**WorkforceGPS**

**Transcript of Webcast**

**Voices of Experience**

**Workforce Board: Middle Tennessee**

*Transcript by*

*Noble Transcription Services*

*Menifee, CA*

Marla W. Rye: I just wanted to start off by saying that I personally believe that the public workforce system is one of the most, if not the most, essential service to the economic recovery of the state and our nation. With over 250,000 people losing their jobs in the norther middle workforce area, we went from a 2.6 percent unemployment rate to over 15 percent.

As a board, we've been challenged to operate in our new normal which is a virtual environment. In northern middle, we are heavily concentrated on bricks and mortar in our 13-county region.

That's because the clientele that we serve are often frustrated by technology changes and this has never been more experienced than with the unemployment insurance system where individuals were frustrated by the online and complex filing of their unemployment claims and oftentimes they gave up instead of being persistent in going through the process.

Those are the individuals that we need to be assisting and helping the most at this time. In northern middle, we had an aggressive reopening plan where we were able to open the doors of our American Job Centers so that we could provide face-to-face services and help those that needed our assistance the most.

We implemented very strict safety protocols, including a temperature screening kiosk, required masks, social distancing and even with all the safety protocols we've seen a resistance of individuals to come into the American Job Center system. I personally believe that the public workforce system would benefit from a national marketing campaign to make those individuals aware of the American Job Center system.

It seems like, during these challenging times, we have a different population of individuals that have lost their jobs in previous pandemics and catastrophes. So we really need to do more to be getting the word out about the American Job Center system across the United States.

Remember, we're all in this together. Another challenge that we've had is with technology and again, in our 13-county region, we have a mix of both urban and rural settings and a lot of those counties do not have access to broadband Internet services. So I encourage individuals that the American Job Centers have solutions for them and that that's where they need to be.

An example of an issue with technology is with our Title II adult education students. Adult ed has gone to an all-virtual classroom delivery structure and many of our individuals that are seeking their high school diplomas do not have access to that technology.

So that brings me to talk a little bit about the innovations that we have experienced during these challenging times. While it's difficult for me to say that anything good has come from this pandemic I will say at the workforce board, we have been mandated to embrace technology and learn a different way to deliver services.

Part of the -- our abilities to be successful has been to leverage funding and seek new funding opportunities. So as a workforce board, we elected to grow our sphere of influence as a board and as a nonprofit organization and apply for community care funding.

And remember I told you about those adult ed students that really didn't have the technology that they needed to be successful and that specifically applies to a lot of our non-English-speaking students. We were able to apply for this grant and get 750 laptop computers that we were able to give away to those adult ed students to help them remove that technology barrier and give them the instructions that they needed to help embrace these challenging times.

Our tagline is all about work and specifically, it says solutions that work. So I believe the American Job Center is about finding those solutions. Another segment of our customer base that has been specifically hard-hit during these challenging times is small business. As a workforce board, we have utilized Cares Act funding to provide grants to employers that have 50 or fewer less employees in the State of Tennessee.

We have been able to provide layoff aversion strategies, because again, we're all about keeping people at work. So businesses that have to adapt and change their business planning models such as small boutiques that have gone to online sales and had to create websites that would offer their virtual wares, we have been able to reimburse them for the technology costs that they've incurred.

We've had businesses that have applied that have had to buy laptops for individuals to work from home. Well, we thought that by paying for these laptops it's better to spend $500, $600 on a laptop and keep the individual at work than to have them go on the unemployment roll.

So again, being a board, being creative, finding solutions to problems during these challenging times is what I believe that workforce boards need to be doing across the United States. As far as innovations as a board, we have also, of course, done, like most of you, and we've gone to virtual board meetings, we've gone to drive-in job fairs, virtual job fairs and more online services than ever before, but it's all about helping those that need our assistance the most.

What are some of the planning and strategic directions as a board that we've gone in? We're very pleased to be partnered and joined at the hip with our Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development. They have provided us a valuable labor market information that has helped us shape our direction that as a workforce board that we want to go in.

The State of Tennessee is very unique in that we have three grand divisions within the state. In West Tennessee, we have Memphis, the home of the Blues, in Middle Tennessee, we have Nashville and country music and in East Tennessee, we have the Great Smokey Mountains, which is the most visited national park in the United States, very reliant on hospitality and tourism.

So when the Department of Labor ran the numbers about who is unemployed in the State of Tennessee, we quickly realized that that hospitality and tourism industry was greatly impacted by these challenging times of the pandemic.

So we implemented a program called the Tennessee Talent Exchange where we recruited individuals from those hospitality and tourism sectors and transitioned them into areas that were growing heavily, like logistics and the big box retailers that had more business than they knew what to do with during the pandemic.

So the Tennessee Talent Exchange was a strategy that was implemented. Also, through the State Department of Labor, we have been able to implement a reemployment program that we're deeming New Skills November and it is a short-term training opportunity for those individuals that have been impacted by the pandemic and that we're offering credentialing and training skills so that they can be trained in high-growth industries, such as healthcare.

We've got CNA classes, phlebotomy classes, we're doing CDL truck drivers for the logistics field, a construction class and basic computer skills and oh, by the way, if you go through one of our basic computer skills and have been impacted during these challenging times, we'll give you a laptop too to go along and hopefully be able to attract some work-from-home jobs that we have in Middle Tennessee.

So again, it's about being creative, it's about being innovative and really solving workforce challenges in spite of all of the challenging times that we're going through. As a workforce board, we have been able to be innovative, to leverage funding, to provide essential services through the Cares Act which only added to our extensive workforce menu of services in the American Job Center.

You know, I think the pandemic has brought to our attention the barriers that our workforce has and what we're seeing is -- unfortunately, we're seeing a lot of folks drop out of the labor force. So even in still very high unemployment numbers at Tennessee and our workforce areas at 8.5 percent we've got industries such as manufacturing and healthcare that are desperately needing workers.

So our job as a workforce board is to put together programs where we can recruit individuals that have dropped out of the labor force, upskill them to demand occupations so that they can get back to work. Also, I would be remiss if I didn't mention our youth programs.

We just recently held a virtual event for manufacturing day where we had a panel of employers that highlighted the benefits of manufacturing and presented that to all of the area high schools in the northern-middle workforce area. So again, in spite of the challenging times, we're still being aggressive and we're still finding innovative workforce solutions to meet our needs in Northern-Middle Tennessee.

Bottom line, we've just got to work and do our jobs in spite of the challenges that we're experiencing right now and I think, again, as I started out with, that the public workforce system is the most essential service that our economy needs right now and we need to be putting people back to work, that's our job.

(END)