

Merrick Workforce Development Assessment and Strategy

Prepared by LukeWorks, LLC

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LukeWorks, LLC was engaged by Merrick Community Services to conduct an evaluation of MCS's workforce development efforts and to couple that information with our previously completed community needs assessment to recommend program strategies that can better meet the employment and training needs of your constituents. LukeWorks principals Luke Weisberg and Kira Dahlk interviewed MCS staff, reviewed written program reports, and spoke with other key stakeholders regarding current program approaches. This document presents our key findings along with recommendations about service strategies and program area expansions, followed by a summary table that identifies potential partners and funding sources.

Key Findings

MCS is clearly in a time of transition. As you well know, and as our community needs assessment confirmed, Railroad Island and the surrounding service area have changed significantly in the last decades. As a result, the constituency that MCS serves – or could potentially serve – is demographically different, and facing different challenges, than it was when many programs were established or last revised. In addition, changes in organizational leadership are still rippling through the agency. Meanwhile, the planned physical relocation of MCS provides a significant opportunity to reshape and expand service delivery. The convergence of these factors, though somewhat unsettling, offers ample room for MCS to improve, add, and innovate workforce development and other program services.

Following are five findings that shape the balance of this assessment and strategy:

1. The environmental and construction worker training program (ECWTP) is not the 'signature' program it was perceived as in years past. The program has had three staff leaders in the past three years and that instability is evident in its program performance. Although over 100 individuals have been recruited annually, the program is enrolling just a fifth of those (about twenty students), and there appears to be tension with union partners over the selection process for current student participants. The program receives about \$120,000 annually from the federal National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) which supports program staff and provides some additional income diversity to MCS. With a potential rise in demand for trained workers in this arena, and because it is often a strong fit with the interests and needs of area residents, the ECWTP is ripe for strengthening and perhaps expansion.

2. Employment may not always be the primary presenting need for many MCS clients, but it is often a primary solution. Staff interviews affirmed findings from the community needs assessment: residents of Railroad Island and elsewhere on the East Side experience significant physical and economic isolation with very few work opportunities readily apparent and available within the neighborhood. Despite substantial employment-related needs, MCS currently offers only the ECWTP and fairly loose job search support. The new building development creates opportunity for MCS to be a site that not only provides the neighborhood with employment opportunities, but perhaps more importantly, to be identifiable over time as an enterprise generator – a hub of work activity that spawns other employment opportunities in and around the east side in partnership with others.
3. There is a lack of structure regarding intake and assessment for workforce and other services offered by MCS (also, lack of metrics and counting related to service delivery); consequently, client needs may remain unidentified and/or unaddressed. Of particular note is the high incidence of identifiable mental health need that MCS is not able to systematically address given current staffing. However, MCS is clearly identifiable as a “go to” location in the neighborhood for a range of individual and family services, and the multi-service history of the organization should be used as a foundation for future growth.
4. The community needs assessment identified significant pockets of need among individuals with language barriers, low educational attainment, and youth/younger adults. Staff interviews underscore that current service offerings are not well-aligned to address these needs. In looking broadly at MCS’ service offerings, there is opportunity to perhaps develop more youth-focused workforce programming; and, to weave workforce services (or at least a workforce-focused assessment) into family and senior services so that some of these pockets of need can be better addressed in the community.
5. Staff confidence feels low at the moment. Staff members recognize that change is needed and coming, but they are not clear if or how they are expected to lead or participate in that change. With their clear commitment to meeting the needs of the community, client case management services could be the staff’s core competency, with other program needs being met through external partnerships. Going forward, MCS staff will need to be better matched with their skills and supported to succeed with should they assume new responsibilities and fulfill changing expectations.

Suggested Service Strategies

As part of broader organizational restructuring and strengthening, we suggest three service strategies to pursue. These are approaches to delivering service that we suggest become the ‘hallmarks’ of Merrick services – core competencies that the agency can build on over time.

A. Build a clear and identifiable competency in assessing client need, triaging the delivery of service based on need, and providing ongoing, high quality, holistic case management services. MCS has historically been a multi-service human service agency. Your holistic approach and the duality of your mission – to work with clients to secure employment and financial security AND optimize their overall well being – distinguish you. Assert yourselves an organization that addresses multiple barriers to employment and ‘success’ – not just skills or education, but often, a variety of life circumstances which MCS is uniquely suited to help clients identify and overcome.

