

Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth
Southwest Michigan Regional Adult Learning Forum
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Excerpted Remarks by
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On behalf of
The Opportunity Center
Benton Harbor, Michigan
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I am representing The Opportunity Center, Benton Harbor, Michigan, which focuses its services on individuals who are disengaged from the labor market or who have multiple barriers to success in the labor market. The Opportunity Center will celebrate its first year anniversary in July.

My comments will focus on the seven values on which our adult education and workforce development programs are based. My colleague, Rose Hunt Redd, Director of The Opportunity Center, will comment on services offered on a daily basis.

1. Human dignity as the starting point

As a human rights organization, Heartland Alliance believes that all of our programs must be based on the foundation stone of human dignity. We try to create an atmosphere from the moment someone walks in the door that emphasizes that this is a place where human beings are taken seriously and where they are affirmed on their journey to new beginnings.

This commitment is expressed on a very practical level: whenever staff members encounter individuals, they look them in the eyes and speak to them, listen patiently, are respectful, and don't blame.

This foundation of human dignity undergirds our work as we advance the human right to economic security and equip individuals for the journey to economic security.

2. Assessment based on being a human being, not on being a worker

At Heartland, we embrace a perspective that we are engaging with human beings who want to or need to work to improve their lives and the lives of their family. We are not dealing with siloed understandings that the person with whom we are dealing is just a worker.

In our Heartland Way to Economic Security model, we state that economic security provides a pathway from harm to hope. Achieving economic security is like baking a cake—it's made up of many different ingredients.

This idea is proven in our assessments in which we explore with individuals what they want to do to: improve skills and income, increase housing stability, secure family well being, and participate in their community.

This is not a soft approach; it is based on mutual responsibilities. We ask our program participants to commit to a partnership agreement, with the following commitments:

We will work to achieve economic prosperity for our families and to build a nest egg for the future.

We will ensure that our houses are well kept to provide pride for our family and our community.

We will strive to provide nutritious food for our families and attend to their health needs.

We will talk to our children about the value of education, will be active in mentoring our children, and will be active with our children's schools.

We will not commit any injustice and we will oppose those who do.

We will participate in our surrounding community to make it a safe and healthy community for all.

3. A “Philosophy of Care” that is strength-based, trauma-informed, and embracing of harm reduction

We begin our journey with individuals by discussing where they have succeeded in their lives and use that conversation to define individual strengths. We then talk about how to eliminate barriers or obstacles to parlaying those strengths into future success.

We understand that many, if not most, of our program participants have experienced considerable trauma in their lives; our staff seek to factor in understandings of trauma as they work to develop service plans.

Finally, we believe that most of us respond to harm reduction approaches to self improvement. We consider it a success if individuals are able to gradually reduce harmful behaviors in their lives.

4. Remediation as a bridge between the present and the future

Remediation services need to occur as a meaningful bridge between one's present condition and the prospect of a job. Remediation services such as vocational literacy, GED, and soft skill success cannot be viewed as ends unto themselves.

Remediation services must be interconnected with job possibilities; remediation services are best understood as a “plus sign” in the workforce equation.

These services need to occur in a setting that applauds success, that makes learning fun, and that builds a sense of community.

5. Learning through doing

Our education and workforce services are centered on a belief that adult learning best occurs in the context of doing. We seek to create learning experiences in a setting that emulates the workplace rather than in a classroom setting.

Culinary arts training is offered in a commercial kitchen setting with an attached café; landscape training is offered with a rotation through community parklands; and construction training includes work experiences through Habitat for Humanity.

6. A continuum approach to learning and workforce preparation

Adult learning and workforce preparation entails a journey with multiple steps on the path. It is a “journey to a job”.

One of the all-too-typically missing steps is stipendiary work or transitional employment. For disengaged learners or workers, “paid” work experiences are critical to achieving self-confidence, tested (and protected) opportunities in the world-of-work, and a real-world basis for assessing strengths and weaknesses.

7. Post-placement: as important as pre-placement

(or, it’s not over when the placement statistic is secured)

Placement is not the end of the journey—rather it is another step on the pathway to stability and success.

Follow up and follow along services are key for: a) job stabilization; b) ongoing soft-skill learning; c) re-employment; and d) learning from mistakes.