

June 2003

## **Community Service Jobs in Wisconsin Works: The Milwaukee County Experience**

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In September 1997, Wisconsin replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with the Wisconsin Works (W-2) program. Within W-2, community service jobs (CSJs) are the most commonly assigned component, or “tier” of activities, both statewide and within Milwaukee County. A substantially higher percentage of participants in Wisconsin’s program are assigned to CSJs than in any other state’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. States may turn more and more to CSJs as federal work participation requirements increase, as welfare caseloads increasingly consist of those who are most difficult to employ, and — in the current economic slowdown — as unsubsidized jobs become harder to find. Wisconsin’s experiences with its large-scale CSJ program in W-2 may provide insights for other states as they consider greater use of community service jobs.

This report examines the implementation of the CSJ component of W-2 in Milwaukee County from 1997, when W-2 began, through mid-2000. Milwaukee’s CSJ component is of particular interest because the county has the majority of Wisconsin’s W-2 caseload and because nongovernmental service providers have implemented W-2 within six regions of the county, under contract to the state. During the study period, there were five W-2 service providers in Milwaukee County. One focus of this study is on the evolving nature of the administrative CSJ component of W-2 as the caseload and economy changed and as state and local W-2 agencies gained experience operating the program. This study also examines the daily experiences of the CSJ participants and their worksite supervisors, identifies administrative issues, and highlights lessons for other jurisdictions.

### **The Nature of Services in Wisconsin Works**

Entrants into W-2 are assessed and typically are assigned to participate in one of four “tiers,” or components, of the program. Each type of tier assignment involves specific activities, services, and responsibilities. In the CSJ tier, participants’ activities range from work experience at an assigned worksite to further assessment and orientation, education, and job search.

- **During the first two years of W-2, the initial work activity assignments for entrants into the CSJ tier gradually changed; although work experience at an assigned worksite remained important throughout the period, the use of one or more additional activities increased.**

Work experience remained important throughout the first two years of W-2, with 60 percent to 80 percent of all entrants being assigned to CSJs. However, the use of other activities — including orientation and assessment, employment training, education, and soft-skills training — increased substantially. For example, the percentage of entrants who were assigned to education increased from 15 percent among the initial cohort to 50 percent among the late cohort. This shift partly reflects changing practices among the W-2 agencies operating the program in Milwaukee County, but it could also reflect the changing characteristics of program applicants as well as the ongoing debate within Wisconsin about the importance of academic and vocational skill-building (beyond the development of general work habits).

- **There was considerable variety in the ways that CSJ activities were structured and in the characteristics of worksites.**

Depending on W-2 agencies' options and caseworkers' discretion, CSJ participants were assigned to worksites that can be grouped into five categories: (1) thrift store work, (2) office work and customer service, (3) care work involving children or adults, (4) light industrial and housekeeping work, and (5) vocational training. The first four categories are *work-only placements*, in that they emphasize work habits, provide hands-on experience, and possibly constitute informal training but are without a formal training component. The last category, *vocational training*, provides a combination of hands-on experience and vocational or job skills training whereby participants receive formal recognition (a certificate or some other verification) of skills learned. Depending on where CSJ participants lived in Milwaukee County and, thus, on which W-2 agency was designated to serve their region, they had varying likelihoods of obtaining a specific work experience.

- **CSJ participants' worksite opportunities varied, depending on the W-2 agency that served their region and the staff member who was assigned to their case.**

Milwaukee County's W-2 agencies differed in the worksite placements they offered, in terms of the size of the workforce, the industry type, and the work activities involved. In part, these differences reflected how the various agencies developed their worksites. Of the five W-2 agencies studied, two of the agencies were affiliated with organizations that had large industrial or commercial operations and that placed many CSJ participants in these worksites. Other agencies developed dispersed placements in smaller organizations, and still others relied on a pool of placements in large public or nonprofit institutions developed by a county agency. But this variety of CSJ placements was also caused in some W-2 agencies by a lack of communication to

staff working with participants; at times during the study, there was no central database of possible placements, so not all W-2 case managers (known as financial and employment planners, or FEPs) had the same information about worksite options.

- **CSJ participants practiced and learned quite different work habits and basic work skills, depending on the kind of worksite assignment they had.**

A survey of CSJ participants attending worksite activities collected information on a broad array of skills practiced in the worksites. Compared with participants in work-only placements, those whose assignments involved vocational training reported improving more on work habits and basic work skills (with the exception of office/clerical work), were given more responsibilities while at the worksite, expected to receive higher wages for future employment, and perceived that their CSJ work experience was preparing them for a job that would provide higher wages. Vocational training — as a CSJ work assignment — was not available to all participants; only about a quarter of the sample were placed in such assignments.

