



*Gary E. Widmar and
Ray Mischon*

Project Refocus, the University of Missouri-Kansas City's long-term, cross-sector collaborative project brings together business, labor, government, and higher education to address the issues of changing employment needs and retraining of laid-off workers. This worker reentry program has been in place for almost 15 years, surviving a multitude of funding changes and accumulating an award-winning record of service.

Project Refocus: A Dynamic Partnership of Business, Labor, Government, and Higher Education

Changes in the national economy, resulting in job market fluctuations, company closures, and layoffs, provided an opportunity for cross-sector collaboration to meet the needs of local employers and employees in the Kansas City metropolitan area. The result of this collaboration, Project Refocus, combines the skills and expertise of the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), the Metropolitan Community Colleges, local business leaders, and organized labor in a unique worker reentry program. Project Refocus assesses a laid-off worker's experience, aptitude, and personality, combines that information with known and projected market conditions, and provides career options that may include retraining with the goal of returning the individual to the workforce. A nationally recognized worker reentry program, Project Refocus was among the first in the country to use assessment and the concept of retraining to successfully place thousands of dislocated workers ranging from autoworkers to corporate executives.

Historical Perspective

Between 1979 and 1984, more than 11.5 million Americans lost their jobs in this country. Although Kansas City had been somewhat buffered from the initial large scale layoffs by its diversified economy, in the early 1980s corporate downsizing and plant closures appeared on the horizon. A group of local business, labor, and higher education leaders then began to meet on a regular basis to discuss how they might work together to deal with what could become a serious problem.

As this group first met to discuss the problem, various local companies began to announce closures and layoffs. The Kansas City industries impacted initially were food processing, textiles, and automobiles. Changes in the automobile industry were especially hard-hitting, as the Kansas City area was the second largest auto and truck assembly area in the United States. As a result of the meetings and the sudden need for outplacement services for dislocated workers, the group was in a position to have an immediate impact on those affected.

The original composition of this dynamic group was impressive in its local status, influence, and leadership. Representing management was the chairman of the board of a local envelope and stationary manufacturing firm, Tension Envelopes. High ranking officers from ARMCO Inc., Marion Laboratories, United Telecommunications, and the Kansas City Power and Light Company also participated. Labor was represented by the ranking member of the AFL/CIO Labor Council and also by representatives of the Carpenters, Machinists, Communications, Auto and Transit Worker Unions. The chancellors of both the University of Missouri at Kansas City and the Metropolitan Community Colleges System rounded out the higher education component of the board.

The group officially incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation known as the Human Services, Testing, and Retraining Council, Inc. (HSTR) in April, 1983, and immediately began to seek funding and determine a mission for the new organization. The HSTR board initially perceived a mission of aptitude and skills testing and job counseling for newly displaced workers, with referral to appropriate services as workers moved from employment to "disadvantaged status" (emergency food and clothing, housing assistance, credit counseling, medical aid, and other services). As the board attempted to define the role of the new organization, Congress was in the process of passing the Job Training Partnership Act of 1983.

As Congress moved through the legislative process, the HSTR board continued its plan to launch the new organization by summer of 1983. Because funding was the immediate need, the representatives from the business sector assisted in getting foundation grants from both their companies and others with whom they had contact.

Armed with several initial grants, the board successfully applied to the Heart of America United Way for a \$25,000 start-up grant.

With about \$50,000 in hand, the HSTR board next concerned themselves with staffing and housing the new organization. The chancellor of UMKC played a key role by offering two houses on the campus rent free. The board also hired a retired UMKC department chairman to be the interim director, along with one staff member to assist him. Initial testing, assessment, and referral services were offered during the summer to garment and food processing workers. By early fall, Allis Chalmers in Independence, Missouri, began to lay off a large part of its work force and these workers also received services. All of the early participants were union members, and the labor component of the HSTR board played a key role in recruiting and referring dislocated workers to the new agency.

In late summer, as the new guidelines to implement the Title III portion of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) became available, it was evident that the new act encouraged the provision of services through already existing local agencies. The then Division of Manpower Planning (DMP) of the Department of Social Services was the state agency assigned the task of implementing the new act. With Title III services reserved exclusively for the dislocated worker (persons out of work through no fault of their own), DMP surveyed both the Kansas City and St. Louis areas to evaluate the most appropriate agency to be targeted for the new program.

