

Strategic Partnering to Advance LMI: Insights from the State LMI Improvement Grants

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The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act) of 2009 allocated \$50 million in grant funds to state workforce agencies to improve labor market information (LMI). The State LMI grant solicitation required applicants to propose methods for implementing grant activities, drawing on “robust strategic partnerships” that included state LMI and research entities working with statewide workforce entities, Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), and other partners (Department of Labor 2009). Partnerships were suggested as vehicles for accomplishing grantee goals during the relatively short 18-month grant period, as well as for obtaining user perspectives, consultations, and advice on training and placement services for green jobs. State LMI grantees were responsive to this requirement: the number of partnerships they formed ranged from 3 to 31 and averaged 10 (Laird et al. 2012). Thus, the LMI grants provided an excellent source of information about options for arrangements, examples of activities, and insight into promising practices.

This brief is intended to serve as a reference for LMI practitioners and others when considering future partnerships. It describes elements of strategic partnering to advance labor market information. Information presented in this brief is derived primarily from site visits conducted with 9 of the 30 grantees as a part of the evaluation of State LMI Improvement Grants. We discuss the reasons for LMI practitioners to consider partnering, the types of partnership structures developed, the kinds of activities that partners performed, and insights from the LMI grants. Throughout the brief, we feature three State LMI grant case studies.

Why Partner?

Partnering can advance LMI at every stage. State workforce information departments, commonly referred to as “LMI shops,” are responsible for the production and dissemination

About This Series

In December 2009, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) awarded State Labor Market Information (LMI) Improvement grants (LMI grants) to 24 individual state workforce agencies (SWAs) and six consortia of SWAs. Grantees used these LMI grants, which ranged from approximately \$750,000 to \$4 million, to collect, analyze, and disseminate LMI and enhance the labor-exchange infrastructure for jobs and careers within the energy-efficiency and renewable-energy industries. In September 2010, DOL contracted with Mathematica Policy Research to evaluate the extent to which the LMI grant program had achieved its stated purpose. Mathematica was asked to broadly document the activities of all 30 grantees, provide a detailed description of the activities and partnerships of a subset of grantees, and identify grantees’ challenges and promising practices. This brief is part of a series that explores lessons from the LMI grant program.

of LMI, and can improve the creation, dissemination, use, and ongoing refinement of LMI by utilizing the skills and resources of partners. High-quality LMI includes reliable information about the demand for jobs; the supply of skilled workers; characteristics of growing and declining occupations and industries, including wages and benefits; and training required and offered for new entrants and displaced workers. Potential partners provide information that improves what we know about labor supply, demand, and training needs and opportunities. LMI data users can offer valuable feedback on how to improve LMI quality, timeliness, or relevance. Partners without a specific stake in LMI, but with expertise in research or technology, can be critical players in the analysis and dissemination of data.

Partnering can be used for shared investments. In 2011, the Department of Labor (DOL) Employment and Training Administration (ETA) issued a Training and Employment Notice (TEN) that encouraged states to partner with one another and described how partnerships had enabled them to “leverage federal funds to solve problems and provide technical solutions for needs common to member states.”¹ The TEN described partnerships within and across states and with private organizations, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are currently supporting the public workforce investment system. Highlighted benefits included cost sharing for technology investments and systems modernization, integration of information for multistate labor markets, development of consistent definitions to enable cross-state comparisons, and development of industry-wide uniform training and certification programs.

Partnership Structures

Through the State LMI grant, state workforce agencies created partnerships following three basic structures: partnerships between states, partnerships within states, and partnerships with outside organizations. LMI shops quickly had to determine whether to apply as single states or consortia and identify core partners, as they had less than two months between the grant solicitation and the submission deadline. States reported drawing on existing relationships and networks to identify appropriate collaborators.

Partnerships between states. Many states opted to form or join consortia to maximize available funds and further shared and complementary goals. In total, 30 states received LMI funds as consortia members. Common goals across consortia included serving a regional labor market in which each state had a role; serving similar target populations, such as displaced workers; and making investments in infrastructure and new products, including advancing real-time LMI.²

Partnerships within a state. Single-state grantees often formed internal state partnerships with other agencies with which they had shared interests. In most cases, the grants were awarded to LMI shops housed within state workforce agencies. Partnerships fostered collaboration across agencies that develop and use LMI, enhanced access to specific expertise that existed within other departments in the state, and facilitated access to broad audiences for LMI products.

