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**Serving Employers to Aid Job Seekers:
A Regional Workforce Development Partnership**

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We describe how rural counties in Northern California have implemented policy reforms that realign workforce development programs as a small business support system. Despite fiscal and geographic obstacles, the reforms are gathering momentum that appears to be sustainable. The case illustrates three factors associated with successful policy reform: 1) the need for institutional networks and a central organization that can reinforce and elaborate reform purposes in the face of inevitable attention drift, 2) the ability to protect the discretion of regional partners from the potentially paralyzing impact of the compliance demands imposed by state and federal governments, and 3) the fragility of reform given the two-edged sword of devolution in which local discretion and innovation face a Sisyphean struggle against declining budgets and cutback management. In addition, we highlight the often neglected role that fun and sociability played in cementing the reform partnership by developing a sense of community.

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Local Workforce Investment Areas—recipients of formula funds allocated under the terms of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998—are in many respects unlikely instruments of significant policy reform. Although the federal legislation envisioned that local area Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) would play a strong leadership role in directing and coordinating service delivery in local workforce networks, an evaluation of local area implementation in California (Campbell et.al., 2006, p. 7) found that they struggle against severe constraints, including:

- the steady decline in federal funding for workforce programs;
- the lingering perception of some that workforce development is “just another welfare program,” making it hard for many WIBs to attract and retain the required business majority;
- the fact that WIA dollars come with tight restrictions that limit the ability and authority of local managers (or elected officials) to exercise discretion;
- regulatory compliance and reporting requirements that force a preoccupation with routine program oversight functions at the expense of strategic policy development, system alignment, and coalition-building;
- competition from other local centers of leadership; and
- a policy mission that has not traditionally aroused civic or political passion and interest.

While such issues as school reform are able to capture considerable policy attention in many states and localities, workforce development programs operate in relative

obscurity. This remains largely true even while local officials are increasingly concerned with community economic development, particularly in areas of persistent poverty.

Given the significant impediments against which local workforce areas must operate, we were surprised to discover that a local area in Northern California has catalyzed a major shift in regional workforce policy. The Northern Rural Training Employment Consortium (NoRTEC) serves a relatively isolated 10-county area encompassing almost one-fifth of California's land mass but representing less than 2% of the state's population. During a 3-5 year period, NoRTEC has reinvented the mission of local workforce development programs from "finding positions for job seekers" to "supporting the human resource needs of local businesses."¹ The results have been dramatic. Prior to the change, job seekers received services that often were out of touch with what employers wanted and employers tended to view local workforce operations with suspicion. One small business owner reflected the prevailing attitude when he admonished local workforce officials to "quit trying to palm off hard-to-serve people on us when we're barely staying afloat" (interview with WIB member).²

Taking full advantage of the local discretion under WIA, NoRTEC has adopted a Business-First approach which places the highest priority on serving the human resource needs of the small businesses which predominate in the NoRTEC area, 90% of which have five or fewer employees. Satisfied business customers are bringing more job orders to the One-Stop Career Centers, giving job seekers more opportunities to find good jobs. This attracts more job seeker customers and as the accessible labor pool

¹ The nine counties include: Del Norte, Siskiyou, Modoc, Lassen, Shasta, Butte, Trinity, Tehama, and Plumas. Subsequent to our research, a 10th county, Sierra, joined the NoRTEC consortium.

² In our research interviewees are promised confidentiality and as such we typically identify quotes by category of respondent only. The exception in this case are the comments of the NoRTEC executive director, who has been given an opportunity to review the quotes used in this paper.

expands, NoRTEC is able to meet recruitment needs more quickly and with less effort and cost. NoRTEC training is raising the level of competence of both job seekers and business customers, increasing the community visibility of its One-Stops, and allowing it to take a leadership role in workforce and economic development.³ The WIB executive director notes:

The stats are bearing it out: we're getting more placements and more training now than we did when we had 30% more funding than we have right now. It's *much* better for the job seeker because if we're referring them to an employer, we're pretty darned sure they're going to make it there. We're not taking everybody with a gussied-up resume and sending them out to *practice*, you know what I mean? We try to make as good a match as we can because we have a promise to that employer, too. We have a responsibility to the employer as much as to the employee, to get the employer the right person.

