H-1B TECHHIRE PARTNERSHIP GRANT

Addressing Unprecedented Disruptions from the COVID-19 Pandemic Across H-1B TechHire Grant Programs

In early 2020, social distancing protocols and the economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect H-1B TechHire grantees in significant ways. Grantees were forced to either transition rapidly to remote work and learning environments or curtail programming altogether. Grantee staff members moved swiftly to transition to virtual case management and communication protocols. As the digital literacy and access issues that predated the pandemic swelled exponentially, staff members also prioritized efforts to ensure that learners had access to personal laptops and broadband internet connectivity. Overall, the types of supports and services participants needed to succeed in their TechHire journeys shifted and expanded. In addition to bringing about technological challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread school and business closures that uprooted family dynamics and diminished many people's access to affordable and safe child care, increased food and housing insecurity.

All of this resulted in massive shifts in the way employers assess their skill needs, conduct hiring, and develop training. While trying to adjust for changing business operations, TechHire grantees also had to find new ways of providing services and supports to participants in an effort to ensure program retention, credential attainment, and job placement in a rapidly changing economy.

The strain TechHire grantees experienced at the onset of the pandemic was significant. They grappled with having to train on new virtual technologies for project management, online learning, and communication while also coordinating the continuation of services to students enrolled in programming. As a result, the TechHire technical assistance (TA) team and coaches quickly restructured previously planned TA activities in order to provide more relevant support to grantees.

Identifying Shared Challenges and Approaches

Shortly after widespread closures were mandated and TechHire grantees transitioned to remote work environments, the TA team began holding peer learning group (PLG) calls—informal, discussion-driven conversations intended to evoke peer sharing and learning across the network of providers. These calls focused on identifying workable solutions to shared

challenges brought on by the sudden and unprecedented need to completely shift grantees' training delivery and support-services models.

The PLG calls, paired with continued monthly coaching calls, revealed a variety of challenges facing TechHire grantees. Some were new issues brought on by emerging technology needs and social distancing protocols, but others were preexisting issues that had simply been exacerbated by the introduction of so many changes at once. Generally, the challenges involved:

1. Transitioning to online platforms;

2. Providing remote participant supports; and

3. Adjusting job-placement strategies.

In addition to the PLG calls, two blogs and a tip sheet on drive-through career fairs, virtual job fairs and virtual job interviewing tips were developed that aimed to provide grantees and their participants with guidance around navigating virtual and drive-through job fairs and virtual job interviews—which have grown in popularity across the country in recent months. Additionally, the TA team resurfaced the previously developed resource *Maximizing the Power of Social Media for Recruitment and Engagement*, which highlights Clackamas Community College's success in establishing a robust social media recruitment strategy.

Grantees were encouraged to begin developing their own customized local resource lists for helping to address the challenges they were facing. In addition, the above-mentioned resources have been assembled on the Virtual and Remote Learning and Service Resources page of the H-1B TechHire Community.

The next section explores several approaches to the challenges mentioned above that were shared through PLG calls, coaching calls, and one-on-one discussions with grantees.

Approaches to Address Grantees' Shared Challenges

Transitioning to Online Training Platforms

As grantees were informed that faculty and students would not be able to return to campus, staff members had to act quickly to identify, procure, and implement new technologies and communication strategies. Grantees ensured that students had access to needed equipment and technology by collaborating with partners to provide grant-funded or low-cost laptops and internet access.

Montgomery College, based in Rockville, Maryland, achieved positive results by using a variety of methods to reach participants and stay connected with them. It adopted a three-pronged approach to communicating with students using Facebook page updates, email, and

the Remind app. Instructors began delivering course content virtually via Zoom, the Schoology Learning Management System, and Facebook Live. Additionally, Montgomery College focused its efforts on increasing the number of emails reaching community members about its TechHire programming and set up an account to host virtual information sessions.

The **Northwest Regional Workforce Investment Board**, based in Waterbury, Connecticut**,** initially designed its program to be flexible for target populations facing barriers to learning and employment. Working with a training provider, it adapted its infrastructure to support online resources accompanied by in-person instruction. Adopting technology from the start of the grant enabled them to more seamlessly transition to fully virtual instruction modules, online collaborative spaces, and virtual libraries.

> *"Before the pandemic, I was unsure of virtual classrooms. Now, I see the additional flexibility they provide participants. We've realized that streaming classroom instruction can help ensure participants, who are caretakers for children and other family members or who may lack access to transportation, can attend both classrooms and labs. For students who prefer classroom settings, we will continue to offer that, to meet both sets of needs."*
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> — Tori Strickland, Montgomery College

As **Wake Technical Community College**, based in Raleigh, North Carolina, was fortunate to have infrastructure in place to support virtual and remote learning even before the disruption caused by the pandemic. It's TechHire grant program was able to continue offering training with minimal interruption. The school pivoted to using Microsoft Teams for conducting synchronous, virtual classes. Although its grant period ended in July 2020, the community college, in partnership with its local workforce development board, committed to paying the tuition for participants currently enrolled until they complet their training.

