



Recommendations for Continuous Subcontractor Evaluation Report



**Report to Advance Central PA
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Introduction

Building on findings from the *Objective Third-Party Evaluation Report* (Shtivelband, Sidman, Spahr, Schmidt, and Finlay, 2002), Research Evaluation Consulting LLC (REC) offers Advance Central PA with the following 15 actionable recommendations for the *Recommendations for Continuous Subcontractor Evaluation Report*. This report presents these recommendations to guide, direct, and support Advance Central PA and the PA CareerLink® network in the present and over the next 2 years. In addition, supplementary workforce development literature that focuses on best practices is included to support these recommendations. REC has grouped these actionable recommendations into specific timeframes to help Advance Central prioritize next steps for implementation. Below is a list of all actionable recommendations made by REC and their associated time frame.

Quarters 1 and 2 in 2023

- 1) Improve Collaboration between Staff, Partners, and Subcontractors
- 2) Share Successes and Lessons Learned Internally and Externally
- 3) Subcontractors Should Address Internal Workforce Development Issues
- 4) Create Staff-Friendly Tools to Streamline and Improve Service Delivery
- 5) Segment Job Seekers to Streamline Service Delivery

Quarter 3 and 4 in 2023

- 6) Review and Streamline Internal Processes and Procedures
- 7) Create a “Data Dictionary” for Job Seeker Data
- 8) Strategically Decide How Data Will be Used
- 9) Refine Data Processes to Focus on the Most Essential Data

Quarter 1 and 2 in 2024

- 10) Support PA CareerLink® Staff to Ensure Data Quality
- 11) Improve the Quality of Business Partner and Job Seeker Contact Information
- 12) Continue to Make Evaluation a Priority

Quarter 3 and 4 in 2024

- 13) Expand Training Opportunities to Assist Job Seekers
- 14) Strengthen Partnerships with Organizations that Provide Wraparound Supports
- 15) Engage Job Seekers and Businesses with Additional Communication and Marketing

The prioritization of these actionable recommendations should be discussed with Advance Central PA leadership, PA CareerLink® leadership, the Workforce Development Board, and other interested stakeholders. Further, some of these recommendations may benefit from hiring external experts to provide support. Finally, as external factors continue to influence economic, social, and societal factors in Central Pennsylvania, it will be important for Advance Central PA and the PA CareerLink® network to determine whether the current recommendations remain relevant, efficient, and effective to further support continuous improvement.

To be Implemented in Quarters 1 and 2 of 2023

The following recommendations should be prioritized first as they will strengthen collaboration between key stakeholders within and across the PA CareerLink® network. These recommendations will help build organizational capacity to meet the needs of job seekers and business partners.

1) Improve Collaboration between Staff, Partners, and Subcontractors

Advance Central PA needs to improve collaboration and communication among their staff, partners, and subcontractors. For instance, WIOA Leaders emphasized that collaboration was critical and described some challenges in communication, understanding expectations, and in their partnerships with Advance Central PA, Advance Central PA subcontractors, and the PA CareerLink® network. In addition, Stakeholders and Leaders suggested that collaboration would support the goal of seamless service delivery to business partners and job seekers. Because staff, partners, and subcontractors provide programs and services to a dual client base, collaboration is especially important to fulfill the needs of job seekers and employers (Weigensberg et al., 2012). Furthermore, the PA CareerLink® network is both interconnected and complex. Each center serves different counties with their own unique challenges, business opportunities, and populations. While each partner may have internal collaboration and communication channels within their respective center, the larger PA CareerLink® network would benefit from more team-oriented partnership that provides support during difficult times and celebrates successes. Mester (2022) found from four decades of research on workforce development programs that collaboration and commitment amongst partners is critical for creative effective programs.

Promoting greater collaboration and communication among these entities will improve coordination and enhance performance for business partners and job seekers. Sharing tools, tips, resources, processes and protocols, lessons learned, internal strategies, onboarding documents, dashboards, toolkits, and other similar supports would strengthen the network's ability to work together and create greater impact for clients. Collaborative efforts can also help when referring candidates to other locations. Introducing more frequent meetings and check-ins (e.g., monthly, quarterly) with PA CareerLink® and Advance Central PA could also yield more opportunities to discuss challenges, celebrate successes, share lessons learned, and develop solutions. These meetings should cover priority topics and allow those who are interested in the topics to participate.

