



AMERICA'S PROMISE PROMISING PRACTICES SITE VISIT

NEW RIVER/MOUNT ROGERS WORKFORCE AREA CONSORTIUM BOARD



INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) awarded \$6 million in H-1B funds under the America's Promise Job Driven Grant Program to the New River/Mount Rogers (NR/MR) Workforce Area Consortium Board to expand regional job training partnerships through the Pathways to the American Dream (Pathways) project. Historically, the 20th century culture of southwest Virginia was closely associated with Appalachia and an economy dependent on coal mining and tobacco. Today, factory and distribution industries, higher education and research institutions, and healthcare services primarily support the economy of southwest Virginia.

PATHWAYS TO THE AMERICAN DREAM GOALS:

- ★ Creating a regional workforce strategy for sector partnerships in manufacturing, healthcare, and information technology.
- ★ Increasing opportunities for unemployed and underemployed adults and incumbent workers to earn skills or credentials in middle- to high-skilled H-1B occupations.
- ★ Developing strategies to increase training and education opportunities for disadvantaged populations.
- ★ Providing evidence-based data and outcomes to shape and inform local and state policies for sustaining and scaling innovative sector partnership training programs. Industry recognized credentials in each of the industry sectors were included and aligned with the training provided.

In addition to the New River/Mount Rogers workforce development board (WDB), Pathways includes the Southwest Virginia WDB, Western Virginia WDB, West Piedmont WDB, eight community colleges led by the Virginia Community College System, partners that include education and training providers, adult learning resource centers, Goodwill Industries, the Office of the Governor, and the Secretary of Commerce and Trade.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Building Effective Regional Workforce Partnerships. The Pathways team brought partners into the planning process at the beginning of the program to use its unique knowledge and resources to develop comprehensive solutions to the various workforce issues. The WDB partners found that collaborating with other boards in the consortium was invaluable. They were able to share information and lessons learned, as well as support each other through challenges. They were also able to benefit from shared resources, such as professional development trainings that were available to all partner boards.

Working with businesses is another example of building effective partnerships. Pathways found that understanding the needs of the businesses helped to strengthen the partnership. Employer tours were conducted to learn what skills potential employees might need to obtain to be successful and Pathways allowed the space for businesses to share their experiences rather than only promoting the specific programs offered by the local training providers. This enabled the boards and the businesses to work together to find solutions for each other's needs. Each partner brought its experience, ideas, technical expertise and, in many cases, additional funding.

Designing Effective Employer Engagement. The Pathways team found that having one person, a business services coordinator, who works directly with businesses and is knowledgeable about their needs, was invaluable. This regional business services coordinator worked with participant-facing staff, workforce system navigators, to ensure that training programs were in alignment with the needs of businesses.

Facilitating the Enrollment Process for Participants and Employers. The workforce system navigator completed a significant portion of each participant's intake and enrollment forms prior to introducing him or her to an employer. This pre-screening helped ensure the participant was a good fit for the employer and often saved time. The participant was placed in a training program that fit his or her interests, and the employer felt confident that the participant was an appropriate match because the pre-screening was provided helpful information. Employers were also pleased with the opportunity to learn about potential employees and bring them into the workplace as soon as possible.

Integrating Credit for Prior Learning (CPL). A key aspect of the Pathways program was facilitating participant enrollment and completion. Working with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), NR/MR developed a plan and framework to implement a CPL assessment. CPL refers to a process used by post-secondary institutions to award academic credit for a student's knowledge and expertise acquired through life and professional experience. CPL ensures the student's knowledge and skills are determined to be equivalent to college-level learning.

The ability to earn CPL contributed to many participants' interest, retention, and completion of the program. Participants were able to complete training sooner because they did not have to repeat classes already completed, or take training for skills learned through prior life experience.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Pathways put together an efficient and productive system for identifying and meeting local workforce needs. Two promising practices include (1) development of a sustainability plan that is integrated into the program from day one of the grant, and (2) establishment of a comprehensive data management system that is transparent, accessible to partners and informs program strategies and operation of the grant.

SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

The NR/MR team understood the need for sustainability planning from the beginning. In fact, the NR/MR Workforce Development Area Consortium Board decided to apply for the America's Promise Grant because the grant's goals and objectives aligned with the board's larger sustainability and strategic plan. This purposeful and clear alignment informs each activity the workforce board pursues and helps advance their continued strategic planning.

