Section 3.4 Financial Aid Support Office

Introduction

Workforce Solutions has one central unit responsible for handling initial and continuing customer eligibility for all our financial aid. We call that unit the Financial Aid Support Office.

The Support Office serves as the hub between system staff who work with customers needing financial aid and Payment Office staff who pay the vendors and track the money. The Support Office works directly with: (1) staff throughout the Workforce Solutions system; and (2) customers requesting financial aid for training, work support and assistance with child care expenses.

Last year Workforce Solutions determined just over 47,000 individual customers eligible for more than $130 million financial aid.

Workforce Solutions provides financial aid to support people’s ability to work, search for work or train for work. Our financial aid falls into the following categories:

- **Work** – this is the largest category of financial aid by dollar and includes substantial support for child care expenses to working parents, and one-time support for individuals to take a job (transportation, clothing, tools and equipment, licenses, documents)

- **Education and Work-Based Learning** – this category includes scholarships for training and education (tuition and fees, books and supplies, on-going transportation support), payments for training at or for a specific employer or group of employers (on-the-job training, custom training, current worker training, apprenticeships), and subsidized short-term jobs (work experience)

- **Work Search** – this category includes one-time or short-term support for individuals to look for a job (transportation, clothing, licenses, documents)

We fund financial aid from a variety of sources, including but not limited to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Title I, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Child Care and Development Block Grant, and the Trade Act.

Current Operations

Currently the Support Office contractor provides the following functions for Workforce Solutions System:

- Employs staff to give customers information about Workforce Solutions financial aid – how to apply, how to establish and maintain eligibility, answer questions and updates information from current financial aid recipients

- Screens financial aid applications from new customers and customers applying to continue receipt of financial aid. Contacts those applicants to discuss eligibility requirements to receive requested financial aid

- Collects documents submitted by the customer as proof of eligibility and maintains these records in DocuWare

- Determines the customer’s eligibility for all fund sources available to support requested service/s

- Notifies the customer, career office and payment office staff of eligibility determination

- Receives appeals when the Support Office makes determinations to deny, reduce or discontinue a customer’s financial aid. If the Support Office decides the initial determination should stand, the Support Office transfers the appeal to the Tracking Unit to complete the processing of the appeal.

- Records information in The Workforce Information System of Texas (TWIST)

- Provides good customer service, including meeting deadlines for processing financial aid applications and returning customer calls

- Is responsible for assuring that Gulf Coast meets the expected number of children served with child care financial aid

- Will incorporate special projects into the daily work schedule as appropriate

- Manages State exception reports by updating requested information and following up so that cases are up-to-date.

Performance and Production

We expect the Support Office contractor to meet the following performance and production requirements. The Support Office will:

1. Process all applications received each week by determining those applications eligible or not eligible
    a. Measure: At least 95% of all applications within five business days of receipt.
    b. Measure: At least 95% of applications received each day are entered into Workforce Solutions electronic MIS on the day that they are received.
    c. Measure: 95% of actions taken on a customer's application for financial aid or her receipt of financial aid are documented in TWIST on the day the action is taken
2. Notify each customer who applies for financial aid within one to three business days of receiving the application to notify customer of application receipt and processing.
3. Answer all telephone calls received each day.
4. Minimize customer wait times on telephones
    a. Measure: The average wait time on telephone is 10 minutes or less for every customer.
5. Respond to customer voice mail, email, or text messages within one business day.
6. Listen to the customer and respond professionally and courteously to answer a question, address a concern, suggest a next step, or provide advice.
7. Notify customers timely about the status of their financial aid applications or actions to discontinue financial aid
    a. Measure: 100% of customers receive written notification of the decision to fund or deny their financial aid application and written notification is sent no later than one business day after the decision to fund or deny.
    b. Measure: 100% of customers who the Financial Aid Call Center determines are not eligible for financial aid or have their aid discontinued receive with the written notification of denial: (1) an explanation for the reason why financial aid was denied or discontinued and (2) written forms and instructions on how to appeal a denial of financial aid.
    c. Measure: 95% of customers who have their applications for financial aid approved will receive direct contact from a Financial Aid Call Center staff member within one business day after the decision in order to provide guidance and establish the financial aid.
8. Notify customers timely about the status of their absences or other issues with the child care automated attendance requirements and promptly resolve customer issues with the automated attendance system.
9. Monitor enrollments for child care financial aid weekly and authorize financial aid for sufficient numbers of customers from the registry in order to ensure that the average number of children served remains at or near the annual target established by the Board.

