**WorkforceGPS**

**Transcript of Webinar**

**Opening Plenary, H-1B Apprenticeship Virtual Convening**

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GRACE MCCALL: And welcome to "Opening Plenary." So without further ado, I'd like to turn things over to our moderator for today, Robin Fernkas, deputy administrator, Office of Workforce Investments, Employment and Training Administration. Take it away, Robin.

ROBIN FERNKAS: Thanks, Grace. Great. Good afternoon, everyone and welcome to the H-1B Apprenticeship Virtual Convening. We're so excited to have you all with us today. This convening brings together. Our H-1B scaling apprenticeships through sector based strategies or our essay grantees and our apprenticeships closing the skills gap – our CSG grantees. So over the next four days, we are here to discuss common topics of interest and to learn from experts and peers.

We're going to cover a wide variety of topics that are really critical for your grant success. So we want to ensure that we equip you with the necessary technical assistance, tools, resources, and aid in our overall goal of accelerating the expansion of apprenticeship to new industry sectors reliant on H-1B visas. And to promoting the large scale expansion of apprenticeships across the nation to a range of employers that includes both small- and medium-sized employers.

So to set the stage, we're very pleased to have our assistant secretary for the employment and training administration, John Pallasch to provide some opening remarks. He most recently served as the executive director of the Kentucky Department of Labor Office of Employment and Training, where he led initiatives to improve outcomes for workforce education programs, to increase the accountability and performance of the unemployment insurance program and to consolidate job training and workforce programs in a single project agency. He's continuing his focus on improving outcomes for our nation's workforce education program, and he's the champion of expanding our apprenticeship program. So welcome Secretary Pallasch.

JOHN PALLASCH: Thank you, Robin. Thank you to everybody for joining us today. I know joining via Zoom is not what we had all planned. Obviously getting together in person, being able to meet your colleagues, being able to meet the folks here at the department to build those relationships would be preferable, but unfortunately the virus gets to dictate how we come together as a group now. So – but this is a great opportunity.

As Robin mentioned, over the next few days, you're going to have the opportunity to talk amongst folks who are all engaged in the same effort. And that effort is to expand apprenticeships. This is an exciting time for apprenticeships. The department and this administration has been extremely committed to expanding apprenticeships.

We have a DOL priority goal that we are to create 1 million new apprentices by September 30th of this coming year – 2021. And we're well on our way to that goal and I hope we blast past that goal. And today efforts and your efforts moving forward underneath these two grant programs is going to help with that considerably. If you just take a step back and look at the scale of the two programs we're talking about here, we're talking about $284 million.

We're talking 50 grantees – many new grantees – about 22 of the 51 are new grantees so that's exciting. A number of individuals in their applications have indicated an interest in dealing with IRAPs, which is another initiative here at the department. So that's exciting for us to see – just as we grow the apprenticeship model across the board.

Since I started here at EPA, we've been really trying to expand apprenticeships, not only into nontraditional occupations, but into underrepresented populations as well. And these two grants are going to move us in that direction, and through your work efforts hopefully we can facilitate even greater growth. As I mentioned, the Industry Recognized Apprenticeship Program is a program that we kicked off earlier this year in May – the rule became effective.

We were able to announce the first round of what are called SREs, which is Standard Recognition Entities – and if you're thinking in that traditional registered space, these are apprenticeships sponsors. So we announced the first group of 18 of those at the end of September. And then the first of this month we announced the first IRAP – actually recognized it's underneath an SRE and that was with Raytheon.

So a lot of exciting things happening in apprenticeships. We've got national apprenticeship coming up in the second week in November as well as a pretty aggressive outreach campaign, that department kicked off to really promote apprenticeships and the apprenticeship model. You've probably heard the stats that the $70,000 starting salary – the 94 percent retention rate in apprenticeships.

That's why we're such big fans of the model here and anything that we can do by working with groups such as yours to expand and grow that is really what we're after. And now more than ever, obviously with the chaos that the virus has created – the drastically different workforce that we're seeing now, apprenticeships more so than ever are going to be another tool that's going to help America get back to work.

