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Employment Assistance Program Focus Group Report

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Preface and Acknowledgements

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Kathy Krepcio
Executive Director

Background

The September 11th Fund, working with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, created the Employment Assistance Program (EAP) to help dislocated workers regain employment and wages lost in the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks. The EAP enables eligible dislocated workers in the New York metropolitan area to connect with employment services, career counselors, placement opportunities, and other resources. Working through six service providers in New York City (and other providers in Long Island and New Jersey), the EAP has been serving displaced workers since September 16, 2002.

A qualitative research project was proposed to assess the EAP's effectiveness.

Objectives

The research objectives were to:

- Determine overall non-Chinese speaking client satisfaction with the EAP;
- Understand non-Chinese speaking client expectations of the EAP;
- Assess the EAP's strengths and weaknesses;
- Measure the satisfaction of the career counselors employed by the participating service providers (specifically F.E.G.S., SEEDCO and CWE);
- Collect client feedback on EAP training programs; and
- Understand ways to improve the program.

Methodology

The research project consisted of eight focus groups conducted at a professional focus group facility in Manhattan between June 25th through July 9th, 2003. During the recruiting process, researchers identified the September 11th Fund and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey as sponsors of the project. To qualify to take part in a focus group, participants were required to qualify for the EAP and to have been involved in the EAP on at least one occasion.

An independent research consultant conducted each focus group; seven of the groups were conducted in English, one was conducted in Spanish. Each group consisted of ten to fifteen participants and all participants received a \$40 honorarium.

Qualitative Caveat: Qualitative research such as focus groups seeks to provide insights into behavior and explore attitudes. Due to sample size, recruitment methods, as well as the study objectives themselves, this type of research is exploratory in nature and the results cannot be projected to a larger population.

Focus Group Participants

The research project randomly selected focus group participants from a list of EAP clients of three agencies serving English-speaking clients. These agencies are:

- F.E.G.S. – with 1,563 clients at the time of the focus groups
- Seedco – with 1,290 clients at the time of the focus groups
- Consortium for Worker Education (CWE) – with 725 clients at the time of the focus groups

In seven of the eight sessions, participants completed a written survey that asked questions about customer satisfaction as well as general demographics (81 surveys were returned). The Spanish-speaking focus group participants did not fill out the survey. Based on the survey questions, a profile of the focus group participants shows that:

- 91 individuals participated in the focus groups; fifty-six percent (56%) male and forty-four percent (44%) female. Thirty-four (34) were F.E.G.S. clients, thirty-seven (37) were Seedco clients, ten (10) were CWE clients, and 10 were clients of one of the three agencies (Spanish speakers).
- Sixty-three percent (63%) identified their first language as English, with twenty-two percent (22%) identifying other languages as their first language (including Yorubo, Taiwanese, Bengali, French, Greek, Creole, Soneke, Japanese, and Russian) and fifteen percent (15%) identifying Spanish as their first language.
- Thirty percent (30%) identified their ethnicity as White, followed by African-American (26%), Latino/Hispanic (20%), and African-Caribbean (17%). Participants in the Spanish speakers focus group identified their countries of origin as the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Nicaragua.
- The majority of the participants were between the ages of 30-49 (58%), followed by ages 50-64 (20%), ages 18-29 (14%), and over 65 years of age (9%).
- The majority of focus group participants (61%) reported that they had had some college (39%) or were college graduates (22%). Thirty-nine (39%) reported being a high school graduate (16%) or having had some high school (13%).
- The majority (51%) of focus group participants reported approximate pre-September 11th earnings of \$20,000 - \$45,000, followed by twenty percent (20%) making \$45,001-\$75,000 and sixteen percent (16%) making under \$20,000.

In general, the profile that emerged through observation of the focus groups is of a long term unemployed population with limited English proficiency, a history of lower wage jobs, and a great need for personal attention.