Some relationships may be strained due to perceived competition, gaps in communication, and not fully understanding why specific decisions are made or why specific data or decisions are available only on certain timelines (e.g., when timelines or decisions are made on a state or federal level rather than by Advance Central PA). REC suggests that an in-person facilitated retreat that ends in actionable processes or procedures on topics such as collaboration, team-building, and creating trusting relationships should be considered. Asking business partners and subcontractors what strategies and ideas that they may have to improve communication and strengthen collaboration over the next year promotes buy-in, can lead to innovative suggestions for improvement, and improve morale. In cases where competition is impeding communication or collaboration,

organizations should be incentivized to improve in these areas. Brainstorming types of incentives with the partners would be a good first step. For instance, create ways to identify and demonstrate successful collaborations and reward staff or organization annually for doing so.

2) Share Successes and Lessons Learned Internally and Externally

Findings from the evaluative study highlight ways in which the workforce development programs provided by Advance Central PA, PA CareerLink®, partners, and subcontractors have been effective. Specifically, Stakeholders, Business Partners, Job Seekers, Leaders, and Secret Shoppers all acknowledged that Advance Central PA is committed to improving workforce development in Central Pennsylvania. They also reported that they were generally satisfied working with Advance Central PA and the PA CareerLink® network overall, despite current economic, social, and workforce development challenges. In addition, nearly 81% of Job Seekers who engaged in programs and services provided by Advance Central PA and the PA CareerLink® found work and 72% still held those positions at the time of the study. Harper-Anderson and Jin (2014) stress the importance of focusing on what is currently working to support workforce development programs.

In particular, successes and lessons learned should be shared internally by staff (e.g., during employee meetings, trainings, conferences) to highlight how they are making a difference and to promote continuous learning. Such communication may help staff feel more inspired, and productive, which should improve staff retention within the PA CareerLink® network.

REC also recommends that Advance Central PA showcase these successes externally to garner additional funding, bolster support and services across programs, and attract both job seekers and business partners through marketing techniques or information on its website. Sharing findings from the evaluative study through newsletters, emails, and events with individuals across the PA CareerLink® network promotes transparency and lets individuals know that their opinions matter.

Focusing on lessons learned will help improve workforce development programming in Central Pennsylvania and help individuals and organizations identify strategies that work. Furthermore, as the labor market continues to shift over time, disseminating lessons learned will help ensure that this workforce development program remains relevant and meet the needs of job seekers and business partners. Additionally, sharing lessons learned promotes continuous learning for all partners and those receiving services.

3) Subcontractors Should Address Internal Workforce Development Issues

The PA CareerLink® network, like the rest of the labor market, is experiencing turnover and having difficulty hiring qualified candidates. Stakeholders, Leaders, and Secret Shoppers all reported that some staff appeared overwhelmed, underappreciated, and strained. An Employee Satisfaction Survey to evaluate engagement, burnout (Maslach & Leitner, 1997), turnover intention, perceptions of supervisor support, workload, hours of operation, benefits, job responsibilities, and other similar topics could help identify primary areas of need. Conducting Exit Interviews with departing staff may also provide insightful information. Understanding staffs' biggest burdens would help

Subcontractors identify next steps to ensure that staff feel valued. Findings and lessons learned from such activities should be shared with Advance Central PA.

Subcontractors should consider offering incentives other than pay and benefits to staff to promote retention. Non-monetary benefits such as recognizing staff for good performance, bringing staff together for social events (e.g., happy hour, picnics, family days, holiday events), supporting volunteer opportunities, and other similar activities may help boost morale and retention. Offering tuition reimbursement, professional development stipends, opportunities to attend conferences with colleagues may also be viewed favorably by staff. Work from home policies also need to be enforced across the network to provide staff with greater flexibility. This benefit was something that was viewed favorably at the height of the pandemic. Indeed, during the evaluative study, Advance Central PA approved staff to work from home once per week contingent on their employer of record's agreement. This policy has been rolled out and is closely being evaluated to see if it is possible to allow staff to work from home twice per week. Finally, as there is greater competition for talent nationwide, offering fully remote job options may help attract and fill open positions. Hiring additional qualified candidates across the network can help alleviate burdens put on staff, improve operations, and provide better service to clients, in addition to reducing workload, and potential burnout (Aronsson et al., 2017). To further support the implementation of this recommendation, subcontractors should collaborate with Advance Central PA for guidance.

4) Create Staff-Friendly Tools to Streamline and Improve Service Delivery

Job seekers may not be referred or co-enrolled to all the programs for which they are eligible. This may be partly due to the multi-county region covered, involvement of many internal and external partners, program-specific eligibility requirements, incomplete staff understanding of a complex network, staff turnover, and potentially inefficient practices. Staff mentioned there was confusion regarding what services were offered and which services may best fit individual job seekers. Furthermore, some barriers that job seekers face call for informal supports to be provided by PA CareerLink® staff or community partners rather than addressed through an existing, formal program. REC suggests that Advance Central PA consider creating several new tools to help ensure that all job seekers are offered the program and informal supports relevant to their needs and that services are delivered in a consistent and non-duplicative manner by all staff members, both experienced and new to the PA CareerLink® and across all centers. The new tools would help document and systematize how PA CareerLink® staff help job seekers and may streamline the process (Fuchs, 2021, Holland 2016). Staff will become more knowledgeable about the PA CareerLink® network, making them better-equipped to help job seekers and business partners. The tools will also present service delivery as a network-wide effort, thereby helping foster a sense of connection, collaboration, and shared mission between staff members, different centers, programs, and subcontractors, and Advance Central PA.