- **Most CSJ participants who attended worksite activities valued learning new skills and getting training, working at engaging tasks, and dealing with amicable supervisors and coworkers; but what they found most valuable depended on their assigned work activity.**

While most of the CSJ participants who were assigned to vocational training activities valued learning new skills, those in care work valued their daily tasks (which they found engaging), and those in thrift store work valued the people around them (in part because they did not find their work tasks engaging).

## **The Administration of Community Service Jobs**

Research into the administration of CSJs has found that it can be complicated to operate large-scale work experience programs because of the variety of organizations involved, the need to monitor worksite activities and participation, and the importance of effective communication.

- **At times during this study, the local W-2 agencies did not have staff clearly responsible for key tasks in administering CSJs — or else multiple staff had partial responsibility for them; as a result, accountability was unclear, and communication was unnecessarily complicated.**

Milwaukee County's W-2 agencies used varying administrative structures to implement the CSJ tier and work experience activities, and several agencies shifted their practices as the program evolved or as funding became constrained. Over the course of the first two years of their CSJ programs, the W-2 agencies at times centralized administration in a single unit and at times dispersed aspects of this activity among staff in different parts of the organization. Over-

lapping administrative structures and unclear accountability were more likely when responsibilities were dispersed across departments within a W-2 agency, rather than having a specific entity responsible for coordinating all aspects of CSJ administration.

- **The complexity of administering the CSJ program — with each W-2 agency having an array of worksites and contracts — highlighted the need for good coordination between the worksites and the agencies, especially concerning the monitoring of participation.**

W-2 agencies were expected to maintain close relationships with their worksites to ensure that the CSJ program was being implemented in a manner that accomplished its goals. Worksite supervisors reported low to moderate levels of communication from W-2 agency staff regarding the goals of the CSJ program. Though worksite supervisors were offered some forms of assistance (which in general they found helpful), they would have liked to have more assistance and information, and they often reported that they would prefer more consistent contact with their W-2 agency.

- **FEPs played a critical role in shaping CSJ participants' experiences with both W-2 and the CSJ program; their key tasks included worksite placement, explaining the program and its requirements to participants, and serving as the primary contact at the W-2 agency.**

CSJ participants' views of the W-2 program were strongly influenced by the nature of their interactions with FEPs. Participants who believed that FEPs listened to their needs and attempted to assign them to worksites that would be beneficial for them expressed gratitude toward the FEPs, and this influenced their satisfaction with their FEP and with the W-2 agency. Participants who believed that their FEP simply assigned them to any work experience without considering their background or goals felt that their possibilities had been limited. CSJ participants received much of their information about the program from FEPs. During initial assessment meetings — a crucial early step in the program — FEPs covered a great amount of information and topics in varying ways, and some CSJ participants left their meeting without a clear understanding of program requirements.

- **Worksite supervisors played a central role in administering the CSJ program at the worksite, helping participants navigate between worksite rules and W-2 agency requirements, providing training, and in many ways contributing to CSJ participants' overall work experience.**

Many worksite supervisors took on the role of mentoring CSJ participants on topics unrelated to specific work tasks. Some took on this mentoring role because they saw participants daily and got to know their needs better than W-2 agency staff. However, this varied by worksite size, as some supervisors in large worksites barely knew the CSJ participants. Participants

expressed appreciation for worksite supervisors who showed them respect, had a positive attitude, and were good communicators and instructors.

## **Monitoring and Improving Worksite Attendance**

- **The W-2 work experience program in Milwaukee County had a substantial issue regarding low attendance at CSJ worksites.**

Though sanctioning (reducing the welfare grants) of CSJ participants for unexcused absences from work activities did occur in Milwaukee County, the extent of the attendance issue was most apparent when researchers tried to locate CSJ participants at their worksites in order to administer a survey. Most randomly selected participants who had been assigned to a worksite could not be surveyed in that worksite, despite repeated efforts. The worksite supervisors supported this observation, reporting that attendance problems were the most common reason that placement of a CSJ participant in their worksite was unsatisfactory.

Monitoring the attendance of CSJ participants was a challenge because of the complexity of the program, the multiple layers of administration at the W-2 agencies and at the worksites, the turnover among W-2 agency staff, and the constant development of new worksites. The assignment of CSJ participants to multiple activities — not all of them colocated — further complicated monitoring. Attendance issues were frustrating to all parties: for W-2 agency staff, because of the paperwork and tasks involved in tracking attendance and documenting absences; for worksite supervisors, because of the unpredictability of their workforce and the extra time needed to notify the W-2 agencies regarding nonparticipation; and for CSJ participants, because of the reduction in their W-2 grant and the paperwork they needed to complete in order to receive a “good-cause” excuse and avoid being sanctioned — and because of the efforts needed to correct mistakes made by W-2 agency staff.