Unfortunately, the virus doesn't always want to play ball with us. And we've seen increases and decreases in cases and issues across the country, but on a whole we know from our friends at the Bureau of Labor Statistics that there's about 6.5 million job openings right now. So we know that the economy is coming back. We know that businesses are looking to reopen and we firmly believe that the apprenticeship model is another connection between the workforce system and the employers that allows you as grantees to work with those employers to stand up new programs, to train apprentices, and to really just grow the model and put America back to work.

So I appreciate you all coming together today. Like I said, unfortunately it's not in person, so it's going to be a little bit harder for you to network. What I've asked Kim and Robin to do is to make sure that we've got contact information from everybody who's going to participate in the sessions over the next few days, and we'll share that electronically.

So as you're talking and meeting individuals, you'll have their contact information so that those conversations can continue long after these sessions are over. And obviously all the folks here at the department stand ready to assist in any way we can, answer any questions we can, your success is our success. So we are fully committed. Kim, Robin, the rest of her team, John Ladd – his team and the Office of Apprenticeship has done a really good job to put this program on for you. And I really hope that you feel it's valuable.

Like I said, there's a number of you who are new grantees, so that's a little bit daunting and a little bit scary – and some of you who have worked with the department before. So encourage you to talk amongst yourself, encourage you to share experiences, share lessons learned so that we can all do better.

So I do appreciate everybody being here. Again, I wish it was in person. I wish we were meeting here in DC. But unfortunately, we'll have to settle for Zoom. So with that, I will turn it back over to Robin. So thank you very much. I think you're on mute, Robin.

MS. FERNKAS: Hi, everybody. Thank you so much, John. We really appreciate those dynamic opening remarks and getting us off to a great start. As our assistant secretary mentioned, we have some significant goals and efforts on the horizon for our essay and CSG grantees – and really are crucial to our success and meeting those goals. So we're making strides towards these really ambitious goals and I think our CSG grantees are about six months into their period of performance. So many of you are just getting your program set up to serve participants. You're doing your outreach – marketing to your community stakeholders, you're establishing your regular meetings with partners, and you're developing your policies and procedures.

These are all critical steps in startup activities for your grant. And we're hoping that you can learn from the essay grantees that are about 18 months into their period of performance. And they're already serving participants. They've been working with close to 3,500 participants and 847 of them are participating currently in registered apprenticeship. And about 1,100 of them have already entered employment. So we're really glad to see these programs off to a good start. And we're looking forward to seeing that you continue your progress toward achieving your grant goals.

So now that you've heard the big picture and key priority for our apprenticeship expansion from our system secretary, we are going to spend the remainder of our session focused on how we can ensure that the workforce system is fully integrating apprenticeship strategies in its efforts to address workforce challenges. So we're going to be hearing from our two of our ETA administrators who are working collaborative on apprenticeship expansion.

So it's my pleasure to welcome John Ladd, who is our administrator for the Office of Apprenticeship and Kim Vitelli who is our administrator for the office of workforce investment. Hi, John. Hi, Kim.

JOHN LADD: Hi, everybody.

MS. FERNKAS: So from your vantage point, how do you believe that we can make closer connections between the workforce development and apprenticeship system?

MR. LADD: Kim, you want to start?

KIM VITELLI: Sure. So I think – so WIOA programs that are delivered in American job centers are designed to be this doorway to a new career for all kinds of job seekers; right? With a special focus on low income adults, people who have lost their jobs, and disadvantaged youth and those jobs centers can provide information about jobs, resume workshops, job search assistance, and training, and deciding on that training – whether to enter training, whether or not to enter training, and then what kind of training is this really important decision point that has affects for people's entire working lives.

So you're here because you know that work based learning and apprenticeships have such a solid track record. And we want to be able to incorporate that into the individual training decisions that job seekers across the country – but especially the WIOA participants are thinking about.

So the WIOA formula system and the apprenticeship grants together have this opportunity to expand the number of people who get training and to influence those training decisions. And on the business side of the equation, we've got the opportunity to sort of increase the number of industry for which we were bridging skill gaps and also on an individual level to sort of engage more businesses and workforce preparation.

So the public workforce system in WIOA haven't cornered the market on preparing people for a career, but they are big players and it has some built in advantages that make them really great partners in your grants. And the programs that you're building are going to benefit all kinds of people, including the WIOA participants.

