



Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota and Urban League Twin Cities

A Case Study in Changing Local
Workforce Ecosystems

November 2023

SUMMARY

This case study outlines the two-year process [Goodwill-Easter Seals of Minnesota](#) (GESMN) and [Urban League Twin Cities](#) (ULTC) undertook, working with the Markle Foundation's [Rework America Alliance](#) to influence systems change in their local workforce ecosystem. This initiative employed a holistic approach comprising three pillars:

1 Improving support available to job seekers by equipping career navigators with a skills-based and equity-driven career coaching model.

2 Removing barriers to employment faced by job seekers by helping employers adopt skills-based hiring and talent management practices.

3 Building a broad coalition of workforce practitioners and policymakers to further influence the system from multiple points.

The first year of the project focused on learning Rework America Alliance resources and integrating them into not only their respective operations but also into those of key community partners. The second year focused on systematizing and scaling those efforts.

BACKGROUND

In January 2021, following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer and midway through the COVID-19 pandemic, GESMN and ULTC partnered to address systemic workforce barriers affecting Minnesota's Black, Indigenous, and People of Color populations. Both organizations were well positioned to address these challenges as GESMN has served job seekers since 1919 and ULTC since 1926.

Common pre-employment barriers include criminal justice system involvement, disclosed disabilities, lack of transportation and/or healthcare access, and housing and food insecurity. While most worker-serving organizations are used to helping participants navigate these issues, the task is especially daunting in the Twin Cities where race- and ethnicity-based disparities pre-COVID were among the highest in the nation. One independent 2019 survey of [States with the Most Racial Integration by WalletHub](#), conducted in each of the 50 states and Washington D.C., ranked Minnesota as one of the least racially integrated at 47th (of 51) with one of the highest homeownership gaps and highest poverty gaps between white and Black residents in the country.

Testing the theory that good jobs can help stabilize families and revitalize communities, GESMN and ULTC joined the Rework America Alliance in early 2021, a nationwide partnership of civil rights groups, nonprofits, private sector employers, labor unions, educators, and others working together to get people without a college degree into better-paying jobs that provide opportunities for career growth.



The following case study documents the two-year model the partners utilized to influence system change in the Twin Cities.



APPROACH: YEAR 1

Learning and Integrating New Resources

NEW PARTNERSHIP

In partnering with the Alliance, GESMN and ULTC received access to two suites of tools designed to holistically increase opportunities for job seekers without a bachelor's degree who have gained skills through experience to move into family-sustaining jobs that enable economic mobility. These tools include resources for those who provide [career guidance to job seekers](#)—to influence the supply side of the equation—so career coaches may assist job seekers and understand the skills these job seekers possess, the value those skills have in the marketplace, and how to best market those skills to help someone get the job they want. On the demand side, the Alliance offers resources to employers and those engaging with employers to forward the adoption of inclusive, skills-based sourcing and hiring strategies to meet talent needs.

DISCOVERY

While GESMN and ULTC explored best practices for operationalizing Alliance resources within their respective organizational contexts, GESMN and ULTC also hosted a series of external convenings and exploratory meetings. The primary goal was to better understand the specific needs of people hit particularly hard by the pandemic, such as women, members of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities, and individuals without a college degree. Secondary goals included sharing their vision, outlining Alliance offerings, cataloging regional workforce needs, and building a broader coalition. Representatives attended from community-based organizations, multiple chambers of commerce, county government agencies, training providers, public policy initiatives, and private-sector employers. The forum’s findings included, but were not limited to:

- The impact of the pandemic had resurfaced and accelerated new levels of distrust of employers within the Black community.
- Gaps exist in credentialing and data on in-demand jobs.
- Service providers sought better methods for creating job seeker career pathways, especially when serving workers who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Placing them into systems that were built on white supremacy and expecting them to succeed is not the correct approach; Transformational system change is needed.
- Trainers and service providers highlighted program evaluation as a learning gap.
- Gaps in wraparound services and a decentralized referral system exist.
- Decreased engagement was observed in young job seekers.
- Technology gaps are an issue, particularly in marginalized communities. Many people do not possess technical skills, Wi-Fi access, and/or computers.
- Challenges exist in training providers meeting employer needs.

These insights highlighted gaps in the ecosystem’s offerings and laid the foundation for solution-oriented partnerships.

