

Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) Project

Stakeholder Views from Early Outreach

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Stakeholders' Views of Promising Next-Generation Employment and Self-Sufficiency Strategies for Low-Income Families

The Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) evaluation is a next-generation test of promising interventions for low-income families sponsored by the federal Administration for Children and Families. A key early step in identifying the interventions ISIS will test was to find out what key stakeholders felt would be most valuable to know. This paper summarizes results from semi-structured discussions with over 250 individuals between May and September 2008. Informants included a diverse selection of state executive office and agency staff, state legislators and staff, federal officials, researchers, advocates, and foundation representatives. The highest-priority target populations for stakeholders were: the working poor, families facing serious or multiple challenges to employment, disadvantaged youth, and families with infants or young children. Informants recommended testing an array of interventions designed to engage and support individuals in jobs and work activities and improve employment skills. By comparison, informants offered fewer concrete nominations for tests of interventions for individuals with employment barriers. There was strong interest in tests of alternative service delivery approaches, particularly of promising mechanisms for coordinating services as part of more comprehensive interventions. Since many of these discussions were held, the financial and economic condition of the country has worsened substantially, and unprecedented efforts to address these conditions are underway. Although these changes are still taking shape, they seem likely to have important implications for evaluation priorities and opportunities. The ISIS team welcomes feedback on the findings in this paper and the potential effects of the economic downturn and other recent events. We welcome also inquiries from sponsoring organizations or agencies interested in opportunities for testing promising interventions in ISIS.

Overview

The Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) project is a next-generation evaluation of promising programs and policies for improving employment and self-sufficiency outcomes for low-income families. The project's sponsor is the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Abt Associates is heading a multi-organization evaluation team. ISIS will be using an experimental design to measure the impacts of promising approaches in at least six sites around the nation.

A fundamental principle of the ISIS project is that it is essential to engage the program and policy community in the identification, development, evaluation and dissemination of promising programs and policies. Anchoring the study in the priorities and information needs of the field will help to ensure the relevance of the results for improving practice and ultimately the economic prospects of low-income families. Therefore, an early project activity was an intensive outreach effort to solicit the views of stakeholders in these communities on what ISIS might test.

This document provides an overview of the outreach findings. Between March and September of 2008, the ISIS team conducted discussions in a variety of formats that involved over 250 individuals from the following constituencies: state and local agencies (e.g., TANF, WIA and community college systems); policymakers in the executive and legislative branches of local, state and federal governments;

advocates; foundation staff; and policy analysts and researchers. The discussions variously took the form of break-out discussions at professional meetings, telephone interviews and teleconferences, and in-person discussions.

Discussion facilitators addressed a common core set of questions but were flexible in the relative emphasis on these questions and other topics of interest to informants. Facilitators distributed to informants a list of possible priority interventions and then posed the following questions: *Which of the listed interventions seem most and least important to assess? Are any important strategies missing? What are some examples of promising strategies and what makes them promising? For which populations of low-income U.S. families is it most important to learn more about effective interventions?*

Since the mid-September conclusion of this phase of ISIS stakeholder engagement, the U.S. economy has experienced a financial crisis and serious economic recession. The resulting acceleration of job loss and associated strain on state and local budgets could substantially affect what stakeholders see as the most promising and feasible ISIS tests. We encourage readers to share their perspectives on how the economy and new federal stimulus program may be changing priorities and opportunities for useful tests in relation to the findings summarized here.

This summary has three main sections: (1) stakeholders' views on appropriate objectives of ISIS interventions; (2) views on priority target populations for ISIS; (3) views on the promise of various types of interventions and the value of testing them in the ISIS demonstration. We conclude with a brief outline of next steps for ISIS.

Objectives of ISIS Interventions

ACF conceived ISIS to test promising intervention strategies to further employment and economic self-sufficiency among low-income families. Specific objectives have varied a great deal in prior evaluations testing interventions generally aimed at these goals. Almost all studies have focused on the degree to which programs increased earnings, either through increased hours of work or increased wage rates, and on the extent to which they increased the proportion of individuals employed at all. Some projects have focused on additional outcomes, such as more individuals in full-time work, greater opportunities for career advancement and greater persistence in work. Past evaluations also have focused on different objectives connected with self-sufficiency—such as reduced dependence on government assistance (especially cash assistance); lower levels of poverty; and higher rates of entry into jobs with benefits such as health insurance, and paid vacation and sick leave. Furthermore, policymakers have cited as successful programs whose positive impacts varied greatly in magnitude and relation to program costs, raising the question of what standards stakeholders would use in judging “success” in next-generation evaluations.