So when it's operating at its best, WIOAs built on sector strategies and helping people move along a career pathway that are all sort of at the point center of apprenticeship models, too. So some of the points for connection might be that business led workforce boards that are already injecting the needs of businesses and to these public training dollar discussions and decisions can work really well with apprenticeship models that are going really deep into industry engagement to tailor to for specific occupation.

So the business center action and the business services and the industry planning and individual business engagement all has this virtual cycle that can work really well together. And then on the worker side, the job seeker who's walking into a job center deeds to know that apprenticeship is an option for them.

They might need help applying for a program; they might need career counseling or some basic skills training before they can get going. There might be career guidance along the way, or help with transportation or childcare and can use supportive services in WIOA, and these are all services that the workforce system is pretty adaptive providing and pretty solid at.

So I hope that we can find ways that you as grantees are able to lean on the workforce system to do things for you, like recruiting applicants and helping to provide some of that upfront career counseling to people who need it so that they know what jobs are growing and what – where the businesses need workers and to prepare them with the skills and preparation so that they can successfully start an apprenticeship program and to support the apprenticeship and the apprentice through their program completion. Those are just a few of the things, but I know that John has other things too that he would want to add.

MR. LADD: Absolutely. Hi everybody. I would just echo a lot of what Kim had just mentioned and maybe highlight a couple additional things. You know, our offices are working really closely together and have been for years. And the H-1B grants are just one area where there's that close coordination between our offices within ETA – our regional offices on the federal project officers that you work with.

So we're really trying to model that one workforce system vision here internally within ETA. But then we're also trying to look at the other levers that we have to support this integration. And we're trying to look at all of – kind of the usual federal levers that we have, so – and we're looking at technical assistance, we're continuing to provide that technical assistance and support that Kim mentioned, and to really kind of answer those nuts and bolts of how do you use WIOA funds for specific purposes, whether it's pre-apprenticeship or RAPs or IRAPs or support services as Kim mentioned – employer outreach.

You know, there's still a lot of questions out there and we get a lot of questions almost every day about, again, how do you do it? So it we're looking at our technical assistance – we're looking at our guidance to see if there's other ways that we can help support that. You know, the other areas is another investments in addition to these H-1B investments, we have a lot of other apprenticeship investments, workforce related investments.

And you really see that cross pollination I think in all of those investment vehicles, whether they're FOAs or RFPs, when we really talked about trying to have the workforce system and the apprenticeship systems kind of at the table together or working together required partners to the fullest extent possible.

So we really want to try to drive that integration right at the front end – as people are thinking about putting together their plans and strategies. You know, I think lastly it's always data, performance, metrics, incentives – I think we're trying to take a harder look at our data – see where we see success – where that integration is happening.

You know, we're trying to look more deeper at those WIOA numbers to see where are we seeing pockets of success where WIOA dollars are being leveraged for a apprenticeship where people are leveraging their apprenticeship investments and supporting and integrating with the workforce system.

So the better data, the better performance metrics that drive that kind of behavior – I think ultimately that's going to be really important as part of this. And I guess just lastly, I kind of really bottom line it for folks.

I mean, I think one of the most successful strategies we see are where the workforce board is serving as a sponsor – John mentioned that earlier – we'd love to see – we see in western Michigan, we see in other places where the workforce board is the sponsor of the apprenticeship program. You represent employers, you have employers, you're employer driven, you all can take on some of that administrative work, work with the consortium of employers in your area, and make it kind of a turnkey operation for the employers in your area that you want to provide an apprenticeship solution to.

So we really have been encouraging that model workforce board service – sorry, registered apprenticeship sponsors. But now with the IRAP model, we're also seeing the workforce system step in and think about serving in that SRE role.

So the Texas Workforce Commission is one of the approved 18 SREs. We think that's going to be a really exciting model and one that we hope other states and other local areas think about. You know, you have a lot of sector strategies in your local areas. How do you organize that effort and think about what entity within your partnership structure might be well positioned to serve it as that SRE?

So that's a real kind of rubber hits the road – that's one way to really drive that integration. That's not the only way – there's lots of ways – and our offices are here to help support you in those efforts and help you to connect with partners if the workforce board isn't part of your partnership already.