Circumstances surrounding this turnaround make it all the more impressive. Between 2001 and 2005, NoRTEC has seen its federal funding decline by more than 30% in a stagnant regional economy where there were 375 plant closures due to the decline of forestry and other resource-related industries. In 2003 the unemployment rate in the consortium stood at 8.1%, well above the state average of 6.7%. Despite these obstacles and a generally conservative, anti-government political climate, NoRTEC has managed to implement a coherent package of reform on a regional scale and its One-Stops have become respected local institutions.

³ NoRTEC's efforts have received a number of awards, including the National Workforce Association's Theodore E. Small Workforce Partnership Award which recognizes innovative business-led community partnerships.

The question that concerns us in this paper is ‘how did NoRTEC do it?’ What explains its ability to secure and sustain genuine reform when many other local areas are struggling in obscurity, dragged down by diminishing resources?

In sketching a partial answer, our analysis draws on recent scholarly work on school reform, collaborative public management, and policy devolution. We apply concepts embedded in the literature to the NoRTEC case to illustrate three points about the dynamics of local implementation of federal policy. The first concerns the need for reform purposes to be sustained by institutional networks and central organizations that reinforce and elaborate core ideas in the face of inevitable attention drift. The second is the need to protect the discretion of horizontal network relationships from the potentially paralyzing impact of the compliance demands imposed by state and federal governments. The third point is the fragility of reform given the two-edged sword of devolution in which local discretion and innovation face a Sisyphean struggle against declining budgets and cutback management.

NoRTEC’s Business-First innovations have received well-deserved acclaim in workforce development circles. Our interest is in analyzing the role of the local workforce area in catalyzing regional change amidst opportunity and crisis and to illustrate the interplay of community development principles and public policy reform.

Source of comparative case history data

Data for this case study was collected during a UC Davis evaluation of Workforce Investment Act (WIA) implementation in California. NoRTEC was one of 10 of

California's 50 local workforce areas selected for detailed study.⁴ The 10 were selected purposively to ensure diversity with respect to size, location, economic conditions, and administrative configuration (e.g., city, county, consortium of cities, consortium of counties). Using a modified field network study (Lurie, 2001; Nathan, 2000; Barnow and King, 2005), the study documented and compared local implementation dynamics, meanings, and perspectives in order to inform workforce policy development.

Field researchers used common protocols to collect qualitative data using semi-structured interviews, meeting observations, review of documents, and institutional mapping of local workforce development networks. Across the 10 areas we conducted more than 250 interviews with workforce development stakeholders, including WIB members, directors, and staff; One-Stop managers and staff who provide contracted services; mandated and non-mandated partners associated with the local One-Stops; leaders and staff in other organizations involved in some aspect of workforce development, such as community colleges, adult education, economic development, TANF, unions, temporary agencies, and community and faith-based organizations; and employers and representatives of business organizations.

The NoRTEC case study is based on more than 40 interviews, site visits to One-Stop Career Centers in 9 counties, observations of WIB and governing board meetings, and frequent informal consultations with the WIB director, staff, and contractors and their staff. Field work was conducted between February and November, 2005 and resulted in a detailed report using an outline of topics and questions that guided the evaluation's cross-case analysis. Although this paper focuses on NoRTEC, we are able to view the

⁴ In addition to NoRTEC, the other 9 local workforce areas we studied included: Sonoma County, City of Oakland, Alameda County, Sacramento County, Tulare County, Verdugo consortium, City of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and SELACO consortium.

case history in comparative perspective and in light of the broader patterns that characterize local WIA implementation in California.

Workforce Policy and the New Governance

Major changes in governance are underway, including increased reliance on service delivery networks that bridge programmatic silos, devolution that grants local agencies discretionary authority in return for greater results accountability, and the emergence of regional economies and their key industry sectors as a focus of economic development efforts. In this section, we dip into the literature on these changes to frame three lenses by which to view the NoRTEC case.

