



SEPTEMBER 2020

Providing Employment Services to the Long-Term Unemployed

INSIGHTS ON IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE READY TO WORK PARTNERSHIP GRANT EVALUATION

The Ready to Work (RTW) Partnership Grant program, funded and administered by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), was designed to assist those experiencing long spells of unemployment as a result of the 2008-2009 recession to find jobs and succeed in the labor market. The RTW grant program also aimed to establish programs that might prove effective in preparing U.S. workers for employment, particularly in occupations and industries being filled by foreign workers through the H-1B visa program.

In 2014, DOL awarded four-year grants totaling \$180 million to 24 grantees.¹ RTW grant funds were to be used to provide a range of customized services, including staff guidance on career planning and appropriate program activities, occupational training, employment readiness and job search assistance, and work-based training, to the long-term unemployed. RTW grants went to partnerships of workforce agencies, training providers, employers, and other local organizations. The grantee programs continued operations through 2019 (grantees received no-cost extensions for their programs).

DOL sponsored an evaluation of the RTW grant program that is being conducted by Abt Associates in partnership with MEF Associates. The evaluation includes an implementation study and an experimental impact study of four purposively selected grantees.

This brief documents findings from the implementation study, describing how the grantees' programs were implemented over the full term of the grant, the institutional benefits the grantees anticipated would be sustained after the grants ended, and lessons for current workforce programs. Future reports, to be released in 2021 and 2022, will examine the impact of the four programs on participants' education and employment outcomes. Findings from this implementation study will be important in interpreting those impact results.

Although DOL funded the RTW grant program in response to the 2008-2009 recession, the overall economy had improved by the time programs started, and it continued to do so through the four-year period of program operations.² However, even in this strong economy, workers with long spells of unemployment continued to constitute a substantial share of those who were unemployed,³ and thus the grantees' experiences are important for others considering approaches for improving economic outcomes for the long-term unemployed. It should be noted that the RTW grantee programs operated and data collection took place before the COVID-19 pandemic occurred.

The Ready to Work Partnership Grant Program and Evaluation

Overview of the RTW Grant Program

DOL’s Solicitation for Grant Applications (SGA) specified that RTW-funded programs should focus on preparing long-term unemployed workers for employment, particularly in high-growth industries and occupations.⁴ The SGA also indicated that grantees could not target entry-level occupations, but rather should provide training and services that promoted employment in higher-skilled occupations. Specifically, this guidance detailed that RTW programs should:

- Target long-term unemployed workers, defined as those who had been jobless for 27 weeks or more (over six months), as well as underemployed workers (meaning those who had lost their job and had obtained short-term or part-time employment but had not yet found full-time jobs in line with their previous level of skill or earnings) .
- Assess participants’ skills and needs and then provide customized services along three tracks: (1) staff guidance, including intensive coaching, and direct job placement services for those participants who had the skills and competencies to be placed directly into employment that was beyond entry-level without additional training; (2) short-term training that leads to direct job placement to refresh or upgrade skills; and (3) training that culminates in an industry-recognized credential for those who needed to gain new skills and competencies.
- In addition to these tracks, grantees were to (1) arrange paid work-based training, such as on the job training and paid work experience; and (2) provide services that addressed the unique barriers facing long-term unemployed workers, such as financial counseling and behavioral health counseling.

Evaluation of the RTW Grant Program

The evaluation of the RTW grant program includes two major components. An implementation study examines the design and operation of the four selected programs. An impact study, using a random assignment research design, estimates program effects on participant outcomes of interest, including educational attainment, employment, and earnings. As noted, this report, which presents results from the implementation study, is primarily based on in-person interviews conducted with program administrators, line staff, and organizational partners between 2016 and 2018. These qualitative data are augmented with analyses of program administrative data on patterns of participation.

Grantees in the RTW Evaluation

The Overview of Grantee Programs below shows the four grantees (the lead agency in each partnership) selected for the evaluation and the enrollment and target industries of their RTW-funded programs.

