**WorkforceGPS**

**Transcript of Webinar**

**Implementing Your COVID-19 National Dislocated Worker Grant Program**

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GRACE MCCALL: Welcome to "National Dislocated Worker Grant – COVID Disaster Relief." Without further ado, I'm going to turn things over to one of our moderators for today, Charlotte Harris, unit chief, Division of Adult Services and Governance, United States Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. Take it away, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE HARRIS: Thanks, Grace. And good afternoon everyone. And good morning to those who are still on the West Coast. I'm Charlotte Harris, and I'm one of the unit chiefs in the Division of Adult Services and Governance at the U.S. Department of Labor, and that is the unit that manages all of the dislocated worker grants to include the COVID-19 grant. Cohosting with me today is Stephen Duval, who you'll hear from later. He is the chief of the Division of Workforce Investment with the U.S. Department of Labor. And he works in one of our regional offices where he manages the Northeast and Caribbean Regions.

Our agenda for today is to do a review of the status of the DWG COVID awards. We'll do a quick overview to include expenditures to date or the amount of the money awarded. And today we're going to cover two priority areas. And those today will be the timely and efficient participant outreach and recruitment and participant eligibility. But the highlight for today are the three states who you will be hearing from who have had early success with implementing these two priority areas. These states are California, Rhode Island, and Washington State.

And then we'll have a Q&A period where you'll be able to ask these three states specific questions about their grant and some of the successes that they had. We're going to hold the Q&A until after all three states have presented so each one will have an opportunity to present the information that will also help you with your grant. Just a quick overview of the DWGs, and this is for anybody who's not familiar with the funding of this program. It is part of the CARES Act for the coronavirus aid, relief, and economic security act.

And this act provided additional $340 million in dislocated worker grant funding. And nationally to date, the department has awarded over $392 million in COVID-19 DWGs to 63 states, territories, and tribal entities. And to see a list of all of these awards, we provided a link for you at ETA's website where you can get more information about each grant. And as you know, the workforce system is a vital component to the recovery of our nation in the workforce system.

And with that significant investment – as you just heard – the amount spent has been provided in response to this pandemic and is designed to help strengthen communities and economies through disaster relief, employment recovery, or humanitarian aid. And all of you who have been awarded grants, your grants include assistance in one or more of those areas. These funds will help individuals – families and communities – recover through the provision of temporary employment and career training and supportive services. Again, this is the workforce system's effort to assist in the vital component to recovery.

As a reminder, with those significant investments made by the department, the OIG will be conducting audits to review the effectiveness and efficiency and integrity of all DOL-funded programs by the CARES Act. And this is done through the pandemic response accountability community. And these TA sessions that we're doing are part of assisting you in efficient and timely project startup and eligibility documentation. As audits continue to happen, or as they occur, they will look at that. And this is our effort to assist you in ensuring successful implementation of your project. And I will turn it over now to Steve.

STEPHEN DUVAL: Charlotte, thank you very much. And good afternoon and good morning to everyone. I'm Steve Duval. I work with the Division of Workforce Investment in the Northeast Region. And I'm delighted today to be able to help the conversation we've been having with our state grantees and local grantees on implementing these crucial (bus?) for addressing COVID-related disaster relief throughout the country.

For those of you who were able to join the first webinar that was held on September 30, you will remember that we featured three states – Massachusetts, Texas, Mississippi were brave enough to come on and talk to us about their early startup efforts at the very beginning stages of putting these grant funds to use. So I want to thank those three states, again, for their presentation and the resources they shared with many of our grantees across the country. Today we have three more states who are willing to help continue the conversation of what it looked like successful in starting up some of the state's huge projects across the country.

We're continuing this conversation. A lot of what you heard at the beginning in Charlotte's reports were shared with the audience on September 30. And we repeated it today because we are really wanting to help grantees who are trying to get these resources put to use and getting their projects off the ground. As Charlotte said, we anticipate that the Office of the Inspector General will be focusing on timely and efficient startup of these grants to ensure that this significant investment is put to good use.

Today we will ask our three grantees to focus on participants and worksite outreach, how they are getting people in the door and getting them enrolled, the documentation process for a moment, and rather importantly this election of subrecipient contractors and worksites that are hosting these participants as they start their disaster relief employment. We're happy that all three grantees accepted our invitation. And I'm just going to take a few minutes to introduce each one before I turn it over to the first presentation.

We'll start with Northern California. We have the Northern Rural Training and Employment Consortium and their partner, the Alliance for Workforce Development. They are representing a local area in the state of California. We are also joined today by the Rhode Island Department of Employment and Training and their key partner, Skills for Rhode Island's Future. And finally, we'll be joined by another local area, Washington State Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council.

Each of these grantees will explain what they're doing, how they're putting their dislocated worker cohort dollars to work, and how they're able to get their projects started under very difficult and trying times. We, here in our region, have been posting monthly peer calls with our grantees. And we hear how difficult it is under the circumstances of a very fluid environment of trying to get projects off the ground.