Build on these roots by developing an agency-wide assessment and triage approach so that as clients come to MCS for specific services, they can be received *for that service* and then also provided a comprehensive assessment that identifies *all* potential service needs (skill identification, family literacy, mental health, etc.). It’s possible that ServeMN VISTAs could be engaged as caseworkers for youth and family triage. As part of this capability, identify metrics and lines of accountability with a stronger data collection and progress tracking component. With a multi-focused assessment, there may be many potential actions to be pursued by individuals that can be measured and benchmarked to help show MCS’ impact on the community. This function (both the cost of assessment tools as well as case management costs) could be paid for as a separate and important program component of MCS; and/or, added to the cost of delivering employment, senior, or other family services and paid for through those program centers.

B. Build partnerships to deliver employment readiness, occupational skill training and related services, emphasizing MCS’ role as the ‘front door’ for the community. An obvious first step is strengthening the service delivery and outcome tracking for the ECWT program and building on that foundation with other relationships that may offer related occupational skill training. A next stage will be to continually identify a few key employment pathways that are accessible to, and appropriate for, resident interests and skill levels, and build partnerships to deliver that training and job placement. We have begun this list below, and a mechanism needs to be built into MCS’ work (drawing on the results of client assessments and other data points) that continually reviews and refreshes the program offerings through MCS and partners. Delivering the training and facilitating placement need not always be a core competency for MCS itself; instead, you can use your assessment process to identify candidates that can be referred to partners for specialized training and job placement. Similarly, strengthen partnership with the Hubbs Center for literacy/ESL training so that MCS is their ‘front door’ for East Side residents.

In thinking about this strategy, a critical step might simply be that in any consideration of a needed program or service, ask first: “Is there a partner organization who can deliver this service effectively?” and pursue that partnership first. The business model for partnerships such as these will vary. In cases where another service provider (like Hubbs Center) has a funding stream to cover their service, MCS can simply be a trusted referral source, with no financial relationship. In some cases, perhaps MCS would raise funds jointly with other providers to cover your own referral expenses as well as the cost of training. A collaborative proposal to a

funder from MCS and one (or even multiple) training providers might be a very attractive possibility (particularly as part of existing collaborations, e.g., the East Side Prosperity Campaign). Finally, there could be scenarios in which MCS earns a referral fee from program funding already secured by another partner. However, that seems to be the least likely arrangement.

C. For areas of significant MCS services, explore what kind of business enterprise could be built around that service and create ‘enterprise clusters’ that can serve as work opportunities for MCS clients and potential revenue generators for the agency. Support the entrepreneurial spirit within the organization’s staff, lay leaders, and clients that can build a ‘culture of enterprise’ around MCS and within the east side. Some of these may take the form of demonstration or pilot projects; able to be tested without a full investment in a social enterprise. In other cases, a potential partnership with other businesses where MCS functions as a staffing resource for work experience, perhaps, or other arrangements outside of full-time, independent placements.

As an example, we have talked about the possibility of building on a theme of healthy eating/food production and distribution. This specific theme could be played out as an extension of the existing food banks through health food prep classes taught at a commercial kitchen in the new facility; growing food in on-site gardens for distribution at the food bank and potential child care center; and, perhaps a “dining in” option for food bank clients at a café or similar eating area in the new facility. In each of those scenarios, the facility (commercial kitchen) and/or the service (classes, dining, or fresh produce) could be sold as well to others at a market or slightly below-market rate. The intention would be to identify any opportunity for a service to lower-income East Side residents that, perhaps with modification, could also be sold to other market groups.

Specific ventures could be supported with a combination of philanthropic and earned income. Perhaps, too, a group of entrepreneurial-minded donors would consider seeding a “social enterprise” fund within MCS that could be used to explore potential programming/business opportunities, led by MCS staff and clients/participants.

Workforce Development Program Components

There are five areas of workforce development programming that may be worth exploring over the next few years, in conjunction with the new MCS building. These areas have been identified because of their growth potential in the labor market; and, because there seem to be opportunities at hand with potential partners. Per the third service strategy above, some or all of these may also be areas for enterprise development within MCS.

