

## **Promising Practice: Serving Rural Communities Workforce Investment Board SDA-83**

Rural areas can create unique challenges for workforce development programs. One of the major issues is accessibility—how do programs reach individuals scattered over large geographic areas, who may live many miles from access points, and have limited transportation options? Common strategies for addressing this issue include strategic marketing and outreach, transportation assistance, Internet services, phone services, and itinerant staff. One-stop centers can create a network of access points in a rural region, each with varying levels of services ranging from comprehensive to computer-only.

The Professional Healthcare Opportunities—Careers and Support (PHOCAS) program, implemented by Workforce Investment Board SDA-83, provides healthcare training to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and low-income individuals in rural northeast Louisiana. The targeted service area, Louisiana Regional Labor Market Area 8, consists of 3 Workforce Investment Areas and 11 parishes. This region has a population of more than 300,000, with one-half of the population residing in Ouachita parish, centered on the city of Monroe. The balance of the population is in 10 highly rural parishes. This region has many poverty-stricken, underserved communities with high proportions of single-parent households, people with low educational levels and high unemployment rates, and no public transportation system.

The PHOCAS program utilizes two primary strategies to address these challenges in serving its rural communities: working with partners to establish program staff at as many physical locations as possible (one-stops, colleges, and other partners); and using technology when appropriate as a way to reduce the impact of physical distances. The appropriate use of support services also helps clients succeed despite barriers.

An important first step for developing the PHOCAS program was partnering with the other two workforce investment boards in the region. This, in turn, facilitated cooperation with the region's one-stops, called Business & Career Solutions Centers. Located in all 11 of the parishes, the centers function as the hub for PHOCAS services, including application, interview, assessment, case management, and follow-up processes. PHOCAS case managers, known as Student Liaisons, are located at each center to keep in regular contact with participants and assist participants from enrollment to completion, placement, and follow-up.

In this region, community colleges are a critical part of the community infrastructure. In July 2012, all campuses of the Northeast Louisiana Technical Colleges became part of the Louisiana Delta Community College (LDCC) system. As a result, there are LDCC campuses in seven of the region's parishes. PHOCAS Success Centers are being established at these campuses, with the main center at the Monroe Campus. PHOCAS Success Centers serve as resource centers for trainees and serve as the guiding force behind a cohort approach to training.

Another partner, DeltaLINC is a regional adult and family literacy program. PHOCAS has a Student Liaison staffed at Delta LINC, so that this program can provide remediation to PHOCAS participants and assistance with those needing help to attain their GED. DeltaLINC will provide comprehensive assessments that will assist with the identification of education needs, career pathway development, and appropriate placements.

One way the PHOCAS program is using technology to overcome distances is a tutoring Web site. Launched in September 2012, the site was developed to connect participants with health sciences tutoring services. Students can use the site to request one-on-one help from a tutor specialized for healthcare training or they can use the site's online tutoring features. Instructors are able to upload study tools and other documents for student use. Additionally, PHOCAS has developed online tutorial videos for basic skills training and pre-requisite courses. The videos are publicly available on the Louisiana Delta Community College Web site, covering dozens of topics in math and science.

Throughout the project, PHOCAS has worked to expand its support services in ways that serve the particular needs of this community. The PHOCAS Zonal Travel Reimbursement Supportive Service was created to assist participants with the cost of traveling to and from education and training providers. This system creates 10 zones based on the total distance participants travel per day. Reimbursement amounts are determined by the travel zone. Student Liaisons work with participants to check on attendance and ensure the reimbursement is awarded properly.