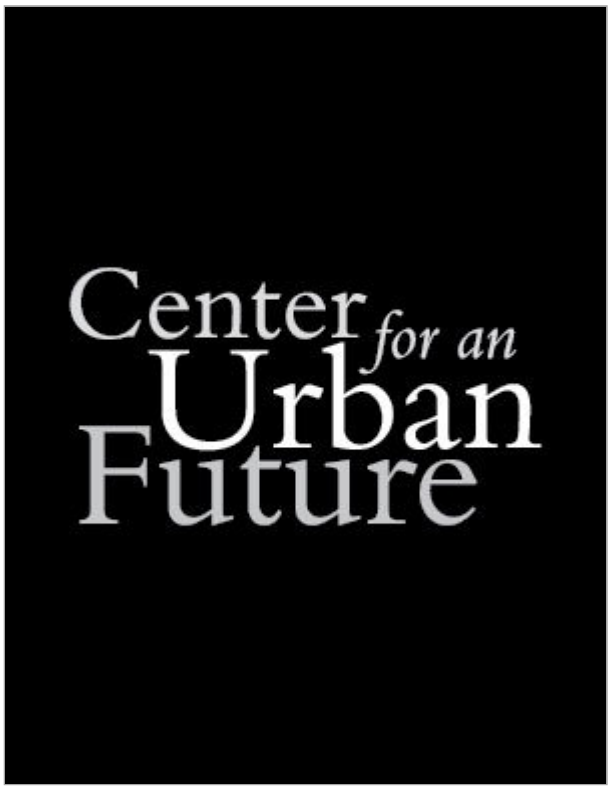


Commentary/Op-Ed - February 2008

Q&A with Blake Walters Foote, head of NYC's Workforce Investment Board

As part of our series of Q&As with New York City innovators, entrepreneurs and policy experts, the Center's David Fischer sits down with Blake Walters Foote to discuss the WIB's priorities and the future of workforce development in New York.

by David Jason Fischer

In September 2007, the New York City Workforce Investment Board (WIB) bade farewell to executive director Marilyn Shea, an administrator with decades of experience in workforce development at the federal and local levels. To fill the role, Mayor Bloomberg tapped Blake Walters Foote, a transplanted Californian who had spent the previous two years working to address the hiring needs of city employers as executive director of NYC Business Solutions Hiring, a department within the city's Department of Small Business Services (SBS). Before joining SBS, Foote had been a researcher on Workforce Investment Act (WIA) implementation with the U.S. Government Accountability Office and a project manager for sector-based workforce initiatives at sites across the country with the National Economic Development and Law Center (NEDLC). She sat down with the Center's David Jason Fischer.

CUF: How do you see your priorities emerging for the WIB, and what is your assessment as far as what's been going well and what might need more attention?

BWF: It's very clear in our minds that we only have these seven hundred and some days left in the administration. Wewanted to establish a strategic plan strong enough to create a vision that lives beyond this administration, but that also builds off the excitement and the energy that Mayor Bloomberg has brought to workforce development: trying to align it better with economic development, bringing a business focus and a dual customer focus.

At this point we've got a good system. It's operating well: DYCD (the Department of Youth and Community Development)has done a great job in getting their contracts and systems in order. They're now strategizing about provision of good technical assistance and capacity building support for their contractors. SBS manages six, soon to be seven, Career Centers that are operating at high functioning capacity. Over 17,000 placements were achieved in 2007, up from about 16,000 for 2006.

Given that things are running well, what I'd like to do with the [WIB] members is to help them see at more of a macro level

what this larger workforce system is and could be. We plan to set up standing industry advisory groups in key industries, so that you're not scrambling at the last minute to organize focus groups and tapping individuals at random times—that doesn't work well with businesses who have a variety of other competing priorities.

Another priority is the labor market information service we're getting ready to launch with CUNY. It's been long in coming because we were trying to gather the resources we have—Marilyn really laid the groundwork for finding the partners and figuring out the structure. We recognize that there's a ton of good work being done out there with labor market information. I think what we're bringing to this is the synthesis of a lot of data into very digestible, accessible information for day-to-day workforce program managers. And that's definitely lacking in New York City, particularly for organizations that may not have the time and staffing to look really closely at the research that would inform their program decision-making. Certainly this LMI service is going to look at research priorities for SBS and DYCD, being that they are the main agencies that work with WIA, but beyond that we also hope that the information that's gathered will be applicable to the broader workforce community and can be posted on our website for providers and other workforce partners to use.

CUF: Is it realistic to think that you can reach the business community in the comprehensive way that might be possible in a smaller community? What's the goal in terms of raising the profile? How will you know when you've reached it?

