



Judy Mortrude and Nola Speiser of Minnesota FastTRAC

Innovative partnerships can help low-skilled adults become productive wage-earners

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

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Present

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Summary

Minnesota urgently needs more effective approaches to help up to 500,000 low-skilled adults become more productive wage-earners, according to Judy Mortrude and Nola Speiser, program administrators for MN FastTRAC, a special effort of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). Such approaches should be carried out at the local level, bringing together employers, educators, trainers and counselors, with the target always being preparation for better jobs in specific careers.

Background

Today's interview with leaders of MN FastTRAC, a state government effort to provide education and training for under-employed adults, represents a follow-up to the Civic Caucus' recently-released [statement on human capital](#).

Biography

Judy Mortrude and Nola Speiser are state program administrators for MN FastTRAC. Mortrude has over 30 years of experience developing, delivering, and managing education projects for workforce development, particularly with low literacy and high barrier populations. She was the lead administrator for Minnesota's largest Adult Basic Education (ABE) consortium and oversaw county,

state, and federal grants including Functional Work English, Office of Refugee Resettlement, EL/Civics, and a variety of adult career pathway grants. She joined the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development in 2009 to staff MN FastTRAC.

Mortrude will soon leave MN FastTRAC for a new role for the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) as the Director of the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways. She is a graduate of DePaul University and currently an adjunct professor in adult literacy.

Speiser has over 15 years of experience working with individuals and families in reaching their goals of self sufficiency within workforce development and housing programs. Her work has ranged from direct practice to program development and grant management. She's a graduate of Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Discussion

Joyce Foundation provides leadership for FastTRAC. The Joyce Foundation, based on an Iowa family fortune, has concentrated on development improving the quality of life in states bordering on the Great Lakes, Mortrude said. The foundation is currently funding efforts to help workers gain skills and credentials essential for living-wage jobs. To date Joyce has invested about \$1.5 million in Minnesota's FastTRAC program. The state of Minnesota has invested about \$6.8 million, and the United Way, another \$600,000.

Goals for program participants help to narrow the focus. Mortrude and Speiser emphasized these goals:

- Training related to a specific career/job.
- Training for jobs that currently are in demand.
- Training that results in a job credential, certification and/or associate degree.
- Working primarily with a low-skilled, lower-income, non-traditional population

Integrating education and training is vitally important. An essential ingredient in MN FastTRAC, Mortrude said, is to place skills training such as reading and math in an occupational context for adults as they work to qualify for high demand, higher wage jobs. Such skills training is coupled with career counseling and connecting with support services such as transportation and child care. To deliver these services, FastTRAC is able to create public and private partnerships among employers and various education, training, and career counseling providers.

MN FastTRAC helps about 1,000 adults each year prepare for living wage jobs. Job seekers are assigned counselors who advise them on the type of training they need and where they should obtain that training. Counselors also help clients obtain the necessary support services to deal with any life circumstances that impose obstacles to training. Successful FastTRAC participants obtain credentials for specific jobs.

MN FastTRAC carries out its work through contracts with organizations at the community level, using funds distributed by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). Community organizations that operate MN FastTRAC programs include 13 Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) in various parts of the state, plus other organizations such as HIRED, Project for Pride in Living, and Goodwill Easter Seals. Organized under the U.S. Department of Labor, Minnesota has a statewide WIB, the Governor's Workforce Development Council as well as community-based WIBs. These WIBs are part of a network of federal, state, and local offices that support economic expansion and develop the talent of the nation's workforce. WIBs develop regional strategic plans and set funding priorities for their respective areas. State and local WIBs serve as connectors between the U.S. Department of Labor and more than 2,500 local American Job Centers that deliver services to both workers and employers.

The community organizations benefit from significant participation from potential employers. These community organizations receive funding from DEED via competitive applications. The applications cover the types of individuals to be served, the jobs for which they will be prepared, and subcontractors such as Adult Basic Education in school districts around the state and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU) system.

MN FastTRAC offers specific advantages. Mortrude and Speiser outlined three advantages of MN FastTRAC over previous efforts to help low-skilled adult job-seekers:

- The availability of counselors who assist participants in all aspects of job training, seeking, and preparation.
- The functional partnerships among workforce centers, employers, educators, and training organizations.
- The active participation of employers who want to assure that job-seekers will be fully prepared for specific positions that employers need to fill.

Individuals access MN FastTRAC via many routes. "No door is the wrong door," Mortrude and Speiser said. Contact might occur through DEED workforce centers; Adult Basic Education run by school districts, community or technical colleges; the Minnesota Literacy Council; or other groups involved in job-seeker support. Adult Basic Education attracts many low-skilled adults for whom regular high schooling was not suitable. A high percentage of participants are people of color and are co-enrolled in programs of the state Department of Human Services and in Adult Basic Education.

A wide variety of career preparation is offered. Preparation for health care careers is a big part of MN FastTRAC offerings, Speiser said, along with training for construction, transportation, manufacturing, office and other jobs. An interviewer wondered how large a role MN FastTRAC plays in training for agriculture occupations. Mortrude replied that in southwest Minnesota some training is occurring in connection with the bio-fuels industry.

A competitive process stimulates partners to invest their own dollars, too. The competitive process that MN FastTRAC follows in awarding its grants acts as leverage for employers to put some of their own money into a project, too. With more funds, MN FastTRAC can serve a broader

population. The Minnesota Legislature appropriated about \$3 million in the current biennium for MN FastTRAC, enabling service to about 2,000 individuals over the next two years.