¹ U.S. Department of Labor. “Training and Employment Notice No. 7-11.” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, August 30, 2011.

² The use of real-time LMI is discussed in greater depth in Laird, Elizabeth, Britany English, and Jillian Berk, “Using Real-Time LMI to Explore Green Jobs” Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, October 2012.

Partnerships with other organizations. Both single-state grantees and consortia formed partnerships with NGOs to gain niche expertise, expand staff capacity, and engage stakeholder groups. Through partnerships with organizations, such as higher education institutions, grantees accessed technical expertise for activities such as green-job surveys and infrastructure improvements. Partnering with outside organizations enabled grantees to better align their goals, activities, and products with the needs of intended stakeholders. Working with educational institutions, for example, helped grantees connect their products and activities to job training programs. Many grantees were under hiring freezes at the time of the grant, and partnerships with outside organizations enabled them to temporarily increase staff resources.

All grantees developed multiple types of partnerships to achieve their goals, including partnerships with other agencies, educational institutions, research organizations, technology providers, and nonprofit organizations. For example, consortia of states subcontracted work to outside organizations. Similarly, single-state grantees coordinated efforts with other states conducting similar types of work, such as updates to the Career Information System, which is used by many state LMI shops.³ We provide insights from three grantees to illustrate the three partnership structures.

Activities Performed by Partners

Partners provided experience that helped advance LMI from creation to dissemination. Common activities performed included the following:

- **Advisement/consulting.** Grantees engaged partners as advisors to apply their specific expertise where needed—such as in survey design, data collection, and economic analysis—and to provide advice regarding specific products or activities.
- **Data collection.** Nearly all grantees fielded surveys of employers and a majority conducted conducting interviews and focus groups with stakeholder groups. Grantees collaborated with partner organizations to apply their experience and used their infrastructures to draw representative samples, develop questionnaires, conduct surveys, and create green-jobs estimates. Many also drew on partner networks to recruit focus-group and interview respondents.

³ The Career Information System (CIS) is an online system for career and educational exploration developed by the University of Oregon.

Examples of Partnerships from the State LMI Improvement Grants

Partnership Between States: The Mid-Atlantic Regional Collaborative

The Mid-Atlantic Regional Collaborative (MARC)—a regional consortium of state workforce leaders from Maryland, Virginia, and District of Columbia—was formed in 2008 to “build a globally competitive regional workforce. . . and proactively address regional economic growth demands.”⁴ MARC’s first project involved jointly navigating the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process. In 2009, members quickly utilized their partnership to apply for a State LMI grant, involving partners early to assess needs and set goals. For the specific purpose of managing joint projects, MARC developed a separate fiscal entity, the Maryland Workforce Corporation. MARC also planned for the future, investing in infrastructure improvements that led to continued production of real-time green jobs estimates.

Partnerships Within a State: Oregon Employment Department

The Oregon Employment Department (OED) developed intrastate partnerships with other agencies to identify grant goals and products; complete key products and activities; and disseminate grant work to relevant stakeholders. OED’s partners included the Oregon Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development (CCWD), Oregon Career Information System (CIS), and Oregon’s seventeen community colleges. To build these partnerships, OED engaged potential partners during the grant writing process, allowing potential partners to help shape the grant’s proposed goals, activities, and products. Upon receiving the grant, OED managed grant work and progress through regular meetings with all grant partners. OED also used its intrastate partnerships to make use of resources and to disseminate grant products to various stakeholder groups. OED’s intrastate partnerships demonstrate important lessons for creating successful partnerships.

Partnerships with Outside Organizations: Driving Change

The Driving Change consortium, consisting of Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio, sought to address the needs of dislocated auto workers; determine how the automotive industry is transforming; and prepare and train workers for the “new” automotive industry, through the LMI grant. To meet these goals, Driving Change states embarked on partnerships with outside organizations. Each state developed and managed a partnership with an outside organization. Indiana worked with its longstanding partner, the Indiana Business Research Center (IBRC), to develop a career planning tool for dislocated auto workers. Michigan partnered with the Center for Automotive Research (CAR) to examine auto industry transformation and host a capstone conference to disseminate the consortium’s work. Ohio developed a partnership with Case Western Reserve University, which resulted in an in-depth analysis of firms in the automotive supply chain.

