



Peer-to-Peer Synopsis

Best Practices for Recruiting and Service Delivery During a Pandemic

The pandemic has created an enormous level of disruption in our workforce landscape. This makes the apprenticeship model even more essential, not only as a means of forging new career pathways for opportunity youth and other job seekers, but also as a way of reinvigorating our economy. At the same time, program managers are faced with a number of new challenges in implementing YARG programs.

The January peer-to-peer session “Recruiting and Service Delivery During a Pandemic” provided an opportunity for grantees to learn from each other and share some of the workarounds they have devised for recruiting and retaining participants and engaging employer partners. The following are highlights of the promising practices put forward in that discussion.

DISCUSSION TOPIC #1:

What incentives have you found to be most effective at recruiting and retaining opportunity youth?

Recruiting

1. Utilize all available outreach networks.

Grantees **Palo Alto College** and **Alaska Works** make their outreach more robust by tapping into every existing network, both traditional and virtual. Social media pages, online interactive materials, and drop-in centers all play a part in their recruiting efforts.

2. Remove barriers to participation.

A lack of access to services and the inability to equip themselves for job training can be substantial obstacles for opportunity youth. One grantee pointed out the difficulty participants may have in purchasing tools, clothing, or other supplies that might be required for onsite work. This grantee helps trainees access such supplies and makes all participants aware of the community resources available to them.

3. Build a rapport from the first interaction.

- 💡 **Easter Seals TriState** has had success engaging youth using a two-stage recruiting process that starts with an initial screening by phone to confirm the candidate’s interest. They then invite the individual to a socially distanced, in-person interview during which the recruiter works to build trust, perhaps even removing their mask for a brief period to create a stronger visual connection.
- 💡 The **Michigan Department of Labor** agreed that, “relationship is key, trust is critical, and meeting candidates at their level is important.”

- 💡 Another helpful suggestion for building relationships from **Palo Alto College** and **Alaska Works** is to find ways to interact that are outside the general purview of recruiting. Inquiring about a young person's personal interests – sports, music, hobbies, etc. – can put them at ease and may even reveal some useful information about possible career paths.
- 💡 It was generally agreed that one-on-one meetings and face-to-face interactions are the most helpful for advancing relationships over time, although, of course, these strategies are being hampered by the pandemic.

4. Make the process less intimidating – and more fun.

- 💡 Young people are clearly comfortable in the online environment, and it was noted that virtual recruiting engagements have become more effective in recent years. Meeting candidates at their level rather than making them come to *your* comfort zone makes a world of sense. Opportunity youth in particular, who may have trust issues with institutions and authority, will likely feel more at ease and more confident in the interaction if they can participate virtually from their homes or other safe space, provided they have access to virtual tools.
- 💡 Gamification and incentives offer effective ways to draw participants through the recruiting process and keep them motivated afterwards. **CareerWise Colorado** uses game-like scenarios, awarding badges for accomplishments and milestones reached. This can make the recruiting process more productive, and it can make the entire apprenticeship journey from recruit to trainee to job holder more satisfying and enjoyable while still injecting some challenge.

Retention

1. Screen potential participants for genuine interest.

As mentioned above, an initial screening helps to determine whether a candidate is willing to commit to the program – or whether they are simply paying lip-service to satisfy a family member, teacher, or guidance counselor.

2. Ensure that participants have input.

One innovative grantee suggestion was to invite participants into the process of their employer matchups. Giving participants a choice of where they will work or train may result in a more compatible pairing and inspire more enthusiasm and determination to succeed.

3. Make educational components easier to use – and easier to implement.

- 💡 **CareerWise Colorado** managed the shift to virtual interaction by making use of online learning experience platforms to deliver educational content. Finding existing digital tools that meet your program needs, or that can be customized, is an ideal way to streamline some of your instructional efforts. You may even want to retain these mechanisms after the pandemic subsidies, as they offer your participants convenient alternatives to in-person learning.
- 💡 **CareerWise** also recommends organizing instructional elements into short, digestible segments with frequent breaks to help maintain student focus and prevent screen fatigue.

4. Provide ongoing support.

- 💡 Finally, one grantee emphasized that retention and positive outcomes require continued youth support throughout the length of the program. It is crucial to remember that many participants are at risk, and the very circumstances that put them in need of your program also make them vulnerable to giving up on it. Mentoring plays an important role in reversing this tendency.
- 💡 And, as this grantee and others mentioned, connecting participants to any social services they may need is vital to their success and is as important as removing barriers to entry.

DISCUSSION TOPIC #2:

How has the pandemic changed your relationships with employer partners?

Main Challenge

Limited in-person contact.

- 💡 As the **Michigan Department of Labor** brought up, the pandemic has transformed the program-employer relationship almost entirely into a virtual one. The face-to-face meetings that can be so crucial in establishing and maintaining these partnerships are no longer a given.
- 💡 This also means that employer site visits are less feasible or even impossible, as another grantee expressed, making it difficult for program managers to learn about employers and their company culture. This also affects participants who are apprenticing virtually. They may have a difficult time integrating into the company and miss out on the benefits of in-person learning and spontaneous interactions with co-workers.

Opportunities

Nevertheless, the pandemic, along with another workforce trend, is creating some areas of opportunity for apprenticeship programs.

1. The “Silver Tsunami” is depleting the workforce.

Since 2011, baby-boomers have been reaching retirement age and moving out of the workforce. That trend accelerated last year, as the [Pew Research Center](#) reports, with about 28.6 million Baby Boomers retiring in the third quarter of 2020 alone. One grantee pointed to this phenomenon as a major impetus for employers to recruit younger workers, making apprenticeship programs more valuable than ever.

2. Employers are open to new employment practices.

- 💡 The loss of retiring workers coupled with the pandemic is causing employers to shift their thinking. One grantee has noticed that companies are re-evaluating their personnel and their long-term business needs in ways they had not considered prior to COVID. A number of employers are now looking to expand the skill sets of their labor forces and are willing to search for new ways to attract and train qualified employees.
- 💡 The same grantee commented that employers seem more intent on innovation as they attempt to remain competitive in their respective industries. This may entail their shoring up their workforces, which would make it easier to gear up when the economy returns to normal. It may also include hiring workers who are more reflective of their customer bases.
- 💡 Another grantee reported an improved willingness to look at Registered Apprenticeship Programs as a viable option for providing education, experience, and mentoring to new workers.

3. Employers are more accessible.

One grantee noted that they have seen increased attendance in online employer meetings and more focused attention; another found that employers are actually *more* available now than before the pandemic. There’s no doubt that virtual meeting platforms have made meeting with potential and current partners more convenient and easier to accomplish. And, as with online teaching tools, this method of employer contact will most likely continue to be useful post-pandemic, either as a supplement to in-person meetings or when in-person meetings are not possible.

The COVID pandemic has undoubtedly upended the economy and necessitated changes in how apprenticeship programs are implemented. Yet, as with every crisis, it has also presented a number of possibilities for growth. This enlightening information-sharing session enabled grantees to exchange views and trade tips for both managing the pain points and making the most of the opportunities.