Environmental & Construction Worker Training

Building on the existing program, there is clearly opportunity to strengthen union relationships and the core federally-funded activity. The construction market is improving, and recent changes from the MN Commission on Human Rights will put increased pressure on contractors to hire minority/disadvantaged workers. In addition to the strengthening of the core program,

MCS can explore opportunities for housing and commercial ‘green building’ and/or weatherization and energy efficiency rehab work that could benefit the immediate neighborhood – specifically bringing work opportunities in the construction/rehabilitation of the new MCS building.

A few other programmatic directions to explore within this area include:

- Consider additional training/certification in heavy equipment operation and related skills for work opportunities in the utilities (Xcel, Centerpoint, etc. all have long-term needs as their baby boomer workforce retires).
- Consider a relationship with the Blue Green Alliance Foundation’s GreenPOWER program and where there may be synergy to allow them to deliver training for MCS program participants.
- Articulate a clear “feeder” or satellite partnership with Metro State in their related offerings.

Healthy food production/distribution with related nutrition/health services

Using Meals on Wheels and the food shelves as a base of activity, there are opportunities for urban agriculture (perhaps in partnership with HAP, AIFC, and the East Side Prosperity Campaign), and food preparation to support existing MCS services. A “Serve-Safe” training could be offered in partnership with Metro State and/or U of M Extension Service and, coupled with other more specialized offerings, a culinary occupational pathway could be articulated.

With an emphasis on building an on-site café into the new property, this could be an MCS enterprise with both youth and adults handling food prep, serving, and the business aspects of running a small café. This would be a training opportunity, a business operation, and of course help build the new MCS site as a neighborhood destination.

There is also opportunity to identify career pathways related to nutritionists/dieticians. The outlook for these specific occupations is just mediocre; but, there is an increasing need for this knowledge base in other careers (especially due to the growing senior population and the childhood obesity epidemic) related to healthcare, education, child care, and other direct care activities. A training pathway that incorporates MCS’ Meals on Wheels and food shelves (and a possible on-site greenhouse/garden) could prove very useful for area residents. Finally, trainees in this pathway could also share knowledge and/or run limited programming for MCS seniors on diet and exercise. This kind of peer-to-peer leadership and learning could be a very powerful programming model for MCS to further develop.

Child care

You expressed interest in exploring the potential for an on-site child care center that could serve the dual purpose of providing care for the children of MCS employees and clients, and offering onsite training for clients interested in child care/education pathway. This is somewhat like the Head Start model, which engages parents in the classroom to improve understand of child development (there are two Head Start programs in the area – Battle Creek Head Start and Swede Hollow Head Start), but broadened to include a certificate training program offered in conjunction with the Hubbs Center, Metro State, or another college or ABE provider.

Assistant teachers (who work under the supervision of a head teacher) are in demand: projected growth rates over the 2004-2014 period in Minnesota at 6%; however, the pay is low, with a median wage of just \$8.28/hr. According to Minnesota Law, an assistant teacher in a child care must meet one of a list of educational qualifications, a couple of which might fit with Merrick providing the on-site training hours:

1. Minnesota Child Development Assistant (CDA) certificate PLUS 520 hours as an aide or intern.
2. High school diploma/ GED PLUS 2,080 hours as an aide and 12 quarter credits of education.

Pursuing this option would certainly require further investigation into the regulations surrounding operating a licensed child care center, some of which may be onerous. However, there may also be opportunities for creative programming around food preparation and service for an on-site center, as well as engagement with the senior program in a multi-generational service delivery model.

Transportation-related occupations and enterprises

There continues to be high demand for commercial drivers and some demand (although a little uneven) for mechanics and related occupations. Thinking about MCS food distribution (Meals on Wheels and food pantries) as well as senior clients' own transportation needs, it seems there may be a smaller opportunity to do some on-the-job training related to these occupations. A commercial driving pathway in partnership with Inver Hills or other MnSCU campuses may be worth exploring. There is also a small concentration of auto-related businesses along University/Central Corridor and this may be worthy of some exploration, too.