The purpose of these webinars is to give you the information that you need through the eyes and the words of your peers across the country who are having some success. As alluded to, at the end of brief presentations, we'll open up the board for questions and answers. But please make sure you type your questions into the chat box so we can keep track of the questions that are on your mind. And we'll take time at the end of the presentation to answer as many questions as we can.

With that, let's get started. And I'm going to introduce our friends from Northern California. And I'll turn it over to Terrianne Brown and Kristine Farrell.

TERRIANNE BROWN: Hi, everyone. My name is Terrianne Brown, and I am the assistant director with NoRTEC. Before I turn you over to Kristine Farrell, who is the NDWG project coordinator for one of NoRTEC's WIOA service providers, I want to share a little bit about how NoRTEC is structured because I believe the structure is primarily responsible for our ability to implement successful disaster employment projects within our very large rural geographic area. And unfortunately, we've had a lot of practice.

Since 1983, when NoRTEC was first created under the Job Training Partnership Act, we have successfully operated more than two dozen disaster employment projects due to floods, storms, drought, fire, and now COVID. NoRTEC's service area is made up of 11 Northern California counties. Our area contains about 20 percent of the state's land mass, but only about 2 percent of the population. As I previously stated, we're pretty rural, with only two population centers with about 100,000 folks throughout the entire 31,000 square-mile region.

Our remaining towns and cities are mostly made up of populations between 3- and 7,000 people. And these small towns are geographically isolated, and do not normally share labor markets. NoRTEC contracts with three private nonprofit community-based organizations that, in addition to providing our regular WIOA programs and services, they are also the presumptive deliverer of any special projects that come up for us in the particular counties that they serve. We have 13 AJCCs in our 11-county service area. And there's at least one in every county.

While NoRTEC staff interact with the state to request funding for these projects, provide oversight, and monitor services and expenditures, the hard work on the ground is done by the CBO that we contract with in each county. These CBOs develop worksites with local agencies, recruit and place participants at these sites, monitor participant progress, and follow up with additional WIOA services at the end of the NDWG work assignment if needed. The CBOs are also the signatory party to the worksite agreements between themselves and the worksite agency.

The worksite agency is responsible for supervision of the worksite. And the CBO provides the workers. The NoRTEC workforce development board itself is not a party to these agreements. Now I'd like to introduce you to Kristine Farrell, who is the NDWG project coordinator for the Alliance for Workforce Development. Kristine Is currently managing three active NDWGs, two of which are fire cleanup projects, with the third addressing COVID. Kristine?

KRISTINE FARRELL: Hi. Welcome, everyone. Like Terrianne said, with NoRTEC, Alliance for Workforce Development serves six of NoRTEC's counties in Northern California. And like NoRTEC, we've been doing this for a long time. We've been here for over 30 years. And it's a beautiful place to live. But unfortunately, it's been impacted by a lot of natural disasters.

Right now with COVID-19, though, it's just so different from previous NDWGs and the disasters that we've had to deal with in the past – or that we're actually currently dealing with unfortunately – and really trying to deliver those services remotely, initially, and working with customers who aren't really looking for a job, completely unknown, economic impact, businesses are closing, daily warn emails. Our unemployment system has just been overloaded.

So COVID has definitely been a different type of disaster than anything we've ever had to deal with in the past. Today I want to talk about a little bit they asked what were some of our key factors to success here under COVID. And honestly, I think we can come away with one – the experience that we've had with other disaster grants and partners. Partnerships are huge. Most of our disasters are actually weather-related – storms, droughts, floods, fire, things of that nature. But with COVID, we had to really take a different approach.

But over the years, we've learned and fine-tuned our temporary job worker program related to those disaster grants and really building on our relationships with the federal, state, and our local governments to really be able to deliver NDWG's successfully. So really it was kind of lessons learned from each of those projects to really be able to apply that to the next disaster. I can't stress enough, though, the importance on COVID how much the partnerships were important to really getting the COVID NDWG off the ground. And that included local partners, counties, cities, state agencies, which I'll touch on a little bit more here.

So our component of the grant, we actually are only running the disaster relief employment part. So it's the DRE or TJC, whatever you might call that. We also are doing humanitarian aid with that, including some contact tracing assistance under that. So with those components that we're dealing with this NDWG, some of the success was in one area alone we had maybe 58 organizations that we kind of almost kept on speed dial that we could reach out to when disasters like this hit; and really building those relationships continually throughout the year and maintaining that communication with them. We've done other programs with them.

We built a lot of trust and had a track record. And really it helped us make this NDWG a little bit more successful than we thought it might be. That's for counties, our county agencies like our Department of Social Services, public health especially, our cities, the state agencies for us – that's the employment development department in California – other federal agencies. Unfortunately in our region, we already have FEMA and other federal partners here because of other disasters that have happened within our region. And so we've already built those relationships and can maintain those contacts. We did full chambers of commerce, CBOs.