Three of the four grantees focused on employment in more than one industry. All included information technology (IT), three also included advanced manufacturing, and two included healthcare. Each grantee served over 1,000 participants over the four-year operational period, and all but one (RochesterWorks!) exceeded their target enrollment goal which varied by grantee (not shown). The RTW grantees included in the evaluation are located in urban areas, but all serve a relatively large geographic area that includes suburban and rural communities. JVS is a non-profit organization; the others are workforce agencies that provide services under the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Text boxes throughout this summary describe the key features of each program in the RTW evaluation.

Overview of Grantee Programs in the Ready to Work Evaluation

Grantee Lead Agency	Program and Enrollment	Target Industries
Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation (AAWDC) 12 counties in Maryland	Maryland Tech Connection (MTC) Total enrollment: 1,254	<i>Advanced manufacturing, bioscience, cybersecurity, healthcare, information technology</i>
Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) San Francisco, CA	Skills to Work in Technology (STW-T)/ Job Search Accelerator (JSA) Total enrollment: 1,006	<i>Information technology</i>
RochesterWorks! Monroe County, NY	Finger Lakes Hired (FLH) Total enrollment: 1,007	<i>Advanced manufacturing, healthcare, information technology</i>
Worksystems Inc. (Worksystems) Portland, OR and Vancouver, WA	Reboot Northwest Total enrollment: 1,348	<i>Advanced manufacturing, information technology, software</i>

Key Findings from the Implementation Study

This section first summarizes the operational experiences of the four RTW grantees over the four-year grant period and then describes plans for sustaining grant-related activities after the programs ended.

Operating the RTW Grant Programs

The grantee programs provided a similar range of services, but they varied substantially in their primary emphasis.

DOL's SGA for the RTW grant program gave grantees substantial flexibility to design their programs. Consistent with that flexibility, grantees adopted different approaches to service provision. Occupational training (largely in IT) was the primary focus of two programs (JVS and Worksystems), accounting for at least two-thirds of their enrollments. In contrast, RochesterWorks! provided employment readiness activities to nearly all of its enrollees, with only about one-quarter attending occupational training. AAWDC fell between them, with most receiving employment readiness activities but more than half also receiving occupational training. For all programs, work-based training (e.g., subsidized employment or unpaid work experience) was the least common service used by participants.

As the economy improved over the four-year grant period, grantees reported that they generally served workers who faced greater barriers to employment than originally envisioned. Grantees adjusted their programs to better serve this population.

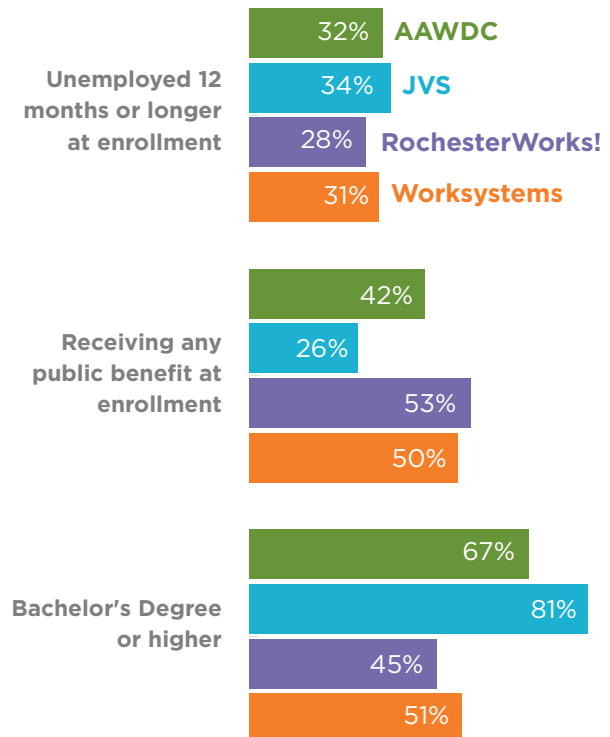
Grantee staff reported that as a result of this economic recovery, many of the long-term unemployed workers targeted by the RTW grant, particularly those with higher levels of education and work experience, found jobs on their own. As a result, staff reported that many of those who enrolled in the RTW-funded programs had lower skill levels and less work experience than grantees had anticipated. In response, grantees made a range of program modifications, including new recruitment methods, greater use of occupational training to address skill deficits, and strengthening employment readiness activities.