Fortunately, a member of the HSTR board was the chairman of the Missouri Job Training Coordinating Council, and, familiar with JTPA, he informed DMP of the new Kansas City organization that had been created to assist dislocated workers. After a meeting with the HSTR board and subsequent discussion and negotiation, the state of Missouri, through the DMP, offered the HSTR board a contract for providing JTPA Title III services in the five-county Kansas City Metropolitan Area. The HSTR staff was merged with the staff of a former training and placement program funded to serve women in nontraditional employment, which provided a fully functioning, trained staff that could offer services on day one of the program. The opening day of the new contract to serve JTPA Title III participants was September 15, 1983.

Program Evolution

The new program, "Project Refocus," refocused unemployed people on new career opportunities. The name has remained to the present day, with a sometimes additional qualifier—UMKC's Project Refocus. Initial services provided by Project Refocus were skills assessment, career testing and counseling, resume writing, inter-

viewing techniques, job seeking techniques, placement assistance, and on-the-job training with employers. In addition, the program created a highly successful workshop/support group called Job Club in which participants gave each other support and encouragement.

The intervening years since the program's inception have been filled with internal growing pains, as well as challenges such as changing legislative agendas, major contracting difficulties, fluctuations in funding, and a changing workforce. All of these factors have required a dedicated board and staff and the cross-collaboration of management, labor, government, and higher education.

The first critical problem to surface in program delivery was the failure to reach performance standards. JTPA programs are numbers-driven, and lack of performance is the quickest avenue to probation. At the end of the first six months, Project Refocus was well below its enrollment goal and was given a three-month probation period.

At this point, the HSTR board of directors went into action. Business board members opened doors at the corporate level of major companies and provided opportunities for staff to promote services to potential downsizing companies. Project Refocus pioneered working with companies considering downsizing, and it has since become a crucial and legally required component of all JTPA programs. Union members provided staff the opportunity to promote Project Refocus through the AFL/CIO Labor Council, and were particularly helpful in opening doors with unions that were in the midst of layoffs and closings. As a result of this effort, an organized recruitment component called "rapid response" was created at Project Refocus and continues to the present. In 1988, under major legislative reform, rapid response became a part of the JTPA.

In 1985, as a result of a major state audit, it was learned that DMP could no longer contract directly to HSTR without a competitive bid. At this point, the HSTR board asked the chancellor of UMKC if the university would be interested in taking over the contract. Since the university is considered a state agency, by Missouri law it can subcontract directly with another state agency. The university accepted the responsibility, and the program has continued under UMKC management. The HSTR board agreed to serve in an advisory capacity to UMKC and has maintained its 501(c3) tax status for fund raising purposes.

JTPA programs ran rather smoothly until a very negative article appeared in the *Reader's Digest*. A number of areas of JTPA fraud were highlighted, many

dealing with training contracts authorized by the Act and the reimbursement of training costs to employers. The HSTR board and staff of Project Refocus, recognizing the potential audit problems that might be encountered, and understanding the retraining needs of dislocated workers, shifted gears quickly and began to direct the bulk of the training funds into classroom training programs sponsored by the community colleges, major universities, private institutions, and area vocational technical schools. Again, the HSTR board played a major role in opening doors and promoting the training services of Project Refocus to area schools and employers.

In 1988, Congress passed major JTPA reform legislation under the Omnibus Federal Trade Act. Among the major changes to affect Title III programs were:

- All JTPA contracts were required to be administered through the local administrative entity;
- Title III programs became 100 percent federally funded (they were 50 percent cost-shared locally in the original legislation);
- One-half of all expenditures must be spent for retraining dislocated workers; and
- There was a new thrust of enhancing relationships and cooperation among the various organizations involved in public out placement programs.

Project Refocus and the HSTR board were poised for the new direction. Having already incorporated rapid response in a program that also included heavy emphasis on classroom retraining, the staff and board concentrated on establishing a positive relationship with the local administrative entity, the Full Employment Council (FEC). As a result of the board's effort, UMKC's Project Refocus won the bid and began to contract with the FEC on July 1, 1989.

Since the new rapid response portion of the act required the participation of other entities, UMKC found itself expanding its association with a variety of human resource agencies such as the Missouri Job Service, the Department of Economic Development, the FEC, and private outplacement agencies. The usual interagency competition for recognition and resources ensued, but slowly working relationships began to emerge that would positively impact all organizations.