Embodying reform ideas in concrete institutions and networks

Workforce development has traditionally been viewed as an extension of welfare services, rather than as the human capital arm of community economic development efforts. WIA legislation and subsequent Department of Labor guidance broke new ground by encouraging local workforce areas to become “demand-driven” and to consider business as a primary customer of the workforce system (Barnow and King, 2005, p. iii-iv). In California, state officials reinforced this message by funding a regional economies project that identified leading industry sectors in 9 regions of the state (California Regional Economies Project: <http://labor.ca.gov/panel/espcrepindex.htm>). Despite the federal and state emphasis, reform momentum at the local level has been uneven. Most local areas use the term “business services” to describe their efforts to become demand-driven and report doing more in this area than in the past. Still, many

workforce officials and staff continue to believe that focused support for job seekers is the most pressing local need and the most appropriate organizational role for the local WIA system.

By contrast, NoRTEC and a few other local areas have embraced the idea that local employers are the primary customers for the workforce investment system. This new approach is rooted in the economic development assumption that helping employers locate, expand, and thrive in a local area will eventually result in more and better jobs for local job seekers. Our concern in this paper is not to test or critique this assumption; rather, we ask how NoRTEC managed to articulate and sustain the reform idea in their local context where 90% of all businesses have five or fewer employees and health care is the only traditional economic sector of significant size.

The issue of how policy reform is sustained was the primary question posed by Stone's research on school reform initiatives in three cities (Stone et.al., 2006). Stone notes that in order to make reform tangible and concrete, ideas must be embodied as purposes that can be sustained over time. This is more difficult for public managers to accomplish than it might first appear. Typically, public agencies define problems in narrow terms that magnify their freedom to maneuver and emphasize a narrow niche of expertise, yet "to be perceived as wearing the mantle of reform, a purpose needs to be seen as responsive to the concerns of a wide public" (Stone et.al., 2006, p. 531). For most public agencies, this amounts to redefining their relevant policy turf from something more like a phone booth to something the size of a football field. Only a larger sense of "we" sparked by defining problems and solutions in broad terms has a chance of attracting the attention of diverse institutional actors who are not necessarily like-minded on all issues but who control resources that are critical to the reform effort.

Sustaining reform also requires an institutional home so that reform aims are not solely dependent on the moment-to-moment intentions of particular individuals or the talents of a single leader. Stone finds that a key feature of successful reform efforts is a central organization that articulates the reform purpose and develops network linkages. Effective networks provide important protections that prevent reforms aims from being displaced by 1) attention drift onto other worthy causes, 2) immediate concerns or everyday demands that prevent a big picture focus, and 3) the inertial forces associated with “the ways things have always been done.” As he states, “network linkages serve to highlight a central purpose and give it credibility, keep communications flowing around that purpose, and provide means by which actors can identify concretely with a purpose” (Stone et.al., 2006, p. 531). As we will see, a significant feature of NoRTEC’s success is its ability to develop networking mechanisms that reinforce and sustain the underlying purpose of the reform agenda.

Simultaneously managing horizontal and vertical linkages

Under WIA’s predecessor, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), local workforce areas managed job training programs which operated within a relatively stable and isolated bureaucratic structure. In that environment, vertical relationships and directives from federal and state governments had a clear priority, and a compliance mindset governed the federal-state-local relationship. That mentality is proving hard to change, even though WIA legislation calls on local actors to develop and manage collaborative programs which draw on separate funding streams and require the coordination of multiple organizations within local workforce networks.

In addition to WIA, at least 30 other publicly funded employment and training programs operate in California, using \$ 4-5 billion in combined federal, state, and local funding (California Budget Project, 2005, pp. 1, 4). Within the array of publicly funded programs, the WIA-funded system bears particular attention for two reasons. First, its One-Stop centers have been designated as a central point of entry to which any citizen can turn when seeking workforce services. Second, local WIBs and their executive directors and administrative staff are intended as mechanisms for promoting overall system integration of the various employment and training programs. Thus, the WIA system has the potential to play a unique role in cross-system alignment.

Whether this potential can be realized by a program of comparatively limited resources and modest community visibility is an open question. In the new governance environment, a compliance mindset and measures designed to enhance accountability to higher levels of government often work at cross-purposes with the need for local area leaders to act as opportunistic entrepreneurs. The work of Agranoff and McGuire (2003) has begun to specify the demands that face public managers as they operate simultaneously amidst vertical and horizontal linkages. Of particular note among the vertical management tasks is what they term “adjustment seeking”, defined as “seeking latitude in implementation by requesting some form of local asymmetrical treatment or program adjustment that is not technically or apparently within standards, rules, or guidelines, but nonetheless forwards the purpose for which both higher-level and local managers are working” (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003, p. 75). Adjustment seeking plays an important part in the NoRTEC story by protecting the freedom and flexibility of local reforms against the potential straightjacket of a bureaucratically imposed and seemingly inflexible compliance regime. NoRTEC’s experienced executive director has proven to be adept at working collaboratively with regional partners and higher level managers to

invent workarounds and ensure that auditing principles demanding literal compliance do not get in the way of reforms that produce intended results.