⁴ <http://www.themarcworks.com/>

- **Data analysis.** Partnering with outside organizations, such as research universities, enhanced grantees’ abilities to complete in-depth analyses. These partners possessed technical expertise, such as economic forecasting, and often had access to broad staff and technical resources, such as academic libraries.
- **Dissemination.** Grantees engaged partners to disseminate grant products using print and web-based resources. Through outside organizations, grantees could host web pages outside of state websites and publish grant work using existing partner publications. Partners also helped grantees plan conferences and recruit attendees through their existing distribution networks, such as mailing lists.
- **Software/technical support.** External partners were used to develop software or web portals for grantees and then provided technical support for their use.
- **Grant management.** Grantees used partners to facilitate grant management. For instance, one consortium member formed a corporation which became a partner to the group and served as the grant’s fiscal entity. Other grantees used an outside partner’s project management expertise to manage grant workflows. In the cases of interstate partnerships, consortia typically selected states with more nimble procurement systems to serve as the grant’s fiscal entity.

Insights from the LMI Grants

Discussions with grantee staff and partners led to the following set of insights regarding promising partnering practices.

Involve partners early to set goals. Collaboration at the start reinforces collaboration throughout the life of the grant. Grant applicants should identify potential partners and assess their needs at the application stage. Early involvement allows potential grantees and partners to identify common and complementary interests, identify key stakeholders, and target gaps to be filled through additional agreements or activities. Finally, early engagement enables partners to establish methods for collaboration and communication that meet the needs of all organizations and facilitate overall grant management. Oregon, Driving Change, and MARC all worked with partners to shape their goals and products during the grant writing stage.

Seek out additional partners as goals evolve. Creating partnerships is an iterative process: partners can shape grant goals and grant goals can shape partnerships. Even when involving partners early, grantees may expect to add partners as activities are implemented. Once core LMI partnerships were developed, grantees specified products aligned with their goals and found additional partners to contribute to those products, such as software developers or economic researchers. Grantees engaged new partners, such as American Jobs Center Staff, at the conclusion of the grant to obtain feedback on products. Driving Change reached out to local workforce areas to collect feedback related to their Trip Time

tool. To be successful, attention must be paid to keeping goals and partnerships aligned throughout the grant.

Manage work and track progress collaboratively. LMI grantees managed work, tracked progress, and engaged partners across grant activities through a variety of structured activities. Regular meetings ensured that partners developed integrated products. To facilitate collaboration, grantees, such as Driving Change, also used online collaboration tools such as SharePoint. Some implemented metrics, like Oregon's Dashboard, to measure partner progress against grant goals. Through these measures, grantees identified potential pitfalls and engaged partners early in addressing them.

Leverage prior relationships. Prior relationships often provide grantees with an opportunity to form promising partnerships quickly, as was the case for Driving Change's partnership with IRBC and MARC's fiscal entity. Whether it makes sense to build from existing partnerships for a new grant depends on an assessment of potential partners' interests and goals. When these are aligned, existing relationships can be particularly useful, as strengths and gaps can be identified easily and pre-existing trust can ease the distribution of work. In some cases, prior relationships also alleviate administrative burdens because written agreements are already in place.

Coordinate with other grants or programs. The presence of other grants, such as the State Energy Sector Program (SESP) grant in the case of the LMI grants, can facilitate partnerships.

Insights in Practice: Oregon's Grant Planning and Management Process

Involved partners early to set goals. During the grant proposal stage, OED contacted potential partners and held a conference call to present potential projects, during which they came to a consensus with the Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development (CCWD) and other partners on the projects and funding levels.

Sought additional partners as goals evolved. Seeking input from partners during the grant proposal stage ensured that the goals of OED and its partners were well-aligned. Partners understood the broad grant goals and saw how their individual goals furthered them. Partners adjusted their scopes of work and funding requests to accommodate additional partner projects that were identified. CCWD, for example, prioritized which of their projects should be funded through the grant in order to accommodate other partners' projects.

Managed work and tracked progress collaboratively. Throughout the life of the grant, OED facilitated open communication between all of the grant partners by holding monthly check-in calls and quarterly in-person meetings to discuss grant activities. These meetings gave partners information on other projects, fostered collaboration between the various efforts, and resulted in integrated products; for example, all partners presented on their project's status and explored ways that projects might connect or benefit the others. For instance, Oregon's Career Pathways include links to and information from WorkKeys profiles completed under the grant. In addition, OED maintained a dashboard progress accountability system, assigning each grant project a red, yellow, or green light corresponding with significant issues, potential problems, and on target, respectively. This system allowed OED and partner staff to be aware of the status of every project funded by the grant and to identify potential issues early.