Addressing job readiness needs / Customer service skill training

Staff interviews suggested a strong need for job readiness/soft skill training. We suggest pursuing a stronger relationship with Ramsey County Workforce Solutions for job readiness and placement support – again, rather than building that capability entirely within MCS staff. In addition, we see opportunity to offer an occupational training component with partners (to be identified) in customer service skills. This kind of training has proven valuable in other settings and, in many cases, reinforces the skills and messaging that are conveyed in more traditional job readiness programs. Finally, we include this here also because it is a strong base for pursuing other service-oriented occupations in financial and insurance services, retail, and other opportunities with easy proximity in downtown Saint Paul.

These programmatic areas are summarized in the attached table, with potential partners and funders also noted. Note that the potential funder listing is based on cursory knowledge of these funders' interests, not an exhaustive review of specific guidelines.

Considerations for 600 Lafayette Road

Some of the considerations relating to build-out of the new space at 600 Lafayette Road have

been discussed in reviewing earlier drafts of this assessment. We identify them here, in brief:

- The entry points to the building should accommodate the holistic assessment – ensuring that potential clients are welcomed by staff in a way that is conducive to beginning a trusting and thoughtful conversation.
- Additional program space may be needed for the environmental & construction worker training program. Planning for flexible, hands-on training space would be ideal.
- A child care center would require ample indoor and outdoor recreational space.
- With a potential program and enterprise focus on healthy food production and distribution, attention should be given to outfitting a reasonably sized commercial kitchen with adjacent access to space that can be used for distribution by cars/trucks.
- Also adjacent to the commercial kitchen, ideally, would be space for food to be purchased and consumed on-site, both for convenience and as a teaching/learning opportunity.
- Also connected to a healthy eating theme is space for outdoor gardening. While there may be other gardening and greenhouse efforts underway among East Side partners, there will be value in having a visible, on-site garden both for actual food production and as a teaching tool in potential programming.

Putting These Recommendations Into Action

There are several next steps to considering and then implementing these suggested strategies and workforce program recommendations. We recognize that the actual implementation steps may be woven into a broader organizational development process. However, we thought it might be helpful to identify a likely sequencing of implementation steps, as follows:

1. Focus on developing an assessment and case management capability. Identify assessment tools¹ and strengthen MCS' ability to collect and analyze client-level data so that the system is holistic, robust, reliable, and tailored to the needs of the community.
2. Consider implementing the assessment tools fairly quickly so that MCS can build a base of knowledge about customers/clients as you further develop programming.
3. Dive deep in relationships with potential partners to identify where there are appropriate training programs, and develop a strong referral process. Key partners are identified in the attached summary table. MCS has good 'neighborly' relationships with these organizations – and now can go deeper into programmatic partnerships.
4. Build relationships with businesses, service providers, and educators in the key areas of interest, as identified above. While this may already be happening from a development perspective, work to identify MCS as a resource within influencers in key occupation/industry clusters.
5. Explore widely program approaches in specific occupational pathways/industries that

have been successful (or not) in other urban areas and/or in concentrations with high poverty. In general, know that researchers and educators are emphasizing programs that feature “contextualized” learning for low-skill adults (who are often low-income), an approach that facilitates the acquisition of basic skills (include English literacy) alongside vocational training. Successful programs contextualize basic skills instruction to occupational categories that are responsive to local economic needs.

Here in St. Paul, the Hubbs Center offers a number of occupational prep courses – many of them designed as entry points to skills training they will need to continue, but some, like the ServSafe Food Safety Class and Retail/Customer Service, provide students with employment-ready certificates. While occupational courses at the Hubbs Center have traditionally been offered separately from GED instruction, the center recently launched its first integrated program, contextualizing GED prep to its Child Development class. Goodwill/Easter Seals also offers successful programming that merges basic skills and general employment readiness with specific vocation training in areas including automotive, medical office, retail, and banking.

There are several sources for information on career pathways training, including CLASP, Public/Private Ventures, the Aspen Institute, and the National Skills Coalition. Lukeworks has recently completed two reports focusing on national best practices related to career pathways, both generally and more narrowly to contextualized GED programming, and these are of course available to you if you want to delve further into this topic.