Wielding devolution's two-edged sword

Viewed from the local perspective, the history of public policy devolution (which reaches back at least as far as the new federalism of the Nixon administration), contains one consistent storyline. That story is the tradeoff between the benefit of increased local discretion and the reality of persistent funding cuts that curtail what can be done with that discretion. Welfare reform proved to be a partial exception to the general rule, but only because of a fortunate convergence of an unusually strong economy, declining welfare rolls, and increased federal investment in child care and other support services (Corbett, 1997; Nathan and Gais, 1999).

In workforce policy, the long-term decline of public investment is well documented. Total public expenditures for training and retraining low-skilled workers diminished from a peak of \$24 billion in 1978 to \$7 billion in 1998 and a little over \$6 billion in 2000, a 75% cut (Giloith, 2004, p. 2-3). Taking inflation into account, the federal government is spending almost ten times less for workforce programs today than it did in 1978. The federal cuts have hit California hard. During the period of early WIA implementation from 2001-2005, 40 of the 50 local workforce areas in California experienced declines in their WIA allocations that averaged 26% (Lemp and Campbell, 2005). Compounding the problem in the NoRTEC region was a pull-out of Employment Development Department staff from the region, draining One-Stop Centers of valuable resources.

Fiscal scarcity is a mixed bag for would-be reformers. On the one hand, the severe scope of the cuts means that change is inevitable and efficient, creative new ways of doing business must be developed. On the other hand, the fiscal instability caused by increased reliance on discretionary grants means that workforce officials become less reliable partners and have a harder time deploying staff to develop long-term partnerships among broader networks. While NoRTEC has been successful in seeking discretionary grants and has developed innovative fee-for-service programs as a way to generate new revenues, the WIB executive director notes, “It’s a race against time. We don’t have a very large nest egg to sustain us while we develop.”

Implementing NoRTEC’s Business-First Reforms

In this section we illustrate the policy reform concepts derived from the literature by characterizing how NoRTEC has framed, reinforced, and implemented its reform agenda.

Framing and reinforcing reform purposes

By banding together under the NoRTEC banner, small rural counties are able to share administrative costs and to increase their visibility and clout in state and national workforce circles. Yet until the advent of WIA, the regional partnership lacked an animating purpose beyond overseeing the distribution of federal funds to the respective counties and reporting job placement results back up the line. Under JTPA, the executive director found that he had an uphill battle keeping his board involved. They were bored with JTPA policy details and frustrated by its eligibility restrictions. WIA legislation opened some doors to a more relevant program that could serve not just job

seekers but businesses as well. Walking through that door took a leap of faith of the part of the WIB, since the final WIA regulations provided little guidance on what business services could or should look like.

During a WIB meeting soon after the new law took effect, the board chair asked if the staff were really serious about the idea of serving businesses. When assured that they were, she said:

[Then] help us with our HR [human resource management]. We're small businesses, we don't have an HR department, we hear horror stories of people getting \$100,000 fines, losing their businesses, losing their homes, because they forgot to document something. And we don't even know what that is and we're afraid to ask because when we ask, it will show that we're not doing it!

Within the span of a couple of meetings, the board and staff had agreed to launch an aggressive effort to develop programs that focused on serving the human resource needs of the area's small businesses. Making the policy decision to concentrate on business services was one thing; figuring out how to make the switch at the service provision level was another thing entirely. The shift in emphasis did not sit well with all staff, many of whom had worked for years in the JTPA program. Some of them left; while many others stayed and helped to shape a major change in organizational culture. In addition, NoRTEC's county-level One-Stop contractors are nonprofits with boards of their own to convince, which is not an easy task to undertake when there is concern that the new emphasis might mean shifting resources away from the needs of low-income job seekers.

