

An Institutional Analysis of American Job Centers

AJC Service Delivery in Rural Areas

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Conducted on behalf of the U.S. Department of Labor, the Institutional Analysis of American Job Centers (AJCs) study team visited 40 comprehensive AJCs in 2016 to document key characteristics and features of AJCs. Data were collected when the workforce system, particularly at the local level, was still in the early stages of implementing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Thus, the study provides a useful picture of the AJC system during the early days of WIOA. The findings offer insights into the changes and potential challenges WIOA raises for the existing AJC service delivery system in its efforts to fully implement WIOA and achieve its vision of an integrated workforce system.



Highlights

The geography and population features of rural areas have implications for the effective delivery of employment services to job seekers. Findings from the Institutional Analysis of American Job Centers (AJCs) confirmed prior research about how these features can affect service delivery and surfaced implications for rural areas' implementation of the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Specific contextual factors and their implications include:

- Rural areas' large workforce regions generally mean that job seekers travel long distances to access services and jobs (with limited public transit options) and that AJC partners programs, employers, and training providers, are not in close proximity to one another. The Internet, which could help improve access to services, is not consistently available at broadband speeds required for distance learning and other online service delivery options.
- Rural AJCs continue to operate with less funding and, therefore, fewer staff than their metropolitan counterparts due to both (1) receiving smaller allocations determined by population-based funding formulas for key workforce programs and (2) steady and consistent reductions in state formula grants.
- Due to the opioid epidemic and other social and cultural shifts, rural AJCs reported serving more customers with barriers to employment, but must do so with fewer staff and less access to specialized training and funding than non-rural AJCs.

These features of rural areas pose challenges to achieving the goals of WIOA. In particular, large areas with fewer providers and stretched staff pose challenges for operationalizing WIOA's emphasis on partnerships and systems coordination.

The organizations and institutions that make up the public workforce system have enormous importance for improving the livelihood of rural Americans. The needs of rural areas are of particular significance in workforce policy because many rural areas have also experienced considerable changes in their employment landscapes in recent years due to decline in the manufacturing industry (including numerous layoffs); in addition, rural areas have recovered more slowly from the Great Recession than metropolitan areas.¹

An Institutional Analysis of AJCs: Study background

The cornerstone of the public workforce system is the American Job Center (AJC) or one-stop local delivery system. Created by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) and reauthorized by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014, AJCs bring together key workforce, education, and other partners to offer seamless services to individuals searching for jobs and hoping to build their technical and employability skills, and to employers looking for skilled workers to fill their job openings. Both WIA, and now WIOA, require certain programs and agencies to support and participate in AJC service delivery as well as allowing additional partners to participate. Although the AJC service delivery operates under Federal law and rules, states and local boards, which are responsible for implementing the AJC system, are given considerable latitude to adapt the national vision for an integrated, customer-focused workforce system to the needs of their local areas.

The AJC service delivery system is composed of comprehensive and affiliate centers, as well as additional access points including virtual access points to reach a broad customer base. A comprehensive AJC is a physical location where job seekers and employers can access the programs, services, and activities of all required partner programs. For this study, the team selected 40 comprehensive AJCs located in 25 of the 48 continental states, using an approach that purposively selected centers to ensure that they varied in geographic location and urbanicity. The sample also included a mix of administrative structures represented by different types of One-Stop Operators. To systematically document the institutional features of AJCs and to identify key variations in the AJC service delivery system, organizational structure, and administration, Mathematica Policy Research and its partners—Social Policy Research Associates, The George Washington University, and Capital Research Corporation—conducted the Institutional Analysis of AJCs for the U.S. Department of Labor. Thus, the findings apply only to these 40 comprehensive study AJCs and cannot be generalized to the nation's 2,500 comprehensive and affiliate centers that were operating when the study AJC sample was selected in 2015.²

From July through December 2016, the study team visited each selected AJC to collect information on and identify key variations in the AJC service delivery system, organizational structure, and administration. On each visit, team members interviewed the local board administrators, One-Stop Operator entity staff, the AJC manager, AJC partner managers, and frontline staff providing services to AJC job seekers and employers. In addition, AJC partners in 17 sites completed a brief survey between January and June 2017 to further explore AJC partnerships through a network analysis.

This paper's findings are based on data collected when the workforce system was still transitioning from operating under WIA requirements to WIOA. Thus, the study provides a comprehensive picture of the AJC system during the very early days of WIOA and provides insights into the changes and potential challenges WIOA raises for the AJC service delivery system. A summary of the study design and highlights of study findings is available. This paper is one of four resulting from the study.