- A majority of participants cited English as their first language, but many participants had limited English proficiency. While many identified themselves as being ‘an English speaker’, they had a very limited command of the English language.
- Unlike the Chinese-speaking EAP population, the majority of the focus group participants were male. This is consistent with a recent demographic analysis completed by the Heldrich Center of Chinese-speaking versus non-Chinese speaking participants undertaken in July 2003. That analysis reported that fifty-two percent (52%) of the non-Chinese EAP participants were male and forty-eight percent (48%) were female.
- Most focus group participants earned under \$45,000 in pre-September 11th wages. This is consistent with the July 2003 demographic analysis in which the majority of non-Chinese speaking EAP participants reported incomes under \$45,000 (46%).
- The focus group participants in all eight focus groups reported a wide range of pre-September 11th employment, with most jobs being at the lower end of the wage scale. These occupations included:
 - Hotel employee
 - Security Officer
 - Mechanical Engineer
 - Operations Manager
 - Small Business Owner
 - Worker at the World Financial Center
 - Bookkeeper near the South Street Seaport
 - Waiter near the World Trade Center
 - Prep Cook, Dishwasher at Windows on the World
 - Caterer
 - Welder
 - Bartender
 - Paralegal
 - Network Administrator
 - Printer
 - Recruiter
 - Tour Guide
- About twenty percent (20%) of the focus group participants mentioned that they had worked in the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. In each group, at least one to two participants openly discussed (or visibly exhibited) feeling depressed, traumatized, or having difficulty coping.
- About one-half of the focus group participants either identified that they were currently in job training, or had been in job training. Most participants were still unemployed. On average, approximately 8 out of the 91 participants (or about one per group) said that they had a job. These new jobs included yoga teacher, freelance creative consultant, counselor at a non-profit agency, and customer service representative at a courier service.

Findings – Executive Summary

A general summary of the findings from the eight focus groups follows, organized into two areas – *EAP Policies and Program Features* and reflections on *Operations and Customer Service*.

EAP Policies and Program Features

- ✓ **Overall, participants were grateful for the program’s existence, but wished that program features lasted longer, and included greater financial supports.**

While participants expressed thanks for the program, they also felt that the training should be longer (than 13 weeks) and that the allotted training dollars (up to \$4,000) should be larger (to allow them greater choices of subsidized training).

Spanish focus group members were especially pleased with the program, and for the opportunity to study a vocational career. Several indicated that they were paying for the difference between the money the September 11th Fund provided and the full cost of their training tuition.

- ✓ **Participants were generally knowledgeable of key program features, but confused about all of the services the EAP provides.**

Most participants – both English and Spanish speakers – understood that they could get training and help finding a job, but were confused about their eligibility for job training and job search allowances, how much money they could receive, and when their checks would arrive. There was also a general lack of understanding about the other sources of assistance that was available to them aside from training (such as job search and development or career counseling).

- ✓ **Participants were very pleased about the availability of vocational training, English as a Second Language, and basic computer literacy training.**

The majority of participants who were in training or had completed training appreciated the opportunity training provided. This was true of both English and Spanish Speakers. Those with limited English proficiency were very pleased to have the opportunity to learn English and to learn how to use a computer. While many did not expect that learning English or the computer would lead directly to a job, they believed that these capabilities would help them get a better job in the future.

- ✓ **The majority of participants viewed the needs based allowances as important and much needed.**

Most participants responded affirmatively when asked if they would have entered training without the allowance, but many said that they would not have been able to participate in, or focus on, the training (pay expenses and bills) without the allowances.

Operations and Customer Service

- ✓ **Participants made positive and critical comments about the quality of customer service under the program, especially in reference to their career counselors.**

Some participants thought their counselors were professional, helpful, pleasant and courteous – often citing the personal attention they received. Others found their counselors unprofessional and lacking in expertise; they viewed them as hard to reach or not very effective in helping them select a training provider or get a job. Overall, the more a participant communicated with and developed a personal relationship with a career counselor, the better they felt about the services and the agency. This was true in both the English and Spanish speaking groups.

- ✓ **Participants freely discussed their interaction with counselors; many participants recognized that perhaps there were too many clients, which overwhelmed counselors and impeded their work.**

Many participants empathized with the career counselor. Some individuals said they did not get a lot of help from their counselor. Some indicated that there was considerable turnover of counselors; often they were not notified of this fact. At times, this turnover led to the participant dropping out of the program, or feeling frustrated at having to start all over again with a new counselor. Some early participants in the program thought that some of the service providers were not prepared to help them – or they, as job seekers, were not psychologically ready to help themselves when they entered the program.

- ✓ **Many participants participated in training but had varied experiences; they also made positive and critical comments about the advice they received from counselors on making training choices, and to the counseling they received during training.**

Many of those in training felt that communication with their career counselor either decreased or stopped altogether during the training period. Participants' reactions to training varied: some were very pleased with their training choice and provider; others were unhappy with how they chose their training, or with the quality, length, or cost of the training itself.

