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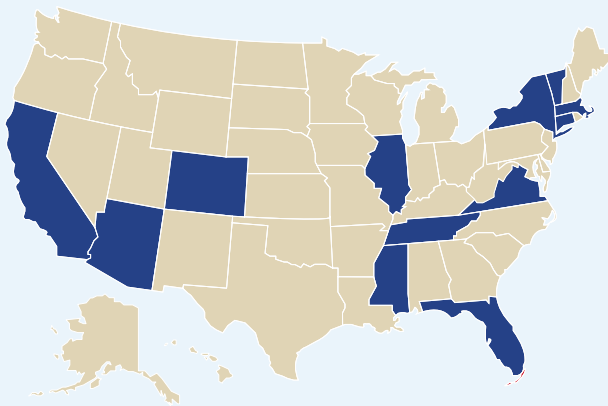
Expanding Employer Engagement and Job Placement

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 offered trainings to help parents enter or advance along a career pathway leading to higher-wage, middle- to high-skilled jobs in information technology (IT), health care, and advanced manufacturing.

As a requirement of their grant—to facilitate ongoing employer engagement and ensure strong labor market attachment for training participants—grantee organizations partnered with business entities like local chambers of commerce or consortia of several businesses. Grantees defined the scope of their partnerships, which could involve business entities informing program design, providing resources to support training (for example, by providing instructors or participating in Registered Apprenticeships), or hiring qualified participants.

The brief highlights some of the strategies grantees used to partner with employers and lessons learned through those efforts.

Strategies

Used multiple methods to engage new and existing employer partners. All SWFI grantees stated that engaging with employers was key to their programs' success. In practice, grantees engaged with employers to varying degrees. To facilitate engagement with employers, some grantees hired dedicated SWFI employer engagement staff; others accessed their organizations' existing business engagement networks. These staff reached out to area employers in their target industries to understand employers' needs and explain how SWFI could help employers train their current employees or recruit new ones. Most SWFI and grantee business engagement staff used multiple methods to engage employers, including informal one-on-one conversations, monthly group meetings, and presentations to professional or regional industry associations. City of Phoenix's business solutions specialist used a structured needs assessment to learn what local employers look for in their hiring process so they could better match job candidates to each employer. Most grantees sought to expand their network of employers throughout the grant period and some deepened their existing employer relationships.

Facilitated job placements through direct connections with employers or job search assistance. Strategies for placing participants in employment varied across grantees, with some grantees making direct connections with employers to fill open positions. Others supported participants with job search assistance, mock interviews, connections to job or hiring fairs, informational interviews, or meet-and-greets with area employers. Alachua Bradford Regional Workforce Board (doing business as CareerSource North Central Florida) held a reverse job fair, where SWFI graduates promoted themselves at their own tables and employers walked around to meet them—all 15 of the graduates who participated received multiple job offers. Another grantee started the grant period with very few employer relationships and initially only assisted participants in finding placements through supported job search. As a result, the grantee struggled to place participants in jobs, so it built relationships with area employers to more directly connect training participants with available job opportunities.

Involved employers in designing training programs and worked to be responsive to their evolving needs. Some grantees sought employers' help in designing training programs to create a training-to-employment pipeline. Some grantees held employer roundtables to understand employer needs, keep apprised of changing labor market conditions, and discuss how SWFI programs could better meet the needs of the employers. In monthly meetings with employers, one grantee, OAI Inc., learned that employers valued soft skills, so the grantee incorporated a soft skill development boot camp into its education and training courses.

Involving employers in training program design

On the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, Moore Community House worked with Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College and Ingalls Shipbuilding, an advanced manufacturing employer, to develop a customized boot camp training. Participants who completed Moore Community House's seven-week General Industry Pre-Apprenticeship course or two-week Women in Trades 101 course received priority access to the boot camp on specific industry information and skills needed for shipbuilding. Ingalls hired participants who completed the boot camp as helper apprentices at a \$17–\$20 per-hour wage.