Other papers in the Institutional Analysis of American Job Centers series include:

- Key Institutional Features of AJCs;
- One-Stop Operators of the AJC System; and
- Resource Sharing Practices Among AJCs.

These papers and the study summary are available at <https://wdr.doleta.gov/research/keyword.cfm>.

Individuals living in rural areas also have consistently lower median incomes and higher rates of poverty than individuals living in metropolitan areas, further heightening the importance of understanding the nuances of how the public workforce system operates in the areas where these higher-need customers live. In recognition of these unique concerns, the White House created an Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity, including a workgroup on the rural workforce.^{3,4}

This paper discusses key features and experiences of 12 AJCs in the study that were located in rural areas (see Table 1). It focuses on AJCs as the unit of service delivery, which is a narrower focus than prior studies of the rural workforce system as a whole. Therefore, the findings offer insight into frontline service delivery and system-wide planning in addition to an update on the persistence of previously-identified challenges in rural service delivery. Previous studies of workforce system operations in rural areas occurred more than 10 years ago, during the early years of implementation of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA).

Workforce system staff in rural areas report that while many issues reported in prior studies remain, rural areas' populations and socioeconomic contexts have also seen notable changes since then. In addition, this paper is the first investigation of rural service delivery since the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014. WIOA strengthens the central role of AJCs in providing workforce services—a role that in rural areas might look different from those in urban areas—and emphasizes improving the quality and accessibility of those services to both job seekers and employers.

Study sample of rural AJCs

For this analysis, the study team identified rural AJCs based on their Rural-Urban Classification Code (Box 1). The rural AJCs in the study had larger service areas than did the non-rural AJCs, based on the following two measures:

- **Rural AJCs served more total counties than non-rural AJCs.** The local workforce areas in which rural AJCs were located included, on average, 24 counties, whereas local areas where non-rural AJCs were located included 11 counties; and
- **Even within the county in which the AJC is located, rural AJCs had bigger service areas in terms of square miles.** Counties in which rural AJCs were located covered, on average, slightly less than 1,200 square miles, whereas counties in which non-rural AJCs were located covered, on average, slightly less than 800 square miles.

Box 1. Defining "rural"

In defining which AJCs serve rural areas, this paper continues the practice in the existing literature of using a broad definition of what constitutes a rural area to fully capture the experiences of operating AJCs outside of a metropolitan area. AJCs are classified as "rural" based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural-Urban Continuum Code (RUCC).

The RUCC classification assigns a category to each county based on the size of the county's population and proximity to a metropolitan area. RUCC classifications include nine categories, with 1 being the most urban and 9 being the most rural.

The 12 rural AJCs discussed in this paper all have an RUCC classification of 5 or higher; rural AJCs, then, are defined as those located in counties that are nonmetro-urban and:

- (1) have fewer than 20,000 people and/or
- (2) are not adjacent to a metropolitan area.

Because the study focused on comprehensive centers, which are generally located in more populated and central parts of the local area to facilitate access to services, none of the AJCs visited in this study were located in a county classified as rural (that is, an RUCC classification of 8 or 9). However, the service areas of the AJCs discussed in this paper often include counties that have more rural RUCC classifications than the county where the AJC itself is located.

Table 1. Rural AJCs in the study, grouped by rurality

Rural-Urban Classification Code	AJC Name	City	State
(5) Nonmetro-urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area	Workforce Oklahoma – Ardmore Center	Ardmore	Oklahoma
	KansasWorks Dodge City	Dodge City	Kansas
	New Mexico Workforce Connection Center – Lea County	Hobbs	New Mexico
(6) Nonmetro-urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area	WorkOne Linton	Linton	Indiana
	OhioMeansJobs Meigs County	Middleport	Ohio
	Minnesota WorkForce Center – Thief River Falls	Thief River Falls	Minnesota
	Department of Commerce, Division of Workforce Solutions	Wadesboro	North Carolina
	Wahpeton Job Service	Wahpeton	North Dakota
(7) Nonmetro-urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area	Anaconda Job Service Workforce Center	Anaconda	Montana
	Idaho Department of Labor – Mini-Cassia	Burley	Idaho
	Minnesota WorkForce Center – Montevideo	Montevideo	Minnesota
	Arkansas Workforce at Mountain Home	Mountain Home	Arkansas

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Services, 2016

In addition, although rural AJCs provided services over a wider geographic area, they had a smaller customer base from which to draw across that area. Figure 1 on the next page shows a map of the states where rural AJCs are located, including county population densities, illustrating that most of the rural AJCs were not only located in, but also surrounded by, counties with low population densities.

