



SkillWorksSM
PARTNERS FOR A PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE

The Public Policy Component of SkillWorks

JUNE 2009

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The Public Policy Component of SkillWorks

Public Policy Goals

One of the most unique aspects in the initial design of the SkillWorks Initiative was including public policy advocacy as one of the three “legs” defining its overall approach. Few other workforce efforts had made such an explicit and long-term investment in funding simultaneously workforce-related projects along with a policy advocacy and organizing process. The goal of the public policy component was “to achieve long-term sustainable improvements in the workforce development system’s ability to help low-skill/low-income individuals achieve family supporting incomes.” The initial idea was that the public policy work would institutionalize successful innovations emerging through the activities of the workforce partnerships and capacity building components of the Initiative.

To address the public policy goals of SkillWorks, the Funders Group issued an RFP seeking a team that would develop and implement specific strategies to move the system in the direction outlined by the public policy priorities that the funders had identified. The initial priorities were to build a broad continuum of services, create industry-responsive career ladders aimed at the advancement of low-wage workers, and increase coordination amongst all agencies involved in workforce development.

Workforce Solutions Group (WSG), the entity selected by the Funders Group, is a partnership of a variety of organizations in Massachusetts that came together to

respond to the RFP. The group’s approach had three defining elements:

- ❖ operating a regionally-based, statewide campaign;
- ❖ aligning grassroots organizing with media, research, marketing, and advocacy; and
- ❖ putting the needs of low-wage workers at the center of its efforts.

Tactically, WSG made an early decision to focus on increasing available workforce resources rather than taking on the more challenging structural issues affecting the workforce system. The theory was that by gaining credibility through its efforts to increase funding for workforce development, WSG would be better positioned to build consensus around a change agenda.

Key Stakeholders

Workforce Solutions Group

The initial organizations that came together to form WSG included the Crittenton Women’s Union, the Massachusetts Communities Action Network (formerly known as the Organizing Leadership Training Center), and the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board (WIB) Association. A fourth major partner, the AFL-CIO, was added at the request of the SkillWorks funders. All four organizations had been working on various aspects of workforce development policy independently, prior to the SkillWorks Initiative.

WSG was led by an Executive Team made up of the senior staff of the member organizations. Three of the members of the initial team had extensive experience in the workforce policy arena; the fourth member had extensive community organizing experience. While the group was diverse in terms of interests, it operated on a consensus model, meeting on a bi-weekly basis. Over time, the specific staff members changed. Two leaders in WSG with significant experience in workforce development left their positions and no longer played a leadership role within WSG. There were also many transitions in the staff assigned to work on the project by the AFL-CIO. These transitions changed the dynamics of WSG, as well as the level of experience of the group in the workforce development field. However, even with these changes, WSG was able to maintain a strong collaboration over the entire five years of the initiative.

A WSG project director was hired in February 2004 who reported directly to the Executive Team. This director took on a stronger and more proactive leadership role as the partnership evolved and by the second year of SkillWorks played a key role in facilitating consensus amongst the Executive Team, managing the leadership transition as the individuals involved in the team changed, and building relationships with state elected and appointed officials as well as other statewide workforce and educational advocacy organizations. This project director left WSG in May 2008. In the final eight months of Phase I of SkillWorks, the individual Executive Team members chose to take over the day-to-day management of the organization, which resulted in some decrease in the level of activity. A new

