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November 24, 2010

Karen A. Staha
U.S. Department of Labor
Employment and Training Administration
Office of Policy Development and Research
200 Constitution Avenue, NW, Room S-5206
Washington, D.C. 20210

Dear Ms. Staha:

Thank you for offering states the opportunity to review and comment on the U.S. Department of Labor's (U.S. DOL) comment request for information collection for the data validation requirement extension with no changes that was published in the Federal Register on September 27, 2010. Staff from our Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Title 1 and Title 3, and Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) programs has reviewed the proposed requirements following the Review Focus criteria described in the announcement. Our comments and suggestions are addressed below.

Evaluate whether the proposed collection of information is necessary for the proper performance of the functions of the agency, including whether the information will have practical utility.

We agree that data validation activities have value and generally support the U.S. DOL's efforts to promote and refine these requirements. Wisconsin has used data validation results to improve the quality of our program and performance data over the past several program years.

Evaluate the accuracy of the agency's estimate of the burden of the proposed collection of information, including the validity of the methodology and assumptions used.

We question U.S. DOL's statement that states and grantees are able to conduct data validation with a "reasonable, but sustained, level of effort." States perform this task because they are required to do so. The constraints that are placed upon staff to conduct the data element validation activities are not, in our opinion, "reasonable" under the currently defined process. Wisconsin, like most states, is enduring continuing budget cuts for U.S. DOL-funded programs while travel expenses are increasing at an alarming rate. It is becoming less cost-effective for teams of validators to travel to local offices and spend three days or more reviewing and validating participant case files. As travel budgets are squeezed, staff will have less opportunity to take advantage of U.S. DOL-sponsored conferences and training because of this continuing requirement, for which no additional funds have been provided beyond our annual WIA allocations. In addition, state staff reductions have resulted in fewer staff available to complete this time consuming task.

Requests for waivers that would allow us to conduct data element validation in-house are usually denied. In discussions with Regional and National Office staff, we got the distinct impression that U.S. DOL believes that if not for data validation, staff would never visit local offices. Nothing could be further from the truth in Wisconsin. Staff visit local offices several times a year for the purposes of monitoring, technical assistance and program guidance. Roundtables and other training activities are scheduled each year to increase the opportunities for dialogue between state program managers and local staff and grantees about all facets of our programs. Therefore, we ask that U.S. DOL re-visit the data

element validation process and afford states more flexibility in getting the job done efficiently and in a more cost-effective manner than the current process allows.

Enhance the quality, utility, and clarity of the information to be collected.

The software, user guides and report submission processes continue to be the weakest points in the data validation effort. We understand the problems that arise when dealing with contractor-developed software and do not feel that U.S. DOL's efforts to improve this situation are yielding satisfactory results. Even after several years of data element validation with the same developer, there are too many problems with software. Problems from the previous year or version are fixed and then new problems are created.

Part of the problem, we believe, is the National Office's tendency to continuously change the performance standards and program reporting requirements faster than most state and local reporting systems can adjust to the changes. We encourage U.S. DOL to consider changing data validation to a biennial, rather than an annual activity. This would allow the software developers ample time to test their software and reduce the "bugs," create User Guides that are user-friendly, and give U.S. DOL time to analyze and publish results from previous years to determine if data validation is effective.

The following are events that occurred in the Program Year (PY) 2008 data validation cycle, many of which are recurrences of previous program years.

- To our knowledge, states have never received any analysis of data element validation results - how other states are doing; common errors/error rates, etc. We have no way to measure our progress or compare our results to other states.
- Each year, the software is released in numerous versions and patches. Even then, additional problems arise that require states to submit their files to the software developers who "fix" the file and return it to us so that we can submit the report electronically. As we have commented in previous program years, this development and repair cycle is difficult to contend with because of our own information technology security requirements and policies. A biennial process, as we suggested above, would likely improve the quality of the tools that are given to us to conduct data validation activities.
- The software-generated worksheets did not have identifying information on all pages (only first page). Worksheets have to be printed on paper and carried out into the field to conduct the data element validation. Since the worksheets range from one to four pages per participant, the lack of identifying information on each page (e.g., observation number, participant name) increases the risk of the worksheets being separated and mismatched or lost.
- The software provides us with no ability to produce local-level reports or custom reports. This minimizes the software's utility in identifying data quality issues in individual workforce development areas (WDAs).
- The software is sluggish and requires excessive amounts of system resources, even with personal computers that are built to the developer's specifications. The PY08 version was even slower than previous versions and required more key strokes for entering data. We urge U.S. DOL to move this software from a PC-based system to a network or mainframe application that is compatible with multiple operating systems and platforms. This would resolve a number of the problems discussed in this section.
- In earlier versions of the software, it was easier to "find" the records to enter data element validation results; the most recent version is a lot more time-consuming.
- Data for some elements does not print on worksheets, but appears on computer screen. This creates problems for data entry staff and creates a greater risk for reporting errors which may invalidate the validation results.

Minimize the burden of the collection of information on those who are to respond, including through the use of appropriate automated, electronic, mechanical or other technological collection techniques or other forms of information technology, e.g., permitting electronic submissions of responses.

As noted above, multiple releases and software updates/patches are not available until the end of the program year. States cannot upload and install software as quickly as the various versions of each year's data validation application are published. However, given past experience, we do not believe it is reasonable for U.S. DOL to remove the start-up burden from the Office of Management and Budget inventory if we are continuously installing new software and performing all of the tasks related to that start-up, in order to perform data validation. As stated previously, moving validation to a biennial activity would allow time to produce a more acceptable set of software for states' use.

In addition, staff has the following comments and suggestions regarding data element validation:

- Many of the elements required to be validated do not directly relate to performance. For example: date entered training and date completed training. We believe it is more important to validate that an individual received training, rather than verifying the beginning and ending dates for that training.
- Veteran status is not an eligibility criterion. Documentation other than the DD-214 should be acceptable.
- The WIA Title 1 Adult program does not have income eligibility criteria. However, most local areas collect this information (e.g., low income, public assistance) and enter it into our reporting system. If selected for data validation, the file documentation is usually present for just one of the items since income eligibility is not required. Case managers report public assistance per information from the participant. Thus, there usually is not anything in the file to document both public assistance and low income.
- With the emphasis on reducing paperwork and addressing identity theft issues case managers should be able to verify that they viewed a document rather than photocopying documents. We have asked DOL for guidance on which documents can be copied. As of this date, we have not received a response.
- We believe the validation standards fail to fully consider how automated data systems are replacing and streamlining local participant data collection processes, particularly as those standards relate to individual identifiers, demographic and participant characteristics.

We are fully aware of the scrutiny that information systems and program reporting requirements are under at the National level and the push for tighter security of personally identifiable information. We hope that U.S. DOL staff will consider the utility of data-sharing agreements that states have entered into with other Federal and state data collection systems to ensure the validity and accuracy of our participant and program data at the point of entry into our workforce programs.

I hope you will find these comments and suggestions helpful and that they will help U.S. DOL continuously improve its product and evaluation processes. If you have any questions about this correspondence, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,



Gary Denis
Bureau Director