Given that objectives are fundamental to, and vary across, the interventions that ISIS might test, it is useful to have some sense of the priority stakeholders attach to different objectives. Although facilitators raised the issue directly only in a few stakeholder discussions, many informants nonetheless directly or indirectly reflected on goals and objectives in the course of commenting on promising target populations and interventions. Informants seemed to accept that work in low-wage jobs might be a necessary and helpful first step, but expressed virtually no interest in additional evaluations of “work first” approaches. Nor was there any interest in testing approaches that might reduce government assistance without producing at least commensurate increases in earnings. In contrast, there was strong interest in learning about promising approaches to increasing placements in, and advancement to, better-paying jobs with

benefits. Recognizing that this standard might be unrealistic due to personal situations and the economy, many informants expressed interest in testing supports that could both sustain work and improve families' standards of living. More generally, there was substantial interest in learning about interventions aimed at reducing poverty and improving the overall well-being of families and children. Finally, there was little mention of the desirability of interventions being cost-beneficial to government, at least in the short-run—perhaps reflecting relatively great concern in improvements in families' economic situations with positive long-run benefits for children.

Priority Target Populations for ISIS

Several rationales figured prominently in stakeholders' endorsements of various priority target populations for ISIS tests. One widely-cited consideration was the seriousness of the challenges and needs facing different groups. A second rationale was the degree to which informants saw promising theoretical avenues and promising interventions exploiting those avenues. Connected with this second rationale was substantial interest in populations where there seemed to be strong prospects for interventions with a prevention focus (e.g., young children, youth on the cusp of key decisions, and families facing a variety of personal and economic transitions providing leverage to intervene productively).

Given that TANF recipients have figured so prominently in past evaluations of interventions for low-income families, we also asked in most of our discussions what priority stakeholders would assign further research on this population. There was a very strong consensus across stakeholder groups that ISIS not be limited to studying interventions for families receiving TANF cash assistance. There was nonetheless some TANF-related interest, particularly in the effects of the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) of 2005 changes and certain innovative uses of TANF resources, suggesting that stakeholder sentiment might not preclude some emphasis on TANF in the context of a more broadly focused set of tests.

Across the stakeholder groups, four broad overlapping population groups emerged as of especially high interest: (1) working poor families; (2) families facing serious or multiple challenges to employment; (3) low-income families with infants or young children, including teenage parents; and (4) youth and young adults from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. To stimulate feedback on how priorities may have changed since the onset of a serious economic recession, we include also in the following sketches a fifth group, newly-unemployed low-income adults, in which interest may be growing.

Working poor. Across the stakeholder groups, we received the most substantial expressions of interest in tests of strategies focused on the working poor, particularly low-income adults with relatively stable work histories. There was widespread concern that many families with low-wage workers remained “stuck” in jobs that paid poorly, had few or no benefits, and had unpredictable work hours. There was great interest in how to help individuals in these situations advance to better jobs and, in the absence of advancement, how to help families maintain more stable employment and enjoy a higher standard of living.

Families facing serious or multiple challenges to employment. A close second in stakeholders' ratings was the widespread interest in testing effective strategies for hard-to-employ individuals, including: (1) parents—especially single mothers—with problems (typically more than one), such as physical and mental health, substance abuse, low cognitive skills, learning disabilities and domestic violence; (2) unemployed single parents not receiving TANF assistance, often having the above problems; and (3) low-income, minority noncustodial fathers, including those who were formerly incarcerated.

Youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. A third frequently-cited population was older children and youth, especially adolescent and young adult males. In particular, a number of the discussions cutting across the stakeholder groups advocated pursuing strategies directed at 16-to-20 year-olds, who are on the cusp of making bad or good decisions and, thus, for whom prevention-oriented interventions might be especially appropriate.

Low-income families with infants or young children. Another set of recommendations advocated targeting first-time mothers and parents with very young children, a population overlapping with other categories. One rationale was empirical evidence on the transition to parenthood as a time when parents were especially receptive to child- and family-focused interventions. Informants sometimes mentioned this target population in the context of multi-generation intervention strategies that would both improve adult employment outcomes and prevent problems for the next generation. In this regard, a number of informants cited encouraging results for early childhood interventions.

Recently unemployed workers. As noted above, we expect that interest in studies of effective strategies for this population has increased markedly since our last discussions with stakeholders in September.

Priority Interventions to Test under ISIS

Facilitators used an initial list of intervention strategies to stimulate discussions with informants, who were encouraged to nominate additional strategies for testing. As a result of this process and subsequent literature review, we arrived at four broad categories of strategies: (1) engaging and supporting individuals in jobs and work activities; (2) building skills for employment success; (3) improving outcomes for individuals with serious and multiple barriers; and (4) service delivery improvements. In this section, we summarize feedback on promising interventions for each category.

