**WorkforceGPS**

**Transcript of Webcast**

**Voices of Experience**

**America's Job Center: Northeast Florida**

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Bruce Ferguson: So certainly, first and foremost for us, was pivoting to being able to provide services virtually. We closed our offices, our AJCs and career centers to the public in mid-March, around March the 18th, if my memory serves me right, and fortunately, we had been investing in technology for years.

That's a big push that I've always had is we need to be as technologically advanced as we can be. Because of those investments that we've made over the years, we were actually able to pivot and go to full remote and virtual services in less than a week and that's 150-odd staff to working remotely in a week.

So that was huge for us to be able to pivot that quickly and do that. And so then the process becomes how do you deliver quality virtual services? We're used to in-person, we're used to people in the centers and getting staff up to speed and comfortable with that and giving them all the tools they need to be able to do.

So that was a challenge, to say the least. All the while you're developing those new processes you're also starting to think about what do we need to do when we re-open, how does this look?

And first and foremost is ensuring that the job seekers and the staff that are going to be working in the centers and coming into the centers feel safe, that we've earned their trust and that's something that we really focused on is earned trust, both from a staff perspective and a job seeker perspective so that everybody's comfortable, that we're following CDC guidelines, that we're doing everything we can on our end to curtail the spread of the virus so that we don't become a hot spot or a place that people aren't coming into.

So that involved redesigning the career centers and reconfiguring what they look like. The resource rooms, where we had computers back to back to back next to each other, we had to pull every of -- every other computer had to come out of the resource room in order to maintain that proper social distancing based on the CDC guidelines.

So that in turn created another problem, we're now reducing capacity at a time when we have exponentially greater unemployment. So how are we going to continue as we reopen? Are we going to get flooded with job seekers? How are we going to handle the capacity for that?

We began and invested in a booking software to be able to book appointments so that when we reopened we did so on an appointment-only basis so that we could control that environment and not have people flooding in the centers and also not having a lot of people potentially having to stand outside and wait for a computer to open up.

So those are a lot of the things that we're juggling in the career centers. So it was an interesting time. We reopened in late May.

So about two months after the closure we reopened by appointment only and one of the other things that we did in the reconfiguration of the centers is where we had like assessment rooms and assessments labs or training labs where we would do -- you know, typically have an in-person resume or a resume class or interviewing classes those we all transitioned to do online.

So we were able to reconfigure those rooms and add resource room computers in there so people would have the ability to do their job searches and work on their own resumes. So that enabled us to bring back the capacity in the terms of the numbers of people we could see in any individuals.

And we also leased some additional space right next door to a career center in one of our most needy areas in order, again, to maintain or increase capacity. So those were all going on at the same time. So it was certainly -- and hey, we're not unique in that challenge, but that was a massive challenge and how do you change your whole service delivery model in response to a pandemic; you know?

We have hurricane disaster plans, we have all these disaster plans, but the pandemic disaster planning wasn't part of it. The level of unemployment claims was through the roof, as it was across the whole country. Interesting for us is this Florida's UC System is kind of completely separate from what we do, although, we are --

From that computer resource standpoint, a lot of people were coming in to utilize the computer resources in order to try to log into the system. Florida had some really significant challenges with even the system functioning properly. So it was a difficult time.

Once we reopened a lot of those -- once we were able to reopen to the public a lot of that technical challenge that the Florida system had had been resolved to a degree, but while we try to promote that we are the get-a-job side of the equation people need those computer resources that are in our centers to file their claims and we certainly had that utilization available to them and to this day, it's probably a 50-50 split.

For the people that are coming into our centers now, many of them are still filing or updating claims as they go along, as many as we have that are looking for a job, but what we're trying to do is ensure that those that come in mostly to do the claims piece is to say, look, we're the help-you-get-a-job, so let us help you while you're here and that's beginning to resonate as Florida has moved to this phase III.

So from a services standpoint, we still are not doing the in-person resume classes or the in-person interviewing classes like we've done. We've developed some micro-learning videos around that that we -- that people can link to from our website and do those. We are doing some virtual types of those trainings and we're also doing virtual job fairs as well.

So that has been a staple of employer services is that virtual job fair platform that we've been utilizing. The state has purchased that so every region across Florida has access to the same virtual job fair platform and that's been very, very helpful.

The employers have embraced that, job seekers have embraced that, but the interesting challenge for us right now is we still see a significantly reduced level of traffic flow into our career centers, which, in a time of unemployment that we've had, is it's a bit curious, but in our discussions with other regions in our state as well as other states across the country, this is not a unique phenomenon, I don't think, but --

So we're actually developing outreach campaigns which we haven't done in quite a while. When unemployment, a year ago here in our region, was 2.9 percent, there wasn't much to outreach to. So -- and now you would think you wouldn't need to do outreach with unemployment levels more than -- you know, double what they were, but that's where we are.