Flowcharts and/or standardized online forms that include skip logic (e.g., automatic branching based on earlier responses, such as “if... then..., otherwise...”) may be useful tools for identifying

programs for which a job seeker is eligible. Flowcharts would visually represent eligibility pathways for each program, including those run by external partners and those internal to PA CareerLink®. Programs descriptions and lists of program-eligibility requirements already exist but are not accessible or understandable to all staff, especially those external to the individual program. Visual representations of this information can be user-friendly and should be useful as references for PA CareerLink® staff while working with clients as well as training material when introducing new staff to the network. Online forms with automatic branching can also systematize program eligibility decisions into a standardized, step-by-step process while staff are working with job seekers. However, program eligibility criteria are less transparent with online forms so the tool could be less useful as reference or educational material than are flowcharts. Whether the new Digital Intake Forms serves a similar function depends on the form's content and format.

Separate but complementary tools are needed to systematize and improve the support that PA CareerLink® staff provide to address barriers for which there are not stand-alone programs (e.g., Internet access, transportation, childcare). A “Guide to Offering Job Seeker Supports” could be developed to explain what specific services or support strategies should be offered to address each specific need or barrier. Job seeker needs and available assistance should be described as specifically as possible while still remaining relevant for common groups of individuals. For instance, job seekers without home Internet but with mobile phones could receive assistance finding public Wi-Fi networks or accessing mobile hotspots. Those without access to a car could be assisted with identifying alternative modes of transport (e.g., public transportation, vouchers for taxis, Lyft, or Uber) to PA CareerLink® or training centers. If an individual needs childcare, staff can provide lists or specific suggestions of community resources that provide assistance with childcare.

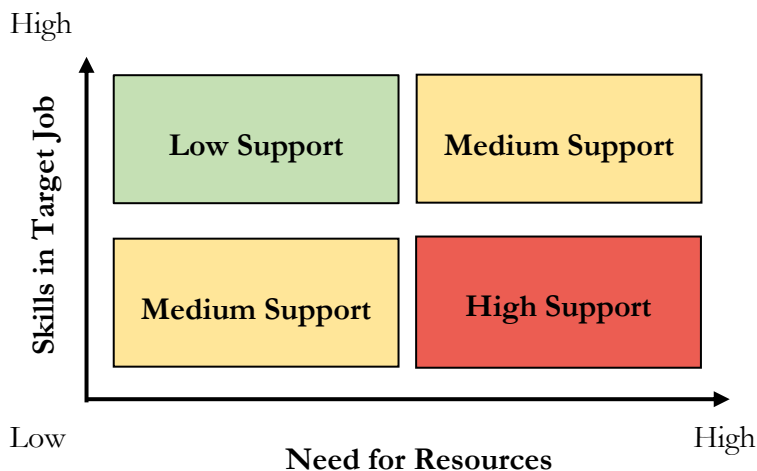
The “Guide to Offering Job Seeker Supports” would identify common situations where additional supports would be appropriate as well as specific support strategies, but would be generalizable to all counties served by the PA CareerLink® network. Staff's well-developed understanding of their communities, and the community resources available therein, is a noted strength of the PA CareerLink® centers. However, this knowledge may not be universal among individual staff members, especially new hires or those who are temporarily covering jobs or tasks for coworkers. It may therefore be useful to institute and maintain one or more online documents or spreadsheets where staff could add county-specific organizations, agencies, or contacts that they have found helpful to supporting job seekers. These “Community Resource Recommendations” would be viewable (e.g., maintained online) and modifiable (e.g., universal permission to edit) by all staff members. Developing formal and up-to-date lists of each counties' community partners can be a burdensome task. The “Community Resource Recommendations” tool should provide a centralized place for more informal information-sharing between staff to augment individual staff members' unique knowledge of their communities. Mester (2022) found that effective workforce development programs recognize that place matters and that resources should be tailored to meet the specific needs of the communities they serve.