MS. FERNKAS: Thank you both. I think that was really helpful and I think it will be helpful to these grantees to think about how they take advantage of these opportunities to connect with these systems. John, you had mentioned, IRAP and since these grantees were awarded – well, the upcoming grantees – well in advance of the IRAP.

But the CSGs in March – and we're just wondering now that we have IRAP and we know that some of our grantees either have become SREs or partnering with SREs, what kind of opportunities you see for them?

MR. LADD: Yeah. So that's a great question. Again, we're really excited that a lot of you had this opportunity to kind of get organized and start thinking and putting your partnerships together and your strategies together. And many of you were thinking about IRAPs in your application. So I know I have to say that ultimately it's covered by what you have in your statement of work is really important here.

The IRAP rule has gone into effect we've approved 18 SREs and we have our first IRAP. So IRAPs are happening and you all really have the opportunity to take this opening and really think about whether the IRAP model, the RAP model, or some combination of the two makes sense for the employers that you're serving as part of your grant.

So clearly under the IRAP rule, if you're not thinking about becoming an SRE, you have to think about who would be appropriate to play that SRE role; right? So the SRE, as John mentioned, they're really the approving body and think of them as the accreditors, but they're the ones where we devolve some of our authority to say we're entrusting in you to recognize and approve apprentice programs in your region or in your region and/or industry that makes sense for your region and/or industry.

So the really critical thing is if you have a specific sector strategy, take a look at our website, see which SREs have been approved and see if there's a good match for you – for a potential SRE to help you work with. If there isn't one that matches, think about who might be and start talking to them about their moving forward and submitting an application to become an SRE.

So I think those are – that SRE piece is really kind of the first critical piece of this that you've identified who can play that role. But then I would also start thinking about who are the employers, who are the industry groups in your particular area, and would they be interested in sponsoring those individual apprenticeship programs at the local level – at the employer level?

And does the flexibility that's allowable under the IRAP model makes sense for that industry or are they interested in the registered apprenticeship model? So I think now that kind of all the known knowns are known, it's a lot easier to figure out how to move forward and have those conversations with the employers in your local area and decide on that next step.

We have a really fabulous team here. We're also working with our regional and field staff to integrate them into this effort, but you're certainly welcome to contact our office – Sierra Mitchell on our team, who I think is speaking to you later in the session – would also be a tremendous resource to help you make those connections and find the right SREs that could work for you. I think you're on mute Robin.

MS. FERNKAS: Thank you. That is really helpful, John. And I think for our grantees, we have put forward that guiding – in the form of our FAQ documents and through webinars recently with the Office of Apprenticeship to provide some early assistance just to let you know that you can use your grant funds in developing these IRAP models as well as the registered apprenticeship model.

And so we're just excited that you have the opportunity to do this through the grant. So I'm going to shift a little bit here and talk about sort of what our present challenges are as John – our assistant secretary had noted – the pandemic has really thrown a curve for everyone in terms of the plans that we've had for this year.

And that definitely extends to our grant activities. It has caught some disruption to our education and training systems. And given that these are workspace, grants are given the focus of apprenticeship as workspace grants – what site do you have for these grant needs

And then I – (technical difficulty) – Kim, and I think then – think we need to be looking more broadly at some of the innovative training delivery lessons that we can draw from the public workforce system that may be helpful for these grantees.

So anyway, I'll throw that out to both of you but I'm sure everyone's thinking about these challenges and curious what you're hearing from others that might be helpful.

MR. LADD: I'm going to let you go first.

MS. VITELLI: Sure. Yeah. Definitely. This has been an interesting year. The pandemic has really altered the way we work, but also the types of skills that are in demand and what skills we know we need to develop.

So the department has remained really committed to trying to fulfill all critical workforce needs and really address the workforce related impacts of the coronavirus pandemic that's been evident in how we've tried to put more resources out into the workforce system, through dislocated worker grants and provide as much flexibility as possible for all of our formula grantees and our competitive grantees, so that they can adapt to changing circumstances and shift where they need to, to online services or just different strategies and providing people what they need in order to be able to stay in training and to adapt to the different way that training might be delivered.

