

CHAPTER IV

OVERVIEW OF THE CERC MODEL

Providing services through CERCs represents a new approach to service delivery in Virginia. The state previously had not implemented a service delivery system that aims to offer such a broad range of services in one location. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) One-Stop career centers are similar, in that a range of service providers are co-located in a single location, but these centers focus almost exclusively on providing employment and training services. With the CERCs, Virginia is attempting to extend the One-Stop concept to the co-location of a much broader array of services, ranging from education and training programs to health care and emergency assistance.

This chapter provides an overview of Virginia's model for the CERCs. We begin by describing the initial goals for the CERCs; we then examine how they were funded and planned. We also describe the two approaches to CERC implementation that have been used, the CERCs' supervision and staffing structure, and the roles of partnering agencies.

GOALS FOR THE CERCs

Governor Warner intended for the CERCs to serve as single points of contact in communities affected by widespread job loss, and thus ensure that residents could obtain information about, and apply for, all available services and benefits in one location. Several officials said that the CERCs were modeled after the approach of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which sets up service centers in which people affected by natural disasters and other emergencies can access a range of federal and state services.

One official from Virginia's Department of Social Services (DSS) said that this One-Stop service center model for the CERCs was chosen because of concerns about two barriers faced by residents of the affected communities. First, because these communities are rural, and in some cases service providers are not centrally located, lack of transportation was seen as a potential barrier to accessing services for some community members. Establishing the CERCs was expected to ensure that customers found the help they needed

in a single location. Second, Virginia Economic Strike Force members wanted to make sure that community residents had adequate information about the range of services and benefit programs available to help them. Strike Force members thought that co-locating service providers at the CERCs would (1) facilitate customers' access to information about community resources, and (2) raise customers' awareness of the range of supports available.

State officials reported that, initially, they expected to achieve extensive co-location of services in the CERCs—with staff from various agencies available nearly full time to take applications and determine eligibility for a range of programs. They also expected to provide services in an integrated fashion—by coordinating services for individual families across participating agencies. Local staff also were optimistic that co-location and service integration could be achieved, because the governor was promoting the initiative and because communities showed a great deal of enthusiasm and interest in achieving these goals.

Staff from the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) shared similar goals. They also noted that the Strike Force had always intended for the CERCs to be temporary. As with FEMA operations, the Strike Force wanted to bring together state and local agencies and resources so they could have a major impact in affected communities soon after layoffs occurred—and then to close the centers once community members were able to apply for the services and benefits that the state and local communities could offer.

PLANNING ACTIVITIES

Planning time for the CERCs was very short, a factor that has limited the ability of state officials to develop operational procedures and systems to promote the integration of services across agencies and providers. Indeed, early in the process, when an additional company announced layoffs in the Clarksville area, the planning process was accelerated, with the goal of opening a CERC in Clarksville within 30 days. Despite the short planning phase, participating agencies at the state and local levels engaged in several important planning activities that enabled them to establish the CERCs and to begin providing services quickly.

The VEC led the CERC planning process in each community.

The VEC took the lead responsibility for coordinating the logistics of opening the CERCs and for operating the CERCs, once they opened. State-level VEC officials coordinated the procurement of office space, furniture, computers, and Internet hookups, as well as other equipment. Staff in the local VEC offices helped identify potential locations for the CERCs and handled logistics locally. For example, they set up mail service, created floor plans for desks and office equipment, and oversaw the installation of computers and telephone lines. In the two CERCs that operate within the VEC's WIA One-Stop career centers, local VEC staff oversaw the renovation of office space needed to create space for partnering agency staff.

CERC and local VEC staff reported that the state provided ample support to the local offices during each phase of a CERC's planning, thus ensuring that all needed supplies and equipment were in place when the CERC opened. Partnering agencies concurred that the CERCs provided all the supplies, computer hookups, and space they needed to serve customers.

The Strike Force served as a forum for coordination among state agencies.

At the state level, the Strike Force coordinated planning activities across agencies. For example, staff from the local DSS offices needed access to the agency's computer database, called the Application Benefits Delivery Automation Project (ADAPT), to determine eligibility on site at the CERCs. This issue was brought to the Strike Force, and plans were developed for installing the computer equipment necessary to make ADAPT available at the CERCs. A state-level liaison at DSS was appointed to coordinate with all parties. Similar issues related to the participation of various state entities were raised and addressed at Strike Force meetings.

