

# ISSUE BRIEF

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JANUARY 2005  
NUMBER 1

## TRENDS IN EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

### Promoting Access to Work Supports in Rural Areas: Lessons from Virginia

by Diane Paulsell

*Factory closings can create extreme economic hardship in rural areas. This brief summarizes Mathematica's study of Virginia's Coordinated Economic Relief Centers (CERCs), which used a comprehensive approach to support workers and their families and provide the services of many agencies at a one-stop location. The study looked at how CERCs were implemented and assessed their potential to increase low-income families' access to work support programs. By the end of 2003, the Virginia Employment Commission had established CERCs in four rural areas hard hit by job loss—Clarksville, Martinsville, South Boston, and Marion.*

#### Layoffs Challenge Rural Areas

Nationally, the manufacturing sector took a downturn in summer 2000 and has yet to recover. Plant closings in the textile and apparel industries have created substantial job losses since August of that year. These closings have had a major impact on rural areas. Most of those who lost their jobs were dislocated because of import competition. They also included some of our country's most vulnerable citizens—since dislocated workers tend to be older, less educated, and living in areas with limited options for reemployment.

What happens to these individuals and their families during large-scale layoffs is an important policy concern. Interest has grown in identifying strategies for improving their access to food stamps, job search services, child care, and similar offerings. States are implementing and testing initiatives such as community outreach campaigns, streamlined application procedures, and centralized provision of diverse services. Virginia opted to enhance the offerings of

established one-stop career centers, which have proliferated since the passage of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998.

This approach is convenient—unemployed workers can apply for multiple programs in a single visit. They may also learn about other services they didn't know existed. For example, knowledge of services available in the community increased for those in our study, enhancing CERCs' ability to provide effective referrals and partner with other providers.

On the other hand, research has uncovered challenges to this approach. For instance, agencies can face logistical and philosophical barriers. Space limitations, lease requirements, variations in geographic service areas, and turf concerns can all be issues. Differences in mission can lead to mismatched ideas on how best to serve participants. Disparate funding streams, procedures, goals, performance standards, and reporting requirements can also impede coordination, as can incompatible information systems.

#### Setting Up Shop

In response to sharp job losses in rural areas, Virginia's governor launched an Economic Strike Force in 2002. Adapting the Federal Emergency Management Agency's model of a single point of contact for natural disasters, the state established CERCs for dislocated workers, their families, and other low-income community residents (see below). Employment counseling and training were the primary services provided, but

CERC LOCATIONS IN VIRGINIA

Location	Population of service area	Job loss from plant closings
Marion	33,081	2,380 (1998-2002)
Martinsville	92,753	9,000 (1999-2002)
Boston	37,355	2,000 (1999-2002)
Clarksville	32,380	1,400 (2001-2002)

Source: Population from 2000 Census of Population; job loss from the Virginia Employment Commission.

#### EXAMPLES OF PARTNERING AGENCIES

- Agencies on Aging
- Departments of Health, Rehabilitative Services, and Social Services
- Offices of Child Support Enforcement
- Adult education programs
- Community colleges
- Community health services
- Area churches
- Salvation Army
- United Way

social services, health/mental health services, child support enforcement, and emergency assistance with heating, medical, and other expenses, were also available. CERCs partnered with community colleges and nonprofit organizations to provide emergency food assistance and other types of help.

CERCs served two-parent, single-parent, and single-adult families. Many clients were older adults, with little work experience beyond manufacturing jobs. Additional barriers to reemployment included little education, poor job-seeking skills, and, in some cases, lack of transportation. Many also needed emergency assistance and lacked access to health care.

### Measuring Success

CERCs were able to facilitate access to sources of help in the community, such as food banks, although referrals to other services were lower than expected. They also made obtaining services more convenient for some clients, and some may have provided more personalized attention.

Improved communication and strengthened ties among providers, especially faith- and community-based ones, is another area that CERCs may have improved. Sharing information about agency services was the first step in working more closely together on behalf of clients. In addition, communities responded positively to state awareness of their widespread job losses; some also felt that CERCs boosted local morale.

For the most part, CERCs did not realize the integrated one-stop model envisioned by the state. While they achieved a moderate level of co-location in their initial months, most agencies discontinued their relationship with CERCs over time, due to limited resources, low levels of referrals, and a perception by some partners that co-location was unnecessary. Affected clients were referred to other locations, just as they had been before CERCs opened.

Other challenges to the one-stop model included:

- Resource constraints—lack of funds, insufficient space, and increased workloads
- Limits on planning time and inadequate recordkeeping systems
- Unrealistic expectations about what CERCs could accomplish—some communities expected them to promote economic development or offer services beyond those already available

### Moving Ahead: What Did We Learn?

Job losses continue to challenge rural areas. With the federal government encouraging states to offer services for dislocated and unemployed workers in one coordinated location, Virginia's experience can help others understand the challenges involved. States interested in offering this type of collaborative assistance may want to:

- Subsidize agency costs of co-locating essential services on site
- Explore screening tools and resources available online as alternatives to co-location
- Develop common forms, referral procedures, and information systems for use by all partners
- Explore options for creating client tracking systems that can be timely and updated easily
- Conduct community outreach on an ongoing basis

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, funded the research. For more information, contact Diane Paulsell at (609) 275-2297, [dpaulsell@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:dpaulsell@mathematica-mpr.com). The full report is available at [www.mathematica-mpr.com](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com) or call Publications at (609) 275-2350.

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