Strengthening Working Families Initiative

Mathematica
Progress Together

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Recruiting Parents for Entry into Middle- and High-Skilled Employment

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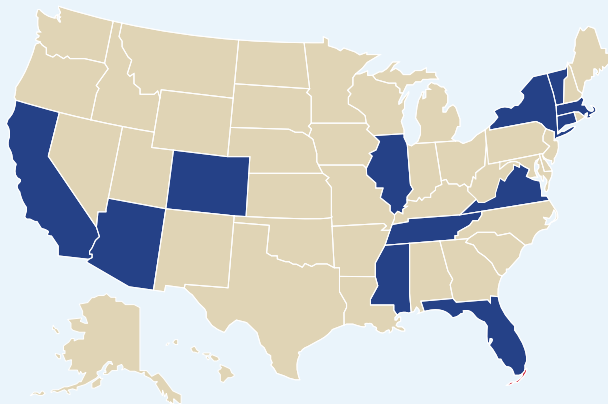
Required partners: Workforce entities, education and training providers, child care services, business entities

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 that began in March 2020

Grant amount: $4 million maximum per grantee

SWFI grantees aimed to recruit parents with child care responsibilities and skills gaps—a population that encounters many barriers to training and employment.[1] Given those barriers, some grantees experienced challenges in recruiting participants into their programs. Grantees contended with competing demands on parents' time, participants' skills gaps and need for remedial education, the need for intensive marketing of training programs to appeal to parents, and shifting labor market conditions. In this brief, we share some strategies that grantees designed and implemented to identify and enroll participants and help address these challenges.

Strategies and lessons learned

Used multiple recruitment methods, including word of mouth from graduates. Some grantees primarily relied on community partners to provide referrals to their programs. Others used traditional marketing techniques to attract potential participants, such as flyers, radio advertisements, and television spots. Grantees included participant success stories in monthly newsletters to spread the word about SWFI in the community. Other grantees maintained a regular presence or scheduled recruitment meetings at places where parents accessed other services, such as public assistance offices, Head Start centers, and day care locations. Grantees also attended local job fairs and networking events. Grantees noted that networking groups and word of mouth from graduates or past participants were critically important in reaching potential participants.

Recruited through social media. Some grantees reported that social media recruitment efforts were more productive and yielded more contacts than traditional marketing. They said that Facebook and other social media platforms permitted grantees to speak directly to potential participants and quickly modify or adapt marketing strategies based on participant feedback. For example, Moore Community House used Facebook to share information about its program. The picture below illustrates how Moore Community House created images and messaging to reach potential participants and reduce perceptions of advanced manufacturing professions as being only for men.

Moore Community House Facebook Marketing

Hired dedicated recruitment staff. Several grantees hired dedicated staff to focus on boosting recruitment. For example, OIC of Broward (doing business as OIC of South Florida) developed positions for "enrollment champions." It hired two people with a presence in the community to work as recruiters, leveraging their personal and professional contacts to get information out to agencies with whom they had pre-existing relationships.

Marketed training as a way to earn stackable credentials. Some training programs require up to a year to complete, with additional time needed to take the credentialing exam and begin work in the industry. To address this challenge, grantees advertised the benefits of stackable credentials—credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual's qualifications.

Addressed skills gaps. SWFI grantees sought to help parents enter middle- and high-skilled employment. However, grantees reported that interested potential participants often lacked the skills necessary to pass entrance exams or start training programs immediately. In addition, some participants needed soft skills training to ensure they could succeed in training and employment. To address skills gaps

Strategies for stacking credentials

Memphis Bioworks Foundation highlighted stackable nursing credentials as a key feature of its SWFI program. The grantee helped participants obtain their certified nursing assistant (CNA) credential and then continue to the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) training. LPN training could take up to a year, but participants could earn money as a CNA while continuing their training.

City of Phoenix worked with its training providers to add stackable credentials in health care and IT to attract more participants and make them more competitive in the job market. Participants with a CNA credential had the option to add electrocardiogram (EKG) and phlebotomy credentials to their certificate. Those working toward entry-level IT certificates could earn an additional CompTIA A+, Network+, or Security+ credential.

and the need for remedial education, many grantees worked with participants to help them get ready for training. Some grantees partnered with adult basic education or English language acquisition programs to prepare participants to take entrance exams and set them up for success. Other

grantees worked with local community colleges to find alternative training programs and connect participants with remedial education when they were unable to meet the community college placement test requirements.

Helping participants get ready to succeed

The Community College of Aurora instituted "Interest Cafes," where staff met with interested potential participants and assigned them to a navigator. The navigator then helped participants through the eligibility process and had them each meet with an achievement coach before program entry. The achievement coach helped assess their readiness and recommended whether they needed additional courses or resources.

Endnotes

[1] Eyster, Lauren, Tom Callan, and Gina Adams. "Balancing School, Work, and Family: Low-Income Parents' Participation in Education and Training." Washington, DC: Urban Institute, October 2014. Available at http://www.urban.org/research/publication/balancing-school-work-and-family-low-income-parents-participation-education-and-training.

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.