

Employer Engagement Strategies in Regional Partnerships

Issue brief: Lessons from America's Promise

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Sector strategies¹ rely on active engagement between workforce development organizations and employers in a specific industry to meet workforce needs (Dedrick 2014; Barnow and Spaulding 2015; Maguire et al. 2010; Prince et al. 2017). To promote that type of engagement, DOL required that the sector-focused regional partnerships funded by America's Promise Job Driven Training (America's Promise) grants "secure commitments for deep employer involvement" from at least five employer partners or a regional industry association (DOL 2016b). DOL expected employers to play a critical role in partnership efforts to identify the needs of targeted middle- to high-skilled occupations and industries; train unemployed, underemployed, and incumbent workers; and place them in employment leading to careers in those industries (DOL 2016b).

Study background

Chief Evaluation Office
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR 

This issue brief is part of a study funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Chief Evaluation Office that explores the implementation and impact of the America's Promise Job Driven Training grants, which 23 organizations received in 2016. These four-year grants, funded by DOL's Employment and Training Administration, support creating and expanding regional partnerships—that include workforce development agencies, institutions of higher education, economic development agencies, employers, and community-based organizations and are—aimed at preparing workers for careers in middle- to high-skilled industries and occupations (DOL 2016b).▲

Exhibit 1. Summary of findings

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| <p>How did regional partnerships recruit employers?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the survey, grantees reported an average of 21 employer partners. Fifty-eight percent of employer partners were newly established as part of the grant. • Partnerships indicated during site visits that they used multiple methods to reach out to potential new employer partners, typically initiating contact through phone, email, or ongoing meetings of industry associations or chambers of commerce, followed by one-on-one conversations. • Administrators often recruited employers as partners for input on services and oversight, while frontline staff engaged employers for participants' work-based learning and job placement. |
| <p>How did regional partnerships integrate employers into their work?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Across all 23 partnerships, grantees noted on the survey that nearly half of employer partners participated in advisory boards. Employers advised on program strategies and goals, the occupational focus of training programs, and the design of training curriculum. • Work-based learning supported by employers included incumbent worker training (offered by 14 of 18 partnerships involved in virtual site visits). Eight of the 18 partnerships offered health care clinical practice, 7 offered apprenticeships, 7 offered paid internships, 5 offered on-the-job training (OJT), and 2 offered pre-apprenticeships. |

¹ DOL's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) has defined a sector strategy as "a partnership of multiple employers within a critical industry that brings together education, economic development, workforce systems, and community organizations to identify and collaboratively meet the workforce needs of that industry within a regional labor market." (DOL, 2016a)

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All partnerships sought employers willing to hire individual participants; 12 of the 18 partnerships visited virtually developed arrangements with employers that committed to hiring multiple participants. |
| <p>What were key lessons learned related to employer engagement?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lessons on employer engagement that emerged from virtual site visit interviews suggest the importance of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Devoting sufficient time and resources to employer outreach – Using incumbent worker training to engage employers – Engaging small businesses in work-based learning through OJT and internships – Conducting outreach to potential new employer partners throughout the grant life cycle – Reviewing the pool of employers in the region when selecting an industry or sector focus – Engaging in both small- and large-scale hiring partnerships with employers – Business services coordinators, who worked primarily with employers, helped partnerships to succeed in understanding and meeting employer needs. |

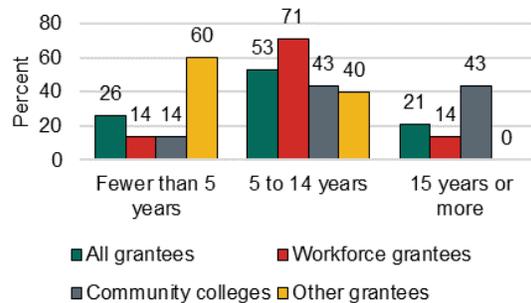
Source: Grantee survey with all 23 America’s Promise partnerships and virtual site visits to 18 partnerships.

The America’s Promise evaluation explored the strategies that regional partnerships used to engage with employers and the lessons they learned. This brief draws primarily on interviews with grantee and partner administrators² and frontline staff collected through virtual site visits with 18 of the 23 America’s Promise partnerships in fall 2020. Across these 18 partnerships, advanced manufacturing was a target industry for 11 grant partnerships, health care for 9 grant partnerships, and information technology (IT) for 10 partnerships.³ Findings also rely on data from a survey administered to all 23 grantees in spring 2019. Although the perspectives shared through the interviews and survey are not representative of all the members of each partnership, they offered valuable insight on employer engagement across partnerships. A companion brief, “Employer Perspectives on Regional Workforce Partnerships,” presents findings from interviews with 31 employers who participated in America’s Promise partnerships (English et al. 2021).⁴

How did regional partnerships recruit employers?

