A Q&A with Maria Heidkamp

Maria Heidkamp is a senior researcher at the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development. Her work includes research and technical assistance projects on issues that affect dislocated workers, older workers, the long-term unemployed, and persons with disabilities. Maria is also the director of the New Start Career Network, which will offer assistance to long-term unemployed residents of New Jersey.

Can you tell me about the New Start Career Network? What is your role on the project?

With generous support from the Philip and Tammy Murphy Family Foundation and several prominent New Jersey employers, the Heldrich Center is currently developing the New Start Career Network (NSCN) to coordinate a range of free-of-charge services dedicated to helping long-term unemployed New Jerseyans, especially those over the age of 45. NSCN will provide access to information about the labor market, careers, education and training, and job search strategies. While many of these resources will be available online through a members’ website, we know that many individuals need personal assistance as well as virtual services. NSCN is also working to establish a volunteer counseling corps of job coaches and access to mental health and financial advisors as well. We want to help individuals get the customized support and services they need to return to work.

A critical component of our activities will be raising awareness among New Jersey’s employers, encouraging them to consider the long-term unemployed for job openings, and reviewing hiring practices that inadvertently screen out many highly qualified applicants. We will encourage employers to commit to creating internship, “returnship,” on-the-job training, or other trial employment positions to help the long-term unemployed demonstrate that they have the skills and experience to do the job. We will also collaborate with New Jersey’s public workforce system, the labor department’s industry-specific talent networks, community colleges, nonprofit organizations, libraries, job clubs, faith-based institutions, and others.

This project will enable us to blend our research with our operational skills. That said, our evaluation and research projects are almost always geared toward generating actionable recommendations to design and improve programs, and in this case, we will draw heavily on what we’ve observed through our research efforts. In some ways, it will be similar to the Heldrich Center’s work in the aftermath of 9/11, when the Center helped design and operate programs serving 11,000 dislocated workers who lost jobs following the terrorist attacks in lower Manhattan.

I am the director of this project. As we prepare for the launch of the network, I am working closely with Heldrich Center leadership to develop and design the model as well as to identify partners who will be willing to work with us.
In your research, what have you found that the long-term unemployed are currently experiencing? Why is this group in particular struggling in the current economy/workforce?

Research has found that the longer an individual is out of work, the less likely he or she is to get another job. This includes individuals from all backgrounds and all educational and skill levels; a college or graduate degree does not protect against long-term unemployment. The ill effects of long-term unemployment are more severe for older workers.

Long-term unemployment is devastating to individuals, their families, and their communities. The Heldrich Center’s Work Trends surveys have found that the reductions in income and savings have resulted in some individuals losing homes, selling possessions, cutting back on necessary medical care, and employing other coping mechanisms to make ends meet. These surveys have also found adverse physical and mental health effects. Many of the long-term unemployed suffer from isolation, stress, anxiety, and depression. One recent study found that long-term unemployment can permanently alter an individual’s personality, and not for the better.

Few services are available to help this population. Heldrich Center research has found that currently, most long-term unemployed job seekers do not receive assistance from the public workforce system or meet with a job coach or counselor. Most access nothing beyond their unemployment insurance benefits (for those who are eligible for them), and by the time people enter the long-term unemployment phase, their unemployment insurance benefits have expired.

Though few people know it, New Jersey has the second highest rate of long-term unemployment in the nation, with 4 in 10 of the state’s job seekers unable to find work for six months or more. Of the more than 125,000 New Jersey residents who count as long-term unemployed, nearly three-quarters of them have been out of work a year or more, making them the “very” long-term unemployed. These numbers do not count the thousands more who have simply given up searching for work, or who are under-employed in part-time jobs when they would prefer full-time ones.

What can be done/is being done to assist the long-term unemployed?

We know from our research that the long-term unemployed need reliable, unbiased advice about skills in demand and about what, if any, educational and training opportunities make sense for them, as well as how to pay for education and training they may need. They often need help with networking, both online and in person, since we know that many jobs are found through contacts, referrals, and word of mouth. They may need access to job clubs, peer support groups, mental health services, and financial counseling. Many of them need an advocate to help them connect to employers, who may be wary of hiring them simply because they have been unemployed so long, even when they have the required skills and credentials.

Drawing on our research, we are incorporating elements into the NSCN model based on emerging promising practices we have studied elsewhere. For example, there are a few models being tested around the nation that incorporate components for mental health counseling, subsidized employment opportunities, volunteer counseling opportunities, and dedicated websites.

Another valuable initiative is under way through New Jersey’s community colleges, which received a $10 million Ready to Work grant from the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) and $2 million from the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development to help up to 1,000 long-term unemployed get into training programs tied to local employer needs over the next several years.

What area of research are you most passionate about?

I became interested in dislocated worker issues in college when I received a research grant to study how Weirton Steel in West Virginia avoided a shutdown by becoming an employee-owned business. Older and dislocated worker issues remain my primary interests, though I’m also interested in postsecondary education and how the workplace is rapidly changing due to technology and the rise of part-time and “gig” employment.
How do your projects tie in with your research interests?

Launching NSCN is a chance to combine my research interests with hands-on development of a model to help New Jersey’s long-term unemployed. It’s a dream project for me. In many ways it’s similar to what I did for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and USDOL in Hungary, which involved developing a model, building a coalition of partners, implementing the model, monitoring results, and eventually finding ways to institutionalize the model through new policies and programs.

What is your educational and professional background?

Prior to joining the Heldrich Center 10 years ago, I was director of an initiative supported by USAID and USDOL that was helping the Hungarian government develop a system for coping with the mass layoffs that were occurring as a result of the transition from communism. I worked with the Hungarian Ministry of Labor and county labor centers to develop “rapid response” services that included using labor-management committees to help the workers with reemployment and also strategies for local economic development. I spent time at steel mills, uranium and coal mines, canning factories, meat processing plants, bus manufacturers, and porcelain companies, and also worked with public administrations having layoffs. We even had a project that involved working with the Hungarian army as it was restructuring to prepare for NATO entry. Among other jobs, previously I worked for the National Governors Association in employment and training issues with a focus on dislocated workers. I have a Bachelor’s degree from Cornell University and a Master’s degree from New York University.

What hobbies do you enjoy when you’re not working?

I’m involved in different ways with my three kids’ various choir and musical theater activities. I’ve just completed a year as the parent association president for the American Boychoir School and am in my third year as a choir manager for the Princeton Girlchoir Ensemble. I’m also an avid gym goer, enjoy boxing, and love old movies, reading, and long walks, especially in Cape Cod.

About the Heldrich Center

The Heldrich Center researches and implements strategies that increase workers’ skills and employability, strengthen the ability of companies to compete, create jobs where they are needed, and improve the quality and performance of the workforce development system. For 18 years, the Heldrich Center has worked with partners and clients to translate cutting-edge research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, unions, schools, community-based organizations, and government officials can leverage to strengthen the nation’s workforce. Connect with us at www.heldrich.rutgers.edu