IDENTIFIED SUSTAINABILITY TASKS:

- ★ Onboarding and cultivating a high-performance team focused on the right tasks with the right information.
- ★ Identifying gaps, barriers, and strategies to address each challenge at the start of the grant.
- ★ Engaging partners and identifying the roles they will play to move the project forward.
- ★ Building a data system that is open and transparent and gathers all information needed to make quick and informed decisions.
- ★ Developing and employing a logic model that assesses the impact on industry, participants, system, knowledge, and attitude.

NR/MR intentionally wrote specific requirements into the grant statement of work, such as data system development, processes for prior learning assessment, communication methods, staffing levels, and strategic partner organizations. NR/MR also brought in outside consultants to help it identify strategies to advance its regional goals as well as measure impact and encourage the team to better adjust their program activities to meet regional workforce needs.

The NR/MR project team aimed to answer the question, "What have we changed in the world?" The team used a logic model as a road map to represent the shared relationships among the resources, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact for the program. The team was able to visualize the relationships between the program's activities and their intended effects such as the impact on industry, participants, and the

workforce system. With the guidance of an outside consultant, the team conducted training exercises and mapped these efforts into a systems model to help guide it throughout the program.

COMPREHENSIVE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The motto of New River/Mount Rogers is “if it is not in the system, it did not happen.” This motto reminds all staff and partners that they must record relevant outcomes for tracking and monitoring purposes. To ensure that the Pathways project met its grant goals, NR/MR recognized that it needed a comprehensive data system that addressed three key needs: project management; participant tracking and reporting; and participant training and learning resources.

THREE SYSTEMS WERE EMPLOYED AND CUSTOMIZED TO MEET DATA REQUIREMENTS:

- ★ ProjectHUB* – a project management tool customized to provide ongoing grant information, checklists, timelines, financial information, regular communications, and summaries of progress achieves. All documents were uploaded into this system.
- ★ B2B Engage* – a business and participant customer relationship management system that was used to collect data on each employer engaged and the status of every participant in the grant.
- ★ KnowledgetoWork.com* – a custom online portal that provided a database of over 25,000 learning resources aligned with the competencies that are part of Pathways training initiatives.

**The data systems used by Pathways are examples of available data systems and are not endorsed by DOL.*

These data systems organized the operations and activities of staff, partners, and employers as a team. The team could put topics for discussion on the platform, which facilitated communication between partners. The workforce system navigators updated program and participant information weekly. Information was available for use by staff, employers, and partners engaged in the grant as needed and appropriate. The data management systems also enabled the navigators to minimize paperwork during enrollment for participants with automated forms (e.g., enrollment, retention, and placement forms) that staff could complete.

CONCLUSIONS

The New River/Mount Rogers team encompassed more than just the program staff and intentionally included essential local employers, regional workforce development boards, community colleges, community-based organizations, and experts in specific areas. This expansive team was engaged throughout the implementation of the grant and worked together to establish the steps needed to meet the goals of the grant. Together the team addressed challenges and barriers by focusing on data to make decisions and looking back at proven successes.

THE TEAM IDENTIFIED SEVERAL KEY LEARNINGS AS IT WORKED TOGETHER TO IMPLEMENT THE AMERICA'S PROMISE GRANT:

- ★ Everything that is done must be intentional.
- ★ Every decision should answer the question “How does this move our vision forward?”
- ★ The system put into place facilitates the operation of the team as a team.
- ★ If it is not in the data system, it did not happen.
- ★ Let front-line staff do what they are trained to do; give them permission to have tough conversations and make decisions.
- ★ Be prepared for energetic team discussions. You might not all agree, but focus on the solutions, not the problems.
- ★ It is okay to make mistakes if you learn from them.

PROGRAM PARTNERS

Business: Carilion Health, Ballad Health, Hollingsworth & Vose and New River Computing

Workforce Development Boards: Southwest Virginia (LWDA 1), Western Virginia (LWDA 3), West Piedmont (LWDA 17)

Community Colleges: Mountain Empire, Southwest Virginia, Virginia Highlands, Wytheville, New River, Virginia Western, Patrick Henry, Danville

Other Training Providers: Radford University, Giles County Technical Center, SWVA Center of Excellence, Buchanan County Technology Center, Lee County Career Center, Jefferson College of Health Sciences, ONLC Training Center, Arconic, Homestead Material Handling, JP Superior Solutions, Omnex, Inc.

Community-based Organizations: Goodwill Industries of the Valleys, People Incorporated

Subject Matter Experts: Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development, Outcomes Consulting Services, Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, Virginia Community College System, Lord Fairfax Community College