The other part that was successful was our outreach and marketing. I hate to call it marketing, but really that outreach. We really built up a presence online to get the word out. And we've been doing that over the last few years just to really ensure that our communities in the area understood we were there and what we could do so when we did have special projects come out, we could get that information out pretty quickly. We use a chat feature, all those things that you can use technology-wise on your website and through social media sites.

We also used workshops hosting webinars, virtual rapid responses for the businesses that were closing, virtual workshops for actual things that jobseekers wanted to hear, so not just the normal run-of-the-mill, interview, job-search workshop, but things that they actually wanted to hear to try to get people interested and over into our program. I'm not going to lie; obviously there have been a lot of challenges with COVID and a lot of issues. And I don't know about all the other areas, but this one was especially hard to run.

Initially, just getting the NDWG grant, that timeline of submitting the paperwork and the application and the level of detail that they need. And fortunately for us, because of our experience and through every application – even though it's a little bit different every time – we were able to fine-tune that and get that information out quickly when those turnaround times were a little bit short. I would say that finding participants was a huge challenge – finding willing and able and eligible participants.

We've got high unemployment, benefits and compensation, but it's not really relating to those that are actually looking for work. Their schools are not open in our area. There's a few that just started. So we've got a lot of individuals that were working that have kids in school and they can't go back to work. There's that fear. There's a lot of people that are scared. The types of jobs that we're offering under the temporary work are not really positions that they maybe wanted to do. So getting participants has been a struggle.

But we were able to overcome that a little bit by using our outreach, our social media, both rapid responses, the virtual workshop, and all of those partnerships and relationships to our benefit. Our unemployment partners, the state agency, the employment development department – working with them to try to identify those that are on unemployment so that we can connect with them to see if they'd be interested in that temporary work was one of the ways we overcame that.

And unfortunately, we actually are running a few NDWG grants right now in this region. And so that's multiple disasters just layered one on top of the other that's impacted our rural area.

Sometimes we were able pull from clients that were in a previous NDWG and maybe they're done in that program and able to co-enroll them over into this new NDWG, depending on their circumstance and if that was the right thing to do with them. Onboarding was a struggle for us because initially our offices were closed to the public and our staff was working remotely. So we had to just completely overhaul how we were going to do onboarding and eligibility and paperwork, but virtually – what was allowed, what wasn't allowed?

And making sure – how are they going to sign? Getting different programs that the state was okay for us to use to sign documents that we normally would do in the first (inaudible). Providing those interviews remotely is kind of weird initially. So that was definitely a struggle with this. And honestly, the worksites, finding worksites. Even though we had a lot of connections and partnerships finding worksites, because initially these agencies really didn't even know what did they need? What was that struggle?

There was also other funding floating around for the counties and city agencies that maybe they were going to use instead. So it's almost like we were competing with that. But that constant communication with them and using the CBO – for like humanitarian aid, the food banks – that really needed our help, because initially those are usually run with a lot of individuals that are seniors. And they're volunteers. And this is not a time when they're getting a lot of them. So being able to help at the food bank at that time was definitely a benefit and helpful.

A little bit about our primary partners and how they aided in our success – our six-county region – and reaching out and those relationships we have with them really helped in this circumstance, and our state agency, to be honest. Really having a good relationship with EDD and the local workforce service areas and their staff. And like I talked about earlier, we already were participating in regional economic meetings with a lot of the different public and nonprofit CBO agencies within our region. So we had already kind of prebuilt those relationships.

So as soon as this started coming out, we just started reaching out to those agencies immediately asking them if they knew of other agencies. What did they think was going to be some of their need and some of the things we might be able to help with? Because of the types of positions that the COVID NDWG provides – like sanitation workers, humanitarian aid under the TJC, of course, and of the DRE – we see a lot of turnover, but in a good way. Because they're not staying almost the full length of their contract because they do actually end up finding full-time employment because they don't want to stay in that temporary position.

But then also, some of them are able to go back to their jobs, the job that they were laid off from. And they're reopening, and now they have an opportunity to go back. So it was a way for us to help supplement employment for them for the time being and move it over. Our partners at the worksite specifically kind of had that "try before you buy" option with the temporary workers to see how those participants are working, who they like, really encouraging our participants and supporting them to apply for some of their permanent positions and their openings.

And we have even had one work type that had about 15 of our temporary placements at their site. And 10 of them were picked up by the agency for permanent employment. So it's hard for us to go back and replace those individuals. But it is amazing for them, and amazing for those participants to get that employment, and for the worksite to be able to find the individuals for their openings. We have been having some success there. So training services and community response – we don't actually have the training component. We just have the temporary job component.

But what we do do is we co-enroll. We co-enroll them into our regular WIOA Program for any training services that they need or they want that we think is going to help them be successful in finding employment. Luckily, we're kind of in the beginning of the program year, so we have the funding and we do meet the numbers on that site as well, which has helped us even just on our regular program site. But we really looked at co-enrollment.