SESP grants were awarded to states around the same time as the LMI grants and required grantees to develop green training programs. In some cases, SESP and LMI grantees used the LMI grant to determine what types of training programs were needed and used the SESP grant to create them.

Use processes that move formation and operations forward.

Adapting processes and structuring partnerships to ease administrative burdens can reduce grant management challenges. For instance, some LMI grantees used standardized memoranda of understanding to establish partnerships with outside organizations quickly. One consortia created a fiscal organization to simplify the procurement process. Consortia also considered which member states' fiscal systems eased financial coordination. For example, the Northeast Consortium selected Vermont to serve as the fiscal entity since its procurement system was the easiest to navigate. Selecting a state with a nimble procurement system to serve as the fiscal entity promotes interstate cooperation by reducing start-up time and enabling funds to be shifted easily among state partners and outside organizations.

Plan for the future. For some grantees, the State LMI grant served as an opportunity to create lasting partnerships, thus

facilitating future work. Some of these partnerships resulted in formal structures. The MARC consortium facilitated the development of the Maryland Workforce Corporation, which can now function as the fiscal entity for future grants. In other cases, grantees developed informal partnerships across state agencies that will inform future work and processes. For instance, Alaska created an informal "Central Data Group" that brings together agencies that use LMI to facilitate intrastate collaboration.

Utilize partner networks. Engaging partners allowed grantees to draw upon their partners' networks to expand input and facilitate dissemination. Considering partner networks when planning data collection and dissemination activities can help grantees reach intended audiences. For the State LMI grants, for example, grantees partnered with state agencies, employers, and industry associations to recruit respondents for qualitative research and encourage employers to respond to surveys. Partners also distributed completed products through their email lists and sponsored conferences attended by stakeholders. IBRC, for example, could easily issue press releases on Driving Change's behalf and could publish grant research in its publications.

Insights in Practice: MARC'S Fiscal Entity

Leveraged prior relationships. At the time of the grant solicitation, MARC was actively partnering on BRAC activities. In those collaborations, they encountered many challenges with managing funding from multiple states, a problem many State LMI grantees experienced. Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLLR) a member of MARC, initiated an effort to create a fiscal entity that could be used to centralize and efficiently manage multi-state projects.

Used processes that moved formation and operations forward. The Maryland Workforce Corporation (MWC) enabled centralized management of funds and was exempt from state procurement and personnel policies. Through the MWC, MARC states pooled funds, procured supplies, paid subcontractors, and let competitive bids. "The time it took to do a competitive bid was reduced from nearly a year to 45 days," according to Andrew Moser, who leads the MWC.

Planned for the future. The continuation of the MWC supported efficient future partnering: MARC has received a workforce innovation grant and will apply lessons learned from this experience to refine their practices and policies. Implementation of green jobs definitions into real-time web scraping for a shared green jobs portal led to continuous updating of green employment for multiple states after the grant ended.

Insights in Practice: Driving Change's Use of Existing Partners and Partner Networks

Leveraged prior relationships. Prior to the grant, Indiana developed a longstanding partnership with IBRC. The Driving Change consortium, of which Indiana was a member, seized the opportunity to lean on that relationship to advance LMI. Trust established in prior work and an understanding of each organization's capabilities enabled rapid collaboration.

Aligned partnerships with goals so all partners benefited from collaboration. Driving Change utilized the Center for Automotive Research and Case Western Reserve's expertise to gain a thorough understanding of automotive industry transformation and create tools useful for dislocated automotive workers. IBRC provided the technical expertise necessary to create a career planning tool that quantifies the time needed for dislocated auto workers to complete a career transition.

Summary: Benefits of Partnerships

State LMI grantees created multiple partnerships, using different partnering arrangements, to achieve their goals. They developed arrangements that drew upon partners' specific expertise to advance the creation, analysis, and dissemination of LMI. Partners added research and technical expertise, expanded LMI shops' reach to stakeholders, conducted data collection, increased the reach of dissemination efforts, and offered solutions to streamlining contracts and payments.

State LMI grantees' experiences provided valuable lessons when developing future partnering efforts. These included working with previous partners, leveraging partner strengths, collaborating early to set goals, aligning partnerships with goals throughout the project, tracking progress collaboratively, and planning for the future.

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