
WORKFORCE PARTNERS OF METROPOLITAN CHICAGO 2020 YEAR-END REPORT

2020 started as a strong year in terms of regional efforts. The Workforce Partners of Metropolitan Chicago were completing a grant-funded project that focused on the needs of employers in the Transportation/Distribution/Logistics sector, they had identified a group of regional employers who were ready to implement Registered Apprenticeship programs, and they had received a large grant to expand integration services for staff from the WIOA Core Partners in the Region. In February of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the WPMC shifted their efforts to address the needs presented by the pandemic. The report that follows highlights the activities and project that were undertaken by the WPMC in 2020 and includes a focus of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

General Regional Activities

Local response to COVID-19 pandemic

Description

In March of 2020 all of the American Job Centers (AJCs) in the Northeast Economic Development Region (NEEDR) were forced to close to the public due to the COVID pandemic restrictions. WPMC meetings changed from monthly in-person meetings to virtual meetings every two weeks via Zoom. With the unemployment rate skyrocketing within Illinois and nationally, the WPMC directors identified activities their agencies could carry out virtually for customers. Workforce areas started with webinars, as most were already conducting those virtually pre-COVID, and changes to workforce area websites to provide more information on how, where and when customers could access services. Most areas initially had staff working from home and most eventually rotating through the offices that were still closed to the public. As time went on, virtual meetings were held with customers and local area staff were trying to identify solutions to obtain customer signatures, accepting and uploading file documentation, dealing with transferring phone calls from desktops to cell phones and emails from customers. In April 2020, the group decided it was best to conduct a survey of a variety of topics related to re-opening the centers for service so that promising practices, solutions to common challenges and current thinking could be compared and discussed. Survey topics included staffing, center coverage, opening dates for staff and customers, customer limitations both in number and in areas they could access within the centers, COVID precautions, basic skills testing, security, cleaning and sanitation, and more. The survey was updated a month later to what things had changed in four weeks (survey summary link: <https://feraconsulting.com/documents>). Local area re-opening updates were also provided at the beginning of every WPMC meeting for the balance of the year.

Outcome

Outcomes were varied across the region. Areas explored a variety of software for signatures, file uploading and storing and selected those that were right for them. Areas worked through all of the services provided by Title I in the AJCs and implemented processes that allowed for all services to be offered remotely. The only concern some areas identified that could not be delivered virtually was situations where customers needed access to computers, the internet, a fax machine, copier or scanner. Some areas saw an increase in virtual workshop attendance by 100%. Facebook Live and other virtual methods allowed for expansion of types and frequency of workshops and networking groups. The Region recognized the importance of continuation of service delivery was even more critical during this time. All of the services delivered in person pre-COVID were also delivered virtually during the pandemic. The WPMC meetings were valuable in allowing the directors to talk through certain approaches, ask colleagues questions, compare observations, etc.

COVID Impact/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

The pandemic had a tremendous impact on the delivery of workforce development services through the local AJCs in the Region. Directors were compelled to consider how services could be delivered virtually in a comprehensive manner. Virtual services kept customers and staff safe while at the same time making sure that those individuals who lost their jobs due to COVID-related effects had support and services to become re-employed and receive training to upgrade skills or coaching and training to change their occupational focus. In fact, local workforce areas discovered over time that some services delivered virtually should actually stay that way even after staff and customers are able to interact in person. For example, virtual meetings with customers were oftentimes more efficient and effective in meeting customer needs: the customer didn't need to travel to the meeting and find parking; individuals could keep an eye on their children while participating in the meeting from home; and if staff needed to share documents with customers like resumes with changes/suggestions, they could show them on the screen and walk the individuals through the documents ensuring the customer had a good understanding of what was being proposed.