Of course, we have to be a little bit careful there, because we're always trying to consider performance and making sure that co-enrollment makes sense and they're going to be a success and it's not going to affect our performance too much on that side. I'm sure you guys have seen sometimes with NDWGs the participants that will do these temporary jobs are really harder to serve. They have multiple barriers, a lot of things going on. So we're always assessing and looking at that really closely.

On the humanitarian assistance side with the food banks and other agencies, the community has just been very thankful and grateful for the services we've been able to help them with. They're always kind of surprised when they hear of our services and wonder why is this such a secret? even though we're trying to be out there as much as we possibly can and let them know what we do. But it always comes as a surprise sometimes.

I would say next level plans for us at this point really for our NDWG with COVID and our other NDWG is really just to continue to think outside the box. We're really looking at what are those needs on the ground? It's changing from moment to moment. Businesses are reopening. Then maybe they're not. I don't know as many of you know in California run a color tier system in each county. And sometimes they might be able to reopen. And then they might fall back to a different tier and now they're back to being closed again on these businesses. So we're really just trying to think outside the box in looking at what is needed in our communities.

We're also going to be looking at some new recruitment strategies to figure out where we're going to get these placements now for businesses or the public agencies and organizations that are opening back up and are going to need some assistance through our NDWG. In looking at what assistance we might need, I've always said if there was a way we could really push outreach and recruitment of the NDWG grant out there, that would be great, like a national commercial or something of that nature might be very helpful. But that's kind of where we're at right now and what we're doing with our NDWG COVID grant. So I thank you for joining us today.

SARAH BLUSIEWICZ: Hi. Good afternoon and good morning, everyone. This is Sarah Blusiewicz from the Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training. I'm joined by my co-presenter, Nina Pande, who is the executive director of Skills for Rhode Island’s Future. And we're having a talk about what we're doing in Rhode Island. We're actually administering this grant at the state level. At the state level, we have actually won just over $2.3 million for our dislocated worker grants. And we're on path to serve 388 participants.

Currently for the dislocated worker disaster relief employment day, we have already enrolled 152 of those participants. So we are nearing 40 percent of our grant completion. And we only started enrolling around May. I would say that the most important part of our grant has been our partnership with Skills for Rhode Island's Future, which is a nonprofit recruiting agency which we partner with in our regular work. So we in Rhode Island grade not just COVID dislocated worker grants, but any other dislocated worker grant formula dollars. We do apprenticeship work. We have state funding. So we really stand up a lot of work with Skills.

In addition, we have a really robust partnership program so that employment and things are accessed that will be funneled through our partnerships, which include all of our higher education institutions, all of our industry partners, because our state is really focused on job training. With that, I'm going to turn this over to Nina to walk us through a little bit of the process that we have with Skills. I would say in summary, the two biggest things that we have focused on is, one, a sense of urgency and immediacy for immediate reaction to COVID.

So we have – (inaudible). The other thing that I would say is strong integration between our team. So between the eligibility process, the recruitment process, data sharing, data integration, all of that work has to be seamless to do a project this big in such a short period of time. So I think that would be our biggest lesson learned. But, Nina, take it away on the process flow.

NINA PANDE: Thank you very much, Sarah. And thank you all for allowing us the opportunity to speak with you. I am going to talk a little bit about the process flow from an employer perspective, as well as the candidate perspective. But before I do that just very quickly, as Sarah mentioned, Skills for Rhode Island's Future is a nonprofit entity. We are a workforce intermediary where we are at the intersection between the demands of our employer partners and the needs of our jobseekers. We start with the demand of our industry partners. We work through sector partnerships.

And at this point, we manage at our agency 172 employer partnerships across all industry sectors representing every corner of our state here in Rhode Island. And then we also match those jobs and those employer demands with the talent that is here locally. For this grant, what we do is we stay closely with Department of Labor and Training to identify employers who have immediate need. If we could go back one more slide to the process flowchart, we start with our employer partners in really doing a deep dive and understanding of what some of their short-term temporary employment needs are that have been created because of the pandemic.

And when we do that, we have those employer partners apply in line for eligibility to see, in fact, if they can take advantage of this grant opportunity. And that is where Sarah and her team at the Department of Labor and Training are really testing the compliance and validity of the application. And that's where the current conversation between the state and our agency starts in saying, is this employer partner a good fit? And do we believe we have the talent out there who can help meet the short-term immediate employment needs of our employer partners to keep them whole as they are continuing to contemplate their business structure amid the pandemic?

From there we make an employer selection. And then our agency enters into a memorandum of understanding with the employer partner that really outlines the status of our work, the type of talent we're going to provide for that, for the period of time to exceed no more than 60 weeks of employment. And then what is that job description? What are the qualifications that we're looking for? So that we can develop a candidate profile. And then that works shifts within our agency, and we begin the recruitment process to try to match up the talent that exists to the demands of those employer partners.