5) Segment Job Seekers to Streamline Service Delivery

Advance Central PA and PA CareerLink® support a broad range of job seekers, from those who are looking for a specific job to those who are seeking training to pursue other career opportunities. However, not all job seekers need the same type of support. Findings from the evaluative study suggest that nearly 91% of Job Seekers were pleased with their career coach and about 56% had found a job within 6 months. However, many Job Seekers reported that it took much longer to find a job – 6 – 9 months (9%), 9 – 12 months (6%), greater than 12 months (10%), or that they had not found a job yet (19%). Furthermore, 68% of Job Seekers estimated that they had received 10 or more hours support from PA CareerLink® staff, with 36% reporting greater than 25 hours.

Such findings suggest that Advance Central PA could refine and streamline their systems to more efficiently support job seekers. Job seekers are likely at different stages of job readiness and as such, may need more targeted support (Holland, 2016). Improving practices that identify whether an individual job seeker may need minimal support (e.g., they have needed skills but are seeking to work at a new organization) to much more intensive support (e.g., they are pivoting careers and have many barriers) may help more job seekers obtain work in less time. Specifically, it may be helpful to divide job seekers into four groups based on Skills in Target Job (i.e., low, high) and Need for Resources (i.e., low, high; see *Chart A*).

Chart A. Segmenting Different Types of Job Seekers



This simple categorization can help set expectations for type and level of support needed, appropriate staff to make the support most effective, and expected timeline within the PA CareerLink® system. Job seekers requiring more intensive services could be served by career coaches or other staff with specialized training or deep experience in the relevant area of support. Job seekers with higher and more complex support needs (e.g., multiple barriers, low basic skills) would also likely benefit from more intensive follow-up and joint case management even after being referred to other programs (e.g., Title II); in contrast, those with clearly-defined and limited needs

that are readily addressed by existing programs would require less follow-up by career coaches after referrals are made. Evaluating actual time in program or number of support hours received against support expectations based on *Chart A* could also help identify instances of inefficient or, conversely, missing supports. In terms of inefficient supports, some job seekers may be receiving more hours of assistance than are necessary given the job seeker's documented needs (e.g., *Chart A categorization*). But in cases of missing supports, higher hours of support may reveal job seekers who were initially categorized as needing less support but actually have previously unidentified needs that should be addressed through additional services. Segmenting job seekers into these four categories can also help guide discussions between career coaches and the Business Solutions Team when they meet about individual job seekers. In summary, by assessing job seekers based on their skills and needs for resources from the beginning and using this categorization to inform supports throughout their time with PA CareerLink®, staff can more efficiently provide individualized career services. Ultimately, job seekers' time to job placement and staff hours utilized should both be minimized and even reduced.

To be Implemented in Quarters 3 and 4 of 2023

The following actionable recommendations should be prioritized later in 2023 once the previous recommendations have been successfully implemented. It is assumed that Advance Central PA and the PA CareerLink® network have strengthened their collaboration and built capacity. The next steps focus on systemwide streamlining of processes as well as improving data systems and metrics.

6) Review and Streamline Internal Processes and Procedures

Feedback from the Staff and Stakeholder interviews and WIOA Leadership Survey revealed some dissatisfaction due to the PA CareerLink® network's complicated structure (e.g., varying processes, procedures, and performance goals across subcontractors, partners, and programs) and inconsistent communication throughout the network. To start addressing these concerns, REC recommends conducting facilitated leadership meetings between Advance Central PA, PA CareerLink® centers, WIOA Leaders, and the Workforce Development Board to identify which systems and procedures are most difficult for each stakeholder group, and where additional communication from Advance Central PA would be most beneficial (Meléndez, Borges-Mendez, Visser, and Rosofsky, 2015). Using an expert in improving processes and procedures to facilitate these meetings can lead to concrete actions. These meetings can also bolster a sense of teamwork amongst the leaders in this network and may help increase overall satisfaction with Advance Central PA.

7) Create a “Data Dictionary” for Job Seeker Data

Data should be used to guide supports for and monitor the progress of individual job seekers, evaluate service quality within and across PA CareerLink® centers, and assess collective impact across the Advance Central PA and PA CareerLink® network. The evaluative study identified a need for improvement in data collection and utilization to achieve these aims. Advance Central PA leadership reported limitations with existing network-wide performance measures (i.e., Common Measures), especially the time lag before results are reported with the region by the State and the

absence of potentially important indicators of service quality. PA CareerLink® staff reported spending time entering data (e.g., completing monthly updates), but often did not feel that the resulting reports were accurate or useful in guiding their work, nor that data (e.g., individual-level data about job seekers, real-time outcome measures) was available to them in clear, accessible, and usable formats. Moreover, PA CareerLink® staff were unclear on how Advance Central PA or the State uses the collected data.