Although these categories are useful in distinguishing the major foci of interventions ISIS might test, many informants expressed interest in testing more comprehensive approaches combining two or more strategies across categories. Several such informants acknowledged the “bundling problem” in tests of multi-component programs, which makes it impossible to assess accurately the contributions of specific strategies to impacts. They nonetheless felt that next-generation tests should aim to generate larger positive impacts, that larger impacts required more comprehensive approaches, and that multi-arm treatment designs could help to identify contributions of key components.

Engaging and supporting individuals in jobs and work activities

This category includes a variety of strategies aimed at furthering individuals’ engagement both in actual jobs and in activities that are designed to prepare individuals for work. In some cases—for example, job search—the purpose of the activity itself is to engage people in a regular job. In addition, there is a layer of strategies aimed at engagement in job preparation activities. Thus, this category also includes strategies designed to boost participation in skill-building activities described in the section following this section, as well as other preparatory and transitional activities (e.g., job readiness, community service employment).

Engagement strategies were of broad and substantial interest across the varied stakeholder groups we interviewed. Some of the key problems underlying this interest included: the large numbers of low-

income families who do not work persistently; the high percentage of individuals who initiate education or training in order to advance, but fail to complete these activities; increasing cooperation with *mandatory* work activity participation requirements and reducing the need for financial sanctions; and engaging individuals in a range of other activities that might strengthen employment and self-sufficiency (e.g., life skills planning, household budgeting, and use of the mainstream banking system). Key high-interest strategies include:

Work supports. There was very broad interest in testing promising approaches to increasing utilization of existing work supports, as well as in expanding work support benefits. This interest was justified in terms of improving employment outcomes, providing families with a higher standard of living, and improving prospects for children over the long term. Frequently-mentioned benefits included child care, early childhood education programs, and transportation assistance. There also was relatively strong interest in emerging approaches to providing such supports, such as through home visiting, job coaching, and disability navigation models.

Financial incentives and supports. Many of the benefits of the work support programs referenced above could operate to encourage work, as well as provide family supports necessary to sustain employment. Sentiments on further study of earnings disregards and non-welfare wage supplements were mixed, with some informants feeling that there has been sufficient testing of such approaches and others raising unanswered questions about these strategies and arguing that incentives should be included in tests of multi-component approaches. In the welfare arena, there was little interest in tests of financial sanctions, which informants generally felt were “off the table” of possible policy changes, although there was interest in services that might increase compliance with work requirements. Within and beyond TANF, there was relatively strong interest in an emerging array of positive incentives tied to performance benchmarks, such as bonuses at varying job retention and training milestones.

Interest in tests of financial supports may increase in connection with any expansion in benefits as part of federal stimulus package. Tests conceivably might focus on a range of questions pertaining to the effects of various levels and types of relief, potentially in combination with new training and job creation initiatives, on short- and long-term economic outcomes for families.

Subsidized employment, including transitional jobs, supported work, and community service employment. Only a few individuals strongly advocated that ISIS focus on subsidized employment *per se*. There was broader interest in learning more about effective ways to use supported employment for individuals with serious labor market problems. Interest in this category of strategies also could strengthen as a worsening recession takes its toll on the supply of unsubsidized jobs.

Linkages to economic development. A very common theme was interest in promising approaches for linking “supply oriented” (i.e., individually-focused) employment and training strategies to job sectors with strong and growing demand for workers with relatively lower skills. Additionally, there was substantial interest in innovative approaches to connecting individuals with government initiatives to promote economic development in promising employment sectors.

Job search. For the most part there was little interest in further research on job search, although two researchers suggested that for such a common activity, rigorous evidence was lacking about the relative effectiveness of different job search techniques.

Building skills for employment success

Stakeholders expressed strong interest in tests of promising education and training approaches in ISIS. This interest was based partly on the conviction that “education is the key to moving up” into good-paying jobs and partly on the sense that there was a variety of promising emerging education and training approaches that have not been sufficiently tested. Underlying many recommendations was the conviction that next-generation tests should focus on approaches capable of generating substantial increases in earnings and family well-being.

Soft skills/life skills. State agency staff and researchers especially expressed interest in promising approaches to providing a range of practical skills useful at work and in daily life. Informants cited a variety of examples of approaches that seemed worth testing, including “home grown” soft skills curricula developed in concert with employers; more intensive (e.g., longer) job readiness programs; approaches involving instructors with varying levels of training; and replications and extensions of particular skill-focused approaches such as Building Nebraska’s Families, the Nurse Family Partnership program, and Winning New Jobs.