- **Poor attendance can present special problems for CSJ participants in a time-limited assistance program.**

If public assistance recipients face time limits on how long they can receive aid, poor attendance affects them differently than in an assistance program without time limits. During the study period, examples came to light of CSJ participants who had virtually or entirely stopped attending their assigned worksite activity but who remained on the W-2 caseload — even though CSJ tier assignments are limited to two years. In part this was due to procedural safeguards put in place to avoid inappropriate or premature closing of a case. But it also at times reflected problems with attendance monitoring, in that W-2 agencies were not aware that CSJ participants were no longer active or the agencies did not act quickly on such information. When W-2 recipients had stopped participating in assigned activities, they were no longer receiving the work assistance services (which are intended to improve their work habits, skills,

and employment history), and yet their assistance “clock” continued to “tick.” Thus, even though the recipients might have thought that their nonparticipation had resulted in the closing of their assistance case, in fact, their months of eligibility could gradually run out.

## **Lessons for the Design and Administration of CSJ Programs**

This study’s findings suggest several lessons for W-2 and for public assistance programs in general in their efforts to design and administer CSJ programs.

**Lesson 1: Identify the many tasks involved in administering a CSJ program, and clearly designate responsibility for each.**

Smooth operation of a CSJ program involves creating an adequate number and variety of worksite opportunities, sharing information about available worksites with staff who work directly with clients, assessing clients’ characteristics and assigning them to appropriate worksites, communicating frequently with worksite supervisors and participants, monitoring participants’ attendance and the quality of the worksite experience, and following up quickly to address problems that arise. Some of these tasks involve building relationships and strong communication with potential employers in the community; others, with staff within the administering agency; and still others, with worksite supervisors and participants. Given these various “communication links,” it is important to identify them and to specify who is responsible for each link and how the needed communication will occur.

**Lesson 2: Work to achieve strong and consistent communication among the administering agency, the worksites, and the participants.**

Strong administration of a CSJ program requires that the three key parties — the administering agency, the worksite supervisors, and the participants — share information in a timely manner about their expectations, responsibilities, emerging problems, and promising responses. This three-way communication is important but not simple to achieve in a program like W-2, in which (1) the FEPs provide the primary contact between the agency and participants; (2) the CSJ coordinator or worksite developer is the primary contact between the agency and the worksites; and (3) those participants who are active in the program are in most frequent contact with a worksite supervisor, who is not formally part of the administrative team.

**Lesson 3: Align the characteristics of work experience activities with the program’s goals.**

The specific focus of work experience activities can vary considerably within a public assistance program. At a minimum, work experience activities provide a venue for recipients to satisfy a participation requirement in order to receive aid. The activities may also strengthen work habits, develop an employment history to aid in job searches, and build participants’ aca-

demic and vocational skills. The specific focus of work experience activities is affected by the overall political climate, the emphasis of programmatic policy, the local or national economy, and/or changes in participants' interests and characteristics. Put simply, some supporters of work experience programs may favor a model that emphasizes academic or vocational skill-building, whereas others may favor a model that considers nearly any work experience to be suitable. Whatever model (or combination of models) a program may use, it is important that its goals be clear and that they be aligned with the work experience activities.

Likewise, evaluators must recognize the range of activities that can be considered "work experience." In order to accurately assess and interpret the outcomes of work experience programs, it is important to compare apples with apples. The label "work experience" can encompass a range of activities among and within programs, as goals shift.

**Lesson 4: Acknowledge that attendance in assigned activities is especially important in the context of a time-limited work experience program; monitor attendance carefully, and respond to problems quickly.**

First, quick follow-up and intervention can be effective when a CSJ participant does not attend a worksite. Second, the worksite assignment itself may well affect participation. In this study, attendance was better at worksites that offered more skills training, especially skills linked to employment. Third, travel time affects participation, and efforts to colocate activities in a common site can pay off in improved attendance. Finally, for participants with family health problems and child care needs, the availability of quality child care and transportation can be major problems, suggesting the efficacy of efforts to provide assistance in transporting participants' children to school and child care facilities.

Efforts like these require an effective communication and feedback system for resolving attendance issues. The methods by which worksite supervisors record attendance need to be clearly articulated, and there should be careful monitoring of the accuracy of administrative records, more information about specific worksites and participants' activities, and clear procedures for determining whether participation has truly ended and for closing cases when appropriate (but not prematurely). These are all critically important tasks that have real implications for TANF participants who are seeking to obtain self-sufficiency in a time-limited assistance program.