America’s Promise grantees established far more employer partnerships than the five required by DOL. In response to the survey, grantees reported 21 employer partners on average, with responses ranging from as few as 5 to as many as 65 employers. Most grantees had more than 5 years of experience engaging with employers via sector strategies (Exhibit 2); a higher percentage of grantees that were institutions of higher education reported having 15 or more years of experience. Creating new partnerships with employers requires significant investments of time and resources by workforce organizations (Dunham et

Exhibit 2. Years of grantee experience engaging employers in sector strategies



Source: Grantee survey with all 23 America’s Promise partnerships.

Note: Grantees included nine community colleges, seven workforce development agencies, four nonprofits, one state government, one four-year university, and one higher education administrative agency.

² Grant and partner administrators included program managers, program directors, grant managers, executive directors, vice presidents, deputy directors, directors of operations, and other executive positions.

³ Of the 18 partnerships, 10 targeted a single industry, 4 targeted two industries, and 4 targeted all three industries.

⁴ This brief and others reports for the America’s Promise evaluation are available at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/currentstudies/America-Promise-Job-Driven-Grant-Program-Evaluation>

al. 2020; Barnow and Spaulding 2015; Dunham 2015; Spaulding and Martin-Caughey 2015) and perhaps even more so for organizations with less experience engaging with employers. The grantees that participated in virtual site visits reported leveraging both existing and new partnerships, conducting intensive outreach, and using multiple staff positions to recruit employers in support of their regional partnership efforts.

Existing versus new employer partnerships

To recruit employers and industry associations, all but one of the 18 grantees that participated in site visits used a two-pronged approach, reaching out to (1) employers they already had relationships with and (2) new potential employer partners. In the grantee survey, grantees indicated that more than half (58 percent) of their employer partnerships were newly established for the grant, with the rest (42 percent) being established partners.

- **Built on existing employer and industry partnerships.** DOL explicitly allowed grantees to build on existing partnerships rather than requiring them to develop entirely new partnerships (DOL 2016b). Seventeen of the 18 regional partnerships involved in virtual site visits opted to do so, by including one or more employers or industry associations that already had a relationships with another member of the partnership. Given that it would have required a substantial amount of time to develop new sector-focused partnerships with employers,⁵ one grant administrator stated that the grant was most useful to deepen existing partnerships. The only regional partnership that reported developing all-new employer relationships did so because its industry focus was on a newly emerging sector.
- **Reached out to new employers both before the grant award and during implementation.** Grantee administrators from 16 of the 18 partnerships involved in virtual site visits reported that they reached out to new employers as part of their grant efforts, with two partnerships reporting that they added dozens of new partners over the course of the grant. In all of these 16 partnerships, respondents reported reasons for continuous and dynamic employer outreach both prior to the submission of their grant applications and during the course of grant. These reasons included:
 - **Sought sufficient numbers and regional representation of employers in the partnership.** Grant administrators from four partnerships indicated that they recruited new employers while preparing the America’s Promise grant application to increase the overall number of employers in the partnership and to include employers from across the region covered by the grant.
 - **Needed more employer partners to increase placement rates.** According to site visit respondents across all 18 partnerships, ongoing outreach to new employers helped identify more employment opportunities for participants in the sector of focus and sometimes other adjacent sectors. For example, one partnership focused on a specific manufacturing subsector realized that a narrow focus was making job placements challenging because there were limited employers and the subsector’s hiring needs had changed. As a result, it began outreach to new employers in adjacent manufacturing and logistics sectors which needed similarly skilled workers.

“Ongoing engagement with employers is critical to our overall success.”

–*Workforce partner manager*

⁵ The former executive director of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, a major supporter of sector initiatives, and a key leader in Pennsylvania’s Industry Partnerships sector strategies initiative, estimated that it can take up to five years to develop sector partnerships that engage employers in their talent pipelines (Dedrick 2014).

- **Lost or pivoted away from employer partners recruited during grant application development.** Grant administrators from eight partnerships reported reaching out to new employers over the course of the grant because they either lost or no longer needed to work with one or more of their initial employer partners. Three of these partnerships indicated that employers were unable to follow through with initial commitments because other departments (such as human resources) within their organizations had not been consulted, and so those commitments conflicted with company policies or procedures. Two of the partnerships reported pivoting away from a specific sector or industry and therefore no longer needing employer partners in that sector. Two indicated that employers were unwilling to share proprietary information about specific practices or client lists that were essential for development of training services and participant job placements. Finally, two partnerships said employers opted to create their own internal training programs, in one case because the employer felt the regional partnership was training workers too slowly to meet its needs.