FUNDING

One of the most significant difficulties the Strike Force faced during the CERC planning process was obtaining funding to implement and operate the CERCs. No state resources had been allocated to pay for CERC operations. After conducting some initial research about whether the funds could be used, VEC officials decided to use Rapid Response funds from the U.S. Department of Labor, approximately \$330,639 from March 2002 through April 2003, to pay the costs associated with opening the CERCs, such as renting office space and installing computer equipment.¹⁰ No funds were available, however, to cover partnering agencies' costs associated with outstationing staff at the CERCs. According to state officials, several partners felt that they should receive reimbursement for staff time contributed to the CERCs. Because the resources of most service providers were already stretched thin in the CERC communities, lack of funds to defray these costs limited some partners' willingness and ability to participate.

APPROACHES TO IMPLEMENTATION

Within the Strike Force, the VEC took lead responsibility for establishing and operating the CERCs and for providing customers with services and referrals. Once the Strike Force decided to open a CERC, state-level VEC officials and local staff worked together to

¹⁰The 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.

determine where the CERC should be located, and how it should be operated. These decisions were made on a case-by-case basis, after considering the needs of dislocated workers in the community, the capacity of the local VEC office to operate the CERC and house staff from partnering agencies, and the location of key service providers in the CERC's service area. Two types of CERCs have 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. The rest of this section describes these approaches.

Clarksville and Martinsville implemented the CERCs as satellite offices of the local VEC office.

When the Strike Force began planning for the implementation of the first CERC, in Mecklenburg County, officials decided that it should be located in Clarksville, because both of the plants that closed were located there. The VEC office in Mecklenburg County is located in South Hill, approximately 30 miles from Clarksville. Staff from that office have been responsible for operating the CERC and for coordinating with partnering agencies in the county. The Clarksville CERC is located in a storefront office on the main street of Clarksville.

The VEC took a similar approach in Martinsville. Office space for the CERC was located in nearby Ridgeway, approximately eight miles from the VEC's Martinsville office. Staff from Martinsville have been temporarily outstationed to the CERC to provide services and referrals. Although the Martinsville office is centrally located and accessible to dislocated workers, the CERC was implemented in a separate location, primarily because the Martinsville office lacks sufficient space to house partnering agencies. Due to layoffs in the area, the volume of customers seeking services at the Martinsville CERC has risen substantially; the waiting room has been crowded, and staff needed all the available office space.

In both locations, CERC and partnering agency staff reported that the satellite offices are convenient for customers. In Clarksville, the CERC is especially convenient for customers who live in the western half of Mecklenburg County. Customers who live in or near Clarksville can travel 5 minutes to the CERC, compared with the 40 minutes required to reach the VEC's South Hill office. In Martinsville, site visit participants felt that the CERC was conveniently located and accessible for the majority of dislocated workers in the service area. A few participants, however, thought that the CERC should have been located in Martinsville—that its location in Ridgeway was more convenient for customers who reside in Henry County.

In addition to being conveniently located, the CERCs are convenient for dislocated workers because the volume of customers seeking services is substantially less than at the main VEC offices. As a result, wait times are shorter, and staff thought CERC customers received more personalized attention than did customers at the VEC.

The South Boston and Marion CERCs operate within local VEC offices, which also serve as WIA One-Stop career centers.

Initially, the VEC considered opening the South Boston CERC in a separate location. One potential site was in a shopping center about a mile from the VEC office. However, because the VEC was already operating a WIA One-Stop career center in its office, and other potential sites for the CERC were nearby, the South Boston VEC director recommended operating the CERC out of the VEC office. She felt that this arrangement represented a more efficient use of resources, as the VEC would not have to pay for additional office space, and the South Boston office would not have to outstation any staff at another location. Moreover, partnering agencies that were already sending staff to the One-Stop center probably would not be able to outstation staff at a CERC simultaneously.

In Marion, the VEC director also recommended housing the CERC within the VEC office. Since 2000, the VEC had been operating a WIA One-Stop career center in its Marion office. The director felt that locating the CERC at the VEC would impose less burden on partnering agencies that were already sending staff to the WIA One-Stop. Moreover, several partnering agencies, such as the Smyth County Free Clinic and the Department of Rehabilitative Services, are located across the street from the VEC office; others are located within several miles.

SUPERVISION AND STAFFING

This section examines how the CERCs are managed and staffed. Our focus is on staff provided by the VEC, because they provide most of the services. Participation by partnering agencies is discussed in the next section.

Local VEC directors provide supervision and oversight of the CERCs.

Locally, responsibility for operating the CERCs lies with the VEC office located within the CERC's service area; the local VEC director also serves as the CERC manager. In South Boston and Marion, where the CERC is located within the VEC office, oversight is relatively straightforward and is integrated into the director's oversight of overall office activities.

