REPORT SYNOPSIS:
How Apprenticeship Programs for Opportunity Youth Stay Resilient Through the COVID-19 Recession

Released October 2020 by Center for Apprenticeship & Work-based Learning (JFF) and Social Policy Research Associates

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JANUARY 31

Report synopsis prepared by High Impact Partners for the Youth Apprenticeship Readiness Grant (YARG) grantees
How Apprenticeship Programs for Opportunity Youth Stay Resilient Through the COVID-19 Recession,
released in October 2020, documents the experiences of JFF’s Apprenticeship Expansion and Modernization Fund (AEMF) pilot sites as they faced the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early summer months of 2020. It lays out the challenges these workforce development boards and community-based organizations confronted, and it shares some of the innovative strategies they put into place to sustain opportunity youth apprenticeships through these challenging times.

The promising practices and lessons learned apply to many types of apprenticeship programs and should prove useful to YARG grantees as they cope with pandemic-related issues. What follows are highlights of the report.

CHALLENGES CREATED BY THE COVID RECESSION

The report points to three major challenges facing apprenticeship programs for opportunity youth and others:

1. The loss of employer hosts as businesses have downsized or become less willing to host apprentices.
2. The difficulty of supporting host firms, classroom training providers, and apprentices as recruiting, onboarding, and training activities have moved online.
3. The difficulty of building new partnerships when businesses, organizations, and institutions are themselves struggling to survive.

HOW PROGRAMS ARE RESPONDING

Programs have felt the need to downsize their apprenticeship cohorts or delay program start dates as a result of industries experiencing shutdowns or out of safety concerns. However, many others are adapting by finding new methods for serving their participants during the pandemic while also enhancing their programs for the future.

Providing Remote Services

Apprenticeship programs have joined many educational institutions and businesses in transitioning to online interaction wherever possible. Screenings, orientations, site matching, classroom training, and some on-the-job training have become virtual experiences.

Adapting and Redesigning Programs

Adjusting to COVID-19 guidance, as well as the shifting economy, has compelled the pilot sites to re-think their practices and find novel approaches to program design and implementation. Some of these include:

- **Frontloading technical instruction.** While in-person training remains out of reach, classes can still be delivered through virtual learning sessions in advance of any in-person work.
- **Offering pre-apprenticeship activities.** This instructional opportunity can offer a more flexible, wider-ranging selection of learning experiences, and can help engage and prepare new or future recruits for more formal training.
- **Focusing on transferability of skills.** Diversifying career pathways and adapting training to meet the needs of more than one sector or industry equips participants with occupational mobility, making apprenticeships more beneficial overall.
**Using Downtime to Re-group**

Many projects are taking advantage of the slowdown to address some of the formational work that may be set aside in the crush of keeping a program up and running. This serves to strengthen these programs for their eventual re-opening, and the time spent is a worthwhile investment in the future life of these projects. These activities include:

- Registering new programs.
- Enhancing program management.
- Re-examining and redesigning program fundamentals.
- Cultivating employer engagement and partner collaboration.

**Prioritizing Equity and Access**

During a period of time when the country has been called upon to examine our individual and collective conduct in the areas of racial justice and economic equity, the pandemic slowdown also provides an opportunity to more firmly embed equal opportunity into apprenticeship programs. Many sites have started dialogues with staff and partners to discuss systemic racism and other societal inequities, to determine some of their root causes, and to identify and remove barriers to access and opportunity in their programs.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

While some practices detailed in the report were put in place as a response to the current crisis, many may be incorporated into normal operations even as the challenges of the pandemic subside. The lessons learned from this experience will undoubtedly be valuable for sustaining such programs through future difficulties and making them sturdier in better times.

**Maintaining Contact with Participants**

Keeping participants engaged with their instructors, mentors, peers, and the program in general is perhaps the greatest difficulty during this period of isolation. AEMF sites have redoubled their efforts to expand awareness of opportunities, provide support, connect young people to resources, and use whatever means they can to help apprentices build job skills.

**Bridging the Digital Divide**

Even before the pandemic, access to technology was a barrier to entry for opportunity youth and many other current and potential apprentices. It became an even greater hurdle when in-person, on-site learning was no longer possible. AEMF sites worked to close the digital gap by joining community-wide efforts in technology acquisition, distribution, and access. The following are a few successful approaches:

- Some cities set up partnerships, secured funding, and distributed thousands of laptop computers to students; others set up distribution networks with nonprofit organizations.
- Some colleges and other public service providers boosted their Wi-Fi signals or provided mobile access points from their parking lots.

“When we design these programs, we’re usually hurried and under pressure – applying for a grant and doing a hundred other things. This pause has given us the rare opportunity to focus on quality to figure out how to deliver the highest-value experience for young people.”