Sarah, I don't know if you want to talk a little bit about the ELT process in terms of clarifying eligibility for the program, but I do know that we do work across multiple sectors. And the focus has really been around employers who need the additional temporary talent that has been created because of the COVID pandemic in making sure that our businesses remain whole and open. So, Sarah, I don't know if you want to talk just briefly about the internal process. I'll go about the candidates as well.

MS. BLUSIEWICZ: So what happens is when Skills identifies candidates that they have received an application for a temporary employment opportunity, they're sent to us via a secure FTP site. And then we run eligibility determination daily for Skills. So we return to Skills which of those applicants that they're recruiting are actually eligible for dislocated worker eligibility criteria. We check their selective service.

Our agency is also the employment agency that has access to real time unemployment data, so we can see if they are currently collecting unemployment, (inaudible), etc. So we're able to return that eligibility determination. Once Skills has that determination and that offer of employment has been made, then what we can do is if the person takes the position and actually agrees to go forward, that's the moment that we actually enroll them into the dislocated worker program. So eligibility is first. There's a confirmation on the position on the site, and then enrollment happens in our MIS system. So again, this is all in real time. We even do eligibility determinations over the weekend. So it's a high priority project for sure.

MS. PANDE: Our process for recruitment for candidates begins and starts with the employer demands and really building out that candidate profile. And if you go to the next slide just so you can see the level of engagement that our agency at Skills for Rhode Island's Future has, is you start with our relationship with the state. Even on this project, the governor has gotten involved to make sure that our employer partners know about the services. A lot of times she will start with some C-level of engagement with our employer partners. I will join. Folks from the state will join and Department of Labor and Training to explain the program, explain what are their options.

And then from there, the relationship is really managed within our organization where we also connect with C-level executives and human resources. But we can really say what the pulse of what the hiring needs are of our employer partners. And then from there, we also continue to work with relationships within our organization and that employer partner, as well as the state with other employer partnerships in the state and in our agency; have weekly tie-ups on this work so we can stay as close to real time as possible on where we are and what we forecast the trends of hiring to be.

And then our business of recruitment, which is our really our bread and butter, starts with traditional recruitment strategies that you would see in a staffing agency where we are out-bounding a lot of marketing materials. We get on a lot of local radio stations, as well as local media print stations to make sure folks know about these opportunities from a jobseeker perspective. Social media has become our best friend amid COVID because we find that electronic social media targeting seems to have the best return on investment for us.

But then we also use traditional job boards like EDD and LinkedIn to be able to promote these jobs and opportunities for people to apply. We also have a database that we maintain. Currently, we have over 80,000 unique jobseekers who access our services. So we go to our internal database. And then we have set up a relationship with the state when people are applying for unemployment. We are able to mine that data as well. So we are actively seeking folks who have recently applied for unemployment where we can ensure some eligibility right on the front end.

And then last but certainly not least, we work with over 80 community partners to let them know about those opportunities where they can also spread the word. We used to host a lot of job fairs. But COVID has kind of changed that nature of our work. So we have started to pivot to virtual job fairs where we're hosting; in fact, I think we have two large virtual job fairs for different sector partnerships.

So we will use that opportunity also to let folks know about the specialized programs that we have running. And then once we source candidates – and just for volume perspective, last week alone we had over 1,500 unique jobseekers come into our platform for different opportunities that we're sourcing for. And then what happens is they get paired up with a recruiter who then walks through their resume, checks all of their credentials in making sure that they match up to the employer standards. And through that interview process, we whittle down folks that we then send to the employers for consideration.

For the programs under this grant, we really focused on employers that would otherwise struggle to keep their boards open. And we also have an opportunity for public sector strategies where we even are placing people temporarily for our schools to reopen, to reopen safely. Things like COVID screeners, and COVID testers, and compliance check folks are also going out there that are part of our public sector strategy as well. I don't know if we want to go to the next slide. Sarah, I will let you take this away.

MS. BLUSIEWICZ: (Inaudible) – on our project has been immediate implementation. We hit the ground running, and enrollment has been fast and strong. Again, the integration between the Skills team and the state team has been, at a minimum, weekly meetings on this grant in particular. But I should put context around this as Skills as our partner on many of our workforce development – (inaudible) – so it's not just this particular grant, but all of our workforce projects they're involved with.

And then this created some of the implementation of the broader CARES Act. So they were able to start standing up other public sector needs in terms of help outreach in sectors, screeners – those types of jobs – before some of that broader Department of Health COVID CARES Act money came on board.

Challenges that we have faced is like when the other states – the $600, PUA, and UI payments made that difficult. Individuals were a little nervous. How does that affect my benefits? I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how that's going to affect the job that I – (inaudible). So there was a little bit of uncertainty in the UI claimant world.

