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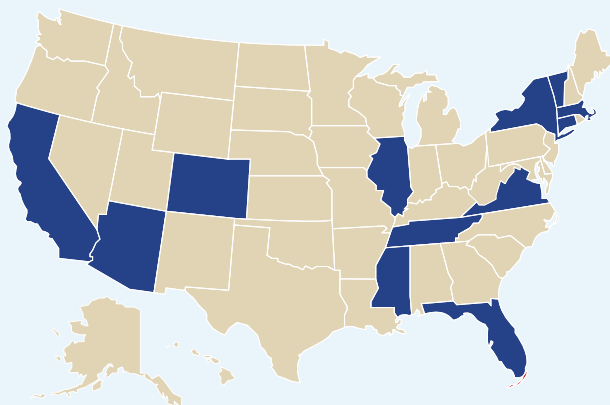
Providing Technical Assistance to Grantees Helping Families Navigate the Workforce and Child Care Systems

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 how the TA team supported grantees operating SWFI programs.

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

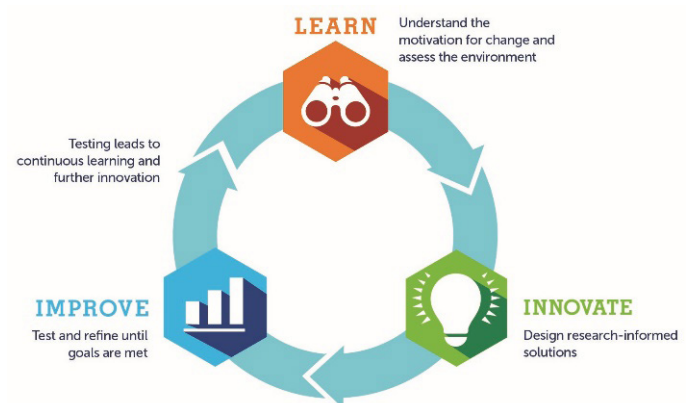
Timeline: 2016–2021; grantees were providing services in the context of the public health emergency that began in March 2020

Grant amount: \$4 million maximum per grantee

SWFI grantees were public-private partnerships that were collaborating to address parents' training and supportive service needs, while simultaneously creating sustainable local changes that help families navigate the workforce and child care systems. The U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL), Employment and Training Administration, contracted with Mathematica and its partner, the Urban Institute, to provide ongoing TA to grantees as they operated their SWFI programs. The TA aimed to increase grantees' capacity to assess challenges and needs while capitalizing on opportunities to align workforce and child care systems; identify creative, workable strategies for engaging and serving families; and assist grantees in implementing the strategies and monitoring success.

Mathematica's LI² (Learn, Innovate, Improve) framework informed the SWFI TA team's work. LI² supports a collaborative, evidence-based approach to TA so grantees are fully engaged in co-creating well defined and achievable innovations for implementing and improving their programs (Figure 1). During the Learn phase, coaches worked collaboratively and iteratively with grantees to assess needs and opportunities for improvement. During the Innovate phase, coaches developed customized grantee work plans that mapped specific resources and activities to the needs and opportunities identified during the Learn phase. Coaches developed and shared those resources and activities with

Figure 1. LI² framework



grantees and facilitated peer-to-peer learning opportunities. During the Improve phase, coaches worked collaboratively with grantees on implementing and refining the solutions identified during the Learn and Innovate phases. This brief describes the methods Mathematica’s SWFI TA team used to support grantees and lessons learned over four years of working with grantees.

Co-creating TA through multiple methods to enrich programming

Co-creation rests at the core of the LI² framework that guides Mathematica’s TA. The SWFI TA team collaboratively worked with SWFI grantees to identify challenges, brainstorm solutions, and implement strategies to provide services to parents seeking to improve their skills. Across four years, the TA team had more than 550 contacts with the 13 SWFI grantees, including individualized and group-based contacts by phone, email, and in person. The SWFI TA team used multiple methods to support SWFI grantees:

Coaching. Each SWFI grantee had a dedicated TA coach who worked with the grantee regularly to help grantees address programmatic issues and build on successes. The coach typically maintained monthly contact with grantees through regular coaching calls and emails and responded to grantees’ additional requests for help or support. TA coaches built strong relationships with grantees and developed a deep understanding of the grantees’ program models, goals, participant pathways, and partnerships, as well as their implementation challenges. Coaching topics covered a wide range of issues, such as cohort models for training, the challenges

of recruiting participants for training in advanced manufacturing, ways to incorporate soft skills training into programming, and sustainability planning.