Virtual and Drive-Through Job Fairs

Description

Whether it is an industry-focused hiring event with 15 employers or one business camped out in an AJC conference room to meet with potential candidates, job fairs and hiring events are one of the mainstays of an AJC. Due to COVID, most job fair and hiring events were canceled or rescheduled to some time in the future when it is safe for people to congregate. As time went on during the months the centers were closed, some local businesses were doing extremely well during COVID and needing to hire new workers, local areas got creative in how these events could still occur. One workforce area tried a "drive through" job fair where individuals were able to provide resumes in advance to the participating employers; individuals stayed in vehicles the whole time wearing face masks and finally, they were able to talk to

business representatives for a number of minutes either through the window or over a cell phone. Individuals were also given PPE when they entered the parking lot in case they did not have any of their own. The initial drive through job fair resulted in several more in the same workforce area and others organized in other workforce areas within the region. As part of their response to COVID, the WPMC directors had multiple virtual conference systems researched to determine if any of them were particularly suited to host virtual job fairs and hiring events. There were a wide variety of options so the consensus was not to move forward with anything at the time. DCEO subsequently rolled out a new virtual job fair system for businesses to utilize. The workforce areas in the region has since assisted employers in using the State virtual job-fair system when needed.

Outcome

The region has developed new job fair and hiring event options when traditional models were not feasible, and made good use of others made available through DCEO in order to support efforts to meet the hiring needs of businesses.

COVID Impact/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

Covid impacted the ability of local workforce areas in the region to hold in person job fairs and hiring events. In order to provide similar support for employers doing well during the pandemic and needing to hire new workers, local areas established drive-thru job fairs and hiring events and made use of a new virtual job fair system DCEO released.

Data Systems Review

Description

Data and information drive decision making for most organizations and the WPMC are not any different. Having access to critical real-time labor market information provides valuable intelligence to develop service strategies and program activities. The WPMC reviewed several data systems for use in program strategy development.

Outcome

The Region reviewed a revised version of the TORQ system is a web-based tool that helps job seekers create a skills-based profile designed to assist in identifying potential new careers quickly. The company offered a multi-region cost for the system to the WPMC. The other data system review incorporated into 2020 activities was a new IDES data system that provides detail on UI claimants and significant detail on UI information for local areas. The WPMC team had the opportunity to review the system and provide input on additional development activities.

COVID Impact/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

The unemployment impacts due to COVID required local areas to be able to access real time data about the pool of job seekers needing services and available to move into new roles because of significant changes in some industries. The development of a real-time UI data system is an important tool for local areas to implement strategic programming to address the both job seeker and employer needs.

Outreach to Congressional Delegation on Funding for Workforce Activities During COVID

Description

The WPMC has long recognized the importance of providing information and policy recommendations to elected officials to assist in ensuring they have an understanding of workforce programs and initiatives. Outreach to the Illinois Congressional Delegation and their staff was critical in 2020.

Outcome

The WPMC provided elected officials with data on the continuous ongoing workforce activities during the pandemic and to give them a base of information on the funding needs to provide services to a significantly increased population of job seekers and employers in need.

COVID Impact/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

In future years, the WPMC should develop a calendar of communication with elected officials (Federal, State, and Local). Keeping workforce initiatives in front of elected leaders on an ongoing basis will ensure that the WPMC is the “go to” source for data and information.

Training Provider List/Demand Occupation Recommendations

Description

The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) maintains a list of approved training providers for WIOA customers. This list, Illinois Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL), is driven by a set of “demand occupations.” These are occupations that are deemed in demand in each of the 10 economic development regions in the state. Periodically the demand occupation list is reviewed and updated and DCEO proposed an update of the list in 2020.

Outcome

After an in-depth review of the proposed list, the WPMC recognized that the changes being advocated would severely limit the training opportunities for job seekers in the Chicago Metro Region. The group met with the developer of the list from Northern Illinois University to get a detailed understanding of how it was developed and then provided NIU with recommendations and justifications on changes to the list that would be the most beneficial to customers in the region.

Communication Team

Description

The WPMC identified that many of their efforts are not recognized because they do not have a strategic communication plan in place. The group developed the outline of a communication plan and then brought together the communications staff from all LWIAs in the region to review, add to, and refine the plan.

Outcome

As a result of the communication staff from all local areas coming together, the group was able to share some of their collateral materials and communication strategies. In addition, they collaboratively

developed a video showcasing individual job seekers, employers, and partners identifying their gratitude for the services of the workforce system (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ezv0lc72Kg&t=20s>).