So if the pandemic has really taught us anything, it's that we need to be able to adapt to what's happening and also to be watching the horizon for what's coming down the pike. It actually means that these apprenticeship investments are even more important because these strategies like apprenticeship that are really practical and that allow learners and workers to move at their own pace are all the more important at a time when we need to be really adaptable and let people adjust their training experience.

These training strategies like apprenticeship that are skill-based rather than time-based are much better able to adapt to different kinds of training strategies and delivery modes then than just a strict classroom-based training would – might be.

And we know that we need to be responsive to the needs of employers and workers. We always need to do that, but in this year it's been particularly important as the changes in the economy are just more intense than usual. And these investments and apprenticeships therefore are coming at just the right time; right? Because it's so responsive to the needs of businesses and supportive of people moving along a career pathway.

So we have heard from some of our competitive grantees that they have found some innovative ways to provide virtual services or online, or like a mix of in person and online services. We think it's – we think that this has been great.

We've been trying to collect best practices and make them more available. Some of those are on WorkforceGPS and we can put into the chat later, some of the places where you can find those. These are strategies that have been effective – not just in the pandemic, but will also be really useful in the future.

A lot of our competitive grantees and formula grantees have invested in like chatbots in more text-based ways to communicate with people rather than always calling people into an office in order to have these milestone conversations with them. And it's allowed people to be able to have more interaction with their grantees, conversely, sometimes because they don't need to worry about finding childcare transportation so they can make a trip to say an American job center.

They're also able to have these conversations in the comfort of their own home. So depending on the worker and what they're needing to be able to talk about so that they can be frank about what they need in order to be supported in training that can have those conversation sort of on their own turf. That's a nuance that we might want to keep in the future as we think about how to engage with people and support them in their training.

But thinking of all of the lessons that we've learned and the competitive grantees and the formula grants right now – I mean, we definitely have to be paying attention to the digital divide now and well into the future and that includes access to broadband, access to laptops, digital literacy. And we need to plan for all of that right from the start of our programs.

Those aren't necessarily issues that any individual grantee can tackle on their own, but it makes it even more important as our assistant secretary was saying to sort of be operating as one workforce and operating in partnership with multiple grantees so that we can tackle some of those things and not just produce training that's useful, but produce it in a way that people can take advantage of it and support people in their ability to interact with training.

So we'll all need to be really thoughtful and planful, but also really flexible. We need to be able to prepare people once we get them online and get them – help them make their decisions for it to be able to prepare people for the jobs that are in demand and some of that might really be changing.

And while there are some occupations that might be a little bit harder to train for in the short run, if they were really dependent on in person training, in addition to sort of paying attention to the different ways that we can adapt that training – also keeping our eyes open for where there are new opportunities for occupations; right?

There's lots of – going to continue to be lots of demand in healthcare and IT and cybersecurity and transportational logistics; all of which are rich opportunities and have had a lot of investments for apprenticeship expansion. So paying attention to those growth pockets, indicators of where there's new opportunities and even where there might be skilled workers sort of leaving one company, that's going through a change and moving into another one, is a place that the workforce system and apprenticeship system can work together.

Both the use of labor market information to help them make those decisions about where to move the supports from the workforce system to make that transition more stable. And then, lasting effective training that people get in apprenticeship that has long lasting impact on closing skills gap is setting them on a path towards economic sufficiency.

So we'll continue to be gathering up these best practices and sharing them, but also watching you and watching the best practices and learnings that you're going to be able to produce that will be important for us to be able to share back with our other grantees as well.

MS. FERNKAS: Thanks, Kim. John, do you want to address this one?

MR. LADD: Yeah, I'll just underscore some of what Kim said – she said it so well. You know, a couple of points – I would agree with Kim that flexibility is really key here. You know, early on we issued some guidance on expanded use of remote learning. So we thought that was really important and we've seen pretty widespread adoption of distance learning – particularly for that classroom instruction portion of an apprenticeship program.

Obviously the work-based learning part is a little bit more challenging, but we are starting to even see some innovation there with companies developing kind of enhanced virtual reality type opportunities for people to learn and do on the job. So we're looking at some additional flexibility that we can provide, but it is really important to be flexible and innovative – to think about different ways of providing these kinds of learning opportunities.

