

Staff Development

STATE CERTIFIES PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE OF ONE-STOP STAFF

More than 3,000 Florida workforce professionals have obtained a credential specifically designed for the state in the first two years that Florida has required its one-stop career center staff to be certified as skilled at providing workforce development services.

Florida Workforce Professional Tier 1 Certification, a test-based credential developed by the state, became a requirement for employment on the front lines of the Sunshine State's workforce system on June 30, 2003. This summer, after successful implementation of the staff development initiative, the state began to require one-stop staff to continue building their professional capabilities.

This is all part of Florida's effort to certify its one-stops. Through state policy, early on in WIA implementation, officials set certification requirements for career centers.

They prescribed common types of employment information to be made available in resource rooms, set minimum hours and required a list of public programs to be made available through full-service one-stops.

Predictable Quality

"We wanted to have a certain level of predictable, reliable quality at all of our one-stop career centers and we did this through such things as technology requirements and, of course, accessibility. But the

most important service we give is human service," Mike Switzer, vice president of Workforce Florida, Inc., the fiscal agent of the state's workforce board, told MII.

Thus, the state also set out to ensure some common level of professional capability and workforce system knowledge for the staff of its career centers.

The Florida Workforce Innovation Act of 2000 authorized state workforce officials to establish a workforce services training program. A committee formed of representatives from the state's workforce agencies, the state's workforce board, and local officials accepted a proposal from Dynamic Works Institute, a nonprofit organization spun off Brevard County's workforce agency, to create the program.

Job into Profession

"They wanted to turn a job into a profession," said Dynamic Works Institute Vice President of Operations Paul Singleton, leading a workshop on Florida's experience at a conference held by the Performance Institute. "I've found when we post a position that is open in our organization, the first people to apply are one-stop staff who are looking at getting out. The state wanted to turn them around and make them want to stay in their profession."

Realizing that the sheer numbers of one-stop staff around the state and the physical distances between them would impede a classroom-based certification program, Dynamic Works and the committee developed the primarily Web based Florida Workforce Professional Tier 1 Certification program.

It consists of 14 multimedia course components, each with its own test, plus a comprehensive final exam, offered as a package from Dynamic Works at a base rate of \$275 per credential seeker.

Course components cover such topics as customer service, the state Workforce Innovation Act of 2000 and labor market information.

NAWDP Certification

At its core, the program covers the components of the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals' certification program, with additional elements designed specifically for the state's workforce system.

Certificate seekers can move at their own pace though the material. They must master 90 percent of the assessment material contained in each course component and score a 90 percent on the final to achieve certification.

One veteran state workforce administrator who had completed the program successfully told MII that he does not think the material would be terribly difficult for someone new to the workforce system, but the final was demanding enough that credential seekers would do well to work earnestly through each course component.

Only a handful of credential seekers have failed to obtain the certification, Singleton said.

Florida launched its certification program in 2001. By the summer of 2003, having or seeking the credential became mandatory for employment as a frontline one-stop staffer. The state allows new staff a six-month window to obtain it.

Typically, one-stop operators have paid for their staff to pursue the certificate, and many allow time during the business day for employees to work through the course components in a resource room. Dynamic Works has, however, seen a significant amount of course taking at night, Singleton said.

Florida has no formal plans to sanction a one-stop operator in any way if it employs uncertified workers, though it will enforce the policy by publicly listing the names of centers that fail to comply, Switzer said.

Successfully implementing a staff certification program for more than 3,000 individuals required buy-in from the service delivery side of the state's workforce system, according to One-Stop Coordinator Lois Scott, of the state's workforce agency.

Push

The state workforce board's push for the policy and construction of the certification program by a committee with state and local representation that listened to input from one-stop operations helped build this buy-in, Scott told MII.

Spelling out the certification requirement and communicating directions on how to pursue it through guidance letters to local workforce boards and one-stops also helped the initiative succeed, Singleton said.

Since rolling out the staff certification program, Florida's one-stop system has seen increasing job placement and customer satisfaction rates.

On July 1st of this year, a new state policy took effect requiring Tier 1-certified one-stop staff to complete 15 credit hours per year of continuing education through other Dynamic Works online courses, a variety of professional conferences and similar activities.

Dynamic Works offers Workforce Professional Tiers 2 and 3 certification programs geared toward workforce system administration, and also offers courses leading to frontline specializations such as business and employer services and jobseeker services. Other programs teach management and fiscal services skill sets.

Fiscal Program

The fiscal program, for instance, included course components on such topics as RFP writing, applying for grants and using fiscal coding.

"Many regions have on their own asked their staff, or had their staff request or volunteer, to take the additional certifications," Scott said. "I've had my own

staff take the Tier 1 certification, even though they work in the state agency and not the one-stops directly. From my perspective, if you're providing guidance from the state level, then you should be certified to work at the local level."

Dynamic Works makes its workforce industry certification courses available to the general public and has also created customized certification courses for National Farmworker Jobs Program grantees, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Fort Worth, Texas, and several workforce areas in Pennsylvania.

—Ryan Hess