COVID Impact/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

In 2021, a refinement of the communication plan is necessary to add specific actionable items in a calendar format and to develop ongoing communication documents for distribution to stakeholders.

Meetings with Core Partner Leadership/Other Stakeholders

Description

Ongoing communication, strategic development, and coordination with leaders and stakeholders in the workforce system are critical to the WPMC success. While 2020 held unique challenges in coordination, the WPMC continued to ensure that their work was aligned and coordinated with that of others in the Region

Outcome

Several meetings with the Director of the Division of Rehabilitation Services (Rahnee Patrick) provided insights and opportunities to connect with additional staff in that Core Partner division on job seeker and business services. Connections with other stakeholders involved in apprenticeship activities allowed for potential fund expansion for apprenticeship training for employers in the Region. In addition, designated members of the group are participants in the CMAP Regional Economic Recovery group designed to coordinate economic recovery activities in the regional workforce development system.

COVID Impact/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

While COVID has made it possible to have meetings with state leaders and key stakeholders without concern about limited time availability and travel distances it has also impacted the ability to have meaningful discussions with these stakeholders. Zoom and Microsoft teams are excellent tools to make connections and provide information virtually, they do not lend themselves well to detailed planning and discussions about difficult or sensitive issues.

GRANTS

Apprenticeship Grants: Navigator – \$399,948; Intermediary - \$249,996

Description

WPMC received an 18-month Apprenticeship Navigator grant. The grant was for two navigators to work on educating businesses from across the region about apprenticeship models and offering assistance where possible. The WPMC contracted with IMEC, the Illinois Manufacturing Excellence Center, to conduct navigator activities in order to take advantage of their business outreach activities already occurring. Part of the grant was also to work with local workforce areas on apprenticeships and organizing local entities to work together to support new or enhanced apprenticeships.

Outcome

By the end of the grant, the navigators had engaged 204 new businesses, completed four newly registered apprenticeships with 13 more paused due to COVID, and enhanced three existing apprenticeships with five more paused due to COVID. A number of in-person scheduled meetings were canceled due to COVID, but it was possible to conduct some meetings virtually. Businesses became less engaged with the project as the impact of the pandemic became apparent. As a result of this project, the navigators WPMC were able to identify multiple businesses interested in partnering with the region to establish or enhance registered apprenticeship programs. The region was awarded a grant to cover part of the cost for three of the apprenticeship projects submitted. The three companies were Otto Engineering from Kane County, FSGI from DuPage County, and VO-TECH from McHenry County. In total, these companies will graduate 14-15 apprentices.

COVID Impact/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

There was a significant impact from COVID on this project. Many company leaders decided they needed to put off employee training and focus on their core business as a result of the pandemic. One of the activities included in the grant was the creation of an apprenticeship advisory council. Originally it was intended to have a mix of educational institutions, workforce development agencies, employer association and others. The WPMC, with input from the navigators, decided the council should just be representatives from businesses from across the region because their input was the most important for the project. The meetings were held at business sites of the representatives on the council. COVID impacted the council's ability to continue to meet at business sites and share information, apprenticeship ideas, programming and site tours.

TDL Grant – \$777, 917 (See grant summary on pages 12-13 for detailed activities)

Incumbent Worker Training

Development of Disability Inclusion Training (training sessions postponed due to COVID)

One of the incumbent worker training projects developed as part of the TDL grant provided from DCEO was Disability Inclusion training for TDL employers. The WPMC recognized that persons with disabilities are an often overlooked population for TDL employment. With the assistance of Deb Russel, an expert trainer in the disability area, a training program was designed for TDL employers. Unfortunately, just weeks before the training was to be implemented, COVID restrictions went into effect and the training had to be postponed. The WPMC believe there is still a need and value to this training and will explore possible implementation in 2022.