- ✓ **Job search assistance also varied. Participants had varying expectations as to whether they were responsible for finding their own job, or if this was the responsibility of the service provider.**

Many participants felt that once their training ended, they received little help on how to navigate the labor market or look for a job. Many felt that the job search help was poor, or were not aware that the service provider could help them find a job. Of course, they recognized that the labor market was tight and they were responsible for looking for work on their own.

- ✓ **Overall participants were satisfied with the program; however, opinion varied widely from ten (highest) to one (lowest).**

According to the written survey, most participants were satisfied with the program. The highest satisfaction was with program services and staff courteousness and helpfulness, rather than with timeliness of services and staff availability and knowledge. Almost all of the written survey respondents believed that EAP would help them return to work. The average satisfaction score recorded during all the sessions was 6.7; however, the Spanish-speaking focus group participants rated the program much higher (8.7).

Findings – English-Speaking Participants

The following is a summary of findings specifically from the *seven English-speaking focus groups*.

- **Overall, the September 11th Fund Employment Assistance Program fostered a sense of goodwill among the majority of participants.**
- **Participants were thankful that the EAP reached out to them and helped them overcome fears of returning to New York City. The EAP showed them that they are not alone in the aftermath of September 11th.**

“When you get out and get to a new place where you’re getting some assistance, at least you’re involved and moving.”

“So at first there wasn’t really any support and I didn’t know of any programs and I was surprised to find the program and I felt complete after I found it.”

“I kept getting phone calls and to be honest, I didn’t want to come back to the city... but I had to do something. It helped me get back to the city.”

“Without the program, I don’t think I would ever have come back to New York but because they were persistent in calling me just to come and find out about it, it got me over coming to New York.”

“I really appreciate the service. I don’t care if they pay me an allowance. I know people that did not get in the September 11 Fund that wish they could get the Funding. I feel lucky.”

- **Overall satisfaction with the EAP among English speakers varied widely, ranging from high scores of ten to low scores of one.**

Many factors affected the levels of satisfaction, including the attentiveness of the counselor assigned, the frequency and consistency of communication, the preconceived expectation that the program would lead to job placement, and the individual experience in the training programs offered. The average satisfaction score among English-speaking participants was 5.7.

“10, because the people I had worked with were very nice. They encouraged me to continue and they followed up on me almost every week.”

“My score is a 5. I’m in the middle of the scale because I was extremely satisfied with Williamsburg Works but somewhat unhappy with [my agency’s] correspondence and communication with me.”

“I rate them a 4. My employment assistance has only been in training, not counseling, not job assistance...”

“3. I appreciate the training. I learned a lot. But I realized late that the best way to do it is on your own. Depending on the people [counselors], you will leave disappointed every time.”

“I would rate [my agency] a 1. [My agency] appeared to be a vehicle for them to justify Fundraising for 9/11, however without delivery to the client. However, I would like to say that the counselor I was assigned was compassionate and diligent. Unfortunately, she came a little too late for me because she was assigned to me about 9 months into the program.”

➤ **Most English speaking participants said they entered the EAP with no particular expectations.**

Some participants entered the EAP expecting that it would guide them through training and workshops and secure them a job. Those with higher levels of education and stronger skills did not have the same expectations.

“What can we expect when we finish the courses? We can not expect a lot from them to find a job.”

“They couldn’t get me a job. That makes me very unsatisfied. I thought that after training, I would get a job spontaneously.”

“I didn’t really expect any assistance in finding a job. I was just happy there was something.”

➤ **Many expressed ambiguity and confusion about some of the EAP program’s policies and procedures.**

Some participants saw a communication gap between Fund service providers and clients. Many said they received either limited information or contradictory information regarding program policies while moving through the channels at SEEDCO, F.E.G.S. and CWE.

“Just like any government institution... they change their minds overnight without even informing the victim what’s going on.”

“[My agency] was like, ‘Are you sure Safe Horizons said that to you?’. What do you think, I’m some kind of moron or something?”

“I don’t see the loss in honoring what you say... We need to have faith in people, when we have faith in people we have faith in ourselves.”

- **Participants expressed frustration about the job training needs-based allowance in terms of eligibility, its duration, and the regularity of allowance checks.**

While participants appreciated the allowance, many felt they were not totally aware of the eligibility stipulations for receiving the money (such as the income test, the 25 hour attendance rule) or how often the allowance checks would be mailed.

