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# Using One-Stops To Promote Access to Work Supports—Lessons From Virginia’s Coordinated Economic Relief Centers

## Final Report

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### Abstract

Policymakers and program administrators have become increasingly concerned about declines in participation in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) and other work supports. As a result, interest has grown in identifying promising strategies for improving low-income families’ access to these programs and benefits. In early 2002, the Commonwealth of Virginia implemented a new initiative: To provide the services of many agencies at one-stop career centers, called Coordinated Economic Relief Centers (CERCs). This report describes the results of a study on how the CERCs were implemented and their potential for increasing low-income families’ access to the FSP and other work supports and provides operational lessons for other States and communities seeking to implement a similar one-stop approach to service delivery. The results indicate that the CERCs helped some customers get information about where to find services and made obtaining services more convenient. However, resource constraints hampered the CERCs’ efforts to operate as envisioned, the level of referrals to food assistance programs was low, and expectations in some communities exceeded what the CERCs could realistically accomplish.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In recent years, policymakers and program administrators have become increasingly concerned about declines in participation in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) and other work support programs. Interest has grown in identifying promising strategies for improving low-income families' access to, and participation in, the FSP and other work supports. States have begun to implement and test such strategies as community outreach campaigns, streamlined application procedures, and service co-location. Offering work support programs in One-Stop Career Centers, which have proliferated since passage of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), is another potential strategy for increasing low-income families' access.<sup>1</sup>

In early 2002, the Commonwealth of Virginia implemented a new initiative that used One-Stops, called Coordinated Economic Relief Centers (CERCs), to provide dislocated workers and other low-income community members with access to a broad range of programs and services in one location. This report describes the results of a study of the CERCs sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR). The purpose of the study was to learn about how the CERCs were implemented, and to assess their potential for increasing low-income families' access to the FSP and other work supports, such as medical coverage and child care assistance.

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<sup>1</sup>The WIA consolidated numerous federal employment and training programs and required states and localities to provide most federally funded employment services through One-Stop career centers.

## **COORDINATED ECONOMIC RELIEF CENTERS**

On February 1, 2002, Mark Warner, governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, issued an executive order establishing the Virginia Economic Strike Force. This working group of state-agency representatives, chaired by the Virginia Secretary of Commerce and Trade, was charged with addressing the economic crisis faced by several Virginia communities that were losing large numbers of jobs, primarily in the textile and furniture-manufacturing industries.<sup>2</sup> Governor Warner directed the Strike Force to establish CERCs in affected communities to serve as the single point of contact for dislocated workers, their families, and other low-income members of the community. According to state officials, the CERCs are modeled on the approach of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which sets up temporary service centers in which people affected by natural disasters and other emergencies can access a range of federal and state services.

To date, the Strike Force has established CERCs in four communities. The first, in Clarksville (Mecklenburg County), opened on March 12, 2002, about six weeks after Governor Warner issued the executive order. The Martinsville CERC opened on March 15 to serve the city of Martinsville, as well as Henry and Patrick counties. The third CERC, located in South Boston, opened on April 12 to serve residents of Halifax County. The fourth CERC was established in Marion on June 10 to serve residents of Smyth County.

## **THE STUDY ON PROMOTING FOOD STAMP PROGRAM AND OTHER WORK SUPPORTS ACCESS THROUGH COORDINATED ECONOMIC RELIEF CENTERS**

This study is a process study designed to learn about the CERCs' implementation and to glean lessons that can be useful to future initiatives. Specifically, the study is designed to answer the following key questions:

- How do the CERCs deliver food assistance and other work supports, and to what extent are these services integrated with other services provided at the CERCs?
- What are the levels of service receipt and program participation in the CERC communities?

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<sup>2</sup>The Strike Force includes representatives from the Departments of Social Services, Education, Agriculture and Consumer Services, Business Assistance, Housing and Community Development, Labor and Industry, Medical Assistance Services, and Minority Business Enterprise; the Virginia Community College System; the Virginia Employment Commission; the Virginia Economic Development Partnership; and the Virginia Tourism Authority.



- What lessons can be drawn from Virginia's experience operating the CERCs?

We used a case study approach as our primary research method for gathering and analyzing qualitative information on CERC implementation. A team of two researchers conducted intensive site visits to each of the four CERCs, as well as a series of telephone interviews with state-level officials from the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) and the Virginia Department of Social Services (DSS). We supplemented this qualitative information with a brief literature review, to provide context for the study, and with an analysis of data on the use of CERC services and participation in DSS benefit programs.

## KEY IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

This section provides an overview of how the CERCs have been implemented and operated, the types of partnering agencies that have participated in the CERCs, the main services provided, and the overall levels of service use and referrals to other service providers.