ISO 9001 (2015) Training

WPMC partnered with IMEC to bring another incumbent worker program for ISO 9001 (2015) training and certification to companies in the region. Many times companies need this certification to be eligible for or continue to be a subcontractor for a much larger company. At least one company from every workforce area was included in this training project. Fifteen companies and 26 incumbent workers participated. Some of the training was delivered in a classroom setting and the balance of the training was delivered on site at each company.

Companies participating in ISO Training*	County of company location
Chicago Welding & Fabrication	Cook
Center Tool Co	Kane
ThermoElectric Cooling America Corporation (TECA Corp.)	Cook
Deep Coat Industries LLC	Kane
Trace Services In.	DuPage
Atlantic Track	McHenry
Composite Cutter Technology	Lake
Platt Luggage, Inc.	Cook
Peters Precision Machining	Will
Kepner Products Company	DuPage
PDP Machining	DuPage
Chicago Circuits	DuPage
Howe Corporation	Cook
Epiq Solutions	Cook
CSL Behring	Kankakee

*=26 participants in total

IMEC Virtual Trainings

During the remaining months of the TDL grant, WPMC and IMEC had to be creative about the outstanding incumbent worker training programs needed and how they were delivered. At the request of several companies in discussions with IMEC, three trainings were developed and delivered through external providers: Lean Six Sigma Green Belt through fkiQuality located in Naperville, IL; Manufacturing Basics through Tooling U in Wisconsin; and Food Manufacturing Safety through the New Jersey Manufacturing Extension Program, Inc. Because of COVID, these three training options were held virtually. Two of options were self-paced training. IMEC introduced on-line classes for the first time to its customers through this project as a result of COVID. Overall, eight companies from four workforce areas participated in these trainings and 41 employees completed the programs and earned certifications.

Development of Board Leadership Training

The WPMC decided that it would be beneficial to bring together the leadership of each of their local Workforce Boards to network, share ideas, and discuss topics of regional importance. Larry Good from The Corporation for Skilled Workforce was procured to develop a ½ day session for these purposes. Specific topics to be included in the training were: *What is “strategic planning” for a workforce board? What it means to do strategic-level work vs. oversight/fiduciary-level work? Leading from strategy vs. chasing the money and Identifying needs and opportunities.* This training was postponed due to the COVID closures and it is hoped that it can be implemented in late 2021 or early 2022.

TA Grant - \$166,005

BST Team

Description

The initial regional business services team developed in 2019 consisted only of staff from local workforce areas. The purpose of this group was to identify ways to work together on regional projects and to expand on how to work together to further meet the needs of employers and job seekers. The group undertook some joint activities and trainings and started to blend together as a team. In December, 2019 a “meet and greet” was held so the team could present to representatives from IDES and DRS on their prior regional activities and invite the state agency representatives to join them and participate in the group starting in the new year (2020). Regional BST meetings in 2020 were initially held in person but had to move to a zoom platform due to COVID. The inclusion of IDES and DRS has led to the team receiving information on what is going on at the state level and on upcoming events. Overall though their participation has also led to the development of special activities locally such as job fairs for people with disabilities and enhanced coordination on rapid response events. Local area staff have also received training and information on IDES systems and greater assistance with outreach to dislocated workers through e-blasts. DRS has also provided information on their hiring events and business outreach activities so that referrals could be made across agencies where appropriate.

- i. 2021 Plan: For 2021 the regional BST plan was recalibrated to be relevant to the current environment with COVID, mass layoffs and significant unemployment. The plan was developed with input from the regional team and WPMC directors. It was decided that for 2021, the group would focus on three things: incumbent worker training, targeted business outreach and rapid response activities. The year-long plan includes third party training, opportunities for peer discussion and learning, and the opportunity to work together on one to two projects in the coming months. The energy in this group and the interactions have been fantastic. It bodes well for future regional business services work.
- ii. Training needs: Training needs for regional BST members had been identified in late 2020 regarding the three focus areas for 2021: targeted employer engagement, rapid response and incumbent worker training. WPMC conducted a bid process to identify and obtain third party trainings for regional BST members. These trainings have been interspersed on the team’s 2021 calendar of meetings, along with opportunities for discussion and planning regional activities. These trainings will initially need to be delivered virtually but hopefully by the third quarter of 2021, the team will be able to meet in person for them.