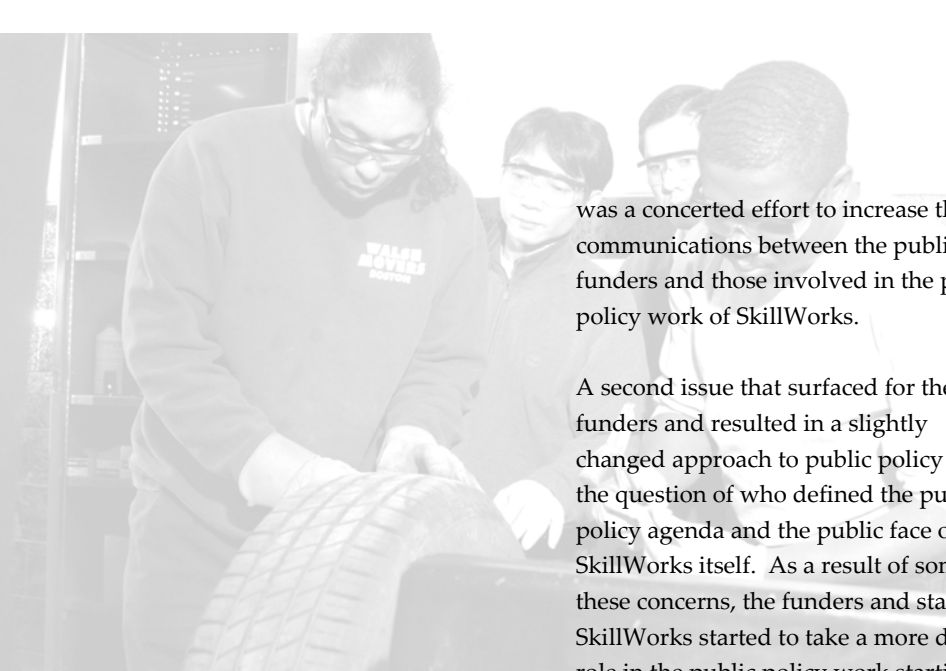
project director was hired in 2009 to manage Phase II of the SkillWorks grant to WSG.

SkillWorks Funders and Staff

For most of Phase I, the role of the Funders Group in the public policy arena involved the oversight provided by the Public Policy Committee. This Committee played a very active role in reviewing the activities of WSG and suggesting refinements to WSG policy work. The public policy role of the funders also evolved over the course of Phase I of the Initiative.

It is important to note that SkillWorks public funders (the city of Boston and commonwealth of Massachusetts) were not involved with the Public Policy Committee. Early in the Initiative, it was decided that direct city or state involvement in the public policy work could inhibit some areas of policy debate and potential for change. Moreover, it would be difficult for city and state agency employees to participate in system change activities that might be directed toward their own agencies. As a result, public funds were not utilized to support the public policy work and city and state representatives were not included on the committee.

Over time, as WSG became more involved in the design and implementation of specific public policy efforts, the absence of city or state involvement proved somewhat problematic. Over the course of Phase I, public policy issues developed in which the position taken by WSG either conflicted with a position of one of the public funders or in which the public funder felt that its experience could have led to better policy outcomes. As a result, towards the end of Phase I there



was a concerted effort to increase the communications between the public funders and those involved in the public policy work of SkillWorks.

A second issue that surfaced for the funders and resulted in a slightly changed approach to public policy was the question of who defined the public policy agenda and the public face of SkillWorks itself. As a result of some of these concerns, the funders and staff of SkillWorks started to take a more direct role in the public policy work starting in Year 3. In 2006, SkillWorks hired the Public Policy Institute to help convene the funders, partnerships, and WSG around a common public policy agenda. Additionally, the Institute's role was to facilitate more direct, one-on-one meetings between SkillWorks staff and funders and Massachusetts political leadership.

The SkillWorks Partnerships

As initially conceived, the public policy work of SkillWorks was to respond directly to learnings of the workforce partnerships. This implied that there would be a close connection developed between the partnerships and WSG. In practice, this relationship was slow to develop and the linkage between the partnerships' experiences and the policy agenda of WSG never fully materialized. Over time, however, partnership staff became involved in many of the WSG-convened meetings and an increasing effort to involve the partnerships more in the policy work did emerge.

Key Activities

Over the five years of its SkillWorks grant, WSG conducted extensive

outreach to help build a workforce development constituency, lobbied consistently for increased funding for workforce development, and played a key role in the design and implementation of important workforce development legislation. (See attached timeline for the specific activities.) At the same time, the staff of SkillWorks were involved in heightening awareness of the SkillWorks model and building relationships with key leadership in the state.

Advocacy for Increased Funding and Focus on Workforce Development

Lobbying for Increased Resources

From the outset, WSG played an active role lobbying for new funding for workforce development. Shortly after SkillWorks started in 2003, the funders identified an immediate opportunity related to an economic stimulus bill being considered by the Massachusetts legislature. Responding quickly to perceived opportunities, the funders, along with the recently funded WSG, initiated an aggressive lobbying campaign that focused on increasing funding for workforce development. This early work resulted in a \$6 million workforce development component being included in the 2004 Economic Stimulus Bill that ultimately became law, despite the governor's veto. The \$6 million in funding was used to fund sector-based workforce partnerships through BayStateWorks, the predecessor to the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund (WCTF), which was enacted in the 2006 Economic Stimulus Bill.

