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INTS 4937  
May 9, 2003

## **Spring Institute WorkStyles Program: Briefing Paper**

### **Background**

The Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning is a non-profit organization based in Denver, Colorado. This organization provides a variety of services through numerous targeted programs. The Spring Institute serves as a consultant to local businesses that do business in other countries in order to prepare their staff to work in a culturally competent manner. Additionally, the agency provides services to local refugees through ESL programs. The Spring Institute also manages the Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Family Initiative (SIRFI) grant. This grant provides support, including technical assistance, to agencies in Colorado that provide services to refugees. Finally, the Spring Institute provides pre-employment training to refugees through the WorkStyles program. Ultimately, all of the programs offered by the Spring Institute revolve around facilitating communication across cultures. This briefing paper is going to focus on the WorkStyles pre-employment training program.

### *Mission*

“The Spring Institute is dedicated to demonstrating that national, cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences need not be barriers to understanding cooperation. The Spring Institute works in partnership with individuals, community groups, organizations and businesses to facilitate communication, growth and the acquisition of new skills and technology. The Spring Institute is committed to the philosophy that intercultural sharing and communication among people contributes to a more peaceful world” ([www.spring-institute.org/pages/aboutus.html](http://www.spring-institute.org/pages/aboutus.html)).

### *Funding*

The WorkStyles program is funded through two federal grants: the first is channeled through the Mayor’s Office of Workforce Development and the second through the Colorado Refugee Service Program. While the Mayor’s Office of Workforce Development grant is a targeted assistance grant, which is specific to refugees living in Denver, the Colorado Refugee Service Program allows WorkStyles to provide services to refugees living outside of Denver. Each grant provides 50 percent of the funding to WorkStyles.

### **Program Overview**

While the Spring Institute has been in existence since 1979, the WorkStyles program began in 1985. This program prepares refugees for employment within the American culture. The program provides pre-employment training for refugees, covering a variety of topics including effective communication, interview skills, conflict resolution, body language, how to fill out an application and problem solving. Furthermore, the course teaches refugees about various ways of finding a job and important vocabulary they will need in this process. The workshops last two weeks and involve role-playing and other

interactive activities to educate the participants about the “culture of employment” and work environments in the United States. The participants learn about the importance of active listening and communication. A major strength of the program is that participants actually practice what they are learning with each other, which helps to further develop their skills. For example, the trainers will role-play a job interview with one of the participants. This role-play is tape-recorded. Afterwards, the group watches the video and evaluates the interviewee on various criteria including body language, communication skills and how questions were answered. This is one of many valuable exercises that refugees in this program participate in.

Clients are primarily referred to WorkStyles from Lutheran Family Services, Ecumenical Refugee Services, Jewish Family Services and the African Community Center. These are Colorado’s four VOLAGs. Sometimes, the Colorado Refugee Services Program will refer a client who has been in Colorado over a year, but this rarely occurs. Usually, refugees who participate in the WorkStyles program are recent arrivals to this country. Refugees who participate in this program come from all over the world and a variety of languages and cultures are usually represented.

The training philosophy of the Spring Institute in general and WorkStyles in particular involves an interactive, integrated approach. “The Spring Institute uses a learner-centered, competency-based teaching methodology. Lessons begin with what the participants already know and activities are designed to maximize their participation in the learning process” (<http://www.spring-institute.org/pages/philosophy.html>). Additionally, the training incorporates the Spring Institute’s core values of learning, respect, quality and service. Furthermore, the training emphasizes learning and practice of tasks that will be necessary in the workplace. When observing this program, it is obvious how powerful this philosophy is in practice. The trainers have a passion for the work, which is evident in how they facilitate the course. The trainers engage the participants in a variety of ways and encourage their participation at every level. In this sense, the participants are active learners. The trainers are also very flexible and willing to spend more time on a topic than initially planned if a special need or interest exists.

Participants who enroll in the WorkStyles program complete a needs assessment prior to beginning the course. This serves as a pre-test for the program. After completing the course participants are given the same test in order to evaluate how much they have learned. Participants are also given the opportunity to fill out an evaluation of the program, where they can provide feedback. When participants leave the program they are given a report, which includes a narrative describing what they have learned and accomplished throughout the course. Furthermore, they leave prepared to look for employment with a completed resume.

Since September 11, 2001, and all of the policy implications that have occurred as a result of this tragedy, the number of refugees coming to the United States has been drastically reduced. As a result, WorkStyles has experienced a decline in the number of people it serves. It is often difficult to facilitate this program when the group of

participants have vastly different language abilities and literacy levels. The facilitator is challenged with keeping everyone engaged and preventing both boredom and frustration

### **Key Accomplishments**

- The WorkStyles program is currently facilitating its 154<sup>th</sup> course since the program was initiated in 1985.
- In talking with case managers who assist refugees with job placement, Chris Tombari believes that close to 100 percent of participants of WorkStyles are placed in jobs. Tombari noted however that there is no study or data to show that there is a direct link between participation in WorkStyles and obtaining employment. However, anecdotally, this has proven to be true.
- There are various anecdotal accomplishments. Often the two-week courses are filled with participants from a variety of cultures, languages and backgrounds. In this context cross-cultural communication is at its best. Tombari describes how it is truly amazing to observe a group of people who have never met each other and who are very different from each other, work together and complete lessons and activities in English.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- WorkStyles should expand its program evaluation to include measures of job placement and retention among participants. This would be of great value to funders, stakeholders and participants. Furthermore, it would give the Spring Institute an additional measure of success.

### References

Tombari, Chris. (29 April 2003). Personal Communication.

Spring Institute (2003). <http://www.spring-institute.org/pages/philosophy.html>