

## CHAPTER VII

### SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES, AND LESSONS

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The experiences of state officials, local staff of the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC), and partnering agency staff in implementing the CERCs can help guide policymakers and program administrations as they design and implement similar One-Stop initiatives. 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.

Lessons from the CERCs are likely to be especially helpful in planning One-Stop initiatives that are located in fairly rural communities, where the volume of customers is likely to be similar to that experienced by the CERCs. In addition, some lessons may be most relevant to One-Stop initiatives that, like the CERCs, are intended to be temporary in nature. In this chapter, we first review successes achieved by the CERCs and the key implementation challenges they faced; we then discuss implementation lessons derived from the study.

#### SUCCESSES

Through the CERCs, Virginia attempted to implement a new approach to service delivery in which a broad array of services are available in one location. This approach extended beyond the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) One-Stop model to include new partners that typically do not participate in the VEC's One-Stop career centers. For example, all of the CERCs reported providing information about food assistance available from food banks, churches, and community action agencies. In this section, we describe

successes experienced by the VEC and partnering agencies as they sought to implement these expanded One-Stops.

**The CERCs may have increased access to services for some customers.**

- **The CERCs helped customers obtain information about where to find the services they needed.**

Although the level of referrals to other service providers was lower than anticipated, VEC staff believed that the CERCs facilitated access to information about services available in the community. Most service providers were on-site no more than one or two days per week; however, CERC staff were able to connect customers to the services they needed by providing information and community resource guides, referring customers to partnering agencies' main offices, and helping customers make appointments with partners.

- **The CERCs made obtaining services more convenient for some customers.**

State and local officials concurred that the CERCs, especially those in locations separate from the main VEC office, made obtaining services and information more convenient for some 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. Officials did not agree, however, about whether the CERCs facilitated access to services that customers would not otherwise have received. Some felt that this may have happened. Although the number of referrals was small, officials said that anecdotal information about specific families indicated that some families benefited tremendously from the CERCs. Other officials and CERC staff thought that, while the CERCs made obtaining services more convenient, most customers would have found the same services on their own.

- **Staff in Clarksville and Martinsville, the CERCs that operate as satellite offices, believed they were providing more personalized attention to customers.**

CERC staff and VEC directors felt that customers at these CERCs received better services than they would have received at the main VEC offices. Because the CERCs were not as crowded, staff felt they could spend more time with customers, get to know them better, and provide more personalized attention. In addition, staff thought they provided more referrals and information about other service providers than did staff at the VEC offices. Especially in the Martinsville VEC office, wait times were long relative to the wait times at the CERC; due to the high volume of customers, many services were provided in group sessions, rather than one-on-one.

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**Participation in the CERCs enhanced community collaboration and increased service providers' knowledge of community resources.**

- **The CERCs improved communication and strengthened ties among community service providers.**

CERC and partnering agency staff reported that the CERCs increased the number and nature of partnerships between the VEC and local service providers. A number of service providers, especially faith-based and community-based organizations that had not been involved in the WIA One-Stops, began participating in the CERCs. Staff believed that this growth in partnerships has improved service delivery in the community. Many site visit respondents reported that sharing information about the services each agency provides was the first step toward working more closely together on behalf of customers and communicating more closely about referrals.

- **Participation in the CERC planning process increased service providers' knowledge of community resources and services.**

Although the VEC offices and many CERC partners were participating in WIA One-Stops, many reported that the process of planning and participating in the CERCs increased their awareness of services available in the community. During the planning process, providers shared information about their services, and the VEC produced resource guides for each community that staff from all agencies can use to make referrals. A number of CERC and partnering agency staff reported that, as a result of this information-sharing process, they felt better equipped to link customers to appropriate service providers.