With the new contract came the first reduction in funding and the Project Refocus staff would learn that they, too, could suffer the perils of layoff. Within a year, however, staffing was above previous levels and Project Refocus moved to a refurbished location.

In 1992, the term "one-stop shops" was heard for the first time. The concept encourages human resource agencies to establish even stronger working relationships,

the interconnection of communication systems and computers, and seamless service in common locations. During the last four years, the HSTR board and Project Refocus staff have worked closely with the FEC, the Missouri Job Service, and the State Division of Job Development and Training to staff and operate four One-Stop Career Centers. At these locations, an unemployed person can apply for unemployment benefits, receive JTPA services, and also learn about and apply for various other benefits such as food stamps and Aid to Dependent Children. The one-stop concept promises to play a key role in future welfare reform efforts.

Unfortunately the one-stop concept, along with many other federal programs, has been subject to reduced funding, and agencies have had to downsize despite continued high usage and record enrollments. Project Refocus was reduced from a staff of 32 in November of 1995 to its current level of 11, resulting in curtailed services and increased staff workloads. Hopefully, the new welfare reform legislation and other Congressional training initiatives will provide positive funding levels during the next several fiscal years.

Collaborative Efforts

While Project Refocus is unique and probably cannot be totally replicated, the model that it does offer other urban communities is comprised of (a) the four-legged stool of support (business, labor, government, education); (b) the cross-sectional board structure; and (c) the tie-in of state government for funding and oversight. The collaboration of business, labor, government, and the university succeeded due to a foundation of mutual self-interest and an understanding of the discrete roles each sector had to play in the partnership. Although certainly operating out of a sense of altruism, all four sectors also realized that it was in their interest to keep businesses in the Kansas City metropolitan area. To do so required a differently trained workforce, which together they could help to produce.

The four-legged stool of support provided the collaboration that makes this model so unique and effective. The business sector provided the entree to companies that would provide services and private dollars to augment state dollars. Equally important was the sense of legitimacy and validation that the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) on the board could bring to other CEOs in the community about the program. Labor provided entree to the unions, and validated the program's efforts in the minds of their workers. Funding, through agencies created as a result of legislative initiatives, was provided by government.

Finally, the university contributed legitimacy because of its expertise in counseling and testing. It also provided a politically neutral environment in which business and labor could come together, although this ended up not being as critical a need as some expected because of the spirit of cooperation and lack of fractionalization of the Board. From the university's viewpoint, Project Refocus was the perfect *urban* land-grant activity, allowing UMKC to act on its mission of being a university *of* the city rather than simply *in* the city. UMKC's long-standing relationships with business and civic organizations helped make the Project Refocus partnership possible, while at the same time improving the university's relationships with area unions. The university's academic component also plays an important role in the project. The appointment of a UMKC professor of economics who specializes in labor relations has been valuable in facilitating collaboration and communication between the business and labor components. Additionally, doctoral level students in counseling have served internships with the program, providing client services, and doctoral students in economics have studied the project in their dissertation research.

While one might argue that a university relationship is not a necessary component of a worker retraining program, we believe it is this university connection that makes Project Refocus more successful than other such programs. Although supported with soft money, Project Refocus is treated as any other department within the university. Its employees are UMKC staff members with full benefits and privileges, who feel themselves a part of the campus community. Administratively, the project reports up the organizational chart to the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, who also sits on its board. This reporting relationship provides flexibility and access, allowing the director to respond quickly to opportunities and problems alike.

Collaboration extends beyond the composition of the board. The testing and assessment program component is a case in point. Labor members initially felt that testing was threatening an invasion of privacy, and detracted from the real problem—lack of a good job. The higher education members, supported by the business members of the board, built the strong argument that most of the dislocated workers would have to undertake new careers. In order to do that, counselors had to be aware of each individual's experience, aptitudes, and personality. Rather than subjecting clients to highly theoretical/academic techniques, a practical approach was developed at UMKC by merging aptitude scores, the Holland Code, and the Myers-Briggs indicator into a single computer-generated output that provided useful information to both counselor and client. This output could then be used to advise clients about the various career

opportunities they might best pursue. Labor members agreed to allow the instrument to be used, and their constituents gave rave reviews on its value. Together, the board built the basis for a strong assessment component that continues to be a mainstay of the program. Today, virtually all JTPA programs in the country have a testing and assessment component to counsel clients on new career opportunities.