Maintained employer relationships through the public health emergency. SWFI grantees reported that during stay-at-home orders and as the public health emergency continued, many of their employer partners were forced to freeze hiring, lay off staff, or even close temporarily or permanently. Grantees worked to stay in contact with employers and found that many advanced manufacturing employers were able to hire SWFI participants again by fall 2020. Several grantees shared that their health care employers continued to hire throughout the public health emergency but struggled to fill positions; placing participants with health care credentials was fast and easy, which motivated grantees to keep the pipeline of health care trainees open for employers. At the same time, many participants expressed concern about entering the health care industry during a global pandemic. For some grantees, this hindered participant recruitment, training enrollment, and placement with employers. To allay participants' concerns, some grantees provided information about the health and safety precautions health care employers were taking. One grantee required participants to attend an in-person orientation to assess which participants were more likely to be comfortable in a health care setting and commit to training.

Lessons learned

Job placements were easier and faster in some industries than others. Grantees with IT training programs found that employers typically required job applicants to have several years of relevant job experience, making it difficult to place participants in training-related employment. Several grantees that focused on advanced manufacturing industries had long-established partnerships with employers, and relied heavily on these partnerships to successfully place participants in employment. Grantees with health care training programs reported that certified medical assistants, certified nursing assistants, and licensed practical nurses were the easiest placements to make. With huge labor market demand for these health care credentials, most participants had job placements upon or before finishing credentialing exams.

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Tapping into high local demand for health care workers

The WorkPlace, which focused exclusively on health care, invited local employers to meet with current and former SWFI participants through its monthly Job Clubs. These Job Clubs provided interview and networking practice for participants and opportunities for local health care employers to meet potential job candidates.

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Administrative barriers may have limited some employers' interest in on-the-job training (OJT). OJT can be an attractive incentive to employers to offset costs of hiring and training new employees and can help job seekers obtain employment and tailored training for their new role. In response to employer interest, some grantees started offering OJT placements. However, other grantees found employers less receptive to OJT given its administrative and documentation requirements and struggled to overcome these barriers. To boost OJT opportunities for participants, a few grantees aimed to simplify the OJT process for employers. One grantee developed a work-based learning portal to streamline and manage OJT documentation; the grantee registered 11 employers through the portal yet still found it difficult to provide employers with good matches from among their SWFI participants. Another grantee tried to reduce administrative burden for employers by making changes to the OJT paperwork, but a cumbersome approval process for changes resulted in few employers pursuing OJT.

Developing apprenticeship programs took time. Four grantees included apprenticeships or pre-apprenticeships in their grant applications, but only one grantee was able to offer pre-apprenticeships to their participants. This grantee—Moore Community House—had an existing pre-apprenticeship program that it leveraged for its SWFI grant. Another grantee that intended to establish an apprenticeship program reported that setting up the program and gaining buy-in from employers was a longer process than it expected. The grantee also noted that for its local employers, the small number of potential employees they would gain through the program would not be enough to justify the increased administrative requirements for participating in an apprenticeship program. The grantee abandoned its plans to develop the apprenticeship program.

Grantees had mixed success with incumbent worker training. Several grantees found employers to be eager partners for incumbent worker training—that is, training their current employees in preparation for job advancement. Some grantees leveraged long-standing relationships with employers in their communities to foster connections to incumbent worker training by learning the training needs for their staff and connecting those staff with appropriate training programs (see box). Other grantees reported that working with employers on incumbent worker training was challenging. For example, one grantee reported that employers did not want to commit to increasing employees' wages upon training completion. Another grantee shared that many local employers were facing staff shortages due to low unemployment and a competitive job market, so preferred to provide in-house trainings to maximize the efficiency of their staff's time.

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Identifying opportunities for incumbent worker training

Vermont Technical College has decades-long relationships with some local employers. The grantee met with these employers to identify the training needs of incumbent workers and connected incumbent workers with training programs to help them advance in their careers.

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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.

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