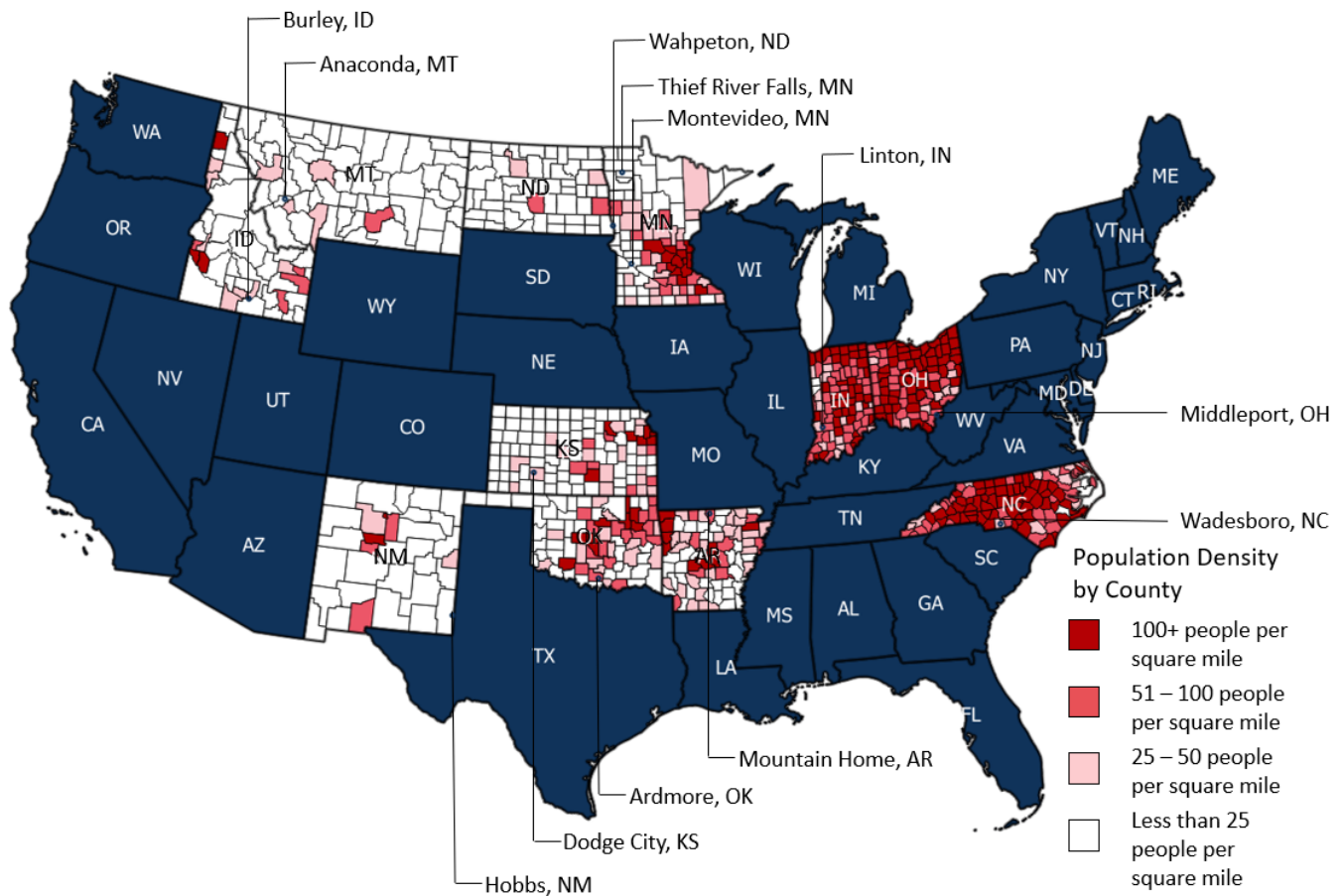
Service delivery factors in rural AJCs

Consistent with published research on the public workforce system in rural areas, data from site visits surfaced common factors impacting service delivery in this context: funding; staffing; geographic accessibility of services, training and employment; technological capacity; One-Stop Operator arrangements; partnerships; and population.⁵

Funding

A key challenge for rural AJCs is their limited funding relative to metropolitan AJCs. Rural areas tend to receive smaller formula funding amounts from two major AJC funding sources—the Adult and Dislocated Worker programs and the Wagner-Peyser Employment Service (ES).⁶ Funding allocations are smaller in local workforce areas served by rural AJCs because the populations in these service areas are smaller than those in urban areas. This funding issue is compounded for rural local workforce areas located in primarily-rural states, as these states also receive smaller allocations due to their smaller populations. This occurs because state allocations take into account relative populations (determined based on all states) and local workforce area allocations involve a similar determination of relative populations based on all local areas within the state.