“We’re figuring that money is going to come in to help us. It shouldn’t be taken back from us. It’s like punishing us... punishing us for going out there and making efforts to better ourselves.”

“People are dependant on this to make it through school if you don’t have money in the bank to hold you over because the checks come maybe two months apart or six weeks apart... They led me to believe that we would get a stipend every week. Once I got into training, I had to struggle to stay in there it was a long time before I got a check.”

- **Some commented that career counselors meant well, but were not very helpful. Others were very pleased with the assistance they received from their counselor.**

Participants used words like ‘well meaning’, ‘nice’ and ‘courteous’ to describe their career counselor, but indicated that counselors were not adequately trained to provide them with employment services or labor market intelligence. Many felt that counselors did not do anything for them that they could not have done on their own.

Those who are very satisfied with the service they received appreciated their counselor’s attentiveness and professionalism. These clients said that their counselors provided personalized customer service by calling regularly to ‘check in’. While almost no one could credit their counselor with finding them a job, they seem forgiving given the economic conditions in New York City and the rest of the country.

“When I call my counselor, he tells me to read the Want Ads in the New York Times or check on the Internet. That is what I have been doing. I don’t need someone to keep telling me that.”

“My experience with my agency was ‘here’s the website, go to the website’.”

“After two times [meeting with the counselor], I said forget it and did everything on my own.”

“Being at home doesn’t help me. I need to get out so I’m working with a counselor. She’s a good person but I don’t think she has it all together.”

“That seems to be typical today. They [the counselors] have no sense of customer service.”

“On the overall, the counselors have been very helpful, very courteous. But due to the economy, you can’t find a job. What can you do? They just don’t exist out there.”

“He always got back to me on questions that I had. He didn’t deal with me on a one to one basis, that would have been helpful as far as looking for employment but as a whole he did a good job.”

“The job coordinator should try better to get me a good job. The coordinator herself should be more interested in me, in us.”

“I was desperate to work and very depressed. My counselor was fabulous. She emailed me websites for me to check out.”

“I felt good about myself and good about the people assisting me.”

- **Most English-speaking participants felt that their job counselors were not labor market professionals in their particular industry, and viewed them as less effective or accountable than they should have been.**

Many participants felt that their counselors lacked expertise in the client’s career field/industry (such as health care, computers) and therefore offered little market intelligence to help them find work. Others felt that counselors were not actively looking for job leads on their behalf. Many felt they were left on their own, either to search the web or newspaper, to find work.

“With a private placement agency, they have to hustle because they eat if you get a job...With the organization, they are not necessarily accountable...”

“If they [the counselors] had legitimate ties to the corporate world, they could probably do something for us.”

“I found redundancy in the program. Someone would call you for an introduction. Someone would call you a week later for a follow up and you come in for that and then you’re really hearing the same thing yet again instead of moving forward with some additional information.”

“I couldn’t contact her [the counselor] I went there today and she told me ‘we don’t help you find jobs’; that basically, you had to do it on your own.”

- **Many cited experiences with counselor turnover or finding counselors hard to reach. Some felt their career counselors did not adequately assess them.**

Some participants complained that after spending time getting acquainted with one counselor, that counselor would leave, requiring the participant to start over with a new counselor. Participants viewed this as a waste of time and money. Many felt that counselors tried to take a generic approach to helping them, encouraging them to enroll in training regardless of whether or not training was appropriate for them.

“It’s a high turnover [for counselors] so you’re pretty much on your own.”

“There was never one counselor that was assigned to you. If you called up this week and spoke to a counselor, the next week that counselor was fired.”

“One of the things I felt they should have done is to get a better assessment of the person coming in.”

“She [the counselor] was pushing me to go to training. ‘You have \$4000, go to training’.”

“They were pushing to give people stipends rather than really sitting down and going through what you really want, what you’re capable of doing. It was way out in my case.”

“They should take time to interview individuals and see what your needs are directly and try to address that.”

“Its not [my agency], its that you’re dealing with a whole new client base... a client base that is not the usual client base that you had before, like displaced workers or people that are alcoholics or people that are homeless. These are people that have been affected by something that’s traumatic and unknown and unfamiliar, so they’re not the ones that should be jeopardized by being thrown into something as good as it is for a short period of time and that’s it. There has to be a certain amount of development.”

