



Benchmarks of Success for Maryland's Workforce System
Policy Committee
October 21, 2021 1:00 – 2:30 PM
Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Brit Ayers, Matthew Bernardy, Natalie Clements, Lloyd Day, Bruce England, Lauren Gilwee, Adam Hiob, Charles Hunt, Matthew Jackson, Susan Kaliush, Kenneth Lemberg, Jane Miller, Patti Morfe, Marsha Netus, Courtney Tramontana, and Tina Turner

Handout: Agenda

Minutes

I. Welcome and Meeting Overview

- This is the committee's last panel discussion for 2021.
- The committee welcomed the speakers for the panel on "Participant Engagement and Outreach":
 - Brit Ayers, Director of Community Case Management, Harford Community Action Agency (HCAA);
 - Courtney Tramontana, Food Advocacy/SNAP Outreach Manager, Harford Community Action Agency;
 - Marsha Netus, Vice President and Regional Director, America Works of Maryland, Inc.; and
 - Susan Kaliush, Communications and Outreach Manager, MD Labor DWDAL.

II. Panel Discussion: Participant Engagement and Outreach

- Prior to the pandemic, HCAA provided in-person/in-house services. They were able to switch to conducting outreach outside of their buildings by driving a mobile unit. They also packed food and supplies to help people in crisis. Providing aid starts the conversation of who they are and can lead into a conversation of what they do.
- DWDAL went from an emphasis of physical distribution of brochures and flyers to a virtual method, so they had to make sure that all information online was current. This is changing now, as people are coming back to AJCs and requesting flyers. It is going back to physical publications. They learned to make sure information on the website is current.
 - Constituent inquiries increased, especially for Unemployment Insurance (UI) claimants. DWDAL kept a spreadsheet of inquiries to give to UI staff.
 - The Communications Committee has put an emphasis on their Benchmarks of Success newsletters for updates on service and program delivery.

- For America Works, the pandemic shook their whole program model. They did everything in-person. They were forced to change and change quickly. The adoption of virtual methods has been a positive because customers often use virtual communications. They lost customers when they first went virtual, so America Works used a text message system to get the word out and had customers share the communications with their networks to bring them back.
 - They realized how far their customers were behind in technology, so they could not rely on Zoom or other platforms. They used a conference room to conduct workshops over the phone.
 - From a national perspective, they changed guidelines for their website to keep customers engaged with their process. America Works will continue the virtual processes. They are now utilizing their social media to engage with customers.
- HCAA's customers generally have smart phones, so they were able to conduct eligibility verification for the rental assistance program by having customers send pictures of their documentation. They did allow customers to drop documents in person in lock boxes if they were not comfortable working virtually. They have not seen a drop in participation.
 - HCAA teaches a parenting class for families dealing with incarceration. Since they have gone virtual, they are getting increased interest in referrals because people want to participate just were not able to necessarily go in person.
 - HCAA depended on their community partners across the county to assist customers who could not contact them online or come in person to help connect them.
- The digital divide was a rude awakening for America Works. They are working with a diverse population with different barriers to employment. In all populations, the digital divide was a challenge. They were surprised by how many did not have devices in their households, so they got laptops for individuals. Agencies collaborated to purchase laptops. Many customers lacked basic computer skills, so America Works has started teaching digital literacy, considering now that many jobs have a virtual component.
- DWDAL made sure that phone numbers are available on websites and current to address the digital divide.
- HCAA tracks the number of customers by month as compared to that month from the previous year. HCAA on average was seeing 200 more individuals a month for the first six or seven months than they were the previous year, likely driven by the need for food assistance. They were seeing customers who had never needed benefits before. HCAA is now seeing the demand taper off for certain programs. Rental and water bill assistance needs are increasing again, particularly for warehouse workers with the delta waive because it is harder to social distance in those settings.
 - Transportation is a huge barrier in Harford County. The hybrid model has allowed more individuals to participate who cannot get to their location.
- America Works could not find half of their population when the pandemic hit. Businesses were still connecting, but it was hard to connect with their customers. They are happy to be back in the office because are seeing more customers come in that were waiting until in-person services came back. Their customers are afraid to come back too because of COVID-19, so America Works is slowly bringing them back to address that fear.
- DWDAL had an influx of UI inquiries from customers, so they devised a system to track the communications to share with staff who could answer their questions.