How It Works

Support Office staff deal directly with customers applying for financial aid. They use various Management Information Systems to communicate with Payment Office and Career Office staff. Support Office provide a weekly update to Board staff who then informs the Workforce Solutions system about how many days a customer should expect to wait before hearing from someone at the Office regarding her application. Support Office staff:

- Respond to calls from customers applying for financial aid, inquiring about an application or notifying us about problems with receipt of financial aid. Examples of common problems include malfunctioning swipe machines at day care Offices or questions about disqualification letters.

- Receives customer's financial aid applications and referral requests forwarded from career office staff, directly from customers and Department of Family and Protective Services-Children Protective Services (DFPS).

- Contact customers who apply for financial aid to discuss our requirements for providing eligibility proof.

- Review each application and determine eligibility for all fund sources available to the customer for her requested service.

- Notify the customer, payment office, and career office when a customer is eligible for financial aid.

- Coordinate closely with the Payment Office to reserve funds by individual and fund source for eligible customers. They do this electronically using the Financial Aid Management System (FAMS) or TWIST.

- Use TWIST to provide information on the customer's chosen child care vendor and FAMS to provide information on the vendor for all other financial aid.

- Notify child care vendors by mail that our customer is eligible for Workforce Solutions funding to subsidize care. They notify career office staff and FAPO to provide customers' vouchers for scholarship expenses, cash substitute cards, or checks to pay for other forms of financial aid.

- Check TWIST notes entered by career office counselors to determine when to notify FAPO that the customer has received an authorized service.

- Send letters to customers when it is time to recertify yearly eligibility for child care financial aid.

- Notify customers on Workforce Solutions' child care wait list or scholarship registry when aid becomes available.

- Send required warning letters to customers in danger of losing financial aid for non-compliance with rules.

- Send letters to notify customers when we deny, reduce or discontinue financial aid.

- Hear initial customer appeals to decisions to deny, discontinue or reduce financial aid.

- Maintain accurate, thorough records including electronic files of documents customers provide to establish eligibility for financial aid and copies of all US mail communication.

- Maintain TWIST records noting customer fund eligibility and summarizing conversations with customers and staff throughout the system.

- Timely process income exception reports for customers and Children's Protective Services (provided by the Board staff) and notify Payment Office and Board staff of customers that are potentially ineligible to continue receiving financial aid.

Successful Bidders

We expect the successful bidder to be able to:

- Provide high quality customer service as defined by Workforce Solutions "I AM Workforce Solutions" campaign
- Maintain a robust Support Office able to efficiently handle a large volume of incoming customer calls
- Manage a large staff flexible enough to perform a variety of duties depending on volume
- Oversee financial eligibility for all Workforce Solutions fund sources applying all applicable rules
- Meet deadlines for customer contact, eligibility determination and customer notification
- Use personal contact and all available Management Information Systems to communicate effectively throughout the system
- Consider co-locating with the Financial Aid Payment Office
- Provide call reports to include at least number of calls received, customer hold times, time to return voice mail messages
- Provide reports for number of applications received and processed. Number approved and denied. Time to process an application from receipt of initial application and from receipt of all required proof of eligibility

- Work income exception and Children’s Protective Services reports timely. Provide information to the Payment Office to follow up on possible funds recoupment. Send updates to Board staff timely
- Work with partner organizations to use standardized labeling to input documents into the Management Information System
- Offer ideas and innovative techniques on how to continuously improve customer service
- Assume operational management of the Trade Act/Trade Adjustment Assistance team housed at the Support Office. This team supports the career office staff in ensuring trade act services are properly provided to customers who need it. The Support Office responsibilities include but are not limited to oversight and quality assurance for TAA customer records served in the Gulf Coast area, the review and approval of waivers and re-employment plans, answering career office staff and customer questions regarding TAA eligibility, and ensuring applicable Federal rules and regulations are used to approve training for TAA funding.

How to Submit a Proposal

Submit your proposal in the following order:

1.0 Proposal Cover Sheet
2.0 Information about your organization
3.0 Information about your proposal
4.0 Budget and staffing summary
5.0 Assurances and certifications
6.0 Copy of organization’s most recent audit and audited financial statements

Information about Your Organization

Provide the following information for us in a narrative that is <u>no more than 12 pages</u>:

1. A description of the organizational structure and why it is structured this way. Is the organization for profit or non-profit? Explain how this organizational arrangement supports Workforce Solutions business model. (no more than 2 pages)
2. An organization chart that shows graphically how your organization operates. (no more than 1 page)
3. Information about any governing boards such as a board of directors or advisory boards. Provide the names and terms of Board members. Include information about affiliated organizations such as subsidiaries or parent companies, and specifically describe relationships. (no more than 2 pages)
4. A list of the key staff for your organization. Identify the principals and leadership and describe their responsibilities, experience and length of service with your organization.