- **A few participants indicated that to obtain the maximum EAP benefit, they learned that they had to go into the EAP knowing what they wanted, and perhaps being more aggressive than they were before September 11th.**

Many felt that what they learned from September 11th was to be aggressive in pursuing services and help. Some participants found this difficult and said that what they needed was for someone to reach out proactively and give them a helping hand.

“You have to keep calling them and be on their backs in order to receive what they are providing you with.”

“You really have to be persistent, if you’re a person that emotionally you were not able to handle things at that time then you couldn’t take advantage of what’s being offered.”

“The squeaky wheel gets the oil.”

“If I want something, I go there [to my agency] because telephones don’t work. Everyone is always on voicemail.”

- **While there was positive feedback on the availability of training, the majority of English speaking participants felt the training programs might not help them eventually achieve their ultimate goal of securing a job.**

Many felt some training programs were poorly run, too narrow in focus, or much too short to make a difference. With the exception of one client, no one stated that they been offered a job as a direct result of a training program. Worth noting, the participants who are less acculturated and have limited English proficiency are more likely to complement training while those with more experience in the labor market, and made higher wages pre-September 11th did not feel the training was long enough or good enough to help them make a career change or get higher paying jobs.

“I am thankful for the opportunity to support my job skills with training.”

“Workshops seemed to be somewhat helpful... but [training] programs need substantial refinement for more skilled working people.”

“I went to a couple of training schools that were on the list and I thought they were big rip-offs.”

“Some of the training that’s offered might not be what September 11th people need.”

“The class I took was overcrowded; I didn’t have a computer for five weeks.”

- **When asked how the EAP could be improved, participants suggested increasing educational opportunities and strengthening the counselors.**

Some participants would have liked to use training money for educational opportunities beyond the short-term vocational training programs offered. Others would have liked to see a greater sum available so they can obtain even more training or education. Participants also said they want professionally trained counselors for job placement, and counselors who are responsible for fewer clients.

“If you’re going to give \$4000 to go back to school, why can’t they take the \$4000 and apply it to nursing, or why can’t he go back to college? Why do we have to take these training courses?”

“Ninety days [of training] just isn’t enough. They accelerate it even more. I’m not even where I should be in my Oracle course because they’re going so fast. There is nothing you can do. You can only read so much and really grasp it. They’re not saying ‘let’s review what we did on Monday’, they’re doing it because there is a guideline they have to follow.”

“You got to have counselors who know how to talk to people and say ‘hey, you better not do that because you’re never going to get that job’.”

“The people that were doing this [job counseling] were not professionals in the industry... They need to be.”

Findings – Spanish-Speaking Participants

The following is a summary of findings specifically from the single Spanish speaking focus group.

➤ **Overall, Spanish-speaking participants appreciated the services available to them.**

All of the participants expressed their gratitude for the services extended to them, and for the opportunity to study a vocational career. They also appreciated their career counselors and/or case managers, especially for their help and patience in getting the services they needed.

“I have a very special memory because the social worker that was assigned to me at [my agency] was so special that she informed me as if I was a little child. I had never in my life had a social worker and she gave me so many details that she convinced me to return to school. I was learning to use computers for which I am very grateful.”

“Yes, I am also very grateful to my coordinator. Well, I expected that maybe it was a job, that maybe they had some job for me. But when I got there, she told me that it was to help me prepare to find a new job. I was very grateful because that day I went, we couldn't accomplish anything because – since I didn't know English well enough – I couldn't arrive (how can I say) find a school more or less for me in Spanish. Well, I was able to find a good school with her help.”

“I am grateful for my coordinator because I didn't expect that I was going to find work right away. In general, many people were left unemployed and at the same time there aren't hundreds, but thousands, that were left unemployed. So, to find work for all of those people, it is going to take a long time.”

➤ **Comments about the training programs varied, but comments on access to training – especially training on computers and learning a specific vocation – was generally positive.**

Some participants were very happy with the training programs offered, while others felt that the English as a Second Language classes and job training programs offered were too short to be truly effective. Many appreciated learning how to use a computer for the first time.

“I worked in my department as a housekeeping steward then I told her that I didn’t want to go back to working in a restaurant. That I wanted a change. I wanted to learn other things. Then she sent me to studying English. I didn’t know anything about computers, not even how to turn one on. Now I know how to turn one on and the basics. But I told her I didn’t want to work in a restaurant anymore. I want to learn other things, what I want to learn is maintenance and carpentry, because that is what I like. Then she did some research, and now I am taking a maintenance course....What I don’t like is that the courses that are offered are too few. The duration of the course is too short. It is too little time for you to really learn a lot. For a person that doesn’t speak English, it would be difficult – no? very difficult to learn in just two months. So that is the negative aspect I see.”