Aggressive recruitment strategies were needed to meet the programs' enrollment targets. All four RTW grantees reported that, over the term of the grant, it became increasingly difficult to identify potential participants who met the grant's definition of long-term unemployed, that is, unemployed or underemployed for over 27 weeks but with the educational background required for middle-skill positions. Staff reported that enrollment was slowed by the improving economy, which shrank the pool of applicants. In addition, to create the evaluation's control group, the RTW evaluation's random assignment design required the grantees to recruit substantially more individuals than would have been needed simply to fill the programs. To ensure an adequate number of participants, all programs used multifaceted recruitment strategies that had been successful in the early years of the grant combined with new strategies.

Grantees relied extensively on referrals of applicants from American Job Centers, community colleges, and community-based organizations. Grantees also added staff partway through the grant period to facilitate these referrals. Several programs also worked with the Unemployment Insurance program to identify workers who had exhausted their benefits and might therefore be interested in the program. As a result of these efforts, grantees identified and enrolled their target population. Participants generally had the educational foundation required to pursue middle-skill positions (some college) yet were unemployed (some for long periods) when they enrolled.

Despite the recruitment challenges, grantees enrolled the population targeted by the grant. Overall, participants were generally well educated but unemployed when they entered the program. More than 80 percent of participants were unemployed when they enrolled in a program, and about one-third had been unemployed for a year or more. One-third to one-half of participants had a bachelor's degree, and most others had some college or a technical or associates degree. Because the RTW grants focused on those with prior work experience and education, most enrollees were older, with an average age of around 45; about one-fifth were older than age 55. Reflecting their long periods of unemployment, about half of the participants were receiving some type of public benefit, primarily Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Unemployment Insurance.

Participants experienced long spells of unemployment and had high levels of public benefit receipt, but had relatively high education levels.



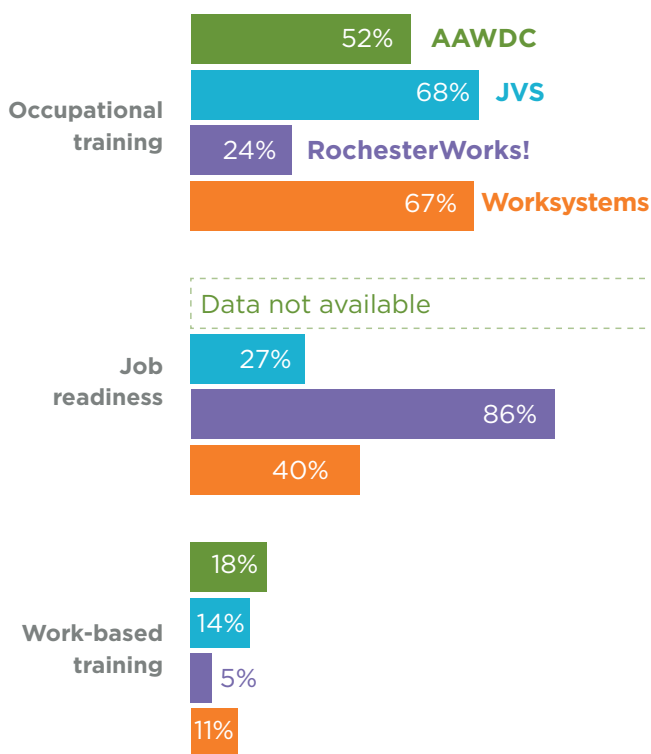


Participation in occupational training was high, but much of the training attended was short term (less than six months).

In part reflecting the need to raise skills to the levels needed for middle-skill jobs in a population harder to serve than anticipated, occupational training was the major focus of the JVS and Worksystems programs, and to a lesser extent, the AAWDC program.

RochesterWorks!, had the lowest occupational training participation rate, but reported having more applicants interested in such training than it had budgeted for that activity. The training programs were short term: the average length of occupational training ranged from 3.2 months for JVS to 5.3 months for RochesterWorks!.

Participation in occupational training was high, use of job readiness varied, and work-based training was less common.



The programs established strong connections with employers, which supported several aspects of the program operations.