Employer outreach strategies and staff responsible for outreach efforts

Because many employers lack knowledge of the public workforce system, workforce programs typically use multiple methods to contact and establish relationships with new employers or industry partners (Spaulding and Martin-Caughey 2015; Dunham 2015; Dunham 2004). Indeed, America’s Promise partnerships made initial contact with employers both during the grant application and over the course of the grant in various ways (see Exhibit 3):

- **Emails and phone calls.** The most common contact method (reported by all 18 partnerships involved in site visits) was to reach out via email or phone to specific employers.
- **Industry association or chamber of commerce meetings.** Respondents from 13 of the 18 grant partnerships that received site visits reported attending industry association or chamber of commerce meetings. Respondents saw these routine meetings as an opportunity to network with employers or make presentations about partnership opportunities to all assembled.
- **Newsletters and industry-related events.** Other methods of contacting new employers mentioned by a respondent from at least one grant partnership, included placing information in chamber of commerce newsletters and participating in industry-related events such as “hackathons”⁶ for networking purposes.
- **One-on-one meetings.** After contacting potential employer partners, eight partnerships set up one-on-one meetings as their next step in

Exhibit 3. Most common methods for contacting new employers

- Sending individual emails or calling to set up an appointment (18), with follow-up one-on-one meetings (8)
- Attending meetings of organized groups of employers, such as industry associations and chambers of commerce, to network or present about the partnership (13)
- Inviting new employers to a meeting specifically about the America’s Promise grant and partnership (3)
- Proactive outreach from employers to engage partnerships. Grant administrators from three partnerships reported that at least one employer proactively approached them about partnering to develop or participate in a customized or incumbent worker training program.

Source: Virtual site visits to 18 partnerships.

⁶ A “hackathon” is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “an event in which computer programmers collaborate intensively with one another and sometimes with people in other specialties over a relatively short period of time to create code usually for a new software product or service.”

partnership development. Pre-pandemic, these meetings were typically conducted in person or by phone, but following the onset of COVID-19, they were often conducted via video conference.

- **Grant information sessions with multiple employers.** Three partnerships set up specific meetings about the America’s Promise grant with groups of potential new employer partners. These sessions typically took the place of one-on-one meetings and occurred either prior to submission of the grant application or shortly after the award.
- **Proactive outreach from employers to engage partnerships.** In addition to partnership outreach to employers, grant administrators from three partnerships reported that an employer proactively approached them about partnering to develop or participate in a customized or incumbent worker training program.
- **Employer partners recruiting other employers.** Only one grant partnership, the Pathways to Health Careers in Michigan, reported using employers to conduct outreach to other employers, an approach that the partnership’s grant administrator thought was particularly effective given that employers were reportedly best persuaded by their peers (see Exhibit 4).

Administrators and frontline staff who participated in virtual site visits reported that efforts to connect with employers were led by workforce organizations (14 of 18 partnerships), higher education partners (11 of 18), and economic development or employer intermediary organizations (11 of 18). Administrators from six partnerships also indicated that outreach to specific employers was often conducted by a partner with a previous connection to that employer.

Across partnership organizations, multiple types of staff reported conducting outreach to employers:

- **Grant administrators.** Grant administrators across 15 of the 18 partnerships said they recruited employers for program input or oversight roles. This outreach occurred during grant application and aimed to involve employers as members of partnership advisory bodies or in designing grant-supported training programs.
- **Job development staff.** Job developers and (sometimes also called job placement staff) at 14 of the 18 partnerships engaged with employers primarily to find participant placements. According to respondents from the 14 partnerships, staff in these positions generally focused more heavily on relationships with participants than employers, with the primary goal of finding placement or work-based learning opportunities for participants. Indeed, grant administrators from one partnership stated developing strong relationships with participants was so central that they did not look for individuals with connections to employers when hiring for partnership staff positions. However, staff in these roles generally tried to meet the needs of both participants and employers. Multiple respondents from four partnerships commented that this was challenging because the needs of participants sometimes differed from those of employers, and the disconnect sometimes led to poor placements. For example,

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Exhibit 4. Peer outreach with employers: Pathways to Health Careers’ approach to connecting with employers

Michigan’s Pathways to Health Careers connected 41 employers to its America’s Promise grant. The grant administrator at Grand Rapids Community College attributed the partnership’s success to the networking carried out by the initial employer partners. She described those employers as being best positioned to promote the grant to their industry peers: “When you do a good job, they speak for you.” She further noted that this employer-to-employer outreach helped address the concerns many employers had about collaborating with a federally-funded grant effort. “Anytime it [the funding and the grant] is with the Federal government, they get nervous...so it is really helpful to have people [from other employers] speak for you.” ▲

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one grant administrator explained that it could be difficult for job developers to balance employers' desire for job candidates with multiple years of experience (which most of their participants did not have) with participants' need for jobs where they could use the skills they had recently acquired through training. To address this challenge, nine partnerships had staff in different partner organizations who focused on both participants and employers as well as staff who primarily worked with employers.