“The maximum help I have received is to know what I know now. I never imagined that I would be a barber. I can’t say that I am 100% professional, but I have a vocational career.”

“The aspect that I have like is that I am in retraining, and starting to feel like a person again – because it affected me a lot emotionally. There are still times when I talk about this, I get disgusted and it bothers me....and I am going to therapy and that has helped me tremendously and, as I said, the aspect I like the most is, how can I say, the training. I am trying to become the person I was before, or I really would like to become the person I was before. That’s it.”

“What I liked is that I am going for what I have liked all of my life – studying hairstyling courses. Because, if I return to my country, I will go with my training...Now that I am getting ahead, I feel good. Everything has gone well.”

➤ **Spanish-speaking participants spoke openly of their setbacks and barriers.**

Many participants spoke of being emotionally and/or mentally distraught since September 11th, making reentry into the job market difficult. Others noted language and ethnic barriers, feeling that career counselors did not give Hispanics the same level of service as whites.

“I am receiving therapy with a psychiatrist and a psychologist. There is nothing that I liked the least. I do have problems with concentration, and especially when I was in class. Yes, there are moments when I would lose my concentration, but it has been a great help to me.”

“Well, it is something difficult to express because I am still going to group therapy mentally. The good thing is like my friend here said, if I could turn back time and that none of this would have every happened...But it is something that is difficult. I understand. I can’t complain. They have helped me. There is one aspect. There were people that you had to be constantly on their case so they would send things. How can I say? What I have seen is that they gave more to the white people. Because I have seen it. I also have friends that have also experienced that, and they have noticed.”

“I want to add something to what he said. Not only is it the whites that put barriers for Latinos. It is that the Latino comes here to work not necessarily to improve themselves. But now there are Latinos in high positions that represent many. What happens is that there are also Latinos not like in the case of the lady here, who speak English. But when we would go for help, they would not help Latino – Latino to Latino. Then you would go for help and they would turn their backs on you although they themselves were Latinos and they know how their parents came to this country and sweat a lot to feed them. However, they didn’t. This has happened to me. However, it hasn’t happened to them. They turned their backs – being Latino themselves they sit in comfortable chairs and say to us ‘no, you’ll have to wait for me, have a seat. I’ll take care of you in a while’, but a white man would arrive dressed in a shirt and tie and they would sit him down and take care of him right away. I don’t know why. That is exactly the way it is.”

“I would also like to say that they must understand that one comes affected. One comes to them traumatized. “

- ✓ **Similar to the English speakers, many Spanish-speaking participants felt that career counselors were well meaning, but should be better trained in customer service and communication. Conversely, others were very pleased with the assistance they received from their counselor.**

Several participants suggested that counselors be sensitive to their special needs; others felt that they should be better trained in customer service.

“But the least I have liked (about the program) is in relation to what my colleagues have been saying regarding good things about their coordinators. I have not had the same experience. I have had differences with her. Well, we have had several differences, but I have had to stay quiet and listen to what she says. I haven’t been willing to say anything and now being an opportune moment, I can say something. The reason we have had differences is in the

coordination of my going to study. So, in that experience there has been some disagreement.”

“I think that for things to start changing, they have to look at the very people that work with them. To change like I said, like he said, there is a lot of preferential treatment. There is a lack of training.”

➤ **Overall, Spanish speakers rated the EAP higher than non Spanish-speakers.**

Among this focus group, there was no score lower than a 6.5. Overall, their satisfaction appeared to be tied to a sense of opportunity that they feel the program offers, coupled with positive (or negative) interaction with their career counselor. The average satisfaction score among Spanish speaking participants was 8.7.

“10. I am happy because the program helps people achieve.”

“9. Because I learned a lot and my coordinator was very good at helping me.”

“7. Satisfied with the study program, in conjunction with the economic assistance. Not satisfied with the rude treatment from my coordinator, which has frustrated me and discouraged me from continuing my studies.”

➤ **When asked how the EAP could be improved, participants suggested expanding the length of training and English language instruction, and training the team of counselors in customer service.**

Some participants felt that English classes and training should be lengthened to ensure effectiveness, and job search component should be strengthened. They also said they wanted counselors who are professionally trained in communication and customer service and with job placement expertise.