Workforce Development programs are more effective when they focus on improving data collection and data quality (Harper-Anderson & Jin, 2014). REC recommends that Advance Central PA take time to re-envision how data is currently being collected and utilized in order to maintain and improve workforce development services. A clear record of what, and how, data is being collected is necessary to identify where process improvements or new information are needed. Therefore, it will be important to first compile a “Data Dictionary” of all variables that Advance Central PA or PA CareerLink® staff need to have on individual job seekers in order to deliver quality services, calculate Common Measures, or for other internal purposes.¹ Advance Central PA leadership should also consult with managers or data staff with individual subcontractors or programs to review their data needs and uses and ensure that they, too, are not collecting data redundantly (i.e., already available elsewhere) and unnecessarily (i.e., not going to be used). Subcontractor- or program-suggested data uses might also be relevant to others within the network and therefore worth implementing more broadly and consistently (e.g., across multiple subcontractors or programs).

The Data Dictionary should accurately reflect the information needed for each decision point around program eligibility (including branching points in any flowcharts or online forms developed in response to the earlier recommendation). Therefore, variables to consider for the Data Dictionary include those that capture the data necessary to determine program eligibility and Priority of Service (e.g., age, school enrollment status, income, basic skills in math, reading, fluency, personal or family Veteran status, disability status, other variables) in order to determine eligibility for:

- Adult versus Dislocated Worker versus Youth programs,
- Individualized versus Basic Career Services, and
- Targeted programs or supports.

The Data Dictionary should also include:

- Data and variables that are used to guide how individual job seekers are supported (e.g., educational and work history, presence or absence of specific credentials, skills, barriers),

¹ A comparable process should be conducted in the future with business, rather than job seeker data and would likely be useful for improving the effectiveness of business support services. However as first steps, REC suggests focusing on re-envision the job seeker data processes and systems, improving data quality and recordkeeping of contact information for individual job seekers as well as businesses.

- Documentation of services offered and/or provided to individual job seekers and businesses, and
- Information necessary to calculate composite variables (e.g., the individual-level data later summarized as numerators and denominators for Common Measure calculations).

For each variable, the Data Dictionary should include details on:

- Data availability (e.g., which data system(s) house the variable, which staff can currently access or use the data),
- Data collection processes (e.g., where the data comes from; who, when, how it is collected, entered, and updated)
- Variable type (e.g., binary, categorical, Likert rating, text), and
- Acceptable response codes.

In order to avoid duplicated efforts and data inconsistencies, Advance Central PA should cross-check their, and PA CareerLink® staff's, data needs against the Commonwealth Workforce Development System (CWDS) to see which relevant variables are already available there (i.e., can be abstracted) and which truly need to be collected anew. The above details for variables available in the CWDS can be simplified from information in the state Validation and Service Coding Guides. Regardless of the data source, however, it will be useful to have consistent descriptors and details for every needed variable and have this information accessible in one document.

8) Strategically Decide How Data Will be Used

REC recommends that Advance Central PA strategically think through and reach consensus on how they would like data to be used within Advance Central PA and the PA CareerLink® network. Dedicating time to metrics that are at the core of the program's mission is important for accountability and improvement purposes (Jez & Adan, 2016). Although leadership may have additional reasons to collect certain data, REC would like to highlight two particularly promising uses of job seeker data. First, data should be used by PA CareerLink® staff every time they have contact with an individual job seeker, in order to streamline how they assess the job seeker's current needs and identify appropriate ways to move the job seeker forward at that moment of contact (see above recommendation regarding Segmenting Job Seekers). It could also be useful for Advance Central PA leadership and data staff to develop a template for a 1-2-page "Job Seeker Current Needs and Activities" checklist that could summarize individual job seekers' barriers or needs and their progress to date (e.g., active workforce development services, activities, or priorities consistent with the "Service Maps").² For example, the checklist could include questions like, "Does the Job Seeker have home Internet?" "If 'No', which types of assistance were provided, scheduled, or

² The purpose and content of this suggested checklist may overlap with those of other existing tools (e.g., the CWDS IEP, the Digital Intake Form). If so, it would be useful for Advance Central PA to decide if another tool (i.e., the "Job Seeker Current Needs and Activities" checklist) is necessary or if the existing tools can be updated and improved to achieve the same purpose.

declined?” This checklist would help staff from all programs and PA CareerLink® centers record job seekers’ current status in consistent ways. It would also allow staff to all work off the same information, in much the same way that patients in healthcare systems have centralized medical records that can be accessed by, and added to, by multiple medical providers.