In Clarksville and Martinsville, where the CERCs are satellite offices of the local VEC offices, the VEC director must manage and oversee the work of both offices. The additional responsibility of managing the CERC has added significantly to the responsibilities of these directors. In Clarksville, the VEC director/CERC manager is not located on site at the CERC on a full-time basis. However, she reports visiting the CERC frequently and maintaining regular contact with the CERC staff by telephone and e-mail. In Martinsville, the VEC director has overall responsibility for managing the CERC; she has delegated responsibility for overseeing day-to-day CERC operations to a VEC supervisor in the Martinsville office. Due to the high volume of work in the Martinsville office, however, this supervisor is not located at the CERC. Nonetheless, she maintains frequent contact with

VEC staff that are on site at the CERC via telephone, interoffice instant messaging, and e-mail. She also visits the CERC at least once every two weeks.

The CERCs are staffed by experienced VEC employees.

In the CERCs that operate as satellite offices, several VEC staff are outstationed at the CERCs, where they provide most of the services to customers directly or through referral to a partner. VEC directors reported that, because CERC staff needed to be able to provide a broad range of services and answer questions about many VEC programs, they found it necessary to assign some of their most experienced staff to the CERCs. Losing these highly skilled staff in the main VEC offices has been a strain on these offices, especially at a time when the volume of customer traffic has increased sharply. In the CERCs that operate within VEC offices, responsibility for serving CERC customers has been spread across most of the office staff. Typically, workforce service representatives (WSRs) staff an intake desk on a rotating basis to determine the reason for customers' visits and to refer them to the appropriate VEC or partnering agency staff. The rest of this section summarizes the staffing arrangements of each of the four CERCs.

Clarksville. The CERC in Clarksville is staffed by two full-time VEC WSRs. Typically, these staff are generalists who can take Unemployment Insurance (UI) claims, register customers for the job service, and provide information about WIA and Trade Act programs. Initially, three WSRs worked full time at the CERC; after several months of low customer traffic, however, the VEC director decided to move one person back to the VEC office in South Hill, the VEC's main location in Mecklenburg County, where customer traffic was high.

One WSR assigned to the Clarksville CERC was a new VEC employee who was hired in March when the CERC opened. The other is an experienced WSR who was redeployed from the South Hill office. The VEC director said that, because learning the guidelines and procedures for UI and other VEC services takes several months, she decided to pair the new employee with one of the most experienced WSRs in South Hill. On rare occasions when South Hill has been short of staff for the CERC, such as when staff are sick or on vacation, she has been able to use experienced staff from the VEC's South Boston or Farmville office. In addition to the new WSR at the CERC, the South Hill office hired four part-time staff after learning of impending layoffs at Russell Stover Candies and Burlington Industries. These staff were hired before plans for the CERC were announced.

Martinsville. In Martinsville, the CERC is staffed by two full-time WSRs and one office services worker who staffs the CERC's resource room, prepares weekly reports about CERC activities, and provides clerical support. As in Clarksville, the VEC director reported that she has had to deploy two of her most experienced staff from the Martinsville office to work at the CERC. New staff could not be hired for these positions, because they would not be familiar enough with the full range of VEC services and programs. Before the CERC opened, some new staff had already been hired in Martinsville in response to the increased

volume of dislocated workers seeking VEC services. In addition, the VEC hired several part-time staff to assist in the VEC office after the CERC opened.

South Boston. The VEC office in South Boston has a staff of 17, most of whom are WSRs who can provide help with UI claims, job search, and referrals. When the CERC opened, the VEC office hired one new WSR to help with the anticipated increase in service provision. To manage CERC intake, WSRs take turns staffing an intake desk in the lobby during two-hour shifts. The intake worker determines the purpose of the customer's visit and then refers the customer to the appropriate VEC or partnering agency staff member.

Marion. The Marion VEC office has a full-time staff of six (in addition to the VEC director), most of whom are WSRs. In addition, six part-time staff work on an as-needed basis. When the CERC opened, the VEC office hired two new part-time staff to help with the anticipated increase in requests for services. One is a clerical worker; the other is a WSR.

PARTNERING AGENCIES

In addition to the VEC, Virginia intended to co-locate a wide range of other service providers in the CERCs, including state agencies and community- and faith-based agencies. This section describes how the VEC recruited and coordinated with partnering agencies, as well as the types of agencies that have served as CERC partners.

The Strike Force mandated that state agencies participate in the CERCs, but each agency determined the extent to which it would participate.