NoRTEC's executive director and administrative staff served as the central organization that reinforced and supported the new direction. The nuts and bolts of serving business was—and still is—the subject of meetings, retreats, and trainings from professionals and consultants from other locations who already have similar programs in place. Regular contacts with outside experts not only build skills within the regional network, they reinforce the idea that a desirable change is underway. Internal communications, managed through the NoRTEC email list-serve, contain regular updates from the director of Small Business California as well as news on how NoRTEC staff are spreading the Business-First message via statewide and national workshops and conferences. The net effect is to provide continuous reinforcement for the reform purposes and to cement the regional partnership and the organizational culture changes required by the new direction.

Intangibles help. There is a thread of informality, humor, and sheer fun that runs through every aspect of NoRTEC, from the web site, to the executive director's email updates, to the quarterly meetings of the WIB and Governing Board.⁵ The tone is lighthearted and upbeat which contrasts with the sober mood and bunker mentality we found in some local areas. As in any reform effort, purposive incentives must coexist with tangible material incentives if sustained participation in the effort is to be enlisted. NoRTEC administration works hard to set up systems that demonstrate how much the people who

⁵ The Governing Board (GB) is made up of the designated members of each county's Board of Supervisors. The GB is the official grant recipient, appoints WIB members, and, together with the WIB, is responsible for hiring, compensating, and firing the executive director. Both the WIB and the GB members meet quarterly, sit at the same table, and are guided by the same agenda. Items requiring action are voted upon first by the WIB and then by the GB (by convention, the WIB chair leads and the GB concurs). Both sets of members hear and take part in any discussion and presentations. It's a practical arrangement in keeping with NoRTEC's emphasis on open communication, and both sets of members express great satisfaction with this arrangement. NoRTEC's administrative staff like it too; it simplifies the business of keeping 10 Boards of Supervisors current on NoRTEC/WIB activities and allows them to deal quickly with any problems.

serve on the boards and in the trenches are valued. Since much of the consortium's business is conducted on-line, each WIB member receives a laptop computer.

WIB/GB meetings are held in desirable locations and are normally scheduled between 10:00 am and 2:00 pm with a break for lunch. By a long-standing tacit agreement, the business is usually concluded prior to lunch to allow plenty of time for informal conversation, networking, and socializing. Friendly traditions such as taking candid pictures at one WIB meeting and putting a montage of them on the cover of the next meeting's agenda build loyalty. WIB members we interviewed were enthusiastic about attending, with one noting "that for many of us it's our favorite meeting to go to." The chance to renew professional connections and receive continuing education on a regular basis makes the investment of time worth it for most members, and the chance to be participating in an innovative reform that is gathering state and national attention to their area deepens the sense of commitment.

Embodying reform purposes in concrete forms

Relationship is the foundation of business service and gaining the trust of employers is no simple task. Justified or not, previous job training programs like CETA and JTPA carry a great deal of negative emotional baggage among many employers. Some of the individuals we interviewed both within and outside of the WIA system used the terms "welfare", "social service", and "government" as if they carried a pox.

As part of the effort to shed these perceptions, NoRTEC has taken a number of practical steps. One-Stop "Job Developers" are now "Staffing Specialists" supported by "Business Consultants," titles that are supported by professional certification for dealing

with both job seekers and business customers.⁶ Career centers offer professional training to businesses and job seekers in a variety of topical courses and workshops and make themselves the convener for business-centered activities such as meetings and special events. Above all, One-Stop staff at all levels are instructed to pay strict attention to employers' needs so that candidates sent for job openings are truly work-ready.

At some risk of raising expectations beyond their ability to deliver, NoRTEC markets itself as providing a comprehensive set of high quality business services. Their service menu moves far beyond the recruiting and pre-screening services that are common across all local One-Stops, to include creating job descriptions, arranging for translators/ interpreters, developing employee handbooks, creating web sites, and offering substantive workshops on topics ranging from customer service and telephone etiquette to labor law and Quick Books. Business services representatives testify that once a business owner receives any type of useful service from them, she or he is more likely to turn to the One-Stop when it comes time to hire new workers.