Consistent with the sectoral emphasis of the RTW program, to enhance the employability of participants, all grantees prioritized developing industry connections. Specific activities included developing work-based training options (see below), providing speakers and employer visits, and posting information on current or pending job opportunities. To facilitate these connections to industry, the four grantees consistently engaged staff in developing employer relationships with sector-specific employers. Grantees used a variety of other strategies to identify and connect with employers, including attending industry events to network with sector-specific employers, soliciting input from employers on program design, and organizing job fairs to which they invited employers.

Workforce Investment Board AAWDC partnered with six other workforce agencies in the state to operate the MTC program. The program assisted long-term unemployed (including underemployed) workers across Maryland in finding jobs in advanced manufacturing, bioscience, cybersecurity, healthcare, or information technology.

The initial activity was a two-week employment readiness workshop designed specifically for the RTW program to provide participants with the tools and motivation necessary for a job search, at the same time helping them gain confidence in their skills and abilities as candidates for employment. This workshop also included a component on mental health awareness and a screening for eligibility for public assistance programs. Next grant-funded Career Coaches worked one-on-one with participants to develop a customized set of program services that could include:

Occupational Training

Short-term, primarily non-credit certificates in targeted industries, with tuition funded by MTC.

Work-Based Training

(1) On-the-job training of up to six months, with MTC reimbursing the employer for half of the participant’s wages; and (2) “Work and Learn” positions of up to 400 hours, with MTC paying the participant directly.

Job Search Assistance

One-on-one assistance from Career Coaches for MTC participants. Grant-funded Industry Talent Consultants developed relationships with employers to help lead to jobs or work-based training experiences for MTC participants.

Other Supports

For participants enrolled in occupational skills training, financial assistance for transportation and training-related materials, as well as a needs-based stipend of \$100 per week while the participant was in training.

Developing work-based training positions took time and remained a relatively small component of the grantee programs compared to the other activities. Staff at all grantees reported that they were committed to and saw the value of work-based training, but they found they had to invest substantial time to develop these positions. In particular, it took time to understand the labor and skill needs of individual employers and establish a level of trust before an employer was comfortable offering work-based training. Moreover, staff reported that some employers were reluctant to complete procedures necessary to sponsor work-based training. Overall, work-based learning positions were slow to emerge and were not a major activity for any programs, although staff reported the number increased over time.

Staff reported that employment readiness activities were a central element of the RTW programs in large part because the programs served workers with more barriers to employment than anticipated. The emphasis that programs gave employment readiness activities differed by grantee. Some grantees required these activities for all participants, while others required them for participants deemed most in need of the services. Despite these differences, grantee staff reported that activities to reorient participants to the world of work as they built job search skills and industry knowledge, were critical program elements.

Grantees provided access to specialized assistance with mental or behavioral health issues, specifically designed for those experiencing long-term unemployment. Explicitly recognizing the possible emotional and psychological effects of long-term unemployment, the four grantees offered services intended to address participants' mental health and self-confidence. Some grantees provided assistance with mental and/or behavioral health issues as part of their employment readiness activities, sometimes provided by an outside agency with expertise in this area.

Sustainability of RTW Grant-funded Activities

By design, the RTW grants were time limited. All grantees reported that they did not have resources to continue the four-year RTW programs in their entirety. However, the grantees reported that they planned to integrate some components of their RTW program into future initiatives, either by finding new sources of funds or reallocating existing funds.

All grantees planned to continue using material developed for the employment readiness activities assisting other unemployed populations. As part of their RTW grants, each of the grantees offered employment readiness services that in part addressed the importance of motivation and self-confidence to participants' job search efforts. Grantees planned to continue offering this material as part of other job search workshops they offered, in addition to the more standard curriculum emphasizing job search skills such as resume development and interview skills.



JEWISH VOCATIONAL SERVICE—SKILLS TO WORK IN TECHNOLOGY AND JOB SEARCH ACCELERATOR PROGRAMS

JVS is a non-profit organization in San Francisco, California. The JVS RTW programs aimed to help long-term unemployed workers find employment, primarily in IT. The Skills to Work in Technology (STW-T) program consisted of three IT training courses:

Business Administration Bootcamp

A five- to six-week course primarily focused on employment readiness skills, supplemented with training on Microsoft Office® software.