Basic skills. Informants expressed substantial concern about the employment prospects for lower-skilled adults, with interest particularly in basic skills approaches for the segment of this population within range of post-secondary level education and training. Noting the limited success of traditional adult basic education classroom formats, they cited a range of promising approaches that integrated basic and occupational skills training and utilized more hands-on and contextualized pedagogical approaches. There was less interest in testing basic skills strategies for individuals at the lowest end of the skills spectrum, with at most one or two endorsements for research on approaches combining light basic skills training with supported work and other principally employment-focused strategies.

Post-secondary skills. Much of the discussion of this set of strategies focused on approaches for youth and targeting adults at or, with relatively compressed remediation, within reach of post-secondary education and training. One of the strongest themes across outreach stakeholders was that ISIS test promising approaches at community colleges. Many informants noted that community colleges had a growing orientation to adult and other non-traditional students, as well as to the needs of the local business community. Informants cited many examples of innovative programs at community colleges. These included special “bridge” programs providing contextualized basic skills and supports to connect adults to regular college programs; customized short-term training for specific occupations; a variety of innovations in instructional formats and technologies designed to facilitate learning, program retention and subsequent spells of schooling; and new forms of financial and other supports for students.

Informants also recommended a variety of strategies for making education and training more “employer-based.” Universally, informants felt that training should be highly focused on jobs in local demand and on the specific skills these jobs required. Informants were interested in learning more about different approaches to involving employers in aspects of developing and operating training programs such as: specifying job requirements, designing customized training programs, developing credentialing systems that recognized these skills, involving employers as trainers, and using registered apprenticeships and other mechanisms to create strong linkages from training programs to specific jobs and upward pathways within firms. Regarding pathways, there also was broad interest in sectoral approaches to creating career ladder systems at the state and regional levels.

Demand side interventions. Some informants felt that strategies focused mainly on the supply side—that is, on better preparing workers—were insufficient given limited opportunities for good paying jobs at low-to-moderate skill levels. The upcoming stimulus package may provide opportunities for testing strategies that connect innovative approaches to sectoral training (e.g., green jobs) to large-scale job creation initiatives. Even absent such connections, however, investments in training may make good sense as objects for research in an environment where jobs for low-skilled adults are less plentiful.

Improving outcomes for individuals with serious and multiple barriers

As described in findings on “target populations,” nearly all stakeholder groups identified finding effective interventions for individuals with serious and multiple barriers as a high priority. This interest seemed to be grounded in the perceived challenges in meeting this population’s needs, more than by enthusiasm for testing particular strategies or any optimism about anything beyond modest impacts on employment and self-sufficiency. Although informants did not recommend specific promising approaches for evaluation, they did advise attention to several potentially important components of promising strategies.

Assessment. There was substantial discussion of assessment tools and their uses in detecting and handling individuals with severe and multiple problems. Informants generally agreed that many problems are difficult to identify without a careful assessment (and, often, even with one), and that individuals frequently are unaware of or unwilling to divulge problems. Some informants argued strongly that early identification was critical, and thus that finding better tools and procedures for identifying problems up front should be an evaluation priority. Others argued that many well-validated assessment tools were available, but the key questions concerned when in an employment program to use them and what sequence of services ought to follow. One informant advised, for example, that since the bearing of problems on employment can vary greatly across individuals, designs might be more promising that waited to assess until employment difficulties became manifest.

Connecting individuals with problems to existing benefits and supports. There was particular interest in learning about effective approaches to connecting two “high barrier prevalence” populations to services. A number of stakeholders expressed great concern about a growing population of families that was neither working nor receiving TANF or other benefits—a population likely both to be struggling with serious difficulties and to be difficult to identify and engage in services. A second strong current of interest concerned approaches to identifying disabilities among existing TANF recipients, determining whether those disabilities qualified them for SSI, and then developing improved strategies for moving those eligible to SSI and for more appropriate treatments and work activities for those remaining on TANF.

Treatment of particular problems. In discussing hard-to-employ individuals, informants often mentioned interest in learning more about effective treatments for behavioral health issues such as depression and substance abuse and for domestic violence. We received little by way of recommendations to test particular treatments of these conditions or of ways of integrating them with employment services. There also was interest in, but virtually no suggestions on promising approaches for, individuals found to have less treatable conditions such as learning disabilities or low cognitive skills.