WSG's active efforts to affect the level of workforce funding in the annual state budget was probably the most significant activity of the group and was sustained throughout the first five years of

SkillWorks. As a result, WSG has become a well known presence on Beacon Hill.

Regional Forums

WSG ran regional forums throughout the state on a regular basis—usually at least one session a year in each of its eight regions. The purpose of these forums was not only to gather information, but also to organize and sustain a constituency for WSG’s policy efforts. The forums were perceived by workforce development practitioners throughout the state as an opportunity to learn more about what was going on at the policy level and to network with a wide range of stakeholders concerned about the skills gap in the state.

e-Newsletter

WSG developed an e-Newsletter that it released to hundreds of interested parties on a regular basis. These newsletters were a means of keeping workforce development practitioners, SkillWorks partnerships, and other workforce development stakeholders informed about the status of key budget issues, legislation, new programs, and funding opportunities.

Research Reports

WSG commissioned a number of reports with SkillWorks funding. The Center for Labor Market Research at Northeastern issued reports on family income, occupational vacancies, and regional employment patterns. In year 3, WSG commissioned two related research studies that focused on employer engagement. These reports will be released in 2009

Public Forums

WSG and SkillWorks staff developed a white paper on workforce development and convened a public session for

gubernatorial candidates during the 2006 gubernatorial campaign.

The Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund (WCTF)

The Commonwealth Corporation, a quasi-public state agency, has been investing in sector partnerships since it established the BEST program in 2001 to pool state resources to fund innovative career pathway models. Following the initial investment of \$3.5 million in BEST, the state continued to invest in these activities through BayStateWorks, a program funded through \$6 million in the 2004 Economic Stimulus Bill that WSG helped to pass. The WCTF is an evolution of these earlier efforts and was created as part of the Workforce Solutions Act written by WSG. The Commonwealth Corporation has received \$18 million in funding over the past three years for WCTF projects. Round one awarded about \$7 million to 20 career pathway projects; round two awarded about \$5 million to 11 career pathway projects; in 2008, grants were provided for about \$300,000 to seven organizations for older worker retention strategies; and, finally, in September 2008, the WCTF awarded two grants for \$100,000 for Innovative Post-Secondary Education Models. One of the highest priorities of WSG has been to further institutionalize WCTF with annual line item funding from the state.

Developing Legislation

Writing the Workforce Solutions Act

One of the most significant and time consuming activities for WSG was authoring and lobbying for the passage of the Workforce Solutions Act (WSA). The most significant components of this act were establishing the WCTF (see sidebar), increasing funding for ABE and ESOL, establishing the Educational Rewards Grant, establishing a Performance Standards and Workforce Accountability Task Force, and establishing the language needed for the state to take advantage of the federal Food Stamp Employment and Training (FSET) program.

Promoting Workforce Development Components of State Economic Development Legislation: Life Sciences and Green Jobs

WSG and SkillWorks staff have also tried to get workforce development funding integrated into any new sector- or economic development-related legislation in the state. This effort was somewhat successful, with language included in specifying that funds should be allocated for workforce training. WSG also succeeded in getting \$2 million in funding for training in the Green Jobs Bill. However, the effort to have that money channeled through the WCTF met with mixed success. Half of the \$2 million was released by the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, using an RFP very similar to (and, indeed, designed by) the staff of the Commonwealth Corporation, which oversees the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund. The other half will be released in spring 2009 through the WCTF. During 2008, WSG also worked to include some training component in any state legislation providing incentives

for film production or as part of the Construction Bond Bill.

Implementation Activities Related to the WSA

During Years 4 and 5, WSG staff, the Executive Team, and the SkillWorks director became very involved in efforts to effectively implement some of the programs and initiatives that came out of the successful passage of the Workforce Solutions Act. Specific activities have included:

Food Stamp Employment and Training

WSG and the SkillWorks director worked with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), the agency charged with implementing FSET, to define procedures for administering the program and, ultimately, to launch a pilot program in early 2007. Additionally, WSG was involved in a national lobbying effort to change the federal "120 hour rule," which limits state reimbursement to food stamp recipients who work or receive training for less than 120 hours per month. The federal advocacy efforts, led by The Workforce Alliance (TWA), a national workforce development advocacy group, lobbied to get a provision into the Senate Farm Bill that would eliminate this restriction. TWA was successful in this effort, and WSG's role in the lobbying effort was considered essential. With this rule change, a number of community-based organizations have begun to more actively and successfully pursue FSET funding and there is increased hope that there will be a considerable increase in federal FSET funds flowing into Massachusetts over the next few years.