Figure 1. Map of rural AJCs in the study, with county population



Source: 2016 TIGER/Line Shapefiles (machine-readable data files), U.S. Census Bureau, 2016

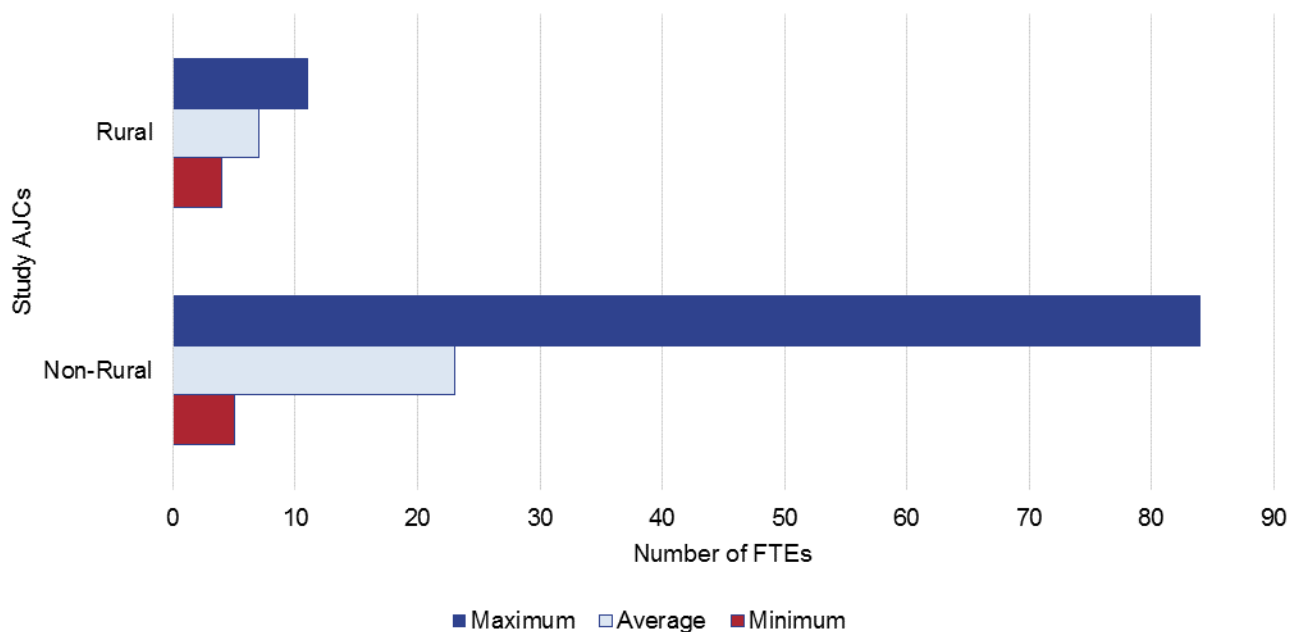
In effect, then, rural areas within more rural states experienced these smaller allocations twice—first because their states receive smaller amounts, and second because they receive smaller amounts than more populated areas within their states. Staff noted that these smaller allocations resulted in rural AJCs employing fewer staff (discussed in more detail in the next section). One local board director also noted that the area’s smaller overall allocation resulted in a small administrative and travel budget, which made it challenging to attend state-level meetings six hours away in person, and therefore to have opportunities for face-to-face conversations with state board staff and other state workforce agency administrators. Additionally, staff from rural AJCs reported minimal resource sharing, meaning financial or in-kind contributions to support center operations, among partners beyond ES and the Adult and Dislocated Worker programs (in part due to limited co-location, discussed in more detail later in this paper).

To maintain adequate funding given smaller formula allocations and limited resource sharing, some rural AJCs reported that their local boards pursued grant funding for special programs, such as those serving customers with disabilities or youth. However, such efforts required board staff to have grant writing capacity, which many rural boards lacked. In addition, both AJC and board staff noted that even when grant writing is possible and successful, the resulting funds only offer a temporary solution because they are time-limited. Staff also cited the difficulty of even applying for some grants, given compliance requirements that are challenging to meet in a rural area. For example, staff at one rural AJC were eager to serve their growing ex-offender population, but noted that specialized grant funding for this group targeted areas with higher crime rates.⁷ Another example cited was the fact that rural regions often cannot pursue grants for career pathways and sector strategies work, given their small and widely dispersed employer base in any specific industry. In other instances, rural AJCs could not meet grant requirements concerning the number of potential customers due to their smaller local populations.