BWF: That's definitely a challenge for SBS and DYCD as they've been trying to build business relationships. I think there's been a lot of progress around engaging large businesses. Those businesses, because they've used our services successfully and have hired hundreds of employees, are where we should start. These clients can help us spread the word about the work that we're doing.

There have been suggestions from Board members about starting a Speakers' Bureau and engaging industry associationsas a way to have a broad net that we cast to increase the profile. We could spend a lot of money on marketing, but that's not what we want to do because we want to be more targeted and use networks of people who actually have had success with the system.

CUF: Regarding a big marketing campaign, a concern I've always had is that if demand for services offered at the Workforce1 Career Centers tripled overnight, the capacity wouldn't be there to meet it.

BWF: The Workforce1 Career Centers placed over 17,000 in 2007, but with WIA cuts it's not clear how many more can be served directly. The community and strategic partners unit at SBS is reaching out to new partners, and DYCD already has a strong connection with a variety of contractors because of the way they structure their work. SBS only has the six contracts right now for the Workforce1. But there are dozens of other CBOs that we're reaching through memoranda of understanding and agreements and referral mechanisms through the Workforce1 Career Centers. I'm hoping that the more we build on those partnerships, the greater capacity we'll have as a system to address what could be an increase in demand in the next year, based on economic trends.

There are the two new sector-based Workforce1 Career Centers coming online through the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), and there's also a new Hunts Point Center that's going to be launched—or actually re-launched. The first version was really a demonstration project with a limited time frame. This will be a full-fledged center with renewable contracts going forward. We are very excited about the opportunity to take the lessons learned from the pilot and apply them to the new model. So we have some new capacity that we're building out, partly leveraging the CEO funding.

CUF: Tell me about how CEO fits into the city's vision for workforce development—aside from adding capacity, what do you see as the significance of this effort?

BWF: What's exciting about CEO funding is, it's historic. It's the city's first time contributing to this workforce investment system. They had enough confidence in the model that we established to make that investment.

Many of the CEO projects build off the foundation we've laid over the past few years: a lot of them are leveraging the existing Workforce1 Career Center system, or the work DYCD is doing, or work we had started to do for the customized training grants. CEO expands who we could serve: businesses have been telling us, 'we'd really like to use this training grant for helping with ESL training, with literacy training, with work readiness training'—and the WIA guidelines don't allow for that. While the CEO projects all center on advancing the working poor out of poverty, all the new programs build on and maintain the strong focus on working closely with businesses.

CUF: So in part it's a vehicle to work around the statutory—and often illogical--limitations of WIA.

BWF: I would say, CEO allows us to implement innovative approaches that complement the core WIA services, which canbe more limited or restricted. CEO came at a great time in our system's evolution. We had spent the first three years, building that foundation—the structures, the bricks and mortar, the relationships that we needed to just get to scale in terms of what services the system should be providing for both businesses and workers. We were ready to look at what we could do to innovate, where we could support better job quality, where we could take our services to the working poor and underserved or special populations that we had little capacity to serve through the Workforce1 Career Center system and the limited number of contracts that DYCD had.

We're hoping to use the CEO model as a learning lab for some best practices around serving those populations—working poor people with criminal convictions, for example; that's one of the other projects they're working on at SBS.

The WIB's role with the CEO projects is to not to conduct oversight, but to help bring business perspective to it. The industry advisory council, for example, can inform the regular services that we have through our WIA-funded programming, but it can also inform the CEO-branded programming. There's no reason why those same council members can't be tapped. And the WIB can play a powerful convening role for bringing together partners and different agencies, which is the other exciting part of CEO. There's been greater dialogue across agencies because this is a mayoral initiative. For example, Veronica White and Deputy Mayor Gibbs have been fantastic at bringing people to the table--HRA, DYCD, Department of Corrections, SBS and others—to talk about young men and some of their employment issues, what each agency was doing and what we could potentially do to better coordinate some of those services. These are groundbreaking kinds of things that we're excited to be a part of with CEO.

CUF: I wanted to touch on the question of sector programming, which you have a background in. How would you characterize the efforts thus far, and what are the plans to broaden the city's involvement with sector work?

BWF: Earlier in my career, I worked with the National Network of Sector Partners, as a part of NEDLC, in an exciting period for the field. There were sector-based programs that developed organically in the late '80s and early '90s, and they were gaining some recognition. What NNSP attempted to do was to build the field of sector work on a national level—by educating workforce providers about what is the sector approach and creating a membership organization.

