

NS Employment Assistance Services-PLA National Demonstration & Evaluation Project

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The PLA Centre (1996-2006) **PLA** centre

- Independent, non-profit, community-based collaboration
– shopping mall location – small staff (6) – diversified contract resources/applications - 'dance with partners who want to' development model
- Early adoption of leadership training and capacity building strategy – 325 + PLAR Practitioners trained and certified (employed by partner institutions/agencies)
- 5,000 + participants completed program over past decade in NS, NB and beyond – via direct and indirect delivery
- Ongoing PD support and development, new adaptations/applications/partners – materials/guides in both official languages – Portfolio@Distance delivery capacity

'Discovery' of Innovative Portfolio Learning Applications

- Broad diversity of adults-in-transition including: blue collar workers, unemployed and receiving social assistance, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal and African Nova Scotian communities, male and female prison inmates, low literacy learners, immigrant newcomers, mid-career professionals
- PSE not top priority for most but Portfolio Learning not a 'one-trick pony' - opens employment/career change & advancement/community engagement options as well as further education/training

EAS-PLA Project

- PLA Centre track record and impact led to proposal to attempt a larger scale R&D initiative using leadership training and capacity building approach
- Complex NS system – HRSDC/Service Canada funds and coordinates through region and Human Resources Centre offices across province
- Services and programs delivered to the unemployed through community-based EAS agencies on individually negotiated annual contract basis

PLAR Practitioner Certification Process

- Portfolio Component
- Transition to Practicum Workshop
- Practicum
- Summary Report
- Certification

Project Scope

- Began Practitioner Training with 105 practitioners. Of those -
 - 60 completed certification
 - 7 are completing (post-project)
 - 20 left their EAS organization
 - 5 went on maternity leave
 - 13 did not to complete
- Under this project, 650 EAS Clients completed Portfolios

Context of Research

- National Demonstration Project
 - HRSD considering wider support for PLA portfolio as an EAS option delivered through community partner agencies
- HRSD-NS wanted PLA for EAS clients
- Wide variety of community partners
 - Some are self-serve resource centres
 - Some offer services to the general public
 - Some focus on particular client populations
 - Persons with disabilities, women, etc.

Research Objectives

1. Compare employment outcomes for portfolio “graduates” with comparable clients receiving other EAS interventions
 - “Employment outcomes” includes:
 - Return to employment or self-employment
 - Participation in employment-relevant education/training
2. Identify/compare outcomes and impacts for clients facing different employment challenges
 - Who benefits most, and how do they benefit?

Core Issue

- What does portfolio PLA actually do?
- “Hard” versus “soft” outcomes
 - “We know clients ‘feel good’, but does it get them into a job?”
- What is linkage between self-esteem, confidence, overcoming social isolation and practical changes on jobs, community integration?

Research Challenges

- Organization/data access
 - Uneven commitment to evaluation
 - Privacy protections
 - HRSD Data systems
 - Contractual complexities
- Valid comparisons
 - “Apples with apples” in terms of clients facing different employment challenges
 - Isolate the influence of portfolio program

Program Structure

- > 100 staff members of EAS agencies trained as portfolio practitioners in > 60 EAS agencies around the province
- Practitioners then recruited EAS clients for portfolio courses
 - Groups of 6 to 10 clients
 - 30 hours contact time, usually 10 sessions
- 650 EAS clients completed portfolio programs
 - 84 % Women
 - 22 % persons with disabilities
 - 36 % “targeted populations”

Research Design

- Surveys
 - 6 & 12 month follow-ups on portfolio graduates
 - Comparison group of non-PLA EAS clients
- Focus groups with clients
- Practitioners
 - Contacts throughout the project
 - Workshop & focus groups at end of project
 - Survey
- Interviews with HRSD and EAS agency managers

Findings - Clients

- Survey analysis incomplete
- Overwhelmingly positive on portfolio
 - Notable: uniformly high rating for practitioners
- Similar employment outcomes to non-portfolio
 - Face more substantial employment challenges
- Measurably higher participation in education/training

Findings - Clients

- Focus Groups
 - Overwhelmingly positive
 - Self-confidence and esteem
 - Social support
 - Discovering knowledge and competencies
 - Emerging issue for EAS clients
 - Problem of raising expectations
 - Need for follow-up to portfolio

Findings-Practitioners

- Recruitment challenges
 - Length/intensity of portfolio course a barrier for many clients
- Concern
 - Practitioners act as gatekeepers
- Make-up of portfolio groups
 - Practitioners favour mix of age, backgrounds,
 - Some debate about education levels (literacy an issue)
- Ideal group size - 7 participants
 - Co-facilitated groups - 11

Findings-Practitioners

- Major beneficial impacts on clients
 - Increased awareness of skills, competencies
 - Increased confidence, self-esteem
 - Building support groups
 - Often ongoing
- Negative impacts (few mentions)
 - Difficulties clients have dealing with history of personal trauma
 - Workload stress
 - Literacy constraints

Findings-Practitioners

- Effectiveness in helping different types of clients
 - Scale of 1 to 5
 - Good employability characteristics - 4.5
 - Homemakers returning to work - 4.5
 - Females - 4.5, males - 4.0
 - Individuals who are under-employed - 4.4
 - Individuals forced to change trade/occupation - 4.2
 - Youth-at-risk - 3.5
 - Range of views
 - Interest in a tailor-made portfolio program
 - Clients with low literacy levels - 3.3

Post-project Follow Up

- Licensing Agreements for ongoing use of Portfolio Program with 14 EAS partners.
- Interviews HRSD/EAS managers indicate strong commitment to ongoing delivery of portfolio
- Major achievement of the project to date
 - PLA-Portfolio now an integral component of EAS program in NS
 - PLA-Portfolio available at little or no cost to unemployed people throughout the province

Concluding Comment

- Need to challenge the false dichotomy between the “hard” and “soft” outcomes
 - Frontline EAS practitioners and EAS managers have deep understanding of extent to which self-confidence and self-esteem issues are “hard” barriers to employment and social integration
 - Mounting evidence that portfolio learning is a powerful tool to overcome these barriers
 - Essential to the re-integration of marginalized populations and people facing more serious employment challenges



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