You know, I also agree with Kim that there are opportunities for growth and there are new opportunities that the pandemic presents – whether it's in the healthcare field or others. You know, our numbers have taken bit of a hit this year, but we still have really, really strong growth – we're looking at about probably approximately 200,000 new apprentices for this year. So that's down from 250,000 last year, but it's still right above or even at or above our kind of 10 year average. So that's 200,000 really well paid careers with strong career ladders and opportunities for wage growth. So there are opportunities out there – we just have to be smarter about identifying what those particular areas are.

You know, I think another opportunity for grantees – and we've been talking with some states and others about this is maybe shifting some of your focus to retention. And thinking about apprentices that have started on the job – those are individuals that employers have invested in – they don't want to lose them.

So think about how, again, depending on what's allowable on your particular grant, but how supportive services or other kinds of services might be packaged to help retain the apprentices that have started their apprenticeship – maybe they're in their second or third years of an apprenticeship and there's some questions as to whether they can continue.

You know, we really want to see those people have the opportunity to complete their apprenticeship. That's where we see the biggest gains in earnings – the biggest gain in employment and retention. So think about retention as a strategy to compliment your expansion strategy.

So that's something that encourage folks to look at. And then again, just any other processes – all the electronic signatures – places where we can kind of remove some of that friction in the system and make it easier so that those don't become barriers to getting people employed and back to work. So those would be some of the things we would add. We are hoping to have some additional guidance coming out later this fall and we'll be sure to get that around to people.

MS. FERNKAS: That's excellent. Thank you both. I think – we're excited about some of the things we're hearing from the grantees and hopefully after the next four days, we'll have some practices that we could share back with everybody. And so I think this is a great place to start with.

I did want to pause here and just see if we've done a lot of talking and give all of you, our audience, a chance to ask some questions, because I know that Kim and John are open to answering any questions that you may have. Or if there's some things that you want to share in terms of practices or things that you've been trying that you think would it be helpful to share with other grantees at this point? So I'll pause for a second.

But I think – and I don't know if you have other things that you wanted to add, Kim and John, but I think as we book at these grantees and the four year period that they have – actually – but here is a question. So I'll pivot to that, but one is how fast can grantees integrate the new SREs into their project design? And I know you talked a little bit about the IRAP, John, but maybe if you could address that specifically?

MR. LADD: Yeah. So, I mean, again, it's really just kind of looking – I mean, right now there's the 18 that we have on our website. But a question we are getting a lot is how we see these are SREs being funded moving forward in the future. And these are meant to be industry driven – kind of industry demand entities.

And a lot of them I think will be working with their employer partners to think about how they create their sustainability. But I think there are a number of SREs that would be looking to partner with existing grantees and think about how to leverage some of those resources. There's a need for curriculum development. There's a lot of business outreach that still needs to happen once these SREs are stood up.

You know, there there's going to be performance and other metrics – best practices. I know we've heard from a lot of the SREs already that they're interested in forming some kind of community practice – community of practice to learn from each other and understand what's working across the industry. So I just think there's a tremendous opportunity here for you all and for them to partner with each other. I think there's interest on both sides to think about how these investments and other investments that DOL has out there – can support the SREs.

MS. FERNKAS: Great. And I think the next question is do you have any suggestions for outreach? And this grantee is in the healthcare field. And if they're saying with the pandemic, obviously healthcare providers are very busy and not responding to their outreach. And I think – Kim, I know you talked about how the grantees maybe able to work with the workforce system on some of the outreach.

And as you're talking about this, I know that we're going to have a few sessions on employee engagement that we're going to have some that are industry focused. And I think we do have your industry intermediary here in the healthcare field. So I think in addition to what both of you offered today, I think this is a topic we're definitely going to be focusing on over the next few days too. Let me– let me stop talking and let you answer the question.

MS. VITELLI: I think you hit it right on the head there, Robin, that where the workforce board might already have a relationship with health care providers, if that was already a sector that they were working in – then they might have established connections that you could leverage.

And you've probably already thought of this, but considering healthcare associations, industry associations that wouldn't necessarily be directly providing services at this point, but could still provide some of the intel that you might need as you're crafting your learning strategies and competencies – might be useful and of course the intermediaries that John can talk about as well.