- **The VEC took lead responsibility for implementing and operating the CERCs.** Within the Strike Force, the VEC took lead responsibility for establishing and operating the CERCs, and for providing services to customers. Because no state resources were allocated to pay for CERC operations, VEC officials decided to use Rapid Response funds (approximately \$330,639 from March 2002 through April 2003) from the U.S. Department of Labor to pay for overhead costs, including office space and equipment.<sup>3</sup> Once decisions were made to open the CERCs, the VEC determined on a case-by-case basis where they would be located and how they would be operated. Two approaches to CERCs emerged from this process: (1) a satellite office approach, in which the CERC is housed in a separate location from the VEC and serves as a satellite office; and (2) an in-house approach, in which the CERC operates within the local VEC office (and WIA One-Stop). Local VEC directors manage the CERCs, and VEC staff conduct initial intake and provide referrals to partnering agencies.
- **Almost all services provided at the CERCs are VEC services.** Most customers come to the CERCs seeking employment-related services, such as help with Unemployment Insurance (UI), job service registration, or job search assistance. Because these are VEC services, and because the VEC provides core

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<sup>3</sup>The WIA of 1998 requires states to provide Rapid Response Activities after permanent plant closures, mass layoffs, or natural disasters that result in dislocation of workers. Rapid Response Activities aim to help dislocated workers find new employment as soon as possible.

staff for the CERCs, most CERC services are provided by the VEC. Across the CERCs, the average number of contacts with walk-in customers ranged from 240 per month in Martinsville, a satellite office, to 1,494 per month in South Boston, a CERC located within the VEC's WIA One-Stop. The CERCs located within VEC offices count all customers who come to the office as CERC customers, regardless of the services sought.

- **The VEC initially recruited a broad range of partnering agencies to participate in the CERCs, but participation waned over time.** The VEC took lead responsibility for organizing meetings of staff from the local VEC offices and other service providers in the community to gain their cooperation as partners, and to plan their participation in the CERCs. Across the CERCs, partnering agencies offer a range of services, including employment services, education and training, social services, health and mental health services, and emergency assistance. Partners include state and local government agencies, as well as community-based and faith-based organizations. Many partnering agencies outstationed staff at the CERCs for at least a few hours per week initially. Most of these partners suspended their regular visits after a few weeks or months, citing low levels of referrals and lack of resources.
- **Several food assistance providers participated in the CERCs.** DSS, which administers the FSP, participated in the CERCs and took FSP applications on site at three of the four CERCs. Community action agencies and charitable organizations that provide emergency food assistance partnered with the CERCs in some sites, but most did not provide on-site services. In addition, CERC staff reported referring customers in need of emergency food assistance to local churches and food banks.
- **The level of referrals to partnering agencies that participated in the CERCs was low.** Almost all referrals made by the CERCs were for employment-related services (41,507 of 42,810 referrals). Of these, nearly all were made to either the VEC, for help with UI or job search activities, or to WIA programs. Fewer than one percent of referrals were for social or emergency services (313 referrals). A small number of referrals were made for education services (221 referrals) and health services (172) referrals. Several factors may explain the lower-than-expected levels of referrals to non-VEC services. Most CERC staff did not inquire about customers' needs and did not offer referrals unless requested by the customer. Customer perceptions of their own needs may have been another factor. Most dislocated workers wanted to find employment as soon as possible; it took time for them to acknowledge that they needed retraining or emergency assistance while unemployed. Reporting problems, including inconsistencies in how referrals were tracked and recorded, may have also contributed to the pattern of low referrals.

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## SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES

This section highlights the main successes and challenges in implementing and operating the CERCs experienced by the VEC and partnering agencies.

### Successes

- **The CERCs may have increased access to services for some customers.** Although the level of referrals to other service providers was lower than anticipated, VEC staff believe that the CERCs facilitated access to information about services available in the community. For example, all of the CERCs reported providing information about food assistance available from food banks, churches, and community action agencies. Moreover, the CERCs operating satellite offices were conveniently located for some customers and may have provided more personalized services to customers. Those who lived near the CERCs did not have to travel as far to access VEC services, and they could obtain information about services available through partners. Some state-level officials thought that the CERCs facilitated access to services that customers would not otherwise have received. Others thought that, while the CERCs were convenient, most customers would have found the same services on their own.
- **Participation in the CERCs enhanced community collaboration and increased service providers' knowledge of community resources.** VEC and partnering agency staff in the CERC communities reported that the CERCs have increased the number and nature of partnerships between the VEC and local service providers. Although the VEC offices and many CERC partners already were participating in WIA One-Stops, many reported that the process of planning and participating in the CERCs increased their knowledge of services available in the community.