Sector work isn't just industry-specific training. It's much more than that. It's reliant on having good partnerships; it's reliant on engaging business from the very beginning of your planning process and not just at the end when you want to place people. It definitely is grounded in that dual-customer focus. And finally it has a very strong focus on systems change. This systems change can be from an educational perspective: changing the way curriculum is designed, how community colleges align with the other higher ed institutions or even CBOs. Or it can be from a policy perspective, like the work Paraprofessional Health Institute has done around advocacy for home health aides and reimbursement rates. Or the change can be from the industry perspective: affecting wage levels, hiring practices, how employers typically train.

I was in an interesting role there in terms of providing technical assistance to programs that were just getting started and trying to get them off the ground and be successful in what they were trying to accomplish. I helped them gather the partnerships, develop mission statements for their partnerships, bring businesses onboard. And I was able to do that in different parts of the country—Flint Michigan, the Delta in Mississippi, right outside of New Orleans, the Ozarks in Arkansas. I worked with a very diverse set of folks who taught me a lot.

CUF: A bunch of high-need communities.

BWF: Yes, very high need. My business travel was definitely not glamorous. But it was a tremendous opportunity to see workforce as it applied in different parts of the country. California, where I'm from and where I started my workforce career, is fairly innovative and ahead of the curve with regards to workforce programming. We were talking about career ladders and career advancement and retention in the mid-'90s. Those are things that I care deeply about, and that I really am excited to see New York embracing.

So I bring that sector lens for sure. When I started at SBS, I was intrigued by the New York City Sectors Initiative and howthe NYC Workforce Development Funders Group had come together with SBS to think about how they could innovate in this way. I provided some technical assistance to Met Council and SUNY and Hunter as they were launching programming, in partnership with Public/Private Ventures. We had lots of dialogue about what these programs could do to be more successful, to really engage business and focus on the systems change piece as well as the day-to-day aspects.

Sector work takes a long time. You don't get immediate outcomes because the intervention is much more comprehensive.. Ultimately, you get better outcomes as a result—higher wages, better retention—but it often involves longer-term training. The NYCSI has provided a great learning opportunity for SBS and the NYC Workforce Development Funders Group. But the sector center that is part of the CEO initiative, is really taking this to the next level. It's attaching the sector approach to the bricks and mortar foundation of what our system is based on, where you're really serving hundreds of people -- versus many sector programs that are more boutique-type programs.

In 2007 the WIB, SBS, and the NYC Workforce Development Funders Group partnered in applying to the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, and we received $450,000 over three years, to fund what we call the Sector Skills Development Institute. We may change that—I know it's a little bit of a mouthful. But the idea is that right now, you have some of the work that SBS is doing with regards to sector work as a city agency, and then you have a lot of other programs—ones that have been around for a long time and have been part of the national sector community, like Garment Industry Development Corporation or Cooperative Home Care Associates, or Artisan Bakery. But within New York, they haven't necessarily been connected or part of a sector network.
Through this Sector Skills Development Institute, our goal will be to increase awareness of sector work and create a better community of sector-based programs, whether they're run by city agencies or CBOs.

CUF: Let's talk a little bit about the federal state of affairs. As we know, there's this constant uncertainty about funding, with the Bush administration trying to push the WIA allocation down and Congress pushing back, and the city is also losing funds as a result of the latest federal rescission of WIA funds. How does that color the planning here?

BWF: With regard to the potential for cuts, we've done a lot of analysis internally to understand what those cuts could mean. Looking at all that, we feel we're still going to be able to provide our services with great vigor. We're not worried about having to drastically cut back key services. But what it could mean is lost opportunities for us to be able to do more innovative things I think we've been hoping to do.

It's not a doom and gloom perspective that we're taking. We have some backup plans in place in terms of use of carryover funds. We've been very diligent about appropriately spending what we get, so that we're not in jeopardy of having money

rescinded. We feel comfortable in how we're positioning ourselves to prepare for the various scenarios regarding what those cuts could mean.

CUF: The bullpen in City Hall famously has the clock ticking down the months, days and minutes left until the end of the administration. Do you feel pressure to accomplish certain goals or cement things in place before the clock strikes zero?

BWF: For me personally, I definitely feel that two-year clock. I've been doing a lot of planning around that, sharing it with Board members and getting their input as to where they want to weigh in and have that impact on the New York City workforce system. My focus is on engaging those board members and ensuring that they're setting the direction. We purposefully set the scope of the new strategic plan to cross over that change-of-administration period. We wanted to have a strategy that is broad enough to cover a three year period but that has clear outcomes to keep the momentum going beyond the administration change.

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