“I think they should train the people that are helping us to communicate better. Rather tell them what we are going through and be more patient. I understand that they don’t only have my case, but many other cases as well, so they should train the staff well.”

SWOT Analysis

All focus group participants were asked to summarize their thoughts into an Employment Assistance Program SWOT (*Strengths, Weaknesses, Threats, Opportunities*) Analysis. **Strengths** indicated what the participants thought was positive about the program, and **Weaknesses** indicated their feelings about the negative aspects of the program. **Opportunities** outlines recommendations that they would make to the September 11th Fund to change the program, and **Threats** indicates those areas or issues that affected a person's return to work, but were out of their control. The following is a summary of the analyses collected at the closing of all eight focus groups. *Note: results from the Spanish-Speaking Focus group are distinguished in italics.*

Strengths:

- ✓ Courteous counselors
- ✓ State-of-the art computer centers
- ✓ Training to upgrade skills
- ✓ Workshops – improve resume, interviewing skills
- ✓ Opportunity to change career
- ✓ Weekly allowance that helps pay bills
- ✓ Networking – helps emotionally and professionally
- ✓ Helps people come back to the City and get out of the house
- ✓ Personalized touch of counselors and administrators
- ✓ Teaches you to stand up for yourself

- ✓ *Assistance in getting ahead by obtaining a career or vocation*
- ✓ *The opportunity to study computers and English*
- ✓ *The psychological assistance*

Weaknesses:

- ✓ Poor job search – too basic
- ✓ Not enough computers in the labs and long waits
- ✓ 13 weeks of allowance is not enough
- ✓ Counselors can seem patronizing to those with advanced skills – too eager to bump people into training
- ✓ Counselor turnover disrupts service to clients
- ✓ Communication lags – no follow up, incomplete information provided
- ✓ Changes in policies are confusing and ill-communicated
- ✓ 25 hours per week commitment is too much
- ✓ Counselors are overworked
- ✓ Some training schools are non-accredited so training is useless

- ✓ *The way the program staff treats the recipients*
- ✓ *The preferential treatment (based on race or ability to speak English)*
- ✓ *Poor communication between service coordinators and recipients*
- ✓ *Not being able to get job placement assistance quickly*
- ✓ *Not being flexible*

Opportunities:

- ✓ Apply \$4,000 to other educational opportunities
- ✓ Move training to schools/colleges that are better equipped
- ✓ Offer child care while in training
- ✓ Offer bus/train passes for meetings, interviews, etc
- ✓ Expand areas to train in
- ✓ Hire more counselors and hire translators
- ✓ Help people open new businesses and create new jobs
- ✓ Take a census of the people and their skills, then create the program
- ✓ Hire those who lost jobs to revitalize Ground Zero
- ✓ Hand out paper rather than relying on websites
- ✓ Provide larger stipends, and more allowances

- ✓ *Improve treatment of recipients*
- ✓ *Develop a training for EAP staff*
- ✓ *Expand the duration of training opportunities*
- ✓ *Extend the program for those that want to continue studying*

Threats:

- ✓ Economy in NYC and in the country
- ✓ Competition for entry level jobs
- ✓ Forced to leave your industry and start over
- ✓ Over-saturation of candidates in areas you train in
- ✓ Mayor of NY/Politics
- ✓ Age discrimination
- ✓ Employers are lowering wages since people are so desperate to work
- ✓ Stigma on those who are victims of September 11th
- ✓ Forced to take significant cut in salary/wages

- ✓ *Emotional/mental trauma*
- ✓ *The length of time it takes to overcome a traumatic experience*

Appendix

**September 11th Fund Employment Assistance Program
Customer Focus Groups**

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| 1. | Welcome and Introduction | <i>Facilitator with Session Participants</i> |
| 2. | Review of the Agenda, Ground Rules and Logistics | <i>Facilitator</i> |
| 3. | Review of Session Goal/Consent form | <i>Facilitator</i> |
| 4. | Facilitated Discussion | <i>Facilitator with Session Participants</i> |
| 5. | Wrap Up | |
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Welcoming Remarks and Introduction:

Thanks for coming here today. My name is _____ and I work for _____ and I will be your facilitator for today's session. Before we get started, I would like to pass around this roster which I would like you to sign. I would also like to take a few minutes to ask each of you to introduce yourself.