Staffing

Rural areas' smaller funding amounts also impacted their staffing levels. Consistent with prior research which found that there are fewer staff in rural workforce areas overall, this study found a similar pattern at the AJC level, with rural AJCs reporting fewer full-time equivalent (FTE) staff on-site than non-rural AJCs (Figure 2).^{8,9}

Figure 2. Reported FTEs for rural and non-rural AJCs



Source: Institutional Analysis of American Job Centers qualitative data collection, 2016.

Note: N= 12 rural AJCs and N=28 for non-rural AJCs; FTE = full-time equivalent staff

One reported advantage of having fewer staff was that, as noted in previous research on rural workforce system service delivery, most rural AJCs cross-trained their staff. Additionally, staff at one rural AJC specifically noted that DOL guidance clarifying that any staff positions can support veterans had been helpful for operating veteran-serving programs with limited staffing.^{10,11,12} However, staff also noted that it can be challenging to have to fulfill multiple roles at the AJC, given their additional program-specific responsibilities.

Several other challenges arose in providing services with fewer staff. Staff at three rural AJCs noted that scheduling time for staff to attend trainings (both outside professional development and cross-training sessions) was challenging with so few staff available to cover the AJC in their absence. At five rural AJCs, business services staff—typically Adult and Dislocated Worker program and ES staff—raised the issue of their limited capacity to conduct in-person outreach to employers. These staff also provided services to job seekers, including staffing the front desk and resource room, and therefore could not easily leave the office to conduct the in-person outreach they cited as valuable for employer engagement. Additionally, although reductions in funding (and, therefore, elimination of positions at the AJC) are not specific to rural areas, staff from half of the rural AJCs noted that these cuts affected them acutely given their already limited staff and each staff member's large contribution to the overall AJC workload.

Geographic accessibility of services, training, and employment

Consistent with prior studies, one significant issue that staff from rural AJCs raised regarding their large service area was that public transportation in their regions was limited or non-existent, requiring customers to rely on private transportation. This lack of public transportation posed a challenge for reaching customers without access

to reliable personal vehicles, particularly those in more remote parts of the service area. To increase customer access to AJC services, rural AJCs noted two key practices:

- **Subsidizing transportation costs through supportive service payments.** While this practice occurred in metropolitan areas as well, these payments in rural areas tended to cover mileage reimbursement, as opposed to public transit fares.
- **Providing direct transportation to customers.** To provide direct transportation, two rural AJCs offered a shuttle van service, although staff cautioned that shuttles were not a reliable option for activities beyond one-time visits because they did not have a set schedule and were only used as-needed. One northern rural AJC used snowmobiles donated by a local manufacturer to transport customers to and from the AJC.

It is important to note that while comprehensive AJCs in large metropolitan areas may also serve customers with transportation challenges across a wide service area, these areas have more affiliate AJCs and may also have more alternative access points, such as libraries, in neighborhoods where these customers live. In rural communities, by contrast, there are fewer alternative access points and the available access points struggle with similar constraints faced by rural AJCs, namely around staffing and funding. For example, libraries, specified under WIOA as an optional partner in serving job seekers, represent an option for rural residents who do not have an AJC nearby to access job search assistance, labor market information, distance learning, and adult basic education resources. However, rural libraries also have more limited funding than non-rural libraries, which impacts their staffing levels, operating hours, and program offerings.¹³

Additional consequences related to access to services in rural areas are the availability and accessibility of potential training providers and employment opportunities. Staff reported that customers' options for selecting training providers were limited, and available providers were sometimes too far from customers' homes or, given low demand, charged higher tuitions than training providers in more populated areas. Additionally, staff noted that customers who could arrange transportation to their AJC for occasional appointments for career services might still struggle to take advantage of employment opportunities available to them, given both the costs of commuting to more populous parts of the AJC's large service area and customers' reluctance to relocate due to strong ties to their towns.

Technological capacity

Another factor affecting access to services is that, generally, rural households and businesses have more limited access to broadband Internet.¹⁴ Consistent with previous studies of the public workforce system as a whole, both rural and non-rural AJCs reported offering and using multiple online tools in the assessment and job search process, with little difference in the types of tools offered.¹⁵ Internet access therefore represented, according to the rural AJCs, a key on-site service for job seekers, as customers could not always complete activities using their home connections. However, three rural AJCs reported that Internet access within their centers was often slow and unreliable, particularly when customers or staff had to operate more than one web-based program at the same time. For one of these centers, a particular challenge was the slow connection to the state job bank's central server. Staff reported delays in accessing customer records, which extended the time required for case management appointments.