Outcome

One of the most exciting things to come out of the work of the regional BST group is the increase of peer discussion and engagement between members outside of the WPMC team structure. At almost every meeting someone mentions in passing that they are working with someone from another area on a project, they connected another area to a business they are working with, or they called and talked through an idea or process with a person from another local business services team. This type of organic

interaction is an outcome desired for all regional teams (i.e. frontline and career coach staff, AJC operators) as it has been a benefit for WPMC directors for more than two decades.

Career Coach/Front-Line staff team

Description

The WPMC through the Regional Business Services Team saw the success of having local staff meet as a region-wide team to discuss potential regional activities, share best practices, identify professional development and training opportunities, identify continuous improvement and customer outcome strategies, and most importantly to develop a network of colleagues to work with in an ongoing fashion. They expanded the Regional Business Services Team concept to create a team of Career Coaches and Front-Line staff to work in a similar fashion. They did recognize that due to the size of this group (nearly 60 people), some upfront work needed to occur to plan for the structure and activities of the group. Each area identified the Career Coaches and Front-Line staff to be included in the regional team. A survey of the team members from all seven LWIAs was conducted to hone-in on the critical topics to address their needs. The survey results became the basis for the development of a training and discussion topic plan for the group. Each Director brought their local group together to roll-out the project and ensure they understood the importance of participation.

Outcome

The survey identified of members identified the following areas as the main focus topics:

- Engagement with customers – technology and strategies; maintaining and building relationships
- Communicating with difficult customers
- Utilizing technology effectively
- Career awareness tools
- Youth activities
- Testing
- Monitoring
- Rapid Response/Trade/TAA

Ultimately the first three topics listed above were identified as those to target initially and subgroups were developed around career awareness tolls, youth activities, and monitoring. The group has met several times in introductory meetings and has a formal plan for training and discussion has been developed for the remainder of 2021.

COVID Impact/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

The impact of COVID has been very evident in this group's efforts. It has not been possible to get the team together in-person and all activity has been virtual. Because connections that could be made through in-person meetings and discussions are missing and the fact that the group is very large, the roll-out of this activity has been rocky. While the next few months will focus on virtual training sessions

around the topics identified through the survey of members, in-person meetings will be implemented as soon as allowable to give members the opportunity to meet each other and form relationships.

AJC Operator Group

Description

Through the WPMC Technical Assistance grant from DCEO, an AJC Operator group was created to bring together the operators from each workforce area. Due to the success of the regional business services group, regional groups for frontline and career coach staff, and AJC operators were envisioned in the technical assistance grant scope of services. The purpose of the group was to provide training, the opportunity for peer learning and discussion, and the identification of promising practices. To date, the group has only had two initial meetings to identify what they would like to work on and to prioritize those topics.

Outcome

A survey was developed to gather information on the operator models and roles since they are not consistent across the region, the things they think work well at their centers and the challenges they face. Further facilitated discussion allowed the group to narrow down discussion topics so that participation is both targeted and useful.

The “challenges” identified by the group was narrowed down and prioritized by the group as their focus for their time together:

- Developing and coordinating partner agency referrals
- Development of partner reporting process for customer and performance tracking
- Partner involvement/engagement
- Customer outreach/marketing

COVID Impact/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

The impact of COVID is substantial on this group. Touring and holding group meetings at different AJCs in the region should be a component of the OSO programming. Seeing resource room and computer lab lay-outs, signage, staffing, equipment, etc, at each location is invaluable to OSOs for comparison purposed and to spark discussion. Initial meetings and interactions between the group members have only been virtual. The group is ongoing so perhaps in the third quarter of 2021 meetings could resume as in-person activities. One of the advantages of meeting in person and having peer discussion is that individuals form relationships that hopefully exist past these grant activities and enable group members to feel comfortable reaching out to peers with questions, to share ideas, and interact on their own.