The appropriated funds are used to pay for counselors who work with job-seekers, to help job-seekers pay tuition at community colleges, and to help job-seekers pay for child care and transportation.

About 500,000 persons could use MN FastTRAC services. While the program now assists only 2,000 people over two years, many more people in the state are in need of similar help. Mortrude estimated that about 500,000 low-skilled adults throughout Minnesota who have no more than a high school diploma, need some type of post-secondary education or job credentials.

Emphasis on apprenticeships is noted. Others are investigating different approaches to the problem. Mortrude highlighted proposed legislation by State Sen. Terri Bonoff, based on the apprenticeship model that has been successful in Europe for more than a century. Bonoff is calling it the PIPELINE Project, which stands for Private Investment-Public Education Labor Industry Experience.

Personal guidance is a key program component. Asked whether mentors are assigned to individuals using MN FastTRAC services, Speiser said that the contracting agencies all provide counselors who offer personal assistance to each student-job seeker.

"Soft skills" are important. An interviewer asked how MN FastTRAC offers training in soft skills such as cleanliness, promptness, communication, and teamwork are handled. Speiser replied that Adult Basic Education and MNSCU classes all cover those skills, as well as the navigator/counselors who work with individuals one-on-one.

Private agencies rooted in the community are important participants . Mortrude said that respected organizations such as Project for Pride in Living have worked with MN FastTRAC. In response to a question she said that FastTRAC has had no relationship to date with Twin Cities RISE!.

FastTRAC does not work with temporary employment agencies. An interviewer noted that private temporary employment agencies have contracts with major employers. Often a person is hired through such agencies for a temporary job with a major employer. After a few months the employer will decide whether to offer full-time employment, based on an individual's performance as a temporary employee. Speiser said MN FastTRAC does not have a relationship with the temporary agencies.

Employers are actively involved. Responding to a question, Speiser stressed that employers work very closely with education/trainers to make sure occupation-related training is included.

Some employers also invest in on-going employee education. She mentioned a professional development assistance program that Mayo Clinic offers to its employees, with up to \$7,200 per calendar year for graduate credits and up to \$4,320 per calendar year for undergraduate credits.

Good outcomes for MN FastTRAC participants are quantified. Speiser used a factsheet that was distributed to illustrate the program's outcomes:

- In 2013, DEED awarded grants to 17 career pathway partnerships to enhance existing pathway programs or develop programming in new sectors.
- In 2014, DEED awarded grants to 18 career pathway partnerships, expanding into new occupational sectors, target populations, and regions.
- MN FastTRAC teams completed and published an **Implementation Study** to research fidelity to the model and regional variation.
- MN FastTRAC teams completed a **Quantitative Report** of Adult Basic Education students moving into Minnesota State Colleges and Universities. Key MN FastTRAC findings include:
 - 60.9% of MN FastTRAC Bridge students enrolled in MnSCU during or within one year compared to 15.6% of ABE Non-MN FastTRAC ABE students enrolled in MnSCU.
 - 59.9% of MN FastTRAC students enrolled in credit courses during or within one year compared to 13.5% of ABE Non-MN FastTRAC (69.7% vs. 15.6% when including non-credit) enrolled in credit courses during or within one year.
 - 69.4% of MN FastTRAC students bypassed developmental education, whereas just 39% of ABE Non-MN FastTRAC credit-taking students did so.
- In the past four years, MN FastTRAC programs have served over 3,000 individuals, with an 88% completion rate of college credit and/or credential and a 69% achievement of continued career pathway education and/or employment.
- MN FastTRAC participants have seen an average wage increase of 11% one year after enrollment, for those employed prior to enrollment and an average annualized wage \$16,000 one year after enrollment, for those unemployed prior to enrollment.
- Since 2010, 44 MN FastTRAC programs have become operationalized in all 18 Workforce Service Areas and on 29 of the 47 MnSCU campuses.
- Since 2010, approximately 90% of Minnesota's Adult Basic Education service delivery consortia have created career pathway programming with MN FastTRAC funding.

Does Minnesota have an overall occupational-related strategy for nontraditional students?

It was noted in discussion that MN FastTRAC produces very significant results for a limited number of persons. It's not clear whether the state has a strategy for other low-skilled potential nontraditional students not reached by MN FastTRAC. Nor is there any measurement on how well the state is doing overall in reducing the magnitude of the need.

Partnerships among employers, educators, and trainers are the result of deliberate outreach efforts. Responding to a question, Mortrude said MN FastTRAC specifically asks for partnerships in contacts with employers, educators, workforce development and community organizations. The partnerships develop because the applying entities know that they will have a better chance receiving MN FastTRAC contracts when partnerships are included as an integral part of their applications.

More comprehensive financing information would help to assess training efforts. An interviewer asked whether it is possible to assemble information on the total investment being made annually in Minnesota on helping to retrain adults with nontraditional educational backgrounds. Mortrude and Speiser said they'd try to put some of that information together. It appears that on average there's an investment of about \$2,500 in each individual served by MN FastTRAC.

Federal involvement is growing. Mortrude and Speiser noted that President Barack Obama signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act on July 22, 2014. The law is designed to help job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market and to match employers with the skilled workers they need. This law requires that states meet certain objectives to be eligible for the federal dollars provided for such employment services.