So Covid has really turned what we do upside down and the way the public is responding is interesting, but what we know through the local labor market data is that the highest area of impact is our entry-level and lower-wage jobs. And so at the same time, when you drive around Northeast Florida, you see a lot of now hiring signs at restaurants, at retail, which is the two industry -- or that industry --

Leisure hospitality and retail was -- got hammered. They easily -- 75 percent of our job loss are in those two areas, but yet there are now hiring signs all over the place.

So we've got to figure out locally how do we engage the job seekers that are out there and let them know that career path -- that entry-level, it's there, it's open, how do we get them confident that they can go back to work and ready to do that and then help them build their skills through the various training programs we have, but at the same time, one of the things we've learned to do better is screensharing.

So we can actually have a career coach in an office that's sharing a screen with a job seeker in the resource room. So we're maintaining the distance by a longshot, but they're able to see the screen and walk them through either a job application or working in our Employ Florida job matching system, working on a resume.

So we will continue to build that skillset within our staff on the virtual side and I think that's the single-biggest change we'll have and we've got a certain cadre of job seekers that that's what they'll want is the virtual. So it's changing how we look at the skillsets that we need to hire and the skillsets that we need to upgrade our own staff training and capabilities to be able to deliver that.

Our youth service providers did a phenomenal job of pivoting themselves to a virtual environment. What we really lost over the summer that is that whole summer work experience and summer youth jobs, just it didn't happen and that was a major blow. I'm very concerned about the kids that are in school right now and what gaps are they going to have in the years to come, because virtual learning for the kids, for some it's great and for others it's really not.

So we'll be really following that. From a training perspective, interestingly, mostly in recessions you see our state and community college enrollments start to skyrocket, they've actually decreased and we saw the same thing as we kind of started into that fall ITA, our Individual Training Account enrollment, our numbers are down.

So we are having -- we're promoting, again, through that outreach that we have ITAs and funding to help you get back to school, get new skills. So the psyche of our job seekers is very different right now and I think there's still some tentativeness about going to class or going to school and we're trying to -- we'll be working with our community and state colleges to address that.

So we'll see what we need to do in terms of doing a higher degree of focus on work-based learning, be it customized training and/or on-the-job-training work experience, those kind of things. So that's kind of to be determined as to how all that works out.

So certainly, throughout this our business services team and in particular, our industry sector managers have been continued to be highly involved with our chambers of commerce and with our economic development organizations throughout the region.

I will tell you, for Jacksonville and Northeast Florida, the level of economic development projects and opportunities for businesses that are looking to grown and locate or start a segment of their business here in Northeast Florida has been off the charts. It never dipped throughout the entire pandemic.

We have been very busy talking with site consultants and other HR managers of companies that have located or are in the process of building locations here in Jacksonville, very high level of manufacturing jobs, distribution logistics-related jobs. So we have been plugged in with those employers and have been doing virtual job fairs and recruitments for them throughout this -- throughout the pandemic.

So that's been a very encouraging sign for us economically is that there's continued to be very strong interest in Northeast Florida for well-paying high-skilled jobs. And so our partnerships that have existed with economic development for years have really paid off and it's enabled us to be in contact with those employers to help them fill those jobs as soon as they're ready to go and that's been a really important part of our recovery.

It's how you get from 11.2 percent to 5.2 in a matter of 4 months. I think the single-most critical thing is that earned trust from both your staff and from your job seekers that the environment that you're providing in the AJC is safe and it's clean and you can get the services that you need in a safe way.

I don't think that can be overemphasized, especially as we head back into the winter and we're already seeing some spikes in those cases. The other thing that we did throughout Florida was really leverage each other's best practices. We learned a ton from other regions about things that worked for them and hey, things that didn't.

The other thing is put a process in place and if it doesn't work, get it out of the way. You know, be inventive, be creative, but if it doesn't work, understand fail fast and get rid of that process and try something else. There -- with the pandemic and with this kind of set of unknown circumstances, there's a lot of opportunity for innovation, to try new things and see what works best in your community and it's going to be different in different places.

So that best practice sharing among all the various workforce regions throughout Florida and from -- we learn stuff from other states as well. So the best practice piece is really, really important. So we learned a lot from that. I think we've done -- my team has done a remarkable job in adjusting to this new environment that we're in and we're providing a valuable service and we look forward to making it better as the days go by.

We learn something new every day and every week about how to get better and that's really important.