- **The CERCs established closer ties between DSS and the VEC.**

One DSS official felt that successful coordination between the VEC and DSS was a significant, positive outcome, because working together more closely through the CERCs has served to begin integrating traditional DSS customers into the mainstream employment services system. Low-income residents who typically receive services from DSS have become more exposed to WIA and other employment services available through the CERCs and the VEC. The official, citing recent state legislation intended to expand the range of One-Stop partners and to facilitate DSS customers' access to the state's workforce development system, viewed increasing low-income customers' access to the employment services available to dislocated workers as an important goal for the CERCs.

- **Communities in which CERCs were established responded positively and appreciated the effort made to help them.**

Some officials indicated that the overwhelmingly positive response from community residents and local governments is a strong indication that the CERCs were successful. By establishing the Virginia Economic Strike Force and the CERCs, Governor Warner wanted to send these communities a strong message that the state government was aware of the widespread job loss they were experiencing, and that it wanted to do what it could to help. Several respondents felt that this message had been effectively conveyed through the CERCs, and that the CERCs' presence has boosted morale in the community.

## **CHALLENGES**

Although the CERCs achieved some successes in linking customers to services, providing information about community resources, and fostering community collaboration, they have not been able to fully implement the One-Stop model initially envisioned by the state. In most sites, only a few partners that did not already provide on-site services through the WIA One-Stops continued regular visits to the CERC after the first few months of operation. Consequently, customers who requested help from partnering agencies were frequently referred to off-site locations, just as they had been before the CERCs opened. Moreover, resource and time constraints hindered efforts to integrate services across providers. In this section, we describe the main implementation challenges the CERCs faced, including resource constraints, insufficient planning time, and community expectations that exceeded what the CERCs could accomplish.

**The CERCs faced resource constraints that hampered efforts to operate them as envisioned, especially efforts to co-locate services.**

- **The Strike Force struggled to identify resources that could be used to operate the CERCs.**

The lack of funds to cover the costs of operating the CERCs and of the 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. Most were already facing an increased workload and resource constraints, and they felt they could not afford to lose staff at their main offices. Moreover, three of the four CERCs did not have sufficient space to house staff from more than two partnering agencies at a time.

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- **Operating the CERCs increased the workload of VEC staff significantly.**

Especially in sites with separate locations for the CERCs, local VEC directors had to manage satellite offices in addition to their main offices. They also had to coordinate with CERC partners, which often comprised a somewhat different set of partners than those participating in the WIA One-Stop run by the VEC. In addition, maintaining the tracking system, especially following up on customer outcomes, was very time-consuming for line staff. Staff in CERCs operated within VEC offices reported that paperwork and recordkeeping duties increased substantially since the CERCs opened. Moreover, according to state officials, at the same time the CERCs were being implemented, the local VEC offices were facing a sharp increase in their workload; in some offices, the number of Unemployment Insurance (UI) claims doubled.

- **Participating in the CERCs strained the resources of partnering agencies.**

Partnering agencies have been expected to provide services to customers on-site at the CERCs, but they have not received additional resources to cover the cost of doing so. Some agencies reported that staff were already stretched thin at their agencies, which made the loss of staff at their main offices difficult to manage. As described in Chapter V, many partners suspended regular visits to the CERCs after several months of operation.

- **The level of referrals to food assistance programs was low.**

The number of referrals to DSS, which administers the FSP, was low, ranging from 13 referrals in Martinsville to 86 referrals in South Boston. The level of referrals for food assistance made to food banks, churches, and community action agencies was also much lower than anticipated before the CERCs opened. In part, this could be due to inconsistencies in reporting referrals made to agencies that were not co-located on site or were not formal CERC partners. During site visits, CERC staff reported providing information about sources of food assistance in the community when customers expressed a need for help with food.

- **CERC staff in some sites reported that finding resources to meet customers' needs has become increasingly challenging.**

According to CERC and partnering agency staff, the increased demand for emergency services and economic assistance has left some agencies and charities with little or no funding for ongoing assistance with basic needs. Emergency funds that were once available through churches, nonprofits, and local DSS offices have been depleted. In particular, staff

in several sites identified prescription drugs and resources to help with housing (for example, mortgage, rent, and utility bills) as areas with significant gaps in services.