The need for an improved physical plant was another issue resolved by collaboration among board members. Initially located in two campus houses between a fraternity and a sorority, the program quickly outgrew their facilities. Because the location limited the number of clients that could be served, the university board members began to search for a new campus location. Finding two adjacent buildings with ample parking on the fringe of the campus where the university intended to expand, UMKC arranged for the property to be purchased for exclusive Project Refocus use. The buildings, of 1920's vintage, were in a state of disrepair, and massive remodeling was necessary to bring them up to codes. Since JTPA funding guidelines have stringent limitations on the use of money for real estate development, UMKC worked closely with the Missouri Division of Job Development and Training (JDT, the state JTPA administrative agency). Although UMKC did not charge for rental of space (a legitimate JTPA cost item), JDT allowed a monthly rental budget to be set up that UMKC used to recover monies needed for construction. The staff and other members of the board worked with UMKC administration to design and build one of the best facilities for this function in the state.

On numerous other occasions, the board and staff worked with company and union training programs, other human resource agencies, and even the teaching and research staff of UMKC, in an effort to improve services and enhance customer satisfaction. The common goal has always been to find ways to satisfy all customers and create a win-win solution. The HSTR board and staff have also been involved in several very successful special collaborative grant programs.

- *UAW-GM Grant.* Probably the largest single layoff in Kansas City occurred in 1985 when General Motors closed the Leeds plant. Since the plant employed 4,500 workers, the states of Missouri and Kansas prepared a multimillion-dollar grant and funded the UAW-GM Human Resource Center. Project Refocus staff assisted the company, union, and Metropolitan Community Colleges in planning the services and the program. Project Refocus also operated a successful Job Club at the center during the duration of the program.

- *ARMCO Grant.* In 1986, ARMCO, Inc. laid off over 1,000 steelworkers. UMKC prepared a discretionary grant application for which it was funded, and the board and staff worked closely with the company and union to set up services at the Local 13 hall. Over 250 workers were retrained and placed in other jobs. The company provided funding for construction of offices, the union provided space, and the program provided staffing during the 18-month grant period.
- *AlliedSignal Grant.* AlliedSignal laid off about 1,200 workers in 1994. Again, UMKC prepared a \$1.6 million discretionary grant application for providing services to dislocated workers at the plant. In this case, the company set up a Career Transition Center that was operated by a union/management transition team prior to receiving the grant. After implementation of JTPA services, UMKC's Project Refocus worked closely with the company and union and occupied space adjacent to the Career Transition Center. The staff utilized the facilities of the center, and combined JTPA and company training funds to produce highly trained technicians for Kansas City's work force. Over 200 former AlliedSignal employees were retrained and placed in jobs with an average wage exceeding \$12 per hour.

Program Results/Effectiveness

The bottom line of any program is producing measurable results, and UMKC's Project Refocus has earned its share of accolades and awards. As an innovative leader, Project Refocus consistently surpassed placement and performance goals. On average, the program has:

- served 1,000 to 1,200 clients annually;
- placed 600 to 800 clients in new jobs;
- experienced over 85 percent client placement rate;
- placed clients in jobs with an average wage of more than \$10/hr., representing an annual payroll of more than \$12 million;
- shortened individual unemployment periods to between two to four months.

In the program year ending June 30, 1996, the program broke all previous records by serving a total of 2,045 participants, placing 878 in new jobs at an average starting wage of \$10.31/hr. The average placement rate was 88 percent of those

successfully completing the program.

The success of Project Refocus has attracted state and national attention, earning the program numerous awards that include:

- the Job Training Partnership Act Presidential Award, presented by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the Missouri Job Training Coordinating Council;
- honors as the number-one worker reentry program in the state of Missouri in four of the last twelve years;
- recognition as one of the nation's top ten exemplary worker reentry programs by the U.S. Department of Labor;
- finalist for Distinguished Performance Award by the National Alliance of Business; and
- charter membership in the Enterprise Council, a Department of Labor (D.O.L.) customer service initiative representing the top ten percent of worker reentry programs.