- AEMF PROGRAM STAFF
• Libraries, school districts, American Job Centers, community colleges, civic centers, coffee shops, and coworking spaces extended their Wi-Fi signals and left them running during closures to expand access to no-cost internet connectivity.

• Some pilot sites created technical helplines for participants. One, JEVS Human Services, turned this into a learning opportunity, offering computer training and certifications to apprentices – who became “digital navigators” for churches, community organizations, social services, and their constituents.

Getting the Most Out of Online Tools
Besides using virtual platforms for education, job training, and general contact, projects are also employing these tools for recruiting, interviews, group orientations, and counseling. In addition, programs are streamlining enrollment by going paperless and accepting scanned or photographed documents and digital signatures.

Facilitating Training Services and Support
The pandemic necessitated a rapid transition to online instruction and training. For businesses in essential services who suddenly needed to expand their workforces, such as pharmacies, that transition was faster still.

Such employer partners saw the benefit in modifying their traditional practices by:
• Helping to devise new training methods and accelerate onboarding.
• Paralleling technical instruction with work-based training to allow apprentices to reach graduation and regular employment more quickly.
• Offering bonuses to employee apprentices.

To support the process from the program side:
• Case managers began communicating with apprentices more frequently by phone or video rather than relying on email or in-person visits.
• To provide the higher level of support required by online programming, several sites started building job coaching into their programs from the beginning in the pre-apprenticeship stage.

Meeting Industry-specific Employer Needs
Another lesson from AEMF site experience is that the downturn is affecting various employment sectors in different ways. This in turn affects their hiring patterns and training needs, how receptive they may be to apprenticeship partnerships, and how they might prefer programs to be implemented. So, accurately assessing industry and specific employer partner needs is more important than ever. For instance:
• In industries where employers have been furloughed, such as food services, employers may want to recall their experienced employees before training new candidates.
• Even within the healthcare sector, where there are shortages of skilled medical personnel, workforce needs are not consistent across all occupations in the field.
• On the other hand, some manufacturers who have an increased demand for workers are eager to partner with apprenticeships programs. The Hershey Company, for instance, is building a training center and collaborating with the Shenandoah Valley Workforce Development Board in it’s Manufacturing Boot Camp and is incorporating COVID-19 safety precautions into the training environment.

LOOK FOR TECHNOLOGY RESOURCES AND INTERNET ACCESS ASSISTANCE IN YOUR AREA USING THE TECHNOLOGY AND WI-FI LOCATORS, MAPS, AND SERVICES LINKS IN THE APPENDIX ON PAGE 30 OF THE REPORT.
MAKING A CASE FOR APPRENTICESHIP

Ultimately, apprenticeship practitioners must continue to promote the value of their programs to employers. As the pandemic and economic difficulties persist, programs must find new ways to demonstrate the relevance and benefits of apprenticeships even for businesses who are navigating difficult waters.

Again, some suggestions from the report:

- **Boost employer engagement capacity with dedicated staff.** Shenandoah Valley hired two network directors to coordinate all business outreach. This kind of effort, if feasible, can pay off tremendously.

- **Address workforce needs in this new reality.** As mentioned above, it is crucial to stay abreast of the changing skills required by businesses and be responsive to their needs as they adapt to new market conditions.

- **Adapt business and training models simultaneously as you follow the course corrections of various businesses.** A good example of this is FareStart, an AEMF site whose members Catalyst Kitchens and Liberty’s Kitchen shifted their culinary focus to institutional food service and essential retail (grocery store delicatessens and bakeries), making sure to change their training in tandem.

- **Promote apprenticeship as a recovery strategy.** A powerful argument in favor of apprenticeships during an economic decline is the fact that economies with robust apprenticeship programs tend to recover more rapidly, according to one source used in the report (“Are Apprenticeships Business Cycle Proof?”). Since apprentices will be trained and ready to work, staffing up will be easier when business rebounds.

- **Show how apprentices can help reinvigorate workplaces.** These younger employees often inspire process improvements as they bring their recently gained knowledge of new technologies, methods, and market intelligence with them.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to the promising practices and lessons learned shared in the body of this report, its Appendix provides several pages of resources, including reports, articles, searchable platforms, and other tools for building and sustaining apprenticeship programs through COVID-19 and beyond.

Access the full report [HERE](#).

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Social Policy Research Associates helps public agencies, foundations and nonprofit organizations, and education and workforce leaders improve work, learning, and livelihoods in America’s diverse communities.

JFF’s Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning provides expert guidance and resources on effective approaches to work-based learning that benefit businesses, students, and workers.