**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.**

VEC and DSS officials stressed the importance of having adequate time to plan for service co-location and integration. All of them concurred that planning time for the CERCs was not sufficient for the Strike Force to address such issues as developing common intake and needs assessment tools or an integrated tracking system. These types of tools might have fostered greater communication among providers about customers' needs. In addition, they might have enhanced the referral process and facilitated coordination across providers. More time would have been required, however, to ensure that new tools and systems met the needs of participating agencies, and that it was feasible to implement them.

- **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.**

VEC officials reported that, because the CERCs had to be opened so quickly, they were not able to provide training for staff who would work at the CERCs. Moreover, because of the short planning time and differences in implementation across communities, VEC officials said that they could not create standardized procedures for conducting needs assessments or making referrals. In three of the four CERCs, staff said they did not conduct a needs assessment or did not ask customers about needs unless such a discussion was initiated by the customer. Moreover, staff did not report consistent referral practices across or within sites. If an on-site partner was not available for the service requested, staff reported that they often told customers to return on the appropriate day, directed them to the provider's main office, gave them a community resource guide to use in identifying an appropriate service provider, or contacted the provider by telephone to help the customer make an appointment. When CERC staff provided written referrals to partners, most did not include information about customers' needs. Moreover, varying interpretations of rules on sharing confidential customer information across partnering agencies also may have limited information sharing in service integration.

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- **Some aspects of the customer tracking system were not fully implemented when the CERCs opened and have not functioned as efficiently as expected.**

VEC staff in Richmond worked to get the tracking system in place as rapidly as possible. However, in part because the CERCs were planned and opened quickly, some aspects of the CERC tracking and outcome reporting system were not in place when most of the CERCs opened. Moreover, local VEC staff reported that their priority was opening CERCs and providing services to the community, rather than focusing on the tracking system. To track customer outcomes, CERC staff asked partnering agencies to report back on the outcomes of customers referred to them from the CERCs. Because this system has not functioned well, the tracking system has accrued a large backlog of customers whose outcomes have not been reported. At the time of the site visit, VEC staff were spending time reviewing electronic records and contacting customers and partners, to identify and record both the services received and the outcome of those services.

**In some sites, community expectations exceeded what the CERC could realistically accomplish.**

- **Some communities expected the CERCs to promote economic development.**

Officials reported that, while all the communities appreciated the efforts made by the CERCs, in some cases the expectations of community members were unrealistic. For example, one official noted that some communities expected economic development to follow after the CERCs were established. Most officials recognized that what community residents wanted most from the CERCs was jobs. Without new employment opportunities in the CERC communities, however, CERC staff were limited in their ability to help customers find employment.

- **Some customers thought the CERCs would offer services beyond those already available in the community.**

Others expected the CERCs to deliver more services than was possible. A number of site visit respondents noted that, especially in the first month of operation, some customers were frustrated when they learned they could not receive every service on-site. In one site, staff noted that initial press releases about the CERC led some customers to believe they would be able to obtain health insurance and cash assistance payments; however, the customers found that they did not meet the eligibility requirements for Medicaid, FAMIS, UI, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Typically, customers who did not meet

eligibility requirements for DSS benefit programs were still receiving UI benefits, had assets that made them ineligible, or did not have minor children.

## **IMPLEMENTATION LESSONS**

This study was designed to examine the implementation and operations of the CERCs, rather than to assess the CERCs' effectiveness. Thus, we cannot report on whether the CERCs increased customers' access to services, nor can we report on customer outcomes. We also cannot make overall recommendations regarding whether the CERC model should be adopted more broadly. We can, however, derive operations lessons from the CERCs' experiences that may be useful to states and communities that have decided to implement similar One-Stop 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 CERC partners felt that their presence on-site at the CERCs was not valuable to customers. These partners usually provided information about services offered at another location, but they could not provide services on-site. For example, community colleges could provide information about courses and financial aid, and they could answer questions; however, interested customers had to go to the campus or to an off-campus center to enroll in and attend classes. It was felt that this information could be provided more efficiently through group workshops or pamphlets, rather than by having representatives keep weekly office hours at the CERCs. In some cases, partnering agencies were already located near the CERC and thus were accessible to customers without having to co-locate.