MR. LADD: Yeah. No. I think that that's really helpful. You know, I don't want to deny that that is a challenge; right? I mean, it's a really challenging environment – particularly when you're talking about sending potentially untrained people into a potentially very dangerous and hazardous situation.

So I don't want to undermine the challenge that exists there and we do appreciate that. You know, I would probably just say what we've kind of learned over the years with business outreach on apprenticeship is different than business outreach in some other workforce development areas. You know, it is a job. It has to make business sense to that employer.

They're taking someone on for the long term that they see as part of their business for the long term and they're going to be making the lion's share of the investment – whatever public contribution we make to the apprenticeship is going to be a very small portion of the total cost of that apprenticeship. You know, we're helping to incentivize – we're underwriting some of the costs, we're sharing some of those investments, but the employer is really bearing the majority of those costs.

So we have to sell apprenticeships as a business solution to a problem; right? So it really has to be connected to what is the problem that they're trying to solve in their workforce and how can apprenticeships meet those needs? And I think that's really the key to selling apprenticeship kind of any at any time; right? Good times or bad times, but particularly now it's got to be positioned in a way that makes business sense to that employer.

MS. FERNKAS: Thanks, John. And while you were talking, we got a question about how do we convince employers and what are some of the best practices around selling them. And so I think that really spoke to that question.

And I think as a group, we'll definitely be focusing on that throughout the convening – one follow up question, John, someone had asked that you mentioned that you were going to come out this fall with some guidance about removing barriers that are getting in the way from the signatory process. And they were wondering if you might elaborate a bit more on that?

MR. LADD: Yeah. I probably shouldn't say too much more about that right now. It's still going through the clearance process. So we're trying to look at some things where we can provide some additional flexibility. So – and until that's all finalized, I don't want to get into too much into the details, but we're continuing to look at where we can be more flexible and more responsive to the needs that we're hearing from everyone.

MS. FERNKAS: So I think you have some additional ones in the next few minutes here as we're wrapping up, please put them in the chat. If we go on to answer them now, trying to get through to you throughout the convening. But I did want to close with kind of a broad question to you both – kind of looking forward at the end of the four year grant, what contributions do you envision that these grantees will make for apprenticeship expansion overall?

MR. LADD: I'm happy to start on that one and then turn it over to Kim. You know, I think it's really important to remember that we are in the really early stages of all of this apprenticeship innovation; right? You know, the first real federal investment in apprenticeship only was in 2016; right? So we're really on that curly wave of learning in terms of what works, what's most effective?

You know, we have been trying a lot of different approaches – looking at different strategies, funding states, funding intermediaries, funding partnerships such as your own, technical assistance, incent- – providing incentives in some places, and so we're still really early in that kind of learning phase.

You know, you look at countries like England and others that went through similar reforms. You know, they started their reform back in the 1990s and they continue to kind of innovate and change. So we're really excited about what you all are doing, because it's going to be such an important part of the evidence base that grows. I think a number – most of you are part of some evaluation studies. We have other evaluation studies going on.

I think it's going to be really incumbent on us to learn from this initial wave, which is essentially about a five year kind of wave of federal investment that's happened over the past five years and what's worked? What works at the state level? What works at the industry level? What are meaningful incentives? How does outreach work? How do we remove those barriers to adoption? You know, some people are referring to in the chat; right? You know, there's lots that we're continuing to learn.

We know we have to make it easier for employers to adapt. You know, we've gone from apprenticeship being something that not a lot of people really understood. It was this kind of thing that happened over there with the construction world. And there's something about unions and there's all this stuff out there and we really try to bring it out into the light, make it easier for people to understand, simplify it – reduce some of those barriers, figure out how do we scale it.

So it's a significant portion of our workforce development system and you all a part of that in terms of helping us figure out what works, maybe what didn't work. I mean, there are going to be things where we're going to discover and it's some of those are that didn't work.

And so I really think that's going to be the most important thing that we look back on to figure where did people really innovate? Where did people find kind of that secret sauce that helped move the needle and bring the system to scale? How do we do better diversity and inclusion efforts? You know, we still have a lot of challenges in that area, but we're really excited at in the investment area. You know, all of our kind of diversity and inclusion metrics are significantly higher than kind of the system as a whole.