Additionally, alternative access points in rural communities can also struggle to offer sufficiently fast and reliable Internet connections. For example, rural libraries, on average, report median download speeds well below broadband standards set by the Federal Communications Commission.¹⁶

One-Stop Operator arrangements

Although the full sample of AJCs in the study were operated by diverse types of organizations, most rural AJCs were operated by public or government agencies.¹⁷ The most common Operator, reported by six rural AJCs, was state workforce agencies (which administered the Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth programs as well as ES), either as the sole Operator or as an active member of a consortium. Public institutions (such as county agencies or community colleges) or local boards operated four rural AJCs. For-profit private Operators operated only two rural AJCs; one of these was a small company located in the same state as the AJC and the other was a national Operator.

Staff offered several explanations for why their AJCs were operated by public or government entities. Three of the centers operated solely by a state workforce agency were located in less populous states with fewer local workforce areas—Montana and North Dakota each have just one area, and Idaho has only two—and that agency operated all AJCs in the state. At AJCs located in states where the state workforce agency was not the only Operator of AJCs, staff cited a variety of reasons why this setup seemed most feasible for rural areas. For example, at three rural AJCs, staff noted that having a public entity as the Operator was more practical because, given the available funding and likely expenses, a private entity would have difficulty making a profit, but the government was not constrained to try to do so. Another rural AJC manager added that few private Operators demonstrated capacity and experience serving large rural areas.

Partnerships

Data collection surfaced three key approaches for facilitating access to partner services, none of which emerged as consistent practices for either rural AJCs or the full sample:¹⁸

- **Using itinerant staff.** Three rural AJCs used itinerant staff (that is, staff who come to the AJC when called or requested and do not have a set schedule at the AJC); each of these AJCs reported using one to three such staff, most commonly from Vocational Rehabilitation partners. However, it is important to note that itinerant staffing models have different implications for rural areas than non-rural areas. When an itinerant staff member is not always available, customers might have to travel long distances to meet with that staff person. Itinerant staffing also has implications for *staff* workload given long travel distances, as this model requires staff to spend time traveling between centers.
- **Formal co-location.** Rural AJCs generally only reported a small number of co-located partners beyond ES and the Adult and Dislocated Worker programs, because of small center facilities, distance from key partners' main office locations, and partners' own limited staff capacity. On average, rural AJCs in the study reported slightly fewer co-located core partners (three) than did non-rural AJCs (four); however, in non-rural areas, partners that were not co-located or only co-located part-time might still be in the same neighborhood or even the same building as the AJC, while these partners were often farther away in rural areas. For example, in one rural AJC, a Disabled Veterans Outreach Program specialist only came to the AJC two days per week and was otherwise stationed at a different AJC located 50 miles away. Beyond ES and Adult and Dislocated Worker programs, rural AJCs' co-located partners, similar to patterns reported for the full sample, included Vocational Rehabilitation (at eight rural AJCs), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (at six rural AJCs), and Adult Basic Education (at three rural AJCs).

- **Referral relationships.** Rural AJCs reported mixed levels of success with facilitating access to partners through referral relationships, consistent with findings for the study AJCs as a whole. Four rural AJCs reported having formal mechanisms for referrals (such as having a common form, using a “warm hand-off” to ensure direct contact with partners, or following up to ensure services had been received), although two other AJCs reported being in the process of developing more formal systems. For these AJCs, referrals seemed to be the most successful and feasible option for facilitating access to partner programs in a rural context (as opposed to doing so via itinerant staffing or co-location). For two of these AJCs, proximity to partners aided formal referral processes; both had more partners on-site (including TANF and Vocational Rehabilitation) than did other rural AJCs, and were located close enough to their Adult Basic Education partners to physically walk customers over for referrals. Another AJC that did not have the advantage of co-location strengthened referral relationships via a “network model” that effectively allowed the local area to serve as the point of contact for developing and maintaining relationships with required and non-required partners to ensure consistent connections to and relationships with these programs (see Box 2).