Review of the Agenda, Ground Rules and Logistics:

I am going to briefly review the ground rules for today's session, then give you a quick overview of why we are here, and what we would like to accomplish. Then, I will be asking you some questions in an effort to engage you in a thorough and in-depth conversation about your experiences and satisfaction with the Employment Assistance Program. We will then wrap up no later than _____ (time).

Today's session will last no more than one hour and thirty minutes. I would like to hear from everyone today. There are no right or wrong answers so please speak freely. We have provided refreshments for you. The session is also being recorded to help me prE.A.P.red the report when this project is done. As you can see, there is one person with me here from Rutgers University. Their job is to ensure that your input is accurately recorded. I am also going to ask you to sign consent forms which allow us to release findings from this session. Your name will not appear in any published papers and your service provider will not know who said what. If anyone has a cell phone or pager, please turn it off or set it to vibrate so we can minimize any interruptions.

Review of Session Goal:

The purpose of today's session is to talk about the September 11th Fund's Employment Assistance Program. The September 11th Fund, and the Heldrich Center at Rutgers University, the name of the organization I work for, have put in place the Employment Assistance Program to help people who were working in lower Manhattan, and who lost their jobs, to regain employment.

It is the goal of the September 11th Fund to continuously improve the program, and make it a better experience for you, and to provide meaningful services that help you regain employment. Your answers to the questions I ask today will help us to do that. You will have the chance to share your feelings/opinions about your experience with the program, and make suggestions on how to improve the program.

(At this point, the informed consent form will be presented and explained to participants - only those who agree to the terms will be included in the remainder of the focus group.)

The questions I am going to ask you focus on your satisfaction with the program, your experience to date with your service provider, and your thoughts about some of the features of the program. We also will be asking you for suggestions about how to improve the program.

Any questions so far?

Priority Topics for Discussion

- What feature or service of the program has been most helpful on your road to regain employment? What has been least valuable/helpful?
- What do you think would make this a better program?
- For those of you who have received job training through this program:
- How did you pick the type of training that you enrolled in?
- Why did you choose that type of training?
- Have you found a job in that field, or do you think you'll find a job in that field?
- If you haven't found a job yet, what have you gotten out of the training program?
- How many of you have been offered jobs since enrolling in the program?
- Did you take them? If not, why not?
- On a piece of paper, please write down your level of satisfaction with the September 11th Fund... 10 being very satisfied and 1 being not at all satisfied. Then, please write down a brief explanation for your level of satisfaction. (This activity will allow facilitator to check in with the back room to see if there are any other priority topics for discussion.)

Other Topics for Discussion

- Let's review what everyone wrote down for their satisfaction levels.
- What kinds of expectations did you have before starting the program? Did the program meet your expectations? Can you tell me more about how the program did or did not meet your expectations?
- Tell me about the assistance you are getting from your service provider/career counselor?
- Did your service provider meet your expectations? If not, why not?
- If yes, what helped you the most?
- How many have received help with searching or being placed in a job?

Close the session: Thank you very much for your help today. This focus group is one of eight that we are conducting right now about the Employment Assistance Program. Your input, along with what we hear from the other sessions, will help us to improve the program.

September 11th Fund Employment Assistance Program Customer Focus Groups

Informed Consent Form

This document serves to inform you that The Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is conducting research on the September 11th Fund Employment Assistance Program, of which you are a participant, at the request of the September 11th Fund. The results of the research will be used by the Fund to improve the program. The research will involve the collection of information from participants and of the programs.

This research will involve the request of your cooperation in participating in a focus group. The focus group may last for up to one hour and thirty minutes and will pose questions to you regarding your satisfaction and experiences with the program. There are no foreseeable risks involved in either of these research activities.

Your participation in the above mentioned research activities is strictly voluntary. Refusal to participate in the research will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits/services to you. Consent may be revoked at any time during the research period without any penalty to you. Your responses will be kept confidential and will be published without any identifying information in the final research report. The results of the research will be used by the September 11th Fund to make future improvements to the Employment Assistance Program.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Carl E. Van Horn, the Principal Investigator at 732-932-4100 x714. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Sponsored Programs Administrator at Rutgers University 732-932-0150 ext. 2104.

At this time, anyone that does not consent to participating in this focus group may leave without any negative consequences whatsoever. Remaining in the session implies your consent to participate in these research activities.