

Kara Conroy, Elizabeth Brown, Nickie Fung, Jessica F. Harding, Jeanette Holdbrook, Max Rankin, and Grace Roemer

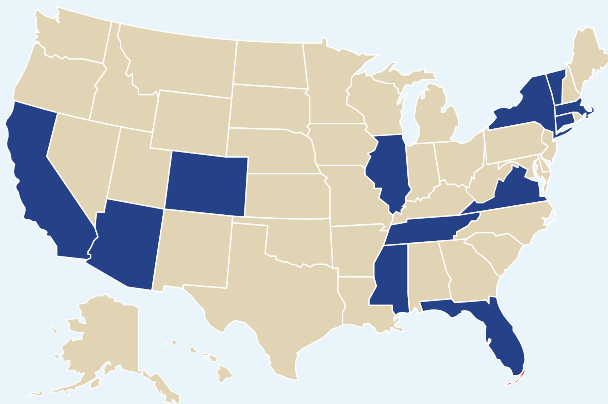
Setting Achievable Training and Employment Goals and Demonstrating Progress

Strengthening Working Families Initiative

The U.S. Department of Labor established the Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) to help parents gain the training and education needed to increase their skills to obtain or advance in jobs in high-growth industries that often rely on visas to hire skilled foreign workers. SWFI grantees aimed to increase access to education and training by mitigating barriers that parents face, especially barriers to child care. To achieve SWFI's ambitious goals, grantees also sought to create sustainable local changes to help families navigate the workforce and child care systems after the grants end.

Mathematica's SWFI technical assistance (TA) team supported grantees in these ambitious efforts. This brief shares grantee strategies and lessons learned through TA and coaching activities.

Grantees: 13 nonprofit organizations, local workforce development boards, institutions of higher learning, and municipalities in 12 states



Required partners: Workforce entities, education and training providers, child care services, business entities

Target industries: Primarily information technology (IT), health care, and advanced manufacturing

Timeline: 2016–2021; grantees were providing services in the context of the public health emergency

Grant amount: \$4 million maximum per grantee

SWFI grantees set goals and tracked progress for five participant-level metrics defined by the U.S. Department of Labor: the number of participants who (1) were served, (2) began education or job training, (3) completed training, (4) completed training and obtained a credential, and (5) entered employment. Given SWFI's ambitious focus on serving parents with high needs through both the workforce and child care systems, some grantees faced challenges reaching their goals. As grantees approached the final months of their grants, they reflected on lessons learned about setting achievable performance goals and demonstrating progress toward those goals. These perspectives may be useful to practitioners as they plan grant-funded programs and could also help funders as they support grantees.

Lessons learned

Setting achievable goals

Use performance from prior grants to inform goal setting.

Several grantees used their experiences from previous grants to help set achievable goals for their SWFI programs. Although this was a useful approach, they shared that organizations should carefully consider similarities as well as differences across grant programs as they establish goals. To use previous grants for goal setting, organizations should pay attention to similarities and differences in two areas: (1) the objectives, target populations, eligibility requirements, types and intensity of services, and duration of the grants, and (2) the definitions for data elements and measures used to set goals and track performance.

Commit to feasible services and outcomes. Some grantees highlighted the importance of connecting their grant writing and planning efforts to the staff who would be responsible for providing services. For example, one grantee noted that its planning department developed its grant application with limited input from program staff. As a result, the grant application included services the program staff could not provide. Other grantees noted that staff transitions could also make it difficult to understand the rationale behind certain goals; documenting how and why certain goals were established may help grantee organizations in the event of turnover.

Allot enough time for start-up activities. Most grantees shared that they would have benefitted from a dedicated start-up period before making progress toward their goals. Before they could start moving participants through training and into employment, grantees spent their time solidifying the range of partnerships needed for successful implementation, finding or creating high quality trainings, and establishing data collection procedures. Several grantees felt that getting their grant operations up and running took longer than expected and that they had been playing catch-up since the beginning of their grants.

When setting performance goals, consider:

- Local labor market demand for the grant's target industries
- Prevalence of the target population in your service area
- Goals and performance on previous grants, accounting for differences in target populations, grant-defined definitions, and duration
- Input from program staff on feasibility of proposed services
- Time needed for start-up activities before making progress toward goals

Demonstrating progress

Establish data sharing agreements. State workforce and other data systems can be used to collect and report participant outcomes. If a grantee organization does not have access to these systems, it should consider data sharing agreements with its state agency and community partners.

Leverage partnerships and contracts with training providers. Several grantees noted how instrumental training providers were in collecting outcome data on training completion and credentialing. Grantees were most successful in collecting data from training providers when they had a cohort of participants enrolled with a provider and set clear expectations that they would be asking providers for data regularly. Some grantees used their contracts to require providers to collect outcome data on credentials and employment as well as meet certain outcome benchmarks to receive full compensation.

Maintain contact with participants. Grantees acknowledged the importance of relationships between SWFI staff and participants in encouraging participants to keep the program informed of their progress. One grantee credited its ability to reliably collect outcome data to the close relationships case managers built with their participants. Because case managers acted as champions for participants, the people with whom they worked naturally wanted to share if they finally passed an exam or got a job in their field. Some grantees that placed participants in training programs that included students from a broader population (for example, at community colleges) shared that their participants had less allegiance to SWFI and thus less motivation to share their outcomes with SWFI staff.

Provide incentives. Grantees that offered incentives found it an extremely helpful strategy to motivate participants to provide employment and credentialing data. For example, one grantee fielded a six-question survey to participants to collect information on their current employment, job tenure, and wages. If participants answered all six questions, they received a \$50 fuel card. If they replied but did not answer all six questions, they received a \$20 fuel card.

Ask for support. It can be challenging to keep track of required data elements, how the different elements are defined, and how to move data from internal systems to a funder's reporting system all while providing services to the community. This can be especially challenging if an organization does not have a lot of experience collecting and reporting these types of data. Grantees should reach out to funders for clarification and support as soon as a need arises to ensure that they can meet performance reporting requirements and accurately capture how services have contributed to participant outcomes.

To demonstrate progress:

- Ensure a clear understanding of funders' expectations for performance data collection and reporting.
 - Seek clarification, if needed, on definitions for performance data elements and measures.
 - Build staff capacity and experience in performance reporting and data-driven decision making.
 - Use incentives, if allowed, and other strategies to encourage participants and partners to share outcome data.
-

SWFI Brief series

This [series of briefs](#) presents strategies and lessons learned through the provision of TA and coaching to SWFI grantees by Mathematica and its partner, the Urban Institute. The briefs cover the following topics:

- Recruiting parents for entry into middle- and high-skilled employment
- Training and credentialing strategies to support working families
- Supporting parents with child care during training
- Expanding employer engagement and job placement
- Integrating workforce and child care systems and promoting sustainability
- Setting achievable training and employment goals and demonstrating progress

To learn more about how Mathematica provides program TA, see [this brief](#) on providing TA to grantees that helped families navigate the workforce and child care systems.

Suggested citation: Conroy, K., E. Brown, N. Fung, J.F. Harding, J. Holdbrook., M. Rankin, and G. Roemer. "Setting Achievable Training and Employment Goals and Demonstrating Progress." Washington, DC: Mathematica, 2021.

This brief has been funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, under Contract Number GS-10F-0050L/1630DC-17-F-00002. The contents of this report do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Labor, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement of same by the U.S. Government. This project was managed by the Division of Strategic Investments.