Digital Marketing

An 11- to 12-week program providing training in digital marketing. This course concluded partway through the grant period.

Salesforce® Administration

A 16-week course providing technical training on managing the Salesforce platform for an organization. Included 1- to 3-week paid “fellowship” position with an employer.

Each of these three courses delivered training concurrent with job search and employment readiness activities. Each began with a “Foundation Week” focused on personal and career exploration to prepare for job search. Later activities included developing job search tools, such as resumes and networking skills, and improving participants' motivation and self-confidence. After the training, participants could attend peer group activities.

Partway through the grant period, JVS implemented a second program, Job Search Accelerator (JSA) that did not have a technical skills component or a focus on IT. This two-week program focused on job search and readiness skills.

Some grantees developed occupational training programs for cohorts of participants, and hoped to continue this training model. In addition to or in place of making individual-level referrals to training providers, three grantees adopted a cohort training strategy. Grantee staff reported that cohort trainings were a way to train small groups of individuals with the skills and credentials that were in demand from one or more employers, with the training courses sometimes tailored to specific employer needs.

Grantees identified ways to sustain the employer relationships that had been established under the RTW grants. Grantees adopted staffing arrangements and practices to help them maintain employer relationships developed during the grant period even after the grant ended. This included presenting their workforce agency as a single cohesive identity to employers. Staff reported that this approach could potentially give the grantee name recognition beyond the life of their RTW grant and lead to continuing relationships with employers. In addition, two grantees rearranged their staffing to allow non-RTW-funded staff at the workforce agency to take over and maintain the established employer relationships.

Regional partnerships developed or advanced under the grants continued after the grants ended. As part of their RTW programs, two grantees established partnerships with other workforce development agencies in order to serve a large region of their respective states. Both grantees were interested in continuing this partnership, finding that some large employers have a presence across county lines. By sharing resources and labor market information across workforce agencies, grantee staff reported they could better meet employers' skill needs and place individuals in jobs.

Conclusion: Implications and Lessons for Future Programs

The RTW grant program focused on serving workers who were experiencing long-term unemployment and moving them into middle- and high-skilled jobs. This section provides reflections from the authors on lessons that could inform future efforts to move unemployed individuals back to work.

Flexibility in program design appears important in meeting local business and employer needs. Economic conditions, potential employers, and participant characteristics all varied across the grantees. Using the flexibility provided by DOL to address local needs, some grantees emphasized occupational training to upgrade skills, while others focused on developing employment readiness skills and/or connections to employers. The forthcoming impact study of each grantee will report estimates of the impact of each grantee's approach on improving participants' employment and other outcomes.



ROCHESTERWORKS!— FINGER LAKES HIRED PROGRAM

RochesterWorks!, the Workforce Investment Board for the city of Rochester and surrounding Monroe County in western New York, operated the Finger Lakes Hired program. The program assisted long-term unemployed (including underemployed) workers in finding jobs in advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and IT. Grant-funded Education and Employment Specialists worked one-on-one with each participant to develop a customized set of program services that could include:

Employment Readiness Activities

One-week workshop available at the Career Center focused on building job search skills and addressing social and emotional issues related to long-term unemployment.

Occupational Training

Short-term certificate and two-year degree programs in target industries, with tuition funded by Finger Lakes Hired. Those enrolled in a training program at a partnering community college got on-site assistance with academic issues from grant-funded staff.

Work-Based Training

(1) On-the-job training, with the grant subsidizing the participant's wages for six to 32 weeks; and/or (2) work experience "tryouts" of two to four weeks, with the grant paying the participant's wages.

Job Search Assistance

One-on-one assistance from Education and Employment Specialists. Grant-funded staff contacted employers in the relevant sectors to identify job openings and connect participants to them.

Other Supports

Participants enrolled in training got financial assistance for transportation, tuition, training-related materials and certification exams, and a needs-based stipend of \$50 per week.

Even with a focus on serving relatively well-educated workers and operating in a strong economy, there are workers with substantial barriers to employment that can potentially benefit from customized workforce services.