Box 2. Using a network model to serve a large rural area

One study AJC was one of three AJCs serving a 14-county local workforce area. These three AJCs are organized using a “network model,” wherein the local board was responsible for overseeing staffing and management of the entire network. Partnerships also occurred at the network level, with partners providing services to all three AJCs in the network (and, therefore, primarily traveling between them rather than being on-site full-time at any one AJC). Staff at the study AJC noted that the local area adopted an itinerant staffing model to bring services to where people were rather than concentrating programs and services in any particular center, which was of special value given that it can take four hours to drive from one end of the local area to the other. Another partnership negotiated at the network level was an initiative with the local public library system and its branches throughout the local area. This initiative sought to help library staff develop a workforce resources list for job seekers and to cross-train library staff on connecting job seekers with online job search and labor market information resources. This approach demonstrates how rural areas can adopt the regionalism emphasized in WIOA to the benefit of job seekers.

Population

Rural areas’ changing demographics also affected the AJCs’ delivery of services. Nearly half of rural AJCs reported serving a larger English language learner population than they did in the past, due to refugee resettlement and in-migration to work in agriculture or food-processing jobs. Staff reported that it was challenging to both engage with and provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services to these populations. Although some AJCs employed staff who were bilingual in key languages such as Spanish or Arabic, these staff were not consistently available during the AJC’s business hours to meet with customers who needed services in those languages. By contrast, only one-third of the non-rural AJCs reported increases in their English language learner customer population, and most were able to either hire bilingual staff or partner with nearby community organizations to adapt to this change.

Four rural AJCs also noted that due to out-migration by younger workers, particularly those with some postsecondary education, to metropolitan areas, the remaining workforce was older and lower skilled. These demographic shifts had implications for local service delivery, as AJC staff from centers reporting higher populations of older and/or lower-skilled workers noted that they needed to assist more with computer-based tasks and saw more need for Adult Basic Education services.

Five rural AJCs also noted an increase in customers with criminal records, due in part to the opioid epidemic and its particular prevalence in and impact on rural areas.¹⁹ (Opioid abuse, more broadly, is also of particular relevance to rural AJCs given its positive correlation with high unemployment rates, high poverty rates, and reduced labor force participation).^{20,21,22} For example, one rural AJC’s staff noted that their location, which was adjacent to a major freeway and equidistant from the closest major cities, made the county a “nice place to stop” for drug dealers, which yielded an increase in both substance abuse and violent crime. Staff from rural AJCs

noted that it can be challenging to serve this population in their regions for several reasons. First, as noted earlier, dedicated grant streams for special populations including ex-offenders require grantees to meet contextual and service metrics that are often not feasible for rural areas due to their lower crime rates and population levels relative to metropolitan areas. By contrast, non-rural AJCs in the study that noted that their customer base included ex-offenders generally reported having dedicated reentry program staff or opportunities for staff to attend trainings on reemployment issues for ex-offenders, often as part of targeted grant funding to serve this population.

Additionally, rural AJCs noted that they have few local employers overall, and these employers were often reluctant or unwilling to consider applicants with criminal records. At one AJC, staff consciously cultivated and maintained a relationship with a local factory that had hired individuals with prior felony convictions to ensure that staff would be aware of open positions, given the difficulty of job placement for this population.

Looking forward

Rural AJCs in this study, consistent with research on rural workforce systems as a whole, confronted the significant challenge of serving a small customer base over a wide geographical area, with limited funds and staffing to do so. Findings from this study also point to the following unique contextual issues relevant to the current state of the workforce system:

- **Continued cuts to WIOA funding overall have specific ramifications for rural service delivery.** As described earlier, AJCs already receive smaller allocations due to population-based funding formulas for key programs, and have difficulty applying for and securing grants given both limited staffing and a smaller pool of potential participants to meet enrollment targets. These challenges are magnified in the current funding climate, as state formula grants under WIOA (and, previously, WIA) have been consistently shrinking since 2001.²³ Rural areas experience these cuts more severely, as they receive a smaller portion of a smaller overall funding amount.
- **WIOA's emphasis on partnerships and systems coordination appears to be more challenging to operationalize for large service areas where key actors are not in close proximity.** The fact that partner programs, training providers, employers, and customers are spread widely over the service areas of most of the rural AJCs in this study underscores the importance of having clear mechanisms and strong relationships for facilitating access to services for both job seekers and employers. Those AJCs that exhibited successful collaboration did so by facilitating consistent access either through co-location or through managing such partnerships across the entire large service area rather than for an individual AJC.
- **Similarly, evidence-based approaches prioritized under WIOA might be more logistically challenging for large service areas given the contextual features discussed in this paper.** For example, because rural AJCs reported having fewer and more widely spread local employers and training providers, it might be more challenging for AJC partners to engage in activities around sector strategies and career pathways as emphasized under WIOA. Further complicating rural areas' successful implementation of these approaches, the existing evidence base on implementing such strategies has either focused on urban areas or found that rural regions struggle to implement these approaches.²⁴

- **Rural AJCs are serving more customers with barriers to employment, consistent with WIOA’s emphasis on such populations, but must do so with fewer staff and less access to specialized training and funding than non-rural AJCs.** Given the slow recovery of rural regions from the recession, out-migration of younger and well-educated workers, and increases in the share of customers who are English learners or have criminal records, rural AJCs are serving a higher-need population—but with fewer staff, with less funding, and over a larger catchment area than non-rural AJCs.