Protecting discretionary reform measures against the compliance regime

Protecting the institutional space in which reform purposes can be patiently and experimentally nurtured is a task that falls mainly to the WIB executive director and administrative staff. The current executive director has worked for NoRTEC since 1986 and has guided the counties through a series of mid-course regulatory and policy

⁶ At present, at least 75 individuals working in NoRTEC One-Stop offices have some combination of college degrees (B.A., B.S., and Masters) and professional certification that includes Registered Professional Career Counselor, Registered Career Paraprofessional, Global Career Development Facilitator, California Accredited Consultant, and Senior Professional in Human Services. All certified individuals must have continuing education and NoRTEC administration tracks and celebrates each added certificate.

adjustments as both JTPA and WIA have evolved. Within the regional partnership, he is widely regarded a skilled manager who is able to inspire an unusual level of loyalty, respect, and affection in his staff, board, and service providers.

A 2006 survey of local workforce area executive directors found that 40% of all staff time in the WIA system is devoted to compliance and administrative paperwork activities dictated by state and federal authorities (Campbell, Lemp, and Treiber, 2006, p. 7). A key function of NoRTEC's executive director and staff is to deflect, creatively interpret, or circumvent rules and regulations that are part of the local system's vertical linkages. At its core, the approach which NoRTEC staff use is to characterize all requests from state officials as starting points for negotiation, rather than as demands to be met without condition. Understandably, this approach does not always please those to whom the local area reports, but NoRTEC has several factors weighing in its favor in ongoing negotiations. These factors include the visibility and evident promise of NoRTEC's Business-First approach, the local area's reputation for completing required paperwork on time and meeting all performance standards, and the inventiveness of the executive director in devising workarounds that suit local purposes while satisfying the spirit if not the exact letter of federal and state requirements. A few examples of the latter give a flavor of what it takes to manage vertical relationships while pursuing regional reforms unanticipated by federal and state officials.

For example, as part of its strategy to emphasize post-placement services, NoRTEC wanted to shift more of its limited training resources to offer customized training to people already employed, a practice that was disallowed under JTPA. WIA provides no specific way to document or report on the results of customized training, since performance measures presume services are directed at job seekers rather than

currently employed workers. On inquiring, NoRTEC found that the operative WIA regulations stated that customized training could only be offered to individuals whose wages did not exceed the regional self-sufficiency standard, which is typically set at or near the minimum wage. NoRTEC staff felt that this standard reinforced the idea that workforce development is a poverty program and it created practical problems as well. It meant that NoRTEC would be permitted to give training only to those employees in a given business earning a certain minimal wage, which would exclude most workers and lead to a distasteful differentiation among employees in a small workplace. The solution was to have the WIB reset the region-wide self-sufficiency standard at \$15 an hour so that NoRTEC could offer training to everyone and remain within the letter of the law. Some state officials blanched, but the change was implemented without challenge.

Another example concerns the NoRTEC use of Rapid Response funds designed to support situations where businesses are closing resulting in significant layoffs. Taking advantage of Rapid Response language that allowed spending on “layoff aversion”, NoRTEC funded full-time community coordinators in each county to develop relationships with the local business community. The rationale was that anything they did to help make local businesses stronger is layoff aversion. In an analogous fashion, NoRTEC workshops for businesses were categorized as “outreach” in reporting how funds were used for auditing purposes.

A final example involves NoRTEC’s venture into the fee-for-service arena. Since some abuses in the late 1980s, federal workforce officials have discouraged fee-for-service approaches, but NoRTEC officials viewed them as an essential strategy in an era of declining federal allocations. Well before instituting fee-for-service operations, NoRTEC administration carefully researched the issue of legitimacy and found that while many

state officials unofficially discourage the practice, nothing in the regulations prohibited it. Gradually, most NoRTEC stakeholders have accepted the fee-for-service concept, with some One-Stop contractors turning it into a fine art, complete with Internet offerings and credit card payment.

These workarounds are a regular feature of NoRTEC operations. The executive director and many of the contractors have an “OK, let’s try it!” approach to new ideas that stands in marked contrast to the “mistake avoidance” mentality that the compliance regime reinforces. Like any significant reform agenda, a certain amount of experimentation is required, and results that further the purposes to which the reform aims provide the best rationale. The executive director admits that it is much easier to defend the experiments that work well than those that do not.