Educational Rewards Grant Program

The WSA included \$1.5 million in funding for a new initiative, the Education Rewards Grant program, aimed at providing low-income students, including those attending school less than part-time, with grants for college degree or certificate programs as well as support for nonacademic needs like childcare and transportation. Implementation of this program proved difficult, with significant bureaucratic problems related to its management by the state. WSG was actively involved in getting the program implemented and in helping to market it in the state. Through the end of 2008, WSG was instrumental in helping to get about 75 percent of the \$1.5 million allocated for the program utilized.

Performance Standards and Accountability Task Force and Involvement in the MWIB

The Accountability Task Force, established through the WSA, was charged with developing recommendations on improvements to the state's workforce system, with particular attention to evaluating and analyzing state policies related to governance and performance measures. After a long delay, the Task Force was convened by the Massachusetts Legislature during the summer of 2007, with significant representation from WSG. While the Task Force was meeting, the new governor's administration was simultaneously trying to rebuild the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board (MWIB) under new leadership. The administration believed that a stronger MWIB would be the most effective path for achieving some of the specific system reform ideas that were to be explored through the Task Force. As the administration's plans became clearer, WSG and SkillWorks also

concluded that a strengthened and more engaged MWIB, with their involvement, would serve the same purpose as the Accountability Task Force as conceived in the legislation.

At the end of December 2007, the Task Force issued its report that included looking at models for performance and accountability systems and submitted an Annual Performance Report on the workforce system. The Task Force was disbanded and the MWIB was charged with providing the oversight, vision, and policies for performance management for the Commonwealth's workforce development system. WSG and SkillWorks continue to play an important role on the MWIB's Performance Subcommittee as well as other subcommittees established under the revitalized MWIB.

Outcomes

More Funding for the Workforce System

While some of the early successes related to system funding have been threatened by the state's fiscal condition, over the past five years WSG was successful in getting more funding into the workforce development system for priorities related to SkillWorks' overall goals. Most notable has been the total of approximately \$24 million that has gone into sector career pathway projects at the state level (\$6 million in the 2004 Economic Stimulus Bill, \$11 million in the 2006 Stimulus Bill, and \$7 million transferred through administrative action in FY08). In addition, as a result of the work of WSG there has been between \$1.3-\$1.7 million drawn down by the state for FSET reimbursements and about \$900,000 in grants awarded to part-time

External Factors Affecting Public Policy Outcomes

There were two major external factors that had a serious impact on the public policy outcomes of SkillWorks in Phase I.

- 1) With the election of Deval Patrick as governor came new leadership in key state workforce-related positions. As a result, WSG and SkillWorks now had a partner who shared many of the same principles in workforce development. It is unclear if some of the positive outcomes could have occurred without a supportive administration.
 - 2) On the other hand, the changing fiscal condition of the state created a serious challenge as WSG worked to consolidate some of its early victories. With declining state revenues, WSG faced significant barriers in achieving some of its public policy goals, particularly in FY08 and FY09.
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college students through the Educational Rewards Grant.

Institutionalizing the Sector Career Pathways Model through the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund

Perhaps more important than helping secure funds for sector-based career pathway projects in the Commonwealth has been the effort by WSG to institutionalize WCTF and create a permanent line item for this type of workforce funding. In 2008, WSG was successful in having the WCTF become part of the Bay State Competitiveness Fund. This Fund was established to use the first \$100 million in net surplus to fund the Life Sciences Investment Fund as well as six other funds, including \$15 million for the WCTF. Unfortunately, due to budget conditions, there was not the surplus anticipated to support these activities. Nevertheless, WSG has continued working to make sure that this funding model is also included in future budgets.

Whether or not WCTF receives a direct line from the state, it has become institutionalized and is seen as the place to go to pilot new, innovative workforce initiatives in the Commonwealth. An indication of this success has been the use of WCTF as one of the vehicles for funding renewable energy career pathway projects through the Green Communities Act, as well as a source of workforce development services for the life sciences sector. More recently, WCTF is at the center of discussions around how to use federal stimulus from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Raising Awareness and Building a Constituency for Workforce Development

One of the key outcomes of the public policy work has been the building of a statewide network of organizations and businesses interested in workforce development. WSG has developed a broad constituency for the public policy work and has engaged close to 600 individuals as part of its regional forums and other outreach activities. The many press reports on the WSA are evidence of the success of WSG in reaching the broader public and increasing the general awareness of the importance of workforce development to Massachusetts. While difficult to measure, this increased awareness and the organizing of a constituency may be one of the more important long-term outcomes of the work of WSG.