Providing Remote Participant Supports

For several grantees, the processes for engaging potential participants, conducting assessments, and coordinating the intake of information all transitioned to virtual services within a few days. Additionally, staff members worked with internal teams and federal project officers to ensure that new processes adhered to social distancing guidelines.

For example, **Montgomery College** experienced a decline in engagement by potential participants at the beginning of the pandemic. Within a few months, however, engagement increased as the college saw the pool of potential applicants increase, and it began to average 50 attendees at each virtual informational session. The grantee used Zoom for group presentations and for one-on-one communication. It also used Zoom for intake sessions and provided Dropbox links for access to supporting documentation.

Some grantees were affected by lags in testing that credentialing bodies experienced as in-person exams were forced to shift to virtual settings. The **Northwest Regional Workforce Investment Board** implemented strategies to refresh skill sets through tutoring and enrollment

in other IT certification programs while waiting for CompTIA to perform virtual A+ certification testing. The training provider offered a vast library of virtual training resources to help students prepare for credentialing exams.

Ivy Tech Community College, based in Indianapolis, Indiana, implemented a tutoring and virtual test-prep strategy for the CompTIA A+ exam. The TechHire program determined that hiring online tutors was the most cost-effective and efficient strategy. Its approach included three components:

- Virtual tutoring and test preparation provided by Ivy Tech TechHire program graduates via Zoom
- Faculty-led virtual test preparation, which included two-hour study sessions tailored to student-identified needs
- Online coaching provided by online services such as InsideTrack.org

Strategies for Increasing Remote Engagement

In order to maintain consistent engagement and support for participants, many programs use a variety of communication channels that participants may feel more comfortable with, in addition to using their learning management systems. Some send reminders via text message or social media, while others post lessons and course content online as videos rather than hosting live classes. However, recognizing that some students prefer in-person classes, some grantees have chosen to offer socially distanced lab sessions.

Text message services and social media platforms such as Remind and Instagram have been instrumental in helping grantees maintain engagement with participants.

Posting lessons and course content as videos rather than hosting live class sessions has also been helpful in giving participants the opportunity to learn at a time and pace that works for them.

For students who prefer in-person classes, **incorporating socially distanced in-person lab sessions** has helped grantees keep individuals engaged in traditional instruction while offering peer-to-peer connections and real-time support.

Adapting Job-Placement Strategies

Job-placement activities became more challenging due to volatility in regional labor markets and grantees' inability to meet with employers to discuss job and training needs. Grantees expanded outreach to other industry partners and worked to expand opportunities for participants after they have completed training.

UAW—Labor Employment and Training Corporation (LETC), based in Los Angeles, California, works with Los Angeles Valley Workforce Training to provide TechHire workforce training and job-placement services. At the start of the pandemic, the college's biotech and advanced manufacturing training program shifted to online training. The grantee expanded its outreach to work with manufacturers outside of aerospace and defense, which previously represented the majority of the grantee's industry partners. The grantee integrated virtual interview preparation into its job-readiness training and provided Chromebooks to students who did not have access to computers.

When COVID-19 impacted the local business climate in March 2020, **Worksystems Inc.**, based in Portland, Oregon, realized that it needed to adjust its previous strategy on building apprenticeship opportunities with employers. The organization began focusing on services that targeted incumbent workers in order to help businesses retain staff members. Eighty workers applied to receive training under Worksystems' modified program. Worksystems continues to collaborate with employers to help incumbent workers who complete training to advance in their careers.

Full Employment Council, Inc., based in Kansas City, Missouri, focused on IT occupations, engaged employers through sector-based listening sessions, and continued to build those relationships by having employers weigh in on student demos and prepare with interviews. These employer relationships, built through early, in-person engagement in listening sessions with students, have been easy to transition to a virtual setting.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned

Despite the challenges that grantees experienced nationwide as a result of social distancing protocols and new safety standards, TechHire grantees made innovative adjustments to continually meet participants' needs in preparing them for sustainable workforce futures. These shifts have allowed both grantee staff and participants to experience the benefits of virtual training, and some grantees have now shown an increased interest in continuing virtual services for the long term. Below are a few summarizing points describing the pivots grantees have made to ensure program success amidst a virtual learning environment:

- **Digital access and support.** All across the country, TechHire participants experienced limited access to laptops and high-speed internet, often logging on via their phones and community Wi-Fi hot spots. Identifying resources and referrals to provide access to technology is a crucial component that programs will need to continue to address.

- **Virtual communication.** Grantees recommend building multiple communication strategies and technologies into program strategies to increase and support participant engagement.

- **Movement to hybrid training.** Many of the TechHire grantees were hesitant to implement hybrid training involving both in-person and virtual classrooms before the pandemic. Now, several grantees recommend this approach because it provides flexibility to target populations who were already experiencing challenges to participating in traditional classroom settings.

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