- **Provide resources to cover the cost of co-locating essential services on-site.**

Many site visit respondents thought that allowing customers to apply for partnering agencies' programs and services on-site could be a valuable service for CERC customers. Several said, however, that for the CERC to fulfill its mandate of providing access to a wide range of services in one location, agencies that could accept applications on-site would need to be located at the CERC on a daily basis. Otherwise, customers who requested services would likely need to travel to another location, as they had done before the CERCs opened. Partners reported that, without additional resources, they could not afford to outstation staff at the CERCs for more than a few hours per week.



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- **Explore screening tools and resources available through the Internet as alternatives to service co-location.**

DSS officials noted that, 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 CERCs was an unnecessary and inefficient use of their resources. They reported that most CERC customers are ineligible for most DSS benefit programs; the customers have too many assets or receive UI. Customers interested in DSS benefit programs could be directed to the screening tool, rather than to a DSS worker at the CERC or the DSS office. Although customers would still have to go to DSS to apply for benefits, they would be able to find out before making the trip whether they were likely to be eligible.

- **Consider establishing CERCs within existing One-Stops, rather than in separate locations.**

Some VEC officials thought that it might have been better to establish all the CERCs within WIA One-Stops, usually operated within the VEC offices, rather than in separate locations. Although separate CERCs have been a convenience to customers, they duplicate services already provided in a nearby location. In some cases, partners must outstation staff to both the CERC and the One-Stop, thus straining limited resources. Managing these centers has led to a sharp increase in the workload of CERC managers and other VEC staff. Moreover, the CERCs in satellite offices have been difficult to close. Although they were always intended to be temporary, community residents oppose their closing.

### **Lessons for Enhancing Service Integration**

- **Devote more planning time to addressing 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. Several respondents stressed that these issues take significant time and effort to resolve, and that they cannot be resolved quickly.

- **Explore options for creating a customer tracking system that can be updated efficiently, and that can provide timely customer information.**

The CERC tracking system has not been effective because partners have not reported the outcomes of customers referred to them. In addition, the system has led to an increase in the workload for VEC staff, who are responsible for following up on customers to determine outcomes and for entering outcome codes into the tracking system. Some VEC officials thought that an integrated tracking system, in which each partner would be responsible for entering outcomes for customers referred to them, 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 for Community Outreach**

- **Conduct community outreach on an ongoing basis.**

In several communities, CERC staff said that more community outreach about the services offered at the CERCs might have helped to increase participation. CERC staff reported that, although the CERCs received a great deal of publicity when they opened, continued efforts to educate the community about the CERCs would have been helpful. In particular, some CERC staff suggested that partnering agencies could have played a greater role in conducting outreach and educating the community about the services they offered at the CERCs. For example, partners could have displayed CERC brochures in their lobbies, and they could have informed customers about the services obtainable at the CERC. Some staff speculated that referrals to partners might have been higher if community residents had been better informed about CERC services.

- **Communicate clear and realistic expectations about what the CERC can accomplish before it opens.**

In some communities, residents have had what state officials consider to be unrealistic expectations about what the CERCs could accomplish, such as expectations about economic development or new services. Officials stress the importance of communicating a clear message about what customers can realistically expect to obtain from a CERC prior to its opening.

- **Establish a closing date for each CERC before it opens.**

VEC officials reported that some communities have reacted very negatively to attempts to close some of the CERCs. Although data on customer traffic indicate a decline in the use of the CERCs, communities want them to remain open. Communicating a definite closing date at the outset may establish more realistic expectations about the CERCs at the local level. In addition, the commitment and the willingness of partners to outstation staff at the CERCs have waned over time. VEC officials felt that partners might be more willing to commit to participating in the CERCs and to sustaining their participation if they knew there would be a definite end to their commitment. To date, none of the CERCs have been closed.