become a better decision-maker. Intuitively the evolution of better decision making may ease the need for larger and more expensive public service programming. This cost saving claim is based on the presumed reduction of the incidence of recycling client-

customers through the GTW-E program (or other public assistance services) again and again, because they will have made better personal development decisions.

Sources

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