Training and Professional Development Opportunities

Description

The WPMC saw this grant as an opportunity to provide training and professional development opportunities to staff, partners, and other stakeholders in the system. Initially, local areas identified the need for Safety and Security training when re-opening AJCs after COVID shutdowns. In addition, each of

the regional teams (Business Services, Career Coach/Front-Line Staff, and AJC Operators) had identified training and professional development topic needs that would benefit them both locally and in their regional efforts.

Outcome

Eight unique training sessions were procured for the regional groups. The first training to be rolled out was Safety and Security. This training focused on changes at the AJCs after COVID closures as well as personal protection in the new environment. The training was offered 7 times and over 160 WIOA staff and partners participated in the sessions. Several other training sessions were procured and are being rolled out in 2021:

- Utilizing Technology
- Recruitment and Enrollment of Job Seekers
- Prospecting for New Business Customers
- Overcoming Employer Objections and Value Propositions
- Communicating with Difficult Customers
- Developing Reporting Processes for Tracking Customers and Processes
- Employer Outreach and Relationship Nurturing

COVID Impact/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

COVID has had both positive and negative impacts on the training activities undertaken by the WPMC. On the positive side, virtual training has allowed the provision of training during shut-downs and eliminated travel time and cost. Negative impacts were also seen especially with respect to interaction between participants and the ability to have discussions and in-depth conversation about training topics. Future training may still be conducted virtually to allow for larger participation but follow-up discussions will be in-person.

DCEO TDL GRANT SUMMARY

Summary/Lessons Learned/Promising Practices

1. Understanding the TDL Sector from a data perspective

LMI Activities

- TDL Overview Report
- TDL Industries
- TDL Occupations
- Website reports
- Review LMI data with Regional BST

Promising Practice(s)/Lesson(s) Learned

- Cannot include all TDL industries and occupations in an analysis of the sector. Need to review and incorporate local intelligence to ensure that subsectors and occupations make sense in the region and with the project (i.e. occupations that require specialty training might not be included – pilot).
- Developed industry analysis that can be used for basis of discussion with employers and to engage specific subsectors in project activities.

2. Incumbent Worker Training

Activities

- Development of Regional IW policy incorporating nuances of local policies into one document that can be used region-wide (**attach**)
- Developed Disability Inclusion IW training program
- Forged relationship with airline industry
- Created discussion guide for initial IW meetings with employers
- Conducted 5 regional IW training programs (Ford Certification, ISO 9001, Food Manufacturing Safety, Green Belt, and Maintenance Excellence)

Promising Practice(s)/Lesson(s) Learned

- Employer outreach and relationship building takes significant time and effort in this sector because the structure is very flat and there is frequent change in management staff.
- Working with training providers and educational institutions to identify employers and training needs can be effective ways to explore IW needs (i.e. UTI and IMEC examples)
- Identified Illinois workNet issues for future regional work
- Pushed for waiver to 6 month employment requirement; provided justification and data for waiver submission

3. Employer Meetings/Promising Practices/Career Pathways/Pain Points

Activities

- Survey and focus groups of employers around 3 topics (Promising Practices/Career Pathways/Pain Points)

- 3 Regional job fairs in TDL sector
- Developed sample TDL Career Pathways

Promising Practice(s)/Lesson(s) Learned

- Need to have significant reason to bring employers together. Need a hook – used regional job fairs as way to engage employers
- Regional job fairs not only served a specific need for employer recruitment but it also was a way to get employers to discuss their career pathways and pain points.
- Requiring employers to respond to survey questions and participate in the pre-fair focus group to register for the job fair was an easy way to collect data and engage employers.
- Employers were very engaged and supportive of the pre-fair focus group process.
- The TDL industry has a relatively flat career pathway and most employers were not able to identify pathway opportunities.

4. Business Services Teams development

Activities

- Engaged business services representatives from all 7 LWIAs for 5 meetings
- Developed Business Services Team action plan
- Expanded team to include other required Core Partners (IDES/VR)

Promising Practice(s)/Lesson(s) Learned

- It is difficult for BST members to think about their work regionally.
- The Regional BST was very engaged in sharing ideas and project activities
- There was a great deal of interaction and coordination between local teams at the meetings.