ACTION PLAN

Community insights forum members created the following five-point action plan:

1. **Market insights:** What were the good jobs within the area that were relevant to unemployed or underemployed individuals?
2. **Training:** What training programs existed that were affordable and accessible to such job seekers?
3. **Coaching:** What coaching resources were accessible to job seekers to help them identify good job opportunities?
4. **Employers:** How can this group secure commitments from local employers to help job seekers move into high-growth, good-paying jobs?
5. **Data tracking:** How could this group easily track programmatic outcomes to determine the initiative’s efficacy?

PROGRAM ROLLOUT

Following the planning phase, ULTC and GESMN launched their career navigation and employer engagement efforts. Tapping into the expertise of staff, the teams identified key roles to lead this work. Each organization utilized a train-the-trainer model to equip other career coaches within their organizations with the skills to operationalize Alliance tools and techniques. Based on nuances between their respective operational contexts, GESMN and ULTC utilized slightly different approaches.

For example, ULTC sent several senior-mid-level personnel through the Alliance’s [Activator Training Program](#), which equips participants with the knowledge and tools to champion skills-based talent management practices in their organization or encourage others to adopt this approach. They also participated in the online [Foundational Career Coach Skills Training series](#), which teaches a human-centered, skills-based approach to career coaching and introduces new tools and resources for career coaches. Both offerings provide tangible support for practice change that participants can use right away and allow individuals to choose what aspects work best for their respective programs. One director found the training “really enlightening and helped [him] give more to the staff at Urban League.”

GESMN, on the other hand, employs a large team of career navigators across multiple programs and locations. Career coaches work with specific populations that are tied to various funding streams (e.g. young people, justice-involved individuals, people with disabilities). GESMN coaches from each workstream completed the Foundational Career Coach Skills Training series. Ten career coaches participated initially and provided feedback on the initial training modules that uncovered a desire for a more formal cohort model with check-ins on the material and clarity around how it can be applied directly to their work—both of which were incorporated in the second year.

To further engage employers, the teams planned and rolled out their initial [Accelerator program](#) cohort late in the first year. The program, developed in partnership with McKinsey & Company, is designed to provide deep-dive guidance and technical assistance to employers seeking to recruit, hire, and grow candidates from a skills-based perspective. The partnership’s complementary nature cannot be understated here. While GESMN held a close relationship with the Minneapolis Regional Chamber that would leverage their network to attract employers, ULTC’s DEI expertise and curriculum allowed them to weave this powerful offering into the training. Eleven Twin Cities employers participated in the multiday workshop that included both group work and one-to-one coaching sessions for each employer.

FEEDBACK

Employers provided the following comments after the initial launch:

“Making a few skills-based tweaks to our program coordinator job posting yielded 12 applicants within the week and a successful candidate that was hired with a ‘backup,’ whereas previously it was hard to find anyone who passed resume screening.”

“Thinking about what we can train on versus what is required day 1 has been a mindset shift to have it be part of the hiring and retention process and the internal promotion process.”

“What I would do through the program in one hour would take me 6-8 hours to do on my own. The progress we made was incredible.”

“To me the best parts were when we broke out into small groups.... What’s unique is there was a mix of manufacturing, there were banks, there were nonprofits, there were bus companies, and we all brought this wide array of experience. And yet we were all going down the same path.”

“This helps the hiring managers gain focus during the interview to see [if the] candidate has the skills necessary for the job.... It is a better way to evaluate candidates more objectively.”

APPROACH: YEAR 2

Scaling and Sustaining Efforts

Learning from the first year of the project, GESMN and ULTC refined their model and began scaling efforts. For instance, GESMN addressed staff capacity challenges by creating one key role, a workforce development training coordinator focused on: 1) leading training and providing resources to staff related to motivational interviewing as well as facilitating career coaching discussions based on the Alliance's coaching model; and 2) facilitating the implementation of skills-based strategies with regional businesses.

With dedicated staff in place, GESMN and ULTC doubled down on three components of the original plan: furthering a skills-based, human-centered, and equity-driven career coaching model; engaging employers around skills-based hiring practices; and coalition building.

As a next step, GESMN and ULTC staff participated in a virtual cohort for career navigators, led by staff from the Markle Foundation, which yielded another 15 career coaches trained in this approach. GESMN approached the cohort using a train-the-trainer model, with their new workforce development training coordinator participating so they would be able to lead future regional cohorts. To ensure sustainability, both organizations incorporated aspects of the Foundational Career Coach Training into their respective onboarding process for new hires and professional development for existing employees.