Also, coordination, broadly speaking, with CARES Act at large – what money? What positions? Does somebody need to transition between grants? Does someone need to transition between projects? So that work was challenging to navigate, but nothing that we couldn't overcome. And I would just say that in our state, our governor has been instrumental in this work. Not just for this dislocated worker grant. She has also designated $45 million of the corona relief fund out of CARES Act for workforce development training.

So this grant as being $2.3 million is a significant investment in the landscape of significant investment. So our governor has pushed all of us to get people back to work as quickly as possible. So I just wanted to say if you are interested in the Skills model, for those of you on the phone from Illinois, this is franchised from the Skills for Chicagoland model.

So Skills can come to other states, and I would highly recommend looking into that if you are looking for that recruitment partnership to really help augment the traditional workforce services. Skills is a really important partner for our AJCs as well. So a lot of our clients that we work with in the AJCs we use to refer to Skills as a recruiter. So it's that hand-in-glove relationship that we have that I can't say enough about how valuable that has been in implementing this grant and many of our other workforce projects as well.

MS. PANDE: If I could just add if I have a second and we can go back to some of the early woods too. And this is something I should have mentioned with recruitment. We made sure that the wages that we were paying under this grant were competitive, particularly for candidates who were debating whether or not they were making more money on unemployment with the stimulus money.

So we made sure that the wages were competitive to get people back into the workforce, which was a huge victory. So I thank you for the plug for Skills for Rhode Island's Future. And the Skills model, we are definitely working on national expansion of this right now and happy to talk with anybody who might be interested.

MS. BLUSIEWICZ: Thanks, Nina.

JULIE BAXTER: All right. Hello, everyone. My name is Julie Baxter. I am the COVID-19 Disaster Recovery Workforce Initiative manager with Washington State's employment security department. Washington receives $12 million in COVID-19 disaster recovery funds, an additional $12 million in employment recovery funds, which were then distributed formulaically out to the state's 12 local workforce development boards.

Today we have Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council – which is also known as PacMtn – to highlight their efforts in implementation of these funds at the local level. The PacMtn region covers nearly 7,000 square miles from the Pacific Ocean to the Cascade Mountain Range in the southwest area of Washington State. And this region encompasses Grays Harbor, Lewis, Mason, Pacific, and Thurston counties.

PacMtn is the convening and administering entity of the workforce development system in this region, including four work source locations. And just as a note, Worksource is Washington State's branding of the statewide American Job Center network partnership. It is truly a pleasure this morning to introduce Corinne Watts, who is PacMtn's director of workforce services, to provide insight into their innovative implementation of the COVID-19 disaster recovery national dislocated worker grants within the PacMtn region of Washington State. Corinne?

CORINNE WATTS: Thank you, Julie. Good afternoon, everybody. I am Corinne Watts, the director of workforce services for PacMtn Workforce Development Council. Like Julie has said, PacMtn oversees a five-county region in the state of Washington. Thurston County is our more urban county, with Olympia, the state capital, being in that county. The other four counties are pretty rural in nature. So they're pretty rural and diverse. We rely on industries like the timber industry or the fishing industry. Those industries can be cyclical in nature. And they've also seen a lot of closures over the past couple decades.

So that gives you a little bit of context about where we are within Washington State. A little local context and response to COVID and with these funds – COVID-19 upended both the employment and food system landscape in our region; specifically, in the four rural counties that we oversee. So farms were struggling. Everybody across the nation had restaurant closures, school closures. Our farmer's markets were closed or at very limited capacity.

Farmers were reacting to this, and quickly needed to locate new buyers and find innovative ways to get their produce delivered. We were also noticing that there was a high need to get food out to those rural regions. They were struggling with some of the food banks being overwhelmed or not being able to open at all because of the pandemic. So it was a real need that we saw in our region. So what we wanted to do was provide a food system related training with these funds and connect dislocated workers to the food system through work-based learning opportunities, and then train individuals for careers in the food system.

The goal of this project was really threefold – we wanted to provide the disaster employment positions and work-based learning positions to those dislocated workers in the agriculture sector and its associated supply chain across the five-county region. We also wanted to provide locational-related training in agriculture to those that were enrolled that would eventually lead to unsubsidized employment, but also help them create healthy ways of eating and be able to know what to do with the food that they were receiving.

We also wanted to increase food security in the region, especially for the region's most vulnerable citizens. That would include low-income, unemployed, our rural counties, elders, and youth. Our partner development to get this project off the ground was kind of easy, I guess because we had a strong connection with Thurston County Economic Development Council. Our economic development council also is on the board of directors for PacMtn WDC. And they had been in conversations with the Southwest Washington Food Hub in developing that food hub already prior to the pandemic.

That food hub included Washington State University, the Thurston County Economic Council, and the Northwest Agriculture Business Center. So they were pretty strong partners already. And it was easy for workforce development to come alongside them once the pandemic hit to be able to partner and see how those work-based learning opportunities could help get the food hub off the ground. We also partnered with GRuB, which is a local community-based organization. GRuB stands for garden-raised urban bounty. They help low-income youth and at-risk youth by providing work experiences that are agriculture related.

