



News

WORKFORCE INVESTMENT BOARD HONORED IN WASHINGTON

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Workforce Investment Board Executive Director Mary Sarris, fifth from left, with colleagues, from left, Paul Ventresca, Katie Crowder, Dianne Palter Gill, Nancy Huntington Stager, Ed O'Sullivan, Gina Frey, Arthur Bowes, David Manning and Mark Whitmore.

BY BRIDGET TURCOTTE

LYNN — The Workforce Investment Board (WIB) was honored in **Washington, D.C.** this week for leading a 10-person team in a **Customer-Centered Design Project** to improve its employment services to companies in the area.

The team, known as the **North Shore Workforce Innovent**, came up with a customer-centered design research technique that focuses on listening to those involved in an issue to develop appropriate and efficient responses to the issue.

“The process itself is based on asking the people who are having the problems how to fix it, rather than trying to fix it yourself,” said **Mary Sarris, WIB executive director**. “It seems kind of common sense.

“We don’t say ‘we think this’ or ‘that would work,’” she said. “We listened openly and designed a pilot based on that solution.”

The 10-person team is comprised of representatives from WIB, the **North Shore Career Center, North Shore Community Action Program, and North Shore Community College**.

The project is sponsored by the **U.S. Department of Labor**. North Shore Workforce Innovent’s approach was one of 11 chosen winners out of more than 70 applications submitted by participating workforce boards.

“In a way, it was a contest. It was a challenge,” said Sarris. “A challenge to use this new approach to learn what companies needed for talent search services and to implement something at the Career Center that piloted this approach.

“During a lot of the Summer and Fall (months), we talked to companies across the region and asked them about the best experience they’ve had with filling their talent needs,” she said. “From that, we learned that companies, when they’re trying to find talent and they’re using an intermediary, want a relationship with that organization. They want to feel comfortable that organization understands their culture.

The team then developed a short term and long term action plan. A plan to use existing technology to speed up response time was implemented.

“We’re learning about how accurate we are in knowing what a company wants,” she said.

Sarris said the group did not expect to be chosen to attend the learning exchange when it sent in its application.

“We thought ‘what the heck, we like our idea,’” she said. “We applied and were chosen. It was such an honor to be picked and such an opportunity to listen to people who work for the federal government who are interested in this sort of work and are looking for innovative approaches.”

As part of the challenge, the group took an online course and learned about instances across the world where the approach has worked effectively. The process spanned from August to December, when the application was submitted, she said.

The 11 chosen workforce boards were invited to an event in Washington D.C., held at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building

Members of the group traveled to Washington D.C. Tuesday, where they had the opportunity to talk to colleagues across the country and listen to ideas.

“Initially, we heard from some people at the U.S. Department of Labor,” Sarris said. “Then there was a panel presentation from three of the teams about how the projects went.

“We spent the next couple of hours discussing how the projects worked, strengths, why we even did it in the first place, what motivated us to do it, and the issues we ran into in the middle of it,” she said. “Listening to what they did and how it worked, we learned a lot.”

An additional project WIB has taken on, longer term, is working with the **Salem State University Bertolon School of Business** classes on implementing LEAN approaches.

“LEAN is a way that you review your systems to make sure they are as efficient as they can be,” Sarris said.

LEAN techniques set daily goals, track errors, and find ways to improve processes. LEAN techniques are commonly used as management tools in manufacturing sectors.

The **Career Center** is working with one particular business class and will employ one student as an intern, who will work at the Career Center and observe how things go.

“The student will bring the information back to the class and the class will work on (finding) better ways to do things,” Sarris said.

“At our Career Centers, we like to think we are efficient and smooth at handling both job seekers and companies. But we have never analyzed it like a manufacturing company would analyse their processes,” she said.

“From NSCC’s perspective, everything that is done to help strengthen job matching abilities is not only in the best interest of our students, but also gives a competitive advantage to our many business partners,” said **Dianne Palter Gill**, NSCC’s Dean of Corporate and Community Education and a partner in the project.

“We know this creative approach will set the standard for how Career Centers and workforce systems in general, all across the Nation, work in the future,” she said.

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