So we've really emphasized that in all of these investments that there needs to be a strong diversity and inclusion focus. And we're seeing that – we're seeing higher participation rates for women, people of color, people with disabilities, veterans. So that's been promising to see – but still not where we want to be in a lot of these areas.

So you're going to be important part of that knowledge base, obviously going to be an important part of contributing to that 1 million apprentices that we're closing in on. So we really do thank you for those efforts, but we really have to do a good job of documenting kind of this first wave of investment and identifying those strategies that have been effective, have an kind of moved the needle on apprenticeship, whether it's penetration into new industries, expansion overall, reaching new populations, and that integration.

You know, we talked a lot about integration with the workforce system, but we've also seen tremendous integration with the education system and thinking about how apprenticeship is seen as post-secondary education and not an alternative to a college degree, but just another path to obtaining post-secondary credit and/or a degree.

And we've seen a lot of success in that area with community colleges and others playing a really significant role in apprenticeship expansion. So, again, I really feel like it's documenting and building that evidence base is going to be one of the most important things we get out of this initial period. But Kim, I'll turn it back to you.

MS. VITELLI: John said it so well. I mean, the importance of adding to the story about what works so that it can influence operations at the local level, as well as policy at the national level is really important. So no pressure, but we're going to be watching and evaluating how these grants go. There's so much to learn; so much that we're going to learn from you.

And I would just add that at the end of the four years of these grants, what we'll also have are people who never thought of apprenticeship before living as apprentices and growing in their occupations and not just themselves benefiting from that, but being an example to their peers and being an example to their communities.

You're going to produce successful outcomes as well as some things that we'll test and see how it goes, but the positive tax that you're putting out into the world also not just show evidence, but also so show the lived experience so that your neighbors will be watching and understand – oh, I can do that because I saw that they did it.

And young people that didn't know that this was an opportunity for them – now, at the end of the grant, there'll be more young people that know that apprenticeship is a career path that they can aspire to that will have positive impacts both on what we know, but also like how people are living their lives. So it's going to be – your work is important and we'll be watching it and it has potential for some really transformative impacts. So we're really excited. And thank you all for your work.

MS. FERNKAS: Well, thank you both for the robust conversation and for being here today. I think those are some really inspiring words to start not only our convening, but to close the first session. So before we wrap up, I did want to call your attention to the upcoming national apprenticeship week. John, I don't know that you mentioned this, but it's going to take place November –

MR. LADD: Thank you.

MS. FERNKAS: November 8th through the 14th, and you will be hearing from others on the Office of Apprenticeship throughout the week. But national apprenticeship week is a nationwide celebration that brings together business leaders, labor, educational institutions, and Americans interested in apprenticeship to showcase the impact apprenticeship programs are having on closing the U.S. skills gap and preparing American workers for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

So that's a little infomercial there that our colleagues from apprenticeship second here, but we do want to encourage all of you to participate. John, did you want to add to that?

MR. LADD: No, just a big thank you. And you'll see the URL at the bottom – lots of great resources, templates – obviously the focus this year will be more virtual events due to COVID. But we're still pushing to continue the great response we've had in the past five years. So check the website, please register your event if you're having an event, we just love to share that information with everybody across the country. And it's been a great event every week. And thank you for all your support over the past few years.

MS. FERNKAS: So as we wrap up our closing plenary here or excuse me, our opening plenary, you've heard from our ETA leadership on the departmental apprenticeship priorities and how your grant programs can fit into these. We're excited that our H-1B investments are developing new and expanded apprenticeship models and we want to ensure that you're set up for success. So ETA has come up with several success factors or success indicators which outline the critical areas that the grantee should be focusing on to support success.

These include strong organizational management, strong operational systems, sustainability principles, obsessive apprenticeship design, affective partner engagement, and affection participant engagement in an apprenticeship experience.

So one of the things that you will see in the way that we've designed this convening, as we're going to be touching on each of these success factors throughout the next four days.

So we hope that the content of this convening is enlightening, that it provides technical assistance in the areas that you need, and contributes to your overall success. So thank you.

(END)