The latest award, Charter Membership in the Enterprise Council, is especially important because it recognizes the board and staff's commitment to Total Quality Management (TQM) and customer service. Project Refocus was one of 103 programs selected from approximately 850 nationally by the Department of Labor as a high quality customer service worker reentry program. To be considered for membership, a program had to achieve an 80 percent placement rate and have an 80 percent or better customer satisfaction rate, as determined in a survey of its customers by a national survey firm. Project Refocus was among 26 of the programs that received a site visit by the evaluation team, and it is cited in a national summary as utilizing five "best practices" in serving its customers.

Program Problems and Opportunities

As we approach the new millennium, the board and staff of Project Refocus will continue to maintain the standards that have been established during the past thirteen years. It appears that job training in the United States is now approaching a pivotal point in history. In the 1980s, Project Refocus faced one large large layoff after another, resulting largely from foreign competition. The affected workforce was typically blue collar, primarily from the manufacturing sector, earning an average wage of around \$15 per hour. Although they considered themselves skilled workers, in reality they did not possess transferable skills. Today, smaller periodic layoffs are the

rule, resulting from automation stimulated by new technology and other internal efficiency measures adopted by corporate management. The typical client has been laid off on several occasions and lacks the skills to deal with a highly technical job market. The majority of today's unemployed can be described as falling into one of three categories: those long-term unemployed just above welfare status; those on welfare trying to get out of poverty into the working poor; and those skilled blue collar workers who need to be retrained. The competition among these groups for training and job search assistance resources may heighten issues of class and race, and will be a special challenge for this country as it faces welfare reform.

No doubt funding will be the key issue of all job training programs in the future. All programs must learn to do more with less, or begin to explore raising private monies. The federal initiatives for one-stop centers, quality management, and customer service all emphasize cost effectiveness. By working together and collaborating in areas of job development, training, and recruitment, more clients can be served with fewer fiscal resources.

Programs must also be flexible to meet the changing priorities that will be identified at the local, state, and federal levels. As we begin to implement welfare reform and continue training workers for the twenty-first century, programs must be flexible if they are to meet the needs of their customers. As more power is returned to the states, conflicting priorities will develop between Washington and local governments. Job training programs must collaborate with a variety of different governments and entities to deal with these priorities.

Finally, the administrative trends of the last few years have emphasized accountability of programs. Layers of management and record keeping have often detracted from the service delivery aspect of worker reentry programs. With tighter budgets, programs must find ways of maintaining accountability without devoting a sizable portion of their annual budget to administrative maintenance; otherwise client services will suffer. Part of the answer lies in cooperating with other human resource agencies to enhance service and to help state and federal agencies to understand the scope of the problem.

Future Perspective

Never before has cross-collaboration between human service agencies and training programs been more necessary. In 1996, this nation embarked on a program of turning around a 40-year welfare system. The public expects all able-bodied per-

sons to work, and this must be accomplished at a time when the national budget must be balanced or, as some believe, the country faces economic collapse. Hopefully the experience gained by the HSTR board and UMKC's Project Refocus, and the collaborative problem-solving model it represents, will play a crucial role in helping the American workforce to remain vital and responsive to the challenges of the next century.

Suggested Readings

Carnevale, Anthony P., *America and the New Economy* (Washington, DC: American Society for Training and Development and the U. S. Department of Labor, 1991).

Carnevale, Anthony P., Leila J. Gainer, Janice Villet, and Shari Holland, *Training Partnerships, Linking Employers and Providers* (Washington, DC: American Society for Training and Development and the U. S. Department of Labor, 1990).

Desmond, Edward W., and Adam Zagerin, "What Ever Happened to the Great American Job?" *Time Magazine* (November, 1993).

Gardner, Jennifer M., "Worker Displacement: A Decade of Change." *Monthly Labor Review* (April, 1993).

National Alliance of Business. *Shaping Tomorrow's Workforce: A Leadership Agenda for the 90s*. (Washington DC: Author, 1988).

Ting, Yuan, "The impact of Job Training Programs on the Re-employment Probability of Dislocated Workers." *Policy Study Reviews* (Spring/Summer, 1991).

University of Missouri, *Partnerships: Working Together, Missourians and the University Pursue Success Through Strength, Triumph, and Progress*. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 1996).

U. S. Department of Labor. "Evaluation of the EDWAA Job Creation Demonstration." *Research and Evaluation Report Series 94-G*: (Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Labor, 1994).