Given these findings regarding AJCs in rural areas, their experiences and challenges should be given special consideration as the implementation of WIOA continues. Of paramount interest would be learning how local areas have managed implementation of particular components and priorities of the legislation, including WIOA’s new requirement for competitive procurement of the One-Stop Operator, increased emphasis on facilitating access to core partner programs, and engaging in activities around career pathways and sector strategies. A review of best practices around leveraging or blending funding streams, as through the Performance Partnership Pilots, or developing regional partnerships to achieve these priorities would also provide valuable information to the field.²⁵

Endnotes

- ¹ Hertz, Tom, Lorin Kusmin, Alex Marré, and Tim Parker. "Rural Employment Trends in Recession and Recovery." ERR-172. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, August 2014.
- ² As of December 2017, DOL recognizes 2,409 AJCs, which includes 1,529 comprehensive AJCs. A current listing may be found at <https://www.careeronestop.org/LocalHelp/service-locator.aspx>.
- ³ Proctor, Bernadette, Jessica Semega, and Melissa Kollar. "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015." Report Number P60-256. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, September 2016.
- ⁴ For more information on the Task Force, please see the Executive Order on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/25/presidential-executive-order-promoting-agriculture-and-rural-prosperity>.
- ⁵ Studies of rural service delivery identified key challenges, including serving large geographic areas with widely scattered populations and limited public transit, providing services with limited staffing given lower formula funding, connecting job seekers to training and employment within reasonable commuting distance, and contending with limited options for partnerships and service referrals. These studies found that, to address these challenges, local systems in rural areas employed practices such as using technology to deliver services remotely, allowing customers to pursue training through on-the-job-training rather than trying to do so through limited training provider options, and using itinerant staffing, as well as applying high levels of cross-training to ensure coverage. Some rural AJCs were, in fact, designed with cross-training and co-location in mind; these AJCs were formed due to budget cuts that reduced individual agencies' abilities to offer stand-alone services and thereby encouraged agencies to offer a single access point for customers seeking job training, unemployment insurance, and welfare services. See Dunham, Kate, and Peter Rumble. "Rural One-Stops: Issues in WIA Implementation." Oakland, CA: Social Policy Research Associates, 2003; Dunham, Kate, Annelies Goger, Jennifer Henderson-Frakes, and Nichole Tucker. "Workforce Development in Rural Areas: Changes in Access, Service Delivery and Partnerships." U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration Occasional Paper 2005-07. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2005; Trutko, John, Lawrence Bailis, Burt Barnow, and Stephen French. "An Assessment of the JTPA Role in State and Local Coordination Activities." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 1991.
- ⁶ Under WIOA, states receive Adult and Dislocated Worker program funds and allocate them to the local areas based on formulas specific to each program. The statutory formula for the Adult program factors in (1) the relative number of unemployed individuals compared with that number for areas of substantial unemployment, (2) the relative number of disadvantaged adults, and (3) the relative excess number of unemployed people. In determining the formula for the Dislocated Worker program, states factor in (1) the relative number of unemployed individuals, (2) the relative excess number of unemployed individuals, and (3) the relative number of long-term unemployed people—people who have been unemployed 15 weeks or more. Funding for ES is allocated to the states by a formula based on the relative size of the state's civilian labor force and state unemployment rates. For more information on these formulas, see 29 USC 3172.
- ⁷ Ex-offenders are a priority population under WIOA. See WIOA sec.3 (38) for the definition of "offender."
- ⁸ Dunham, Kate, Annelies Goger, Jennifer Henderson-Frakes, and Nichole Tucker. "Workforce Development in Rural Areas: Changes in Access, Service Delivery and Partnerships." U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration Occasional Paper 2005-07. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2005.
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- ²⁵ For more information on the concepts of braiding and blending funding, as well as on Performance Partnership Pilots, see Association of Government Accountants, "Blended and Braided Funding: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners." Available at https://www.agacgfm.org/getattachment/Resources/Online-Library/Intergovernmental-Reports/Intergov-Blended-and-Braided-Funding_Dec14.pdf.aspx.

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