### Challenges

- **The CERCs faced resource constraints that hampered efforts to operate them as envisioned, especially efforts to co-locate services.** The lack of funds to cover the costs of both operating the CERCs and participation of partners limited the CERCs' ability to achieve the state's goals. Partners could not afford to outstation staff to the CERCs on a full-time basis without additional funding. At three of the four CERCs, space was not sufficient to house staff from more than two partnering agencies at a time. Moreover, operating the CERCs increased the workload of VEC staff significantly and strained the resources of partnering agencies. CERC staff at some sites also reported that finding community resources to meet customers' needs became increasingly challenging.

- **Several factors, including constraints on planning time and implementation of recordkeeping systems, have limited the CERCs' capacity to provide integrated services.** Planning time was not sufficient for developing plans and procedures to integrate services across providers. Lack of training for CERC staff, as well as a lack of procedures for conducting needs assessments and making referrals may have contributed to the low level of referrals to partnering agencies and the limited coordination with the agencies. Moreover, some aspects of the customer tracking system were not fully implemented when the CERCs opened and have not functioned as efficiently as expected.
- **In some sites, community expectations exceeded what the CERC could realistically accomplish.** Some communities expected the CERCs to promote economic development and creation of new job opportunities. In addition, some customers thought the CERCs would offer services beyond those already available in the community. For example, some expected to obtain health insurance coverage; others sought cash assistance payments. The CERCs could refer customers to existing programs, but many were ineligible for these programs, either because they were still receiving UI benefits, had assets that made them ineligible, or did not have minor children.

## IMPLEMENTATION LESSONS

The current research has focused on examining the implementation and operations of the CERCs. The study was not designed to determine whether the CERCs are effective in increasing access to services. Reflecting this, we did not collect individual-level data on CERC customers, and thus we are not in a position to make overall recommendations regarding whether the CERC model should be adopted more broadly. However, for those who have decided to implement a One-Stop approach to service delivery, we highlight a number of operational lessons from this study that may be useful in designing and implementing similar initiatives. In this section, we explore lessons from the CERCs related to co-location of service providers, integrating services, and conducting community outreach.

### Lessons for Enhancing Service Co-Location

- **Assess the value of co-locating individual service providers on site on a case-by-case basis.** Some partners felt that their presence on site at the CERCs was not valuable to customers because they could only provide information about services offered at other locations. Others were already located nearby the CERCs and thus were accessible to customers without having to co-locate.

- **Provide resources to cover the cost of co-locating essential services on site.** Site visit respondents thought that enabling customers to apply for partnering agency services on site at the CERCs would be valuable if staff from these agencies were present on a daily basis, rather than for a few hours a week. However, partners reported that they could not afford to outstation staff at the CERCs for more than a few hours a week without additional resources.
- **Explore screening tools and resources available through the Internet as alternatives to service co-location.** Since the CERCs opened, DSS has made a new screening tool available on its web site that customers can use to assess whether they are likely to be eligible for a variety of benefit programs. With the availability of this tool, some DSS officials felt that outstationing staff at the CERCs was neither necessary nor an efficient use of their resources.
- **Consider establishing CERCs within existing One-Stops, rather than in separate locations.** Some VEC officials thought that all the CERCs should be operated within WIA One-Stops, rather than in separate locations. Although satellite offices were convenient, they duplicated services available nearby, strained the limited resources of the VEC and partnering agencies, and proved difficult to close.

### Lessons for Enhancing Service Integration

- **Devote more planning time to address service integration issues, such as developing common forms, referral procedures, and information systems for use by all partners.** State officials believe they would have been able to integrate services across partners more fully if they had had adequate time to develop common forms and systems, and adequate time to train staff to use them.
- **Explore options for creating a customer tracking system that can be updated efficiently, and that can provide timely customer information.** Because of difficulties obtaining customer outcome information from partners, some state officials suggested that an integrated tracking system, in which each partner would be responsible for entering outcomes for customers referred to it, would be a more efficient way to collect outcomes information. Such a system might also encourage more regular followup with customers and facilitate partners' access to updated customer information.

## Lessons on Community Outreach

- **Conduct community outreach on an ongoing basis.** In several communities, CERC staff suggested that more ongoing outreach about the CERCs and services available would have been helpful. In particular, some suggested that partnering agencies could have played a greater role in conducting outreach and in educating the community about the services they offered at the CERCs.
- **Communicate clear and realistic expectations about what the CERCs can accomplish before they open.** Because residents in some communities had unrealistic expectations about what the CERCs could accomplish, state officials stressed the importance of communicating a clear message about what customers can realistically expect to obtain at the CERCs.
- **Establish a closing date for the CERCs before they open.** VEC officials reported that some communities reacted negatively to attempts to close CERCs once the volume of customer contacts declined. Communicating a definite closing date at the outset may help establish more realistic expectations about the CERCs. In addition, partners might be more committed to participating and more willing to outstation staff if they knew there would be a definite end to that commitment. To date, none of the CERCs have been closed.