- **Business services coordinators.** Business services coordinators from 12 of the 18 partnerships worked primarily with employers to understand and meet their needs. These staff members engaged with employers as their primary job duty, spending most of their time reaching out to employers, communicating with them about their needs, and helping meet those needs. Unlike job placement staff and job developers, they spent relatively little time—if any—working with participants, but they did communicate with the placement-focused staff about these needs. Grant and partner administrators from four partnerships stated that having staff who focused on serving employers was critical to their partnerships' successes. One of these organizations, a workforce development entity, used the grant to hire a business services coordinator, the first position the grantee ever had with a sole focus on employers. The grant administrator indicated that the importance and effectiveness of that role convinced the organization that the position needed to continue after the end of the grant.
- **Instructors.** Training program instructors from seven of the 18 partnerships helped engage with employers. Respondents indicated that training instructors forged partnerships with employers based on prior relationships developed when they worked in a related industry prior to becoming an instructor.

Respondents across 13 partnerships involved in site visits shared two common approaches for persuading potential employer partners to agree to use their services or participate in the partnership:

- **Listening carefully to employer needs and determining how to best meet those needs.** Rather than offering employers a list of available partnership or business services, interview respondents from 13 partnerships emphasized active listening and customization of support. As one staff member from a workforce partner stated, “I didn’t go in there [with a company] talking about the [America’s Promise] project and seeing if they have some way to use it...I ask, ‘Where’s your problem?’...and then I go back and see what’s in my toolkit [to help] and the [America’s Promise] project is a big tool.”
- **Assisting employers with immediate needs to engender trust and open the door for other services.** One partnership respondent noted that if they find out what an employer really wants—such as incumbent worker training—and help meet that need, the employer will begin to trust them and will ask for help with other challenges, like recruiting new employees. They stated, “Opening that door is sometimes the biggest feat, just starting the relationship...The next thing you know, they ask for help in recruiting, in developing a training program to bring new people in.”

Reported challenges related to recruiting employer partners

During site visits, respondents from a subset of partnerships mentioned two particular challenges related to recruiting employer partners:

1. **Lack of sufficient resources or staffing to carry out employer outreach.** At three of the 18 partnerships, at least one respondent asserted that their partnerships had struggled to develop employer connections because either the grant budget included too few resources to support salaries for employer outreach staff or a key partner was not engaged enough. Respondents from two of these

partnerships shared their opinion that they should have spent less on training and more on employer outreach. Respondents from the third partnership indicated that the economic development partner needed to be more involved in engaging with the region’s large businesses—the partnership’s key target for incumbent worker training—for the partnership efforts to be more successful.

- 2. Challenges engaging smaller employers in work-based learning.** Grant administrators from three partnerships indicated difficulty developing partnerships with smaller employers or employers with less than 50 employees, especially when developing work-based learning such as apprenticeships or incumbent worker training. These respondents said that smaller employers often lacked human resource departments, and so did not have the capacity to handle the paperwork or the meetings needed to set up work-based learning arrangements.

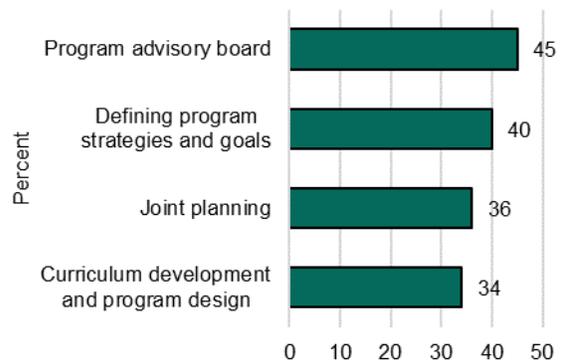
How did regional partnerships integrate employers into their work?

Regional partnerships integrated employers into their efforts via one or more key roles. These included serving as advisors, providing work-based learning opportunities and other services for participants, and providing job placement opportunities.

Employers serving as advisors

Regional partnerships sought advice from employers about planning and implementing training programs through individual discussions, meetings of existing groups that