Building political and fiscal support

Acting as the agent of the regional partnership, the executive director and staff aggressively seek funding and political support for local programs. Discretionary funds are available through state workforce channels just as WIA formula funds are, but obtaining them takes application and ingenuity. NoRTEC goes after every available dollar, joining forces with other local areas where appropriate, submitting solicited or unsolicited applications for demonstration projects, or whatever else might pay off in additional funding.

NoRTEC’s Business-First marketing approach is aimed at other local workforce areas as well as at state and federal government decision-makers. Its purpose is to share a good idea that has been shown to work and to help offset the perception, held at the federal

level, that WIA dollars are producing little result. A 75-page PowerPoint business services presentation—available on the NoRTEC web site—has been used to demonstrate how and why the NoRTEC business emphasis was initiated, how it works, and what some of the results have been. The executive director promotes the Business-First philosophy and programs to government officials at the state and federal levels and to state and national trade organizations. He obtains a regular hearing at the California Workforce Association's meetings and conferences, and is linked to a plethora of other associations that provide a forum for NoRTEC experiences and ideas.

As part of the effort to document the return on investment for WIA funds, NoRTEC launched an effort to get nominated for the Small Business Advocate award from the California Chamber of Commerce. In the process, NoRTEC reported having served 5,459 businesses (an estimated 16.7% market share) and obtained the endorsement of approximately 1,000 business customers who signed the following statement:

As a private business person, I am signing this statement in support of NoRTEC and to highlight that our business and employees are benefiting, and our local community is benefiting, from NoRTEC's focus on Business Services. NoRTEC's bold, fresh approach to providing Business Services has enhanced the relevance of job programs for the business community. NoRTEC's emphasis on providing human resource services directly to businesses, including good hiring and personnel practices, compliance, labor law, training, customer service, and other related support is refreshing and contributes to regional economic vitality and expansion of meaningful employment opportunities.

NoRTEC's accomplishments must be replicated on an ongoing basis and against considerable obstacles. Where skilled workers are in short supply, even the most enlightened workforce development practices face an uphill battle. Among other threats, they face a potential backlash if newly generated business demands cannot be met with an adequate supply of good workers. Given continuing budget cuts, the executive director is not sanguine about the future: "Our funds are being cut so fast, and the general opposition to real business services (never mind the rhetoric about a demand-driven system) is so ingrained at all levels. I guess that puts us in the same boat as any other small business/entrepreneur. We give it our best shot and see what happens."

Conclusion

The NoRTEC case illustrates and echoes reform dynamics and public management challenges identified in existing literature. The Business-First strategy has given form to a purpose that has attracted broad support, new resources, and focused policy attention. Retaining this attention requires that the NoRTEC administrative staff and executive director provide a very particular set of institutional supports, including communication that reinforces the reform goals, material and emotional incentives that build interpersonal and organizational networks, access to training that supports new staff roles and programmatic functions, creative workarounds that preserve local discretion in the face of federal and state compliance demands, and broadly conceived marketing efforts that build political and fiscal support.

In closing, we draw attention to two aspects of the case that call attention to the relationship between policy reform and community development. The first concerns scale. The mobilization of communal purpose is often seen either as requiring the

strong, intimate bonds of a face-to-face community or the inescapable attractions of a powerful social movement. NoRTEC fits neither model, but is consistent with growing evidence that communities of purpose can be organized on multiple-scales. The possibility of building regional workforce partnerships across large geographic scales may hold particular promise for isolated rural communities. Once they found a common purpose in rallying around the idea of supporting small businesses, NoRTEC's widely dispersed stakeholders found that web-based information sharing, regular email communications, and periodic face-to-face meetings provided infrastructure to nurture a growing sense of community.

The second point concerns the role of fun and sociability in supporting the sense of community that accompanies NoRTEC's policy reform efforts. It is a hidden secret that public life is an arena in which humor, playfulness, and the serendipity of unplanned frivolity play important roles. In NoRTEC, the executive director set a tone that made the most of the fact that humans are drawn to activities that are not only purposively rewarding but fun and engaging. Somewhere between the moral crusading of the social movement and isolated striving of the iconoclastic radical lies a realm of association that can be alternately deadening or engaging, depending on its spirit. Journalists seeking to uncover political scandals are told to "follow the money", but the best advice for the analyst of community-supporting policy reform may be to follow the passion, the fun, and the spirit.

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