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Career Centers in D.C. Faulted in New Report

Long Waits, Rudeness Among Complaints

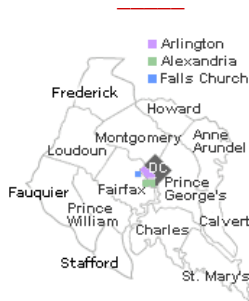
By Sarah Schafer and Sewell Chan
 Washington Post Staff Writers
 Wednesday, June 27, 2001;
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After a year of operation, the District's one-stop career centers often fail to meet their basic goal of providing skills assessments, literacy services and other forms of employment assistance, according to a report to be released today.

The D.C. Jobs Council, a coalition of job training organizations, social service agencies and advocates for the poor, tracked 43 people who had used the centers since February. The report found that many were kept waiting for appointments, had trouble obtaining basic information, were treated rudely by staff or were not provided other promised services, such as help in finding child care and transportation.

Two Spanish-speaking testers were told they could not use the centers' services if they didn't speak English. None of the job seekers, who came from diverse demographic and educational backgrounds, found work by using

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the centers, according to the report.

The findings surprised some of the report's designers. The centers, part of a nationwide system created in 1998 by the federal Workforce Investment Act, are intended to serve unemployed residents or low-income people looking for higher-paying jobs with better benefits.

"We expected some barriers to training. What we did not expect was to see so many barriers to basic services," said Kerry O'Brien, of the D.C. Employment Justice Center, a nonprofit organization that helped prepared the report.

Gregory P. Irish, head of the D.C. Department of Employment Services, which runs the centers, said he was puzzled by the criticism because the centers have received positive evaluations from the U.S. Department of Labor, and four citations and \$25,000 from the National Association of Workforce Boards.

The District has four one-stop centers -- at 2626 Naylor Rd. SE, 401 M St. SW, 4049 South Capitol St. SW and at the city government headquarters, 441 Fourth St. NW.

The four centers have been used by 4,500 people and provided individualized services to 1,000 of them, Irish said.

The centers are supposed to provide basic services, including job listings, assessments and information on child care and transportation; intensive assistance, including personal counseling; and job training. But the report said the testers had trouble obtaining even the most basic services.

Irish said the services are based on eligibility and are "not an entitlement program."

"You are accepted for services based on ability to benefit from the program," he said, adding that not all individuals who approach the centers qualify for all forms of employment assistance.

The report said that job seekers obtained helpful information from job counselors but that making an appointment with a counselor was often difficult.

One of the report's most pressing criticisms is that the centers did not provide job seekers with formal assessments of their basic skills or potential eligibility.

The report recommended that the centers improve bilingual services, punctuality of appointments, staffing levels and computer training for job seekers.

Irish said the centers have 12 Spanish-speaking staff members and are recruiting more bilingual workers. He said he welcomes specific complaints and has hired an independent contractor to review customer service.

The report is part of a larger, nationwide assessment of the centers led by the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support.

One of the job seekers, a 47-year-old man who did not want to be identified, said that the staff at the one-stop center he used seemed friendly but that the experience was not what he had expected. He said he called ahead to schedule an appointment at the Naylor Road center but was not told to bring a résumé.

"I just thought you'd go in and they would help you job search," he said.

His appointment with the counselor lasted about 25 minutes, he said. The counselor asked him to leaf through a thick book of job openings, none of which the former janitor, who left high school during his junior year, felt he was qualified to fill.

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