Peer sharing. Grantees often requested and were eager to participate in peer sharing activities. They wanted to hear what other grantees were doing and discuss common issues and solutions, so providing multiple opportunities for peer engagement was important for providing effective TA. The SWFI TA team facilitated numerous peer sharing calls on a wide range of topics, involving either all grantees or small groups organized to foster discussion; some took place after formal webinars so grantees could discuss and brainstorm on the webinar topics. Topics included recruitment strategies, engaging employers, and using human-centered design (HCD) techniques to problem solve with grant staff. HCD is an approach to problem solving that incorporates the perspective of those who experience a need or challenge and designs a solution to effectively meet those needs. Incorporated into the LI² framework for TA, HCD activities helped foster engaged, collaborative problem solving within and across grantees.

Webinars. The SWFI TA team produced a series of webinars to bring together experts in the field with grantees to share tools and tips on relevant topics. Webinar topics included navigating the workforce development and child care systems and innovative participant recruitment strategies. During a celebration webinar, grantees shared their greatest SWFI successes, which were used to form a word cloud; the word cloud illustrated that for many grantees, addressing parents’ child care needs while they pursued training was a highlight of their SWFI program (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Word cloud activity from celebration webinar

What were your greatest successes? Tell us with short phrases. You can have multiple responses!



Convenings. In collaboration with USDOL, the SWFI TA team facilitated highly successful grantee convenings. The first in-person convening, early in the grant period, encompassed several team-led sessions, including peer learning on different approaches to providing child care, strategies for engaging participants, consultancies with industry representatives, and presentations by foundations that fund programs like SWFI. The second in-person convening focused more strongly on sustainability as grantees approached the end of their grants and considered applying for extensions. Examples of HCD activities that grantee staff participated in were “How Might We” statements and bullseye prioritization (Figure 3). The How Might We statement activity encouraged the group to clearly articulate a problem statement and explore solutions. The goal of this activity was to challenge assumptions and encourage participants to think of creative solutions. During the bullseye prioritization activity, the group ranked items by importance. The SWFI TA team also hosted a series of collaborative virtual convenings one year before many grantees completed their grants so grantees could identify focus goals for their last year, develop strategies to achieve them, and draft plans or road maps to implement those strategies.

Figure 3. HCD activities at convening



SWFI Community of Practice, blog posts, tip sheets, and briefs. To provide a library of resources for the SWFI grantees, the SWFI TA team developed and curated more than 75 products for the SWFI Community of Practice (CoP) on WorkforceGPS (Figure 4). The team produced blog posts, tip sheets, and announcements; amplified grantees’ Bright Ideas, promising practices, and case studies; curated discussion prompts; and developed other written products for the CoP. Drawing on coaching calls and progress reports,

Figure 4. SWFI CoP

A screenshot of the WorkforceGPS website. The top navigation bar includes links for "My WorkforceGPS", "Resources", "ETA Grants", "Communities", "Events", "Member Directory", "Help", and "About". The main header features the "H-1B Strengthening Working Families Initiative" logo and a search bar. Below the header is a navigation menu with "Home", "About", "Announcements", "Blog", "Discussion Topics", "Events", and "Community Resources". The main content area has a blue banner with the text "Tell us how we're doing! →". Below this is a "Welcome to the Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) Community!" section, which includes a brief description of the community's purpose and a "JOIN COMMUNITY" button. The "Featured Content" section displays four articles: "SWFI Bright Ideas: Adjusting Operations in a..." (Jan 20, 2021), "SWFI Wrap Up Tip Sheet" (Mar 19, 2021), "Case study template: A sustainability tool" (Mar 02, 2021), and "SWFI Exam Prep Tip Sheet" (Apr 02, 2020).

the team identified a common topic that would be the most salient for grantees each month. The SWFI TA team then produced a suite of resources and activities related to that topic. For example, on a peer sharing call, grantees used HCD methods to brainstorm strategies to help more participants attain credentials. Around the same time, the SWFI TA team published a CoP blog post on credentials and micro-credentials, linking to useful resources. The team also developed and posted to the CoP a related tip sheet on methods to help participants overcome concerns about taking credential exams.