Which principals, if any, would be assigned to work on Workforce Solutions contract? Who controls the management of your organization? (no more than 2 pages)

5. A description of your organization's mission, vision, and values, if you have them. Describe who developed them and how they were developed. How does your organization communicate the vision, mission and core values? How are they expressed in the organization? (no more than 2 pages)
6. A description of how your organization's mission supports that of the Gulf Coast Workforce Board. Describe how you will ensure that your organization's mission, vision and values will not supplant or confuse the Workforce Board's mission in operation of the project. (no more than 1 page)
7. A description of your financial stability and any comments you wish to make about your credit rating, your payment policies, and any recognition you may have received from accrediting or other bodies for organization or financial excellence. Has your organization experienced any financial difficulty in the past five years? (no more than 1 page)
8. Include references from at least three organizations that have contracted with your organization to provide services similar to those proposed (name of organization, contact person, telephone/email, amount of contract, service provided). (no more than 1 page)

Information about Your Proposal

Provide the following information for us in a narrative that is <u>no more than 20 pages</u>:

1. A description of your organization's experience in handling a customer support Office including a Support Office operation. Discuss your experience managing staff to accommodate fluctuating call volume. (no more than 3 pages)
2. Describe your customer service policy. Include information about training staff to provide good customer service and how you follow up to ensure staff is trained and that you're getting positive outcome from the training. Also, describe how you monitor telephone customer service. (no more than 2 pages)
3. Tell us how you solicit customer feedback and how you use feedback to improve your service with both internal and external customers (no more than 1 page)
4. Tell us what hours of operation you propose and how you will staff if you intend to be available to customers more than Monday through Friday 8am to 5pm to accommodate customers who can't contact you during normal working hours. Also describe how you could use the time to keep up with daily work. (no more than 1 page)
5. We currently use DocuWare as the data management system to store customer records electronically. If you are proposing a different system, describe your data management system and how it can be used to file records electronically. For DocuWare or a different system, tell us how the system will be accessible to partners in the Gulf Coast's system who need access to the records and how you'll get the partners to use a uniform labeling method to identify customer documents. (no more than 2 pages)

6. Describe your proposed telephone system. Include specifications you consider important in handling the call volume found in this request's resources section. At a minimum include the following: (no more than 6 pages)
   a. Total number of daily calls your proposed system can accommodate
   b. Number of available queue menus
   c. Number of available voice mail boxes
   d. Number of available direct lines to be assigned to specific staff members
   e. Reporting on hold time, dropped, and abandoned calls
   f. Tell us the process or requirement necessary for you to expand the system you propose.
   g. Does your system allow for a supervisor to listen/take over staff/customer interactions
7. Describe experience related to your current business in meeting deadlines. For example, Workforce Solutions requires contractors to give each customer an answer about her eligibility within 20 days of application submission. (no more than 2 pages)
8. Describe any experience you have making decisions about eligibility for a customer benefit based on rules used to determine the customer's eligibility for the benefit. How did you train staff to apply all relevant rules and monitor for compliance with the rules while maintaining timeframes to complete eligibility determinations? (no more than 2 pages)
9. Describe how you would use technology to provide increased and more efficient service. Offer some possible examples or descriptions of the technology. (no more than 1 page)
10. Describe how you will analyze operational data to improve the process and make it more efficient. (no more than 1 page)
11. We want to contract with an organization that has the capacity to review operations and process and suggest changes and improvements that will (1) provide quicker and more responsive service to customers, (2) reduce cost, (3) generate efficiencies in operations. Describe how you will do this. (no more than 2 pages)
12. What steps will you take to ensure that any facilities where customers are served, provide physical accessibility in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Texas Accessibility Survey (TAS) guidelines?
13. How will ensure that your services are delivered in a way that makes them equally accessible to individuals with all types of disabilities?

Budget and Staffing

Use the Financial Aid Staffing Table and Budget form provided for the Support Office bidders. Provide a narrative back-up which describes in detail your budget line items. Provide a budget for the first year of the project only. Provide job descriptions for all positions in your staffing summary, and be sure to include the following functions among the duties in your job descriptions:

- Customer service
- Eligibility determination
- Electronic File Maintenance
- Management

All support Office staff must be housed in one location.

Staffing levels, job duties and pay for any current operation are in the Resources section of this request. You will need to add job duties and pay for the data management and systems analyst positions.

Read the General Budget Requirements page in the Resources section before preparing a budget.

Assurances and Certifications

Use the forms provided in this request. Be sure to include all required forms (certifications for debarment, lobbying, and drug-free workplace; Texas franchise tax; Texas state assessments; the general assurances and certifications; and the conflict of interest questionnaire), and be sure that all are properly signed by an authorized representative of your organization.

Audit and Financial Statements

Attach a copy of your organization's most recent organizational audit as well as audited financial statements.