6. Building on MCS’ internal assessment capability as it develops, together with other data sources to establish a data dashboard for staff, Board, and program stakeholders that identifies emergent needs, service trends, and gives market context to MCS’ work. This dashboard could be used as a program management tool, and to identify/review market opportunities. An example of a data dashboard is attached.

These are intended to be first, actionable steps that MCS leadership can advance when ready to do so. Taking these steps, along with a broad-based strengthening in the organization’s data collection and reporting capability will help bring MCS to be an even more results-oriented organization going forward.

There is little question that the neighborhoods and residents served by MCS are in need and that MCS has historically been the “go to” organization for the neighborhood to meet that need. What we have identified here are opportunities to build on MCS’ strengths and historic presence, and be responsive to the workforce needs of your constituents and the surrounding labor market. Further, we see opportunity for MCS to be a catalyst for new commerce that could, in fact, be a factor in *shaping* the local labor market on the east side, bringing greater prosperity for all.

| Program Suggestion | Potential Partners | Potential Funders |
|--|---|---|
| Environmental & Construction Worker | Blue Green Alliance GreenPOWER program Workforce Solutions/RENEW | Xcel Energy Northwest Area Foundation Bremer Foundation Pentair HB Fuller Mortenson ? |
| Healthy Food Production/ Distribution | HAP/AIFC Urban Ag initiative Metro State First Lutheran Church | BCBS Foundation United Health (<i>no unsolicited / Kate Rubin now on staff</i>) General Mills FR Bigelow Cargill WK Kellogg Fdn Food & Community program |
| Transportation-Related Occupations | Inver Hills Community College Goodwill Easter Seals Hubb Center (CDL classes) | Ecolab 3M |
| Customer Service <i>and</i> Job Readiness and Placement Support | Metro State, Goodwill Easter Seals, Workforce Solutions | Knight Foundation Travelers Jostens (for youth) Carlson Family Foundation (youth) |
| Other triaged service needs: | | |
| Literacy/ESL | Hubb Center | Target? |
| Mental Health | Neighborhood Improvement Programs Regions Hospital System | Edwards Memorial Trust (health access) Sweitzer Foundation (youth) |
| Child Care | YMCA and neighboring service organizations; Way To Grow; as well as informally organized child care collectives | Potential cooperative enterprises supported through Social Enterprise Alliance or Social Venture Partners. |
| NOTE: There could be a lot of overlap and a number of ways to approach funders with this. Some may want to support ALL of MCS' workforce strategies, while others would pick just one component. | | |

Envisioning a Data Dashboard for Merrick Community Services

This would be an agency-wide venture, reported perhaps bi-monthly or quarterly, in which the gathering of the data is a meaningful activity to staff (an opportunity to drill down, be proud, and/or ID needs and issues); and, the reporting of which to Board members becomes an expected activity – coupled with some analytical discussion about future needs. So, the dashboard serves as a reporting tool on existing activity; and, a platform for rolling strategy discussion for all MCS stakeholders.

1. Aggregate numbers served, with individual program breakouts, and a % reported of how many clients reached a significant benchmark in their personal plan (following their comprehensive assessment). *This gives us both a sense of volume served; and, movement toward meaningful outcomes.*
2. High-level program outcomes: # placed/retained in employment, # clients needing X% less food than from the previous period, etc.; and, cycle time for key program activities. *This focuses on the efficiency and effectiveness of the programs – key outcomes and time/resources to achieve those outcomes.*
3. Contextual market data like: neighborhood employment/unemployment rate (not sure this is available regularly); building permits pulled for neighborhoods; and maybe business starts (not sure if this mappable below the city/county level).
4. Scoring/grading for area schools (annually). *While this overlaps with MCS programming for youth/families, it's an important indicator of trends for youth and families in the neighborhoods.*
5. Annual data from ACS and Saint Paul police on income, changes in household size, and Part I crime. *East Side Prosperity Campaign is likely tracking these broader indicators...*

¹ Some tools worthy of exploration include: Life Stability Matrix developed by staff at the MN Department of Human Services. See a sample at: http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/business_partners/documents/pub/dhs_id_029267.pdf. and a survey conducted by Snohomish County (WA state) of low-income residents (instrument attached).