Providing responsive, relevant TA

The SWFI TA team developed and aligned its work with a TA logic model that identified drivers, inputs, activities, and desired outcomes for the TA provided to grantees. The logic model identified benchmarks of responsive, relevant TA and guided the team’s ongoing assessments of the uptake, usefulness, and satisfaction with the TA provided.

Each quarter, the SWFI TA team prepared a data-driven assessment of grantee progress, needs, and recent TA; this assessment was used to develop responsive and relevant plans for the coming quarter for each grantee and collectively across grantees. The TA coaches analyzed grantee-produced narrative reports and performance reports submitted to USDOL to identify common challenges and needs. The quarterly assessments helped identify which grantees needed continued support for early-stage grant activities, such as participant recruitment, and which needed support for later-stage activities, such as credential attainment and job placement. Regular coaching calls and peer sharing exchanges also served as sources of information for developing grantee-level plans.

In addition, the SWFI TA team used a tracker to log TA activities, contacts, and questions. The TA tracker helped ensure that the TA team responded to grantees’ requests efficiently and identified TA requests that could be addressed in the upcoming quarter. The tracker also provided useful information on grantee engagement in TA. Metrics on uptake of CoP resources and participation in webinars, peer sharing calls, and office hours informed the team’s assessment and planning process.

Each coach developed grantee-specific TA plans and worked closely with each grantee to adjust the plan based on that grantee’s priorities and resources for addressing them. This approach to TA planning and assessment helped ensure that TA activities and resources aligned with grantee needs as they

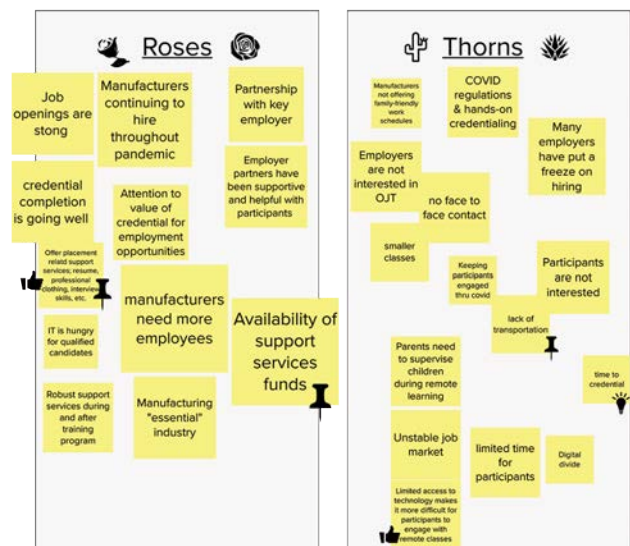
evolved. Regular coordination across coaches was also invaluable in balancing TA plans with the need to quickly address changing needs. Coaches met monthly to update one another on their grantees’ progress and challenges. They identified the most useful TA and the TA that should be deployed going forward.

Maximizing direct, sustained engagement with grantees

The SWFI TA team was flexible in its approach to coaching and adjusted the intensity based on the level of support each grantee needed. For example, when many grantees experienced staff turnover, coaches worked intensively with new grant leadership. It was important to identify and act quickly on what might be most useful for each grantee at a given time, whether that involved more frequent coaching calls in collaboration with USDOL staff or a mix of coaching calls and emails for grantees that needed less support.

The TA team adapted HCD activities to grantee circumstances and needs. Grantee participation in and satisfaction with activities and resources that employed HCD were typically very high, whether they took place in person or virtually via conference calls and peer sharing. For example, a “Roses and Thorns” activity used during the public health emergency quickly helped grantees identify their highest priorities and develop strategies for leveraging what was working well (roses) and what challenges they needed to address (thorns) to maintain SWFI programming (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Roses and Thorns HCD activity with SWFI grantees



Given the ambitious objectives of the SWFI grants and grantees' experiences as they worked to achieve them, the SWFI TA team worked to provide responsive TA that met grantees' ongoing and changing needs. The TA needs varied widely

based on grantee experience and abilities, which the team balanced within the overall TA plan and available resources and activities. Grantees expressed satisfaction with, and in general were highly engaged in, the SWFI TA and coaching.

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 employment and training goals and demonstrating progress
- Providing technical assistance to grantees helping families navigate the workforce and child care systems

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