GESMN improved job seeker outcomes using a progressive career navigation model and also expanded its employer engagement efforts. Building on the initial Accelerator program's momentum, the team interspersed short, 20-minute informational sessions between Accelerator trainings, hosting eight in total for 79 local employers. GESMN's workforce development training coordinator also facilitated four separate Accelerator trainings using two different models. The first closely mirrored the original Accelerator content, hosting four workshops across several months. The second was a one-day, five-hour intensive session during which attendees worked through all Accelerator modules. See Table 1 in the Learnings section for the tradeoffs of each approach.

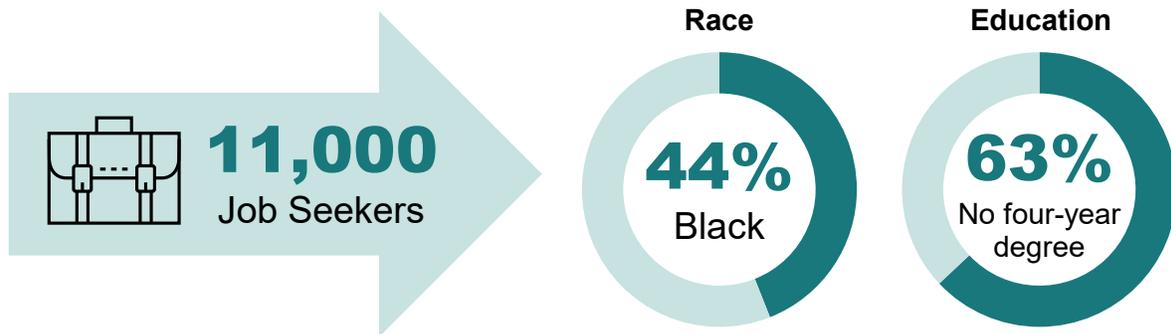
In both cases, staff from the Minneapolis Regional Chamber provided, in addition to the workforce development training coordinator, plus one-on-one coaching sessions for attending employers. This was critical as employers found the coaching one of the workshop's most valuable components.

ENGAGING COMMUNITY PARTNERS

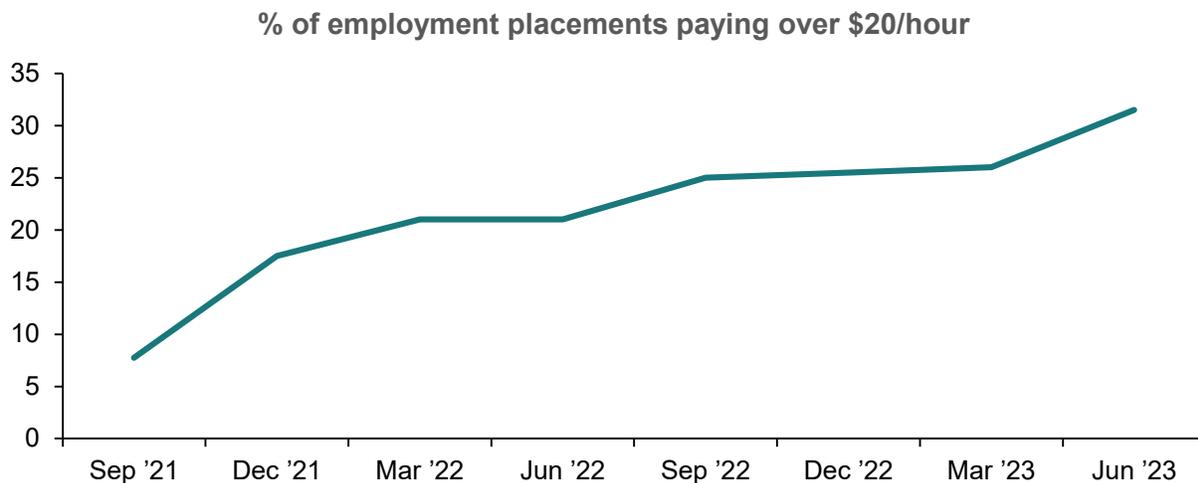
Program staff focused on community engagement in order to further expand systems impact. As the coalition grew, the core team, which now included Minneapolis Regional Chamber, explored a distributed leadership model. It formed a broader leadership team across multiple stakeholders to harness their expertise and establish true buy-in from key partners including the other regional chambers of commerce, additional key Workforce Board leaders, and the Minnesota State Dept. of Employment and Economic Development. In addition to sharing resources, this broader team also serves as a sounding board to determine project goals and objectives and solicit competitive funding opportunities.

IMPACT

During this two-year partnership, nearly 11,000 job seekers received services. Of those 4,826 (44%), identified as Black and 63% of job seekers did not hold a four-year degree.