Member agencies of the Strike Force, such as DSS and the community college system, were expected to participate in the CERCs as partners. Expectations for the extent of this participation were negotiated during the planning phase. For example, local DSS offices initially were expected to staff the CERCs on a full-time basis, to determine customers' eligibility for various benefit programs. Some DSS staff, however, did not think that demand for DSS services at the CERCs would be sufficient to justify outstationing a full-time worker. One DSS official said that, because many of the CERC customers had recently lost their jobs, most were still receiving UI benefits and/or had assets that made them ineligible for most DSS benefit programs. Moreover, local DSS offices in the CERC communities were already stretched thin, because the number of applicants had increased significantly, but local offices did not have the additional resources to manage the increased workload.

In negotiations between state- and local-level DSS staff, it was agreed that local DSS offices would supply staff to determine eligibility at the CERCs for at least two days a week initially, with the understanding that the DSS presence might be scaled back further if the level of referrals to DSS at a particular site was low. Officials also reported that the DSS offered to be available by telephone to do initial eligibility screenings, and to provide training to CERC staff on basic eligibility criteria for DSS programs. Because local-level DSS staff

are city or county, rather than state employees, the state-level DSS agency cannot mandate local participation in the CERCs as the VEC did (local VEC staff are state employees).

The VEC recruited and coordinated with partnering agencies in each community.

At the local level, to gain their cooperation and plan their participation in the CERCs, the VEC took lead responsibility in organizing meetings of staff from the VEC and other partnering agencies. In three of the four communities, an associate commissioner from the VEC convened and participated in on-site meetings with potential partners, including state agencies, community colleges, local government agencies, and nonprofit and faith-based organizations that provide services in the community. The local VEC director convened an initial partner meeting in the fourth community. During these meetings, participants discussed the goals for the CERCs, types of services that could be provided, and the logistics of service co-location. Local VEC office directors followed up with subsequent meetings and negotiations to establish partner schedules and to resolve other logistical issues.

The associate commissioner encouraged the partners in each community to continue these meetings on a regular basis as long as the CERCs continued to operate. At the time of the site visits, only Martinsville was continuing to convene partner meetings on a regular basis. Most of the CERCs held one or two partner meetings after the CERCs opened in order to discuss the referral process and the level of referrals partners were receiving. However, in part because of the logistics of convening staff from partnering agencies, which tended to be dispersed throughout the county, most CERC managers chose to coordinate with partners by telephone on an as-needed basis.

The CERCs include a wide variety of partners.

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 (Table IV.1). For example, Experience Works and several Area Agencies on Aging offer employment and training services to low-income, older workers. Area school districts, adult education programs, and community colleges offer General Equivalency Diploma preparation, adult basic education, and short- and long-term training programs. Social and health services are provided by government agencies, such as the local DSS, and by private organizations, such as the Smyth County Free Clinic. Local churches, charities, and community action agencies provide emergency assistance, such as food or help in paying rent or utility bills.

In the two CERCs located within VEC offices, fewer new partnerships have been forged. The Marion and South Boston VEC offices had established One-Stop career centers in their offices, as required by WIA, before the CERCs were opened. Many of the CERC partners in these two communities were already providing on-site services in the VEC offices, on either a scheduled or an on-call basis. However, the CERCs attracted some new partners, and some on-site partners increased their participation or range of services they offered. One notable addition was DSS, which had not been a mandated partner in the WIA One-Stops, but which became a partner in the CERCs.

Table IV.1: CERC Partners, by Site

Partner	Clarksville	Martinsville	South Boston	Marion
State and Local Public Agencies				
Area Agency on Aging		X	X	X
Department of Health		X		X
Department of Rehabilitative Services		X	X	X
Department of Social Services	X	X	X	X
Office of Child Support Enforcement		X	X	
Adult Education Programs		X		X
Community Colleges				
Patrick Henry Community College		X		
Southside Virginia Community College	X		X	
Virginia Highlands Community College				X
Wytheville Community College				X
Nonprofit Organizations				
Center for Behavioral Health	X			
Piedmont Community Health Services		X		
Experience Works		X		X
Family Access to Medical Insurance Security Outreach Initiatives	X	X	X	X
Family Life Services		X		
Halifax County Community Action			X	
Mountain Community Action Agency				X
People, Inc.				X
Saltville Medical Center				X
Smyth County Free Clinic				X
United Way	X	X		
Faith-Based Organizations				
Area churches	X	X	X	X
Good Samaritan			X	
Lake Country Community Assistance Association	X			
Salvation Army		X		
Smyth County Ministerial Association				X