Grantee staff consistently reported that, in part due to the improving economy which enabled more job-ready individuals to find jobs, the populations they were serving faced more barriers to work than they had originally anticipated. This indicates that even workers with relatively high levels of education that qualify them for middle- and high-skilled jobs experience long-term unemployment. And based on their participation in the RTW programs, these individuals appear to have a need for customized assistance in finding jobs provided. In particular, grantees reported that activities focused on employment readiness skills, such as building confidence and motivation and understanding industry needs, were critical given the length of time participants had been out work.

Developing employer interest in sponsoring work-based training activities requires significant effort and attention. All grantees reported that developing work-based training options was consistently the most difficult program component to implement. Staff reported that eliciting employer interest in sponsoring positions as well as gaining employer willingness to complete necessary steps to place a participant in a work-based training slot were the primary obstacles. Identifying additional strategies to promote employer interest in these activities is an area for future attention.

Industry partnerships to understand and meet employer needs can be enhanced through staff resources dedicated to this activity. While developing business partnerships is a common strategy for identifying employment opportunities and placing job seekers, grantees reported that RTW resources allowed their programs to dedicate staff time to this activity above and beyond what would have typically been possible at American Job Centers. Furthermore, the RTW programs' narrow industry focus allowed for an in-depth engagement with the relevant industry in understanding key employers and their needs.

A four-year operational period for the grants allowed the programs to mature and strengthen over time. The RTW grantees were able to operate their programs at least four years (and longer with extensions). Staff reported that this period of time was sufficient enough to make adjustments and improvements to program design and services, particularly regarding recruitment, industry partnerships, work-based learning, and the structure of occupational training.

Overall the RTW implementation study found that the four grantees each developed, operated, and refined a set of program services designed to improve the employment prospects of a long-term unemployed or underemployed population. Furthermore, while the RTW programs ended as planned, grantees identified strategies developed under the RTW programs that they hoped to continue if funding could be identified.



WORKSYSTEMS, INC.—
REBOOT NORTHWEST

Worksystems, the Workforce Investment Board for Multnomah and Washington Counties in Oregon, operated the Reboot Northwest program in collaboration with two other boards in six counties in the Portland (OR)-Vancouver (WA) metropolitan area. Reboot Northwest aimed to assist long-term unemployed workers find skilled positions in advanced manufacturing, IT, and software. Grant-funded Career Coaches worked one-on-one with each participant to develop a customized set of program services that could include:

Occupational Training

Short and long-term certificate and two-year degree programs in the target industries, with tuition funded by Reboot Northwest.

Employment Readiness Activities

A two- to three-week Career Link workshop designed to increase participants' employment readiness and job search skills and introduce them to industry experts and employers.

Work-Based Training

(1) On-the-job training, with the participant's wages subsidized by the grant with the expectation that the worker would be retained upon completion; and (2) paid work experience positions of up to 240 hours where the participant worked with an employer, with the wages paid by the grant.

Job Search Assistance

One-on-one assistance from a Career Coach and peer support through networking groups with others who had finished other program activities.

Other Supports

Transportation; Assistance on behavioral health issues provided through two contracted partners; and housing vouchers provided by a local housing authority.

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Endnotes:

¹Originally, DOL made awards in 2014 to 23 grantees totaling \$170 million. In 2015, DOL awarded an additional RTW grant bringing the total number of grantees to 24. The grant period for this grantee ended in 2020.

²Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat01.pdf>

³Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2019. "Long-Term Unemployment Fell from Record Peak But Long-Term Unemployed as a Share of All Unemployed Remains High," Chart Book: Tracking the Post-Great Recession Economy. Accessed Feb. 12, 2020, at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/economy/chart-book-tracking-the-post-great-recession-economy>.

⁴U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration (DOL/ETA). N.D. *Notice of Availability of Funds and Solicitation for Grant Applications for H-1B Ready to Work Partnership Grants* (Solicitation for Grant Applications, SGA/DFA PY-13-07). Washington, D.C.: Authors. Accessed Dec. 18, 2019, at https://www.doleta.gov/grants/pdf/SGA_DFA_PY_13_07.pdf.

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