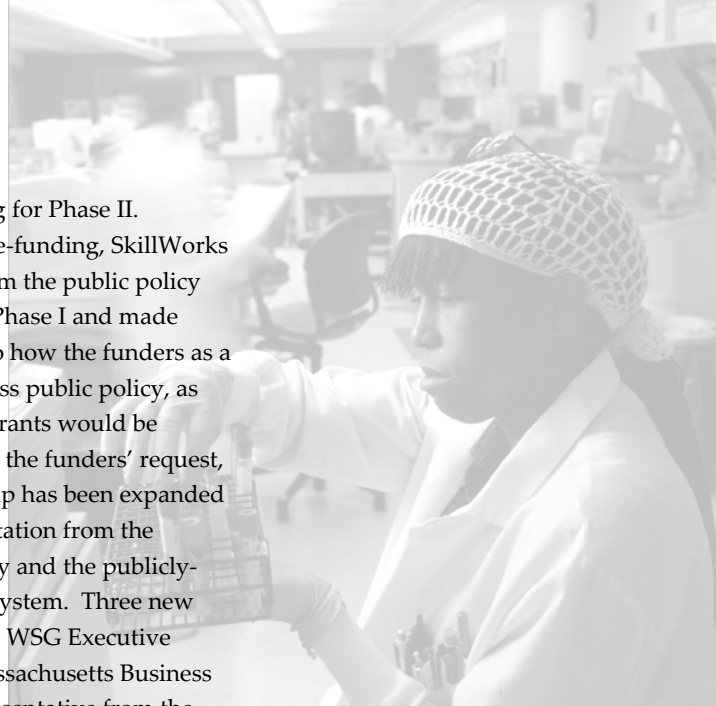
WSG has also been successful at bridging some of the divisions amongst the multiple groups that have been involved in workforce development in the Commonwealth. Over the past five years there has been significant improvement in WSG's relationships with many other workforce-related organizations in the state. WSG has developed more effective working relationships with some of the adult education groups, with organizations such as the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations and with the Massachusetts Workforce Alliance. These groups, working more collaboratively, can have a greater overall impact on raising awareness about the critical workforce issues facing the state.

Conclusions

WSG faced a number of ongoing challenges over the five years of Phase I of SkillWorks. These have included maintaining the momentum in light of long delays in passing the WSA legislation and balancing the individual interests of members of the Executive Team and WSG as a whole. Another challenge was balancing the statewide perspective of the WSG policy work with the Boston focus of the SkillWorks Initiative. There were times over the course of Phase I when some of the policy directions most appropriate for the state as a whole were not the highest priorities of the city of Boston. The SkillWorks funders and staff have also faced the challenge of developing their own policy presence and ensuring that the perspectives of the public funders were considered as the public policy work developed. In the face of these challenges, the collaboration created through WSG not only was sustained, but also grew deeper. Moreover, WSG, working in partnership with the SkillWorks funders and staff, has built a coalition that may have long lasting effects on how the Commonwealth undertakes workforce development.

As the SkillWorks funders looked to continue their efforts in public policy in Phase II, they recognized the successes achieved by WSG and decided to

continue its funding for Phase II. However, in their re-funding, SkillWorks funders learned from the public policy experience during Phase I and made some revisions as to how the funders as a group would address public policy, as well as how WSG grants would be structured. First, at the funders' request, the WSG partnership has been expanded to include representation from the business community and the publicly-funded workforce system. Three new members joined the WSG Executive Committee: the Massachusetts Business Roundtable; a representative from the Workforce Investment Association of Massachusetts; and a representative from Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies. In addition, as part of the planning for Phase II, WSG conducted focus groups with the partnership representatives to explore how it could strengthen the relationship between the public policy work and the partnerships. WSG's plans for Phase II include much closer interaction between the workforce partnerships and the public policy work of SkillWorks. Finally, SkillWorks has structured a role for the public funders in the public policy work by involving them as non-voting members of the Public Policy Committee. With these changes, SkillWorks hopes to be able to make further progress over the next five years along the pathway to longer-term and sustainable changes in the Commonwealth's workforce development system.