- To reach their customers, America Works tried it all – phone calls, emails, social media, etc. The most innovative method was text messaging, especially during the early parts of the pandemic. This method was particularly effective for communications with individuals with disabilities. America Works saw a difference in texting from youth and adult populations. Their youth were not as perceptive with technology as they would have thought to maximize their resources.
 - America Works had initially started with email but found that their customers were not checking their emails.
 - Social media was helpful, but they found more participation fatigue there.
- Maryland has seen more organizations deploy mobile units to take services on the road. HCAA reached out to community partners, largely the libraries, Title I schools, and faith-based organizations. They had to be discerning of how to schedule the route. They made a plan with the libraries based on the needs of the communities, Title I k-we school sites, and feeding sites. It took some practice to determine how many supplies to bring to different sites. It was beneficial to have a routine, so individuals would know when to expect them. They also brought paper applications for benefits on these routes for individuals who did not have technology. The mobile unit was used as an opportunity to refer individuals to other partners and services.
 - Weather has been a challenge and the hours of when it is light or dark because HCAA has been physically out doing outreach. Another challenge has been the physical toll of loading up the mobile unit.
- America Works found that their work is made a lot easier if people have phones. A challenge is that not everyone has access to the internet. They will continue to be creative in using phones to maximize resources.
- DWDAL plans to continue their use of social media as an outreach tool. They have been able to reach many individuals that way, and AJC staff appreciate having their flyers and information on social media. They do not plan to eliminate virtual outreach methods.
- America Works' offices operated independently, but now they partner to make self-directed and live steam virtual trainings available to their customers. They started hosting job clubs for employers to talk to participants over the phone and will continue this practice. They are using the phone more than they were in the past. They will continue their use of texting and social media.
- HCAA will continue to make virtual workshops available to be inclusive of individuals who are not comfortable leaving their homes. They will keep the mobile unit a part of their outreach methods. They do not plan to stop any of the virtual methods because transportation is always a challenge for customers.
- America Works cannot conduct their work without their community partners. Not all of their partners are back in the office yet. They have developed round tables with (1) employers to share what is going on in their industry and with (2) their community partners to share changes in their organizations.
- It is important to get together with partners to make sure that their understandings of each other's work is up to date.
- Partnership plays a big role in the Benchmarks of Success newsletters. The Communications Committee would not have a newsletter without agency input. The newsletter is a tool to keep individuals informed of the status of different agencies.

- America Works is aligned with AJCs, but their strengths are different. They partner with different WIOA partners to reach their goals. They need more resources because there has been so many agency changes. It would be helpful to have a centralized repository of information that they know is updated to pull resources for customers about partner services.
 - Kaiser Permanente has a repository of partner information called Unite Us Tool at: <https://uniteus.com/>.
- HCAA is the largest nonprofit in Harford County, so they are invited to conduct outreach with partners. They are involved in the county's continuum of care and race and equity group. They make sure that someone on their team can attend all group outreach or information sharing events.
- DWDAL can continue to use the newsletter to get the word out, as agencies continue sharing their information.
- America Works was reminded by the pandemic that people learn differently, so they have to ensure that they use various methods to make sure that individuals are receiving and retaining the information from programming.
 - They also learned that youth are not as up to date with technology as they had expected, e.g. some are not comfortable typing on a keyboard.
 - A lesson learned is that they need to strategize internally to provide supports and in multiple methods.
- HCAA recognizes that while many customers have digital literacy and technology needed to work virtually, some do not. They adapted to provide forms in multiple ways, keeping their lobby open and stocked with applications, and making sure that their email addresses were simple. Not everyone has computers, printers, or scanners. Being flexible and willing to think outside the box is key.
 - Customers do not necessarily see how much the pandemic and hybrid model has put pressure on staff. Both sides experienced a learning curve and were navigating a new world.
 - Providing virtual services and appointment only can shield individuals in times of need and provide more privacy.
- MD Labor has designated a staff person to oversee scanning due to the breadth of technological issues they have seen in the UI system. Aligning resources for scanning can make a big difference.
- DWDAL has found that a variety of outreach methods is the key.

III. News and Notes

- Debrief from last month's WIOA Alignment Group meeting:
 - The Communications Committee's September newsletter focused on services for veterans. The October newsletter will focus on National Disability Employment Month.
 - The Data and Dashboard Committee is involved in the policy development process for DWDAL's data validation policy.
 - The Professional Development and Technical Assistance Committee released a module on WIOA Title I on September 20th. Their next module on WIOA Title II is scheduled to be released in November.

- Maryland has begun the process of updating the WIOA State Plan. The plan is due on March 1, 2022. The WIOA Alignment Group is overseeing this process. SNAP E&T will be a new partner in the plan. Committee members can send questions about the State Plan or planning process to Lauren Gilwee.

IV. Next Steps and Action Items

- Lauren Gilwee, Tina Turner, and Natalie Clements will pull together a list of takeaways from all for the panels to share with the committee. The committee will use this list to lift up recommendations for the report. The committee can present the report at the February 2022 WIOA Alignment Group meeting.
- The next meeting of the Policy Committee will be on Thursday, November 18th.