Graph 1 illustrates that during this same timeframe, the team’s percentage of job seekers placed into jobs paying \$20 per hour or more increased significantly, from 7.8% in September 2021 to 31.4% in June 2023.



Graph 1



LEARNINGS

GESMN and ULTC's two-year efforts to begin transforming the Twin Cities workforce ecosystem produced learnings in three key areas:

1 Implementing a skills-based, human-centered, and equity-driven approach to career navigation.

2 Engaging employers in skills-based practices.

3 Coalition building and activating the broader community in both of the first two areas.

The following subsections explore these findings. Also note that impact can be made pursuing any of these areas; however, the Twin Cities team amplified its impact by focusing on multiple levers within the system, both on the supply side (helping job seekers develop and best represent their skills) and the demand side (enabling employers to attract and retain talent based on their skills)..

CAREER NAVIGATION

After GESMN ran its initial Year 1 and Year 2 cohorts, it took feedback from participating career coaches and incorporated some of the training modules to revamp onboarding for new hires. GESMN found the content to be most beneficial to newer career counselors and also complementary to the motivational interviewing training that all staff complete upon hire. It may also be helpful for job placement staff to complete the employer Accelerator program to better understand skills-based hiring from the vantage point of both employer and job seeker.

There is a clear benefit to having staff trained in skills-based hiring as more employers begin to change their practices. A cohort-based model where staff complete online training and then come together to discuss real-life applications to their work proved to be essential for effectiveness. Combining GESMN and ULTC staff in these cohorts has worked well to date and additional nonprofit partners will be incorporated into the training as funding is secured.

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

While the Twin Cities team continues to fine-tune its approach, it still holds in-person, virtual, one-day intensive sessions and series-style trainings. Table 1 breaks down the pros and cons of each; however, the following learnings apply to all formats:

- During the initial employer outreach phase, ensure connection with the highest-ranking personnel possible. Executive buy-in is critical to adoption. While recruiters, human resources representatives, and talent managers are all capable candidates to attend workshops, widespread organizational adoption hinges upon decision-maker buy-in.

Offer the deliverables up front:

“This training will result in your organization having new job posts, interview questions, and a change management process that will build resiliency across a myriad of market conditions.”

Share the content’s universality:

“Whether you have 2 employees or 50 or 200 the curriculum works.”

- For outreach, the GESMN and ULTC team leveraged existing staff-employer relationships as well as the Chamber’s network, local workforce boards, MN Department of Labor, and industry contacts.
- Employers tend to open up during one-on-one coaching sessions as perceived competitors are not in the room. After learning the foundational content, employers have universally flagged individualized coaching as instrumental to operationalizing the concepts within their respective contexts. Including his coaching time, GESMN’s workforce development training coordinator spent roughly 33% of his time facilitating Accelerator cohorts. Additionally, Chamber of Commerce staff dedicated approximately 10 hours per month to coaching.

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT (CONTINUED)

- To increase direct engagement, the team provides participants with all PowerPoint slides, supplementary materials, and links to the tools after each workshop.
- When facilitating, set the expectation that most participants won't complete the online prework. That is alright; just teach the content.
- Experiment with, and solicit feedback from, the workshops. As noted above, the team held workshops in multiple formats. Twin Cities employers held differing opinions on what format was most effective. While the combinations are endless, Table 1 outlines what the team learned about different models and their respective tradeoffs:

Table 1

Accelerator Delivery Model	Pros	Cons
Multi-day	Allows more bite-sized applications	Long workshop cadence can lead to attrition (E.g., participant finds work elsewhere, company pivots strategy)
One-day intensive	Helpful for many to see the entire linear process in one day	Employers relied on one-on-one coaching to move work forward
In-person	Creates a sense of community	May exclude some participants
Virtual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cuts out commute time • Allows for broader geographical participation 	Must utilize breakout rooms to ensure good small group discussions

- Additionally, the team has considered, but not tested, the following alternative workshops based on feedback:
 - Developing an information session for the C-Suite audience
 - Offering sector specific workshops (e.g., all manufacturing or all healthcare employers)
 - Developing a hybrid model where the foundational content is delivered in one large group and the facilitated content is done in a sector-specific environment
 - Offering the one-day intensive but also providing attendees options to dive deeper into individual components (i.e., identifying a role's core competencies, onboarding, revamping the job description, progression planning).