Second, Advance Central should use data on job seekers’ needs and progress to evaluate service quality by individual subcontractor and program. To this end, Advance Central PA will want to develop specific performance metrics that capture progress towards overcoming common barriers to employment across all active job seekers. Two Common Measures, the Credential Attainment Rate and Measurable Skill Gains, are existing, useful, and objective ways of measuring improvements in job seekers’ educational, technical, or occupational skills. Although these measures are complex and currently calculated by the State, Advance Central PA could use them as models for developing simpler metrics to capture related education or training-related progress in real-time. Additional metrics to capture job seekers’ progress in overcoming other barriers should also be developed. Best practices from Weigensberg and colleagues (2012) suggest that tracking the following measures may help monitor job seekers’ progress:

- Initial assessment and continual development of hard and soft skills,
- Engagement in negative behaviors,
- Intermediate participant achievements (i.e., program advancement and retention),
- Use of other support services and public benefits,
- Achievement of industry and occupational credentials,
- Process measures (i.e., completion of administrative processes, referrals, case management, and training indicators),
- Employer engagement and outcomes, and
- Community engagement and community impact.

Accurately tracking a well-defined set of performance metrics across the PA CareerLink® network would help Advance Central PA better evaluate the performance of individual subcontractors and programs as well as collective impact made by the network as a whole. Clarifying subcontractor roles through performance metrics will also help maintain a consistent system of accountability and transparency that helps them determine what is within and outside of their scope of work (Jez & Adan, 2016). Additionally, service deficiencies captured when tracking performance metrics can point to policy or process changes that will ultimately help job seekers and business partners.

9) Refine Data Processes to Focus on the Most Essential Data

REC recommends that Advance Central PA leadership and data staff then review the inventory of existing data (i.e., Data Dictionary) in light of their intended data uses (i.e., those identified above). New data collection needs (e.g., necessary information that is not currently being collected or recorded for every job seeker) may be identified based on information that PA CareerLink® staff will

need to complete the proposed “Job Seeker Current Needs and Activities” checklist and guide their supports for individual job seekers, and on data needed to calculate the performance metrics that Advance Central PA develops to monitor service quality within both individual programs or centers and across the PA CareerLink[®] network. Changes to how some data are entered or formatted should be considered when they would improve data consistency and usefulness (e.g., add “Yes/No/Not applicable” variables to succinctly document barriers faced or services provided, and keep open-ended text variables only for supplemental detail). Points of redundancy within the data system (i.e., where similar information is being collected in multiple variables) should also be identified and eliminated.

The ultimate goal of this step is to systematically and electronically document job seeker’s needs and PA CareerLink[®] staff’s provision of services and supports (including referrals) in formats that can be used to guide services and evaluate performance, but also to retain only the most essential and critical variables. Doing so will further streamline the Advance Central PA and PA CareerLink[®] systems and create easier pathways for staff to enter, update, and use the data to their advantage. Refining data processes also reduced staff burden as they will only be required to enter the most critical information and thereby limit time spent handling and entering insufficient or unhelpful data. All changes (e.g., variable additions, removals, format changes) should be documented within the Data Dictionary so that it remains an up-to-date record of available data and current variables.

At this stage, Advance Central PA should explore the capabilities and limitations of the current data management processes and systems. Weigensberg and colleagues (2012) describe the importance of integrated workforce data management information system to support workforce development programs. At minimum, job seeker data is being entered into the Commonwealth Workforce Development System (CWDS) and business information is being drawn into the Constant Contact email marketing tool from one or more data locations. Other data storage systems or tools, including those used by individual programs or centers, may also be identified when creating the Data Dictionary. However, it is very important that individual-level job seeker and business data is accessible in consistent, usable format to all PA CareerLink[®] staff regardless of program, center, or job role. This ability to access existing data is particularly important because the PA CareerLink[®] centers are experiencing their own workforce challenges, with substantial staff turnover and staff members covering for each other due to staff shortages. It also prevents inefficiencies and reduces customer (e.g., job seekers, businesses) burden that can arise when the same information is re-collected by multiple staff or programs. Advance Central PA leadership and internal or external data experts should determine whether existing databases can be expanded or modified to account for the above identified new data needs or recommended changes, and can provide user-friendly staff access to job seeker information (Weigensberg et al., 2012). Alternatively, the benefits and drawbacks of a complementary data system specific to the regional PA CareerLink[®] centers that are overseen by Advance Central PA could be explored. Advance Central PA could also implement data dashboards that visually present real-time data on aggregate job seekers’ needs, activities, and progress, or on key trends in subcontractors’ performance metrics.

To be Implemented in Quarters 1 and 2 of 2023

Next, the following actionable recommendations should be prioritized in the first half of 2024 once the previous recommendations have been successfully implemented. These recommendations focus on improving data quality and more broadly strengthening evaluation practices.