Lessons Learned

- ❖ **Cultivate relationships with state leadership in both the executive level agencies and in the legislature.** Both the SkillWorks director and WSG spent a considerable amount of time building relationships with the leaders of the various state and city agencies involved in workforce development as well as with key legislators and their staffs. These relationships have been critical throughout Phase I of SkillWorks and have helped to ensure that the overall approach of SkillWorks is part of the public policy discourse on workforce development.
- ❖ **Be opportunistic and flexible enough to respond quickly to address opportunities that arise as well as crises.** During Phase I of SkillWorks, Massachusetts elected a new governor and went through a cycle of fiscal crises. There were shifts in how workforce development was managed at the state level as well as a new emphasis on supporting the life sciences sector and green jobs. From its start, SkillWorks was able to identify opportunities and mobilize quickly to respond to opportunity. While it maintained a set of goals, it was never tied to a rigid policy agenda and was able to adapt as the political environment changed. A good example of this flexibility was WSG's shift in focus from membership on the Legislative Accountability Task Force that emerged from the Workforce Solutions Act, to becoming fully engaged in the revitalized Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board.
- ❖ **Balance efforts focused on increasing resources with a more specific policy agenda.** While it is important to be flexible, more specificity about the policy agenda could help to channel attention on specific workforce issues. WSG, working closely with the SkillWorks funders, made significant progress in raising awareness of the importance of workforce development and in helping to increase funding for workforce development. However, the annual struggle to maintain the funding for the system always took precedence over the more complex and structural elements of the policy change agenda, particularly after the Workforce Solutions Act was passed. Developing a more specific set of policy objectives that is pursued with the same level of attention could provide more of a balance between a focus on resources and a focus on system change.

TIMELINE OF SKILLWORKS PUBLIC POLICY WORK IN PHASE I

TIME	ACTIVITIES
11/03	WSG received SkillWorks grant
YEAR 1: 11/03 – 3/04	Immediate successful effort to include \$6 million for workforce development in the state's Economic Stimulus Bill
YEAR 1: 3/04- 12/04	Statewide organizing and outreach — regional forums and outreach Involvement in design of BEST III Funding
YEAR 2: 12/04 – 6/05	Development of the Workforce Solutions Act of 2005 Outreach, messaging, and lobbying related to WSA Organizing WSG constituents as part of the Legislative “Jobs Growth Listening Tour” Initiated email updates to constituents Commissioned research reports by Center for labor Market Studies on job vacancies and occupational projects
YEAR 2: 6/05 – 12/05	Continued lobbying for WSA Began work looking at FSET
YEAR 3: 12/05 – 6/06	Continued lobbying for WSA Convening of regional planning groups Employer Engagement memo prepared (1/06) Initial research reports received Work with SkillWorks staff in development of “Vision for Gubernatorial Leadership” and Gubernatorial Forum on Jobs and Opportunity 6/29/06
YEAR 3: 7/06 – 11/06	Passage of the WSA (July 2006) - \$24.5 million in state investment, FSET, Accountability Task Force, and Educational Rewards Program Release of initial research reports Assistance in design of WCTF RFP
YEAR 4: 12/06 – 6/07	SkillWorks hires Public Policy Institute to enhance the Initiative's public policy work New governor's Workforce Development Team in place/focus on building relationships Implementation activities related to FSET & Educational Rewards Lobbying for making WCTF permanent line item and FY08 Budget Workforce Accountability Task Force appointed Employer engagement research funded
YEAR 4: 7/07 – 11/07	Additional \$7 million transferred to WCTF by Secretary Bump Workforce Accountability Task Force meets
YEAR 4: 12/07 – 6/08	Accountability Task Force report submitted WSG staff director leaves RFP for second round of WCTF grant funds released Continued lobbying to make WCTF permanent budget line item and regional meetings WSG helps secure workforce component in Life Sciences Bill and Green Jobs Bill MWIB takes lead on performance measures, workplace ABE, and other priority issues of WSG
YEAR 4: 6/08 – 11/08	Employer engagement research report released WSG helps to get new FSET rules as part of National Farm Bill Work on Phase II refunding — expanding the partnerships

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SkillWorks, a public-private partnership, is addressing the needs of employers for more skilled workers and of workers for more and better access to jobs that pay a family-supporting wage.

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This report was made possible by SkillWorks' funders. The authors thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented are the authors' alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these funders.