We partnered with Squaxin Island Tribe. They had a pretty substantial community garden already in place and needed help to make sure that not only the tribal citizens were getting what they needed, but they needed help getting that food out as well. And then our local food banks in the five counties were great partners as well. It was fortunate for us to have those partnerships in place, especially with the economic development council, because that allowed for our staff to really focus on partnerships with employers so that we would be able to find those employer connections for our work-based learning experiences and our disaster relief position.

Our outreach and registration youth – we used a lot of Facebook and social media. I heard that from the other folks today. That was help for us to be able to use social media as outreach. Obviously, the youth of the unemployment insurance list, that was nice. We were able to look to see who was impacted already that might have been coming from the restaurant industry or other food-related industries.

We use Jotform as an online platform. Our Title I contractors use this to manage documents. From that platform, we were able to do a comprehensive program application, secure documents, upload and submit them, secure electronic signatures, etc. That was in the making, probably we started looking into that system I believe in late February, so it was timely. We were already ready to launch that when the pandemic hit. Currently, we are at 60 enrollments within the program.

We have 16 WEX opportunities designed to assist with the distribution of emergency food systems, distribution to food banks, transportation, product and processing of food boxes, farm/farm labor, farmer's markets, and different administration assistance within the different organizations. We have three disaster employment positions with partners. One is at the Northwest Ag Business Center. The second is with the Thurston County Economic Development Council and really doing the coordination for the food hub.

And then third is with the Squaxin Tribe. I think it's important to say that one of the benefits of the WEX placements and the food security system is that most of them are able to social distance and provide a safer work environment. So we have WEXes that are driving. They're doing that solo. The farm workers are pretty spread out, so that remains safe. And any of the food distribution centers and warehouses that we have are pretty big, so that creates a lot of space for people to spread out and feel safe while they're working.

A little bit about our training – we did partner with Washington State University SNAPeD to provide the online training. It is a virtual training. It's a 10-week training that's taught by different chefs. So every week there's a different chef that does the training. And then they will come together as a group and do a Q&A session with all the chefs at the end of the training. The benefit of partnering with Washington State University – obviously, it's a higher Ed partner, so that's great to bring them along.

They do have a satellite campus in Lewis County, which was in our region. And then their SNAPeD Program was great to leverage. The participants in the training don't have to pay for tuition. They do have to be eligible economically, which is pretty easy because they're all dislocated workers. But it was nice that the training cost didn't have to go to tuition. We could focus on training supplies instead. A little bit about what they learned in the training or what they're currently learning – they learned how to cook with the seasons.

The local chefs are teaching them knife skills, food safety, culinary methods and techniques, preservation of fruits and vegetables that they're receiving, and how to properly store the fruits and vegetables. In addition, they receive their Washington State food handlers card and they gain vocational skills in understanding foodborne illness, importance of healthy food workers, avoiding the spread of illness, and then food safety basics, which I think is pretty important during this time especially.

We have had success with unsubsidized employment. We're seeing that people are going back to work already. We've had WEX to subsidize employment in places like our Migrant Farm Laborers Association or on local organic farms. As far as PacMtn best practices, I really think that we've been able to launch fairly quickly with this because of co-enrollment opportunities between workforce programming and other rapid response activities. There were a lot of youth impacted by the pandemic that were employed – youth that are 18-24. So we did notice that there was an inability to co-enroll into dislocated worker with some of our youth participants.

We had one of the closures in Thurston County that was pretty big was the Ostrom Mushroom Farm. So we were able to enroll some of those impacted workers into this program. So that has also been a helpful outreach tool. We were able to bring in quite a few new workforce customers. So that's what we've noticed from this project is the people that were enrolling into our workforce system are new touches. So it's not necessarily people that have been in our centers before. So I found that pretty interesting. And I think just having those strong community partners already established really helped us launch.

And we kind of had to do it quickly because of the nature of the growing season. We needed to help farmers immediately do the distribution. We definitely wanted to launch that pretty quickly. And I apologize. My computer has gone down, so I am not really sure where the slide is. But I did want to say that we have an article in Thurston Talk, which is a local news media article. And I'm not able click on it right now, but when the slides are distributed to those on the call you can take a look at that. I will say thank you to Julie for the introduction. And thank you all. And I'm done.

MS. HARRIS: Thank you very much. This is Charlotte. And it looks like we only have a few minutes for a couple of questions. And I'll read some and have the presenters go over some of the questions. And the contact information for all of the presenters are on the slides. And they have already concurred that it is okay to reach out to them if you have a specific question related to your grant, if we don't get to your questions because I know that we won't. I just was given my five-minute warning. OK. Question number one for Kristine – will you share more information about the disaster relief employment? What types of jobs besides contract? Tracy.