COMMUNITY ACTIVATION

GESMN and ULTC attribute the successful launch and sustained momentum of their employer-focused work to their regional partners' commitment to building actionable solutions. At the time, intermediaries like the Chamber of Commerce and Workforce Board were searching for answers to employer recruitment and retention challenges. Because the problem was acute and the solution the team presented was logical, buy-in from first-mover employers was relatively quick. These partners all note that the nature of the Accelerator program satisfied unmet needs in terms of taking a very practical, hands-on approach to working through one job description with the help of an employer coach.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A few important decisions furthered the team’s success. These are summarized below and can be applied or adapted to multiple operating contexts:

1. Incorporate stakeholder voice	<p>During the initiative’s deployment, the decision to include as many voices as possible was critical. As the team mapped its local ecosystem and identified gaps, its sought representatives who could speak to the workforce experience of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. When possible also recommended to include input from those receiving services too</p>
2. Focus on what you are best positioned to influence	<p>Like most local workforce landscapes, the Twin Cities region is complex. While the vision was grand, the approach was simple. GESMN and ULTC started where they could make mission-aligned impact. Landing on a dual-phased approach, the team decided to first master Alliance career navigation and employer engagement resources internally. When the team was ready to involve external partners, it was already well positioned to engage employers around skills-based hiring and retention practices, in part because of early Chamber of Commerce buy-in.</p>
3. Establish a culture of continuous improvement	<p>The ability to assess the work and quickly act on data-informed solutions was another defining feature of this effort’s success. When staff’s internal time constraints were negatively impacting outcomes, GESMN added a position to drive the work on both the career navigation and employer engagement sides. Similar use of post-workshop employer feedback illustrates the importance of using data to guide cohort design, especially when combined with an experimental approach to determine what resonates best with local employers.</p>

RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

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| 4. Top-down support is key | Leaders from GESMN and ULTC were bought in from the beginning. While they may not drive the day-to-day operations, having their executive buy-in and messaging further enables organizational adoption. It can also influence multiple departments. For example, GESMN, an operator of Goodwill Stores, is a large regional employer. Just as the team found that engaging an employer's leadership before an Activator or Accelerator training, having a CEO or executive director versed in the benefits of skills-based hiring can guide smoother adoption. |
| 5. Start small and scale | In all three areas—career navigation, employer engagement, and community activation—the Twin Cities team started where it could and scaled efforts once the foundation was built. For example, utilizing a few small cohorts of career coaches to understand Alliance content and how to best integrate it into overall service delivery led to a comprehensive and sustainable onboarding and professional development regimen. Similarly, when engaging employers one technique was to start them slowly, especially those who were hesitant or those experiencing capacity constraints. Once the team saw the return on investment from changing one or two job descriptions, it coached employers on fully integrating a skills-based approach throughout the entire talent management cycle. |
| 6. Ensure the right staff are in the right seats | While dedicating staff or funding a new position is not necessarily the recommendation, taking an honest stock of internal skill sets is. In many cases, minor restructuring to capitalize on internal talents is all that's needed. For example, GESMN's workforce development training coordinator is gifted at large group facilitation, deeply understands the Activator/Accelerator content, and also contributes a background of teaching core competencies to adults with disabilities. In this case, GESMN knew it needed all three skill sets; it just took one person to cover them. Others can determine a staffing plan prior to undertaking this work; however, constant monitoring—utilizing formal and informal methods—is critical to any endeavor's success. |
| 7. Understand your service delivery model | Examine your service delivery operations and decide which of the Foundational Career Coach Skills Training modules complement your work in the most impactful way. Just as GESMN did, enlist a high-performing team of career coaches—across population-specific funding streams, if applicable—and have them evaluate the training's offerings from an operational standpoint. Incorporate those findings into onboarding and ongoing professional development. The time this step takes to complete is contingent on multiple factors. Generally speaking, the quicker this step is completed, the quicker assessment can begin and subsequent refinements can be made. |
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CONCLUSION

This case study documents the approach GESMN and ULTC took to shift their workforce ecosystem towards a more skills-based trajectory in hopes of offering a replicable model for other communities across the nation. System change is a long-term endeavor and the work in the Twin Cities is far from complete; however, these two organizations—with the help of other stakeholders—have not only observed real impact for job seekers over the last two years but also laid a strong foundation upon which the workforce landscape is primed for more positive change.

No matter which aspects of the program others wish to adopt, pay close attention to the learning and recommendations sections contained in this document. Tailoring these considerations to the specific needs of other locales will ensure that strong foundations for workforce systems change are laid in other communities.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the teams at Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota and Urban League Twin Cities for their invaluable support and profound insights that made this case study possible.