Supported employment. Quite a few informants suggested that ISIS evaluate strategies that provided supported work in more protected settings for extended periods in conjunction with treatment for problems. Some informants suggested that such strategies might lead to modest increases in regular employment, whereas others had little expectations for employment impacts but saw these approaches as potentially worthwhile for promoting family and child well-being over the long term.

Comprehensiveness and coordination of services. There was strong support for the idea that any programs ISIS tested for participants with serious and multiple problems should be comprehensive, cross-agency efforts that dealt with individuals and their families holistically.

Promising service delivery approaches

A final general area of substantial interest concerned how agencies implemented policies and delivered services. Stakeholders identified promising approaches that might be worthwhile evaluation objects in themselves, as well as approaches that might be embedded in tests of policies and services described in other categories above.

Marketing and outreach. As described earlier under the Engagement category, how to more effectively inform and engage individuals who could benefit from services was a subject of great concern. In addition to the discussion of this issue in terms of particular strategies, such as engagement in a specific education and training, treatment service, or other work activity, some informants stressed the value of learning more generally what attracted individuals to these kinds of services. One informant described marketing research her organization had conducted to determine what messages low-wage single mothers found more and less attractive.

Assessment. In addition to interest in improved assessment of serious problems, there also was interest in assessment in other contexts. For example, there was interest in learning about the effective use of tools such as Work Keys in assessing educational and occupational interests and skills and matching those to training and employment opportunities. There also was interest in when to conduct such assessments in a larger employment and training process. Again, some informants stressed the importance of accurate assessment to improving outcomes, while others expressed skepticism. Several informants suggested that too much emphasis on assessment might be counter-productive, sometimes because appropriate placement options were not available or allowed by current policies, and sometimes because assessments might hinder progress by delaying placements which could be made on the basis of reasonably informed judgments by workers.

Staff training, motivation, and management. One response to concerns about ineffective or unproductive staff was interest in studying approaches to improved staff training, particularly of front-line workers in social service agencies. There was interest in the degree to which eligibility workers in TANF offices could be (re-)trained to provide effective employment services and supports, or whether it was better to hire new staff specifically trained as such. An in-between position suggested by one informant was to hire master case managers, who would provide examples and mentoring to other workers.

Improving contractor performance. Relatively few informants expressed interested in evaluations of alternative approaches to service contracting. We think that there may be greater interest in this subject than was manifested in our discussions, since this topic has received relatively little evaluation and thus may not immediately strike people as suitable for rigorous research. In several instances where facilitators did probe on this subject, they did in fact elicit substantial interest. This interest centered on improved approaches to designing performance-based payments and performance monitoring.

Coordination and service integration. There was a great deal of interest in improved strategies for coordination and service delivery integration. Many state administrators raised concern about the difficulties agencies faced in obtaining information from other agencies and in ensuring that their clients were receiving other services for which they were eligible. State legislators and agency staff alike cited a

number of state-level efforts to improve service coordination. The need for improved coordination often was raised in the context of strong endorsements of ISIS testing more comprehensive approaches to individual and family needs. Many informants stressed that multiple supports and services were needed for many low-income families to make substantial strides and that such services needed to be both in place and well-coordinated. We received a number of recommendations for tests in this area, including strategies involving cross-agency teams; pooled funding approaches breaking down funding “silos”; multi-generational programs; and approaches to creating new points for accessing services, such as neighborhood-based organizations, K-12 schools, and community colleges.

Next Steps

We have learned that the field is interested in improved knowledge on a great many approaches to promoting employment and self-sufficiency. Clearly, testing a few approaches well in ISIS will require a very selective pruning of strategies. In addition to the critical input we are receiving from the program and policy community, other factors will also be important for the ISIS decision making process. For example, some information needs identified in our outreach may already be undergoing rigorous evaluation that ISIS would not want to duplicate. Thus, our next step—currently underway—is to assess interest from the field in light of gaps in existing research and the feasibility of developing random assignment tests of promising interventions underway or in process. Such feasibility is also an important consideration, since ACF conceived ISIS to test existing models or programs rather than new models or approaches.

Over the next few months the ISIS team also will be refining its understanding of the field's priorities. In this connection, we very much will appreciate reactions to the current summary. In addition to feedback on the degree to which it captures accurately perspectives through late summer 2008, we are very interested in assessments of how readers would revise the recommendations we received based on the substantial worsening economic situation since then. Finally, we would be happy to receive and discuss expressions of interest in ISIS testing specific interventions that readers may be sponsoring or in which they may otherwise be involved.

The current schedule calls for ACF to decide what will be included in ISIS this spring, at which point project staff will turn to recruitment of potential sites. The plan calls for all sites to be selected and operating by the end of 2010.

The Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency Evaluation Team

Funder

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