MS. FARRELL: Sure. Absolutely. Some of the other jobs we did were sanitation workers – those that were kind of helping to clean out the buildings in making it safe for the public use – a lot of the county agency buildings, also food bank workers, and even helping to deliver food for some of those nonprofit CBOs in our community. Those were the basis for our temporary job workers that we had.

MS. HARRIS: OK. Thank you. And Rhode Island, what are some of the job descriptions and placement facilities that you have?

MS. PANDE: Certainly. This is Nina. And I'm happy to send several job descriptions. I know some of you have already been emailing, and we'll send over our process (??) decisions with me. So we're seeing a lot in those essential retail so early it's essential retail, grocery stores and stuff that needed to stay open. That was our early findings in April, May, June when we started this program.

As we pivoted over the summer in July, August, September, it was really about reopening some of the public sector parts of our economy – so courthouses – getting some screeners in there, getting greeters in there and making sure folks were getting checked through the Department of Business Regulations and then also Department of Health. Not necessarily contract tracers, but lab work assistants and trying to make sure that testing was happening.

Those are where we really focused our efforts, as well as education and helping our public schools reopen and getting administrative support out there, helping them get some call centers up and running, and making sure that parents and community members have access to information as we were trying to open up our schools. And that work does continue as the needs are changing of our public sector and private sector partners.

MS. HARRIS: Thank you. We have a couple more questions. Kristine, how did you manage the requirement in the TEGL of providing comparable benefits as other employees at the worksite for disaster relief and/or humanitarian aid employment?

MS. FARRELL: Sure. So I think like someone else mentioned here in the presentation offering that higher comparable wage to get people in, but really to offer them the benefits we use – actually a third-party payroll agency at the employer record, which is a little costly. The cost is higher, which makes shorter TJC contracts. But they do offer benefits as the requirement, especially here in California. So we were able to do that through our employer record, or third-party payroll agency, instead of taking that on under us specifically in our agency. We used a third party.

MS. HARRIS: OK. Thank you. There's another question. How are masks and social distancing requirements being handled in each of the sites? Nina, I know you probably can't answer that for each of the sites, but do you have an example of how it's been handled at some of your sites. Any of you can take that.

MS. PANDE: Certainly. This is Nina again from Rhode Island. We have a couple of things that we're doing. As we are onboarding candidates into our system to serve as the temporary staff, we actually make them go through a mandatory training of orientation that not only includes social distancing and proper safety measures, but also about handling stress and coping with stress if we're placing them in difficult positions. So we work with a third-party vendor to put together that training.

But then also with our employers, as part of our memorandum of understanding, we actually have them outline exactly what their protocols are so that we can review it with the staff. And we hold our employers accountable to that. And we do some checks. So if they're actually not being compliant with any of the regulatory things, we have the right to actually close out that contract. And we make sure that they are supplying them with the adequate safety provisions. So we want to really take control on that.

And then we also have our temp staff sign off on a fairly lengthy document outlining exactly what their responsibilities are too. And we've had some folks who have tested positive with COVID after they've been placed. And then we'll put them on a two-week hiatus from going out. And then we'll resume after we do health checks with them. So we have somebody dedicated to the temporary staff workers who have counseled looking at health and safety as part of their placement.

MS. HARRIS: Thank you. One last question. And any of you can take this one. Do any of you have opportunities for older workers?

MS. PANDE: In Rhode Island, yes. And I will tell you in Rhode Island, not only is that a charter demographic that we try to hit if they've recently been laid off because we find that they're harder to place in other jobs. But I can tell you I know like in school settings and other things, we do definitely look at that. We also try to outweigh any risk factors as well. So we don't have age requirements or age limits. And we do absolutely take that as a priority in considering folks that we place, because we do know the older worker tends to be a little harder to place in a permanent role. So we use this as a way to help them reinvest themselves and think of their self differently.

MS. HARRIS: Thank you. And I'm sure we could go on, but that is our time. And I want to thank first of all, NoRTEC, the Alliance for Workforce Development, Rhode Island Department of Employment and Training, Skills for Rhode Island's Future, and Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council. Thank you all for agreeing to participate and share today. And for all of our attendees, thank you for attending.

And hopefully, you've learned something that can help you in the implementation of your grant. But more than that, you've got some peer contacts that you can reach out to, to get some more information on the questions that you have. If you have grant-specific questions, don't hesitate to reach out to your federal project officer to get additional information on that. Steve, do you have any last words?

MR. DUVAL: No. Charlotte, I think you've covered it all. And I do want to thank all three presentations. It was very informative. There were lots of questions that didn't get answered. We apologize that we ran out of time. But as Charlotte indicated, the presenters for today's webinar have graciously offered to answer any questions that you might have. So please feel free to reach out to them.

You can also look forward to future webinars on the topic of the National Dislocated Worker COVID-19 Grant. They'll be announced shortly, but we will be continuing this series. And with that, I thank you all for your participation and wish you well and success in your own endeavors.

MS. HARRIS: Thank you. Grace?

MS. MCCALL: All right. I'd also like to thank all of our presenters.

(END)