10) Support PA CareerLink® Staff to Ensure Data Quality

The data-related recommendations above are intended to help Advance Central PA re-envision how data should be collected and utilized internally and by service providers (both subcontractors and other partners) throughout the PA CareerLink® network. Once changes to data collection processes, data systems, and/or performance metrics are finalized, Advance Central PA will need to communicate them to PA CareerLink® staff so that they are implemented consistently and correctly. Advance Central PA should work with the managers of subcontractor organizations and partner programs to discuss the planned data-related changes and help them determine which of their center or program staff will be responsible for collecting and entering new data. Advance Central PA should explain that these data system updates will allow subcontractors and Advance Central PA itself to continually assess, evaluate, and improve on the effectiveness of the subcontractors and the overall PA CareerLink® network in Central PA, as required by existing operating agreements and contracts. It is also imperative that Advance Central PA provide training and assistance to PA CareerLink® staff on both existing and new data systems, variables, and metrics. These staff trainings and supports should help address identified concerns around data-related technological and procedural barriers (e.g., difficulties accessing useable data, lack of understanding around why data are important and how they are being used within performance metrics or for other purposes). They will also be responsive to requests for standardized data collection procedures and training. Emphasizing how data can also help staff streamline and improve their work supporting job seekers and businesses should also ease potential concerns and increase buy-in.

11) Improve the Quality of Business Partner and Job Seeker Contact Information

To improve customer communications, Advance Central PA and PA CareerLink® should improve data quality and record keeping of contact information for job seekers and business partners. Surveys for both groups had low response rates (about 7%) in the evaluative study. These low response rates may be due to inconsistencies in how contacts were entered into data systems or directories (e.g., CWDS, Constant Contact), duplicate entries, and incorrect emails for many individuals and businesses. For example, some business names were abbreviated and for many cases, staff names were entered in the company name field. For a few Business Partners, the same email address was associated with two or more individuals. Business Partner contacts also often had duplicate records within and across spreadsheets, likely due to either duplicate data entry or when businesses were active in multiple counties. Finally, many email addresses were unusable, mostly due to staff turnover or inactive organizations among Business Partners or because of inactive or full mailboxes for individual Job Seekers. All of these issues decrease subcontractor effectiveness as staff have to use time and resources navigating the errors. Even more importantly, low quality contact

records make it difficult for Advance Central PA to accurately count how many business partners and job seekers are actively using their services. Issues with records might also impede follow-up with clients.

Therefore, addressing data entry issues will help Advance Central PA and the PA CareerLink® network save staff time, streamline communications with business and job seekers, and improve assessments of collective impact. Having consistently entered contacts for business partners is particularly important so that PA CareerLink® staff can easily identify when a partner is already in the system, especially since many staff are involved in entering contact information and communicating with business partners. To combat inconsistencies in contact information, Advance Central PA could create and distribute a brief, 1-page “Contact Quality” checklist that highlights how to search for existing records and identifies what information to include when entering a new contact, when abbreviations are appropriate, and what to do for common situations (e.g., how to enter an “admin or “info@” email address).

Advance Central PA should also advise internal and network staff on how to remove any identified duplicate entries and merge those entries together. REC also recommends sending communications to all business partners and job seekers at least once per year and removing the unusable email addresses that bounce back from this communication. Regular communication with business partners may have the added benefit of helping local businesses learn more about Advance Central PA and the PA CareerLink®, and how they can continually benefit from working together. Lastly, the importance of data quality should be communicated during PA CareerLink® meetings. Emphasizing how data quality can reduce some of the technological issues encountered by staff may also increase buy-in by identifying a staff-relevant motivation to improve data quality.

12) Continue to Make Evaluation a Priority

REC recommends that Advance Central PA continue to make evaluation a priority in the future. While this evaluative study was broad in scope, conducting an in-depth evaluation of individual programs (e.g., EARN, WIOA) would provide additional information on their successes and areas for improvement. Conducting in-depth evaluations can determine why certain types of programs and services are yielding poor results (Harper-Anderson & Jin, 2014). In addition, Advance Central PA should consider conducting annual program evaluations to routinely check their performance and ability to meet business partner and job seeker needs, including by monitoring how well their performance metrics and updated data systems are working for staff and managers alike. Regular performance evaluations are especially important as the state of the economy changes and as needs continue to develop (Weigensberg et al., 2012). Regular evaluation can also identify Advance Central PA’s progress over time, marking areas where improvement has been made and where changes should be implemented. For instance, to monitor the quality of centers’ customer service, Advance Central PA might consider implementing a regular and ongoing Secret Shopper program. Further, Advance Central PA would benefit from involving and collaborating with staff across the PA CareerLink® network in the evaluative process, creating opportunities for them to voice any

challenges with job seekers, business partners, the regions they service, and Advance Central PA or the network as a whole. Regardless of how evaluations are implemented, it is important that they be used as a strategy for continuous learning and improvement. Using objective evidence and research to inform workforce development also helps ensure that programs are effective and can serve the most people (Mester, 2022).

To be Implemented in Quarters 3 and 4 of 2024

Finally, the following actionable recommendations should be prioritized in the second half of 2024 once the previous recommendations have been successfully implemented. These recommendations focus on broadening the reach of the workforce development programs and expanding supports to assist job seekers.

13) Expand Training Opportunities to Assist Job Seekers

REC recommends that Advance Central PA expand training options to better assist job seekers (Fuchs, 2021). Stakeholders mentioned that more paid on-the-job training and internship opportunities are needed as they can greatly benefit job seekers. Business Partners also indicated the importance for job seekers to be adequately trained prior to applying. The lack of training and qualified applicants was a major barrier to businesses hiring more job seekers from Advance Central PA. In addition, respondents to the Job Seeker Survey did not utilize Training Services as much as Basic Career Services and Individualized Career Services (35% vs. 70% and 43%). When discussing their desire for enhanced services, some Job Seekers requested that training workshops be offered more frequently or at different times of the day/week. The literature shows that those who participate in training opportunities that provide credentials or are on a credential pathway yield more favorable return on investments for programs and employers (Harper-Anderson & Jin, 2014). In addition, engaging employers with training opportunities improve employer relationships and show the commitment of meeting their business needs (Weigensberg et al., 2012).

14) Strengthen Partnerships with Organizations that Provide Wraparound Supports

Both Business Partners and Job Seekers identified various barriers facing those looking for work. Some of these were external factors (e.g., accessing transportation, care for family members), while other barriers focused on skills and education gaps. While Advance Central PA and the PA CareerLink® have already forged partnership with various types of organizations that provide wraparound support, further support is needed. Retaining and strengthening these connections can expand the ability for PA CareerLink® centers and Advance Central PA to provide wraparound care and services to job seekers and business partners, keeping all parties engaged in their services (Mazzara & Horwitz, 2014). These connections can also be used as sources of referral, providing a mutually beneficial relationship for both parties (Weigensberg et al., 2012). The more Advance Central PA and PA CareerLink® staff can focus on their own core job responsibilities, the better they can support job seeker and business partner needs, especially during times of limited capacity.

Forging additional and stronger partnerships with community organizations like nonprofits, religious institutions, healthcare providers, and financial institutions (Jez & Adan, 2016; Mester, 2022) would all be helpful. Advance Central PA could also establish partnerships with local daycare centers to provide subsidized care for children while parents are at work, or help job seekers find rideshare programs to help get to work. Offering job seekers additional opportunities to increase their technical skills (e.g., OTJ training opportunities, paid internships) and professional soft skills (e.g., communication, understanding the importance of timeliness) could also be provided through such partnerships. It may be helpful to identify which wraparound organizations offer support remotely, in-person, or both.

All PA CareerLink® staff should have a deep understanding of available community services or be able to access such information (e.g., through formal lists of community partners or through an informal but centralized resource-sharing tool such as that recommended earlier). This would streamline processes and ensure that job seekers are connected to the resources they need. Existing and new staff should have ready understanding of community partners' current locations, service offerings, eligibility requirements, and other pertinent information, and may benefit from ongoing information-sharing or periodic presentations about community partnerships (e.g., "Meet a Partner" segments during team meetings).

15) Engage Job Seekers and Businesses with Additional Communication and Marketing

Findings from the Stakeholder Interviews, the Business Partner Survey, and the Job Seeker Survey revealed that many Business Partners and Job Seekers were not aware of the various offerings from Advance Central PA and the PA CareerLink® network. Existing Business Partners learned about workforce offerings through emails and staff members, but those methods are more applicable to Business Partners already connected to Advance Central PA or the PA CareerLink network. REC recommends developing a communications and outreach campaign to engage new job seekers and business partners, and consider utilizing marketing consultants to identify the best marketing practices. This campaign should help share the successes identified in this evaluation, and about the many supports and services available to both job seekers and businesses. Job seeker communications could include presentations, newsletters, or flyers in community centers or trade schools, social media, and local news stories. Advance Central PA could also present about their offerings at town councils, or conduct outreach visits to businesses in industries with high turnover.

Continued marketing, communication, and networking opportunities for businesses may strengthen the network of business partners and lead to ideas to better attract and retain talent. For instance, giving business partners who already utilize Advance Central PA services an opportunity to share their experiences with other businesses owners may increase the number of business partners who will use service in the future. In addition, building greater awareness of workforce development programs at community colleges, universities, and amongst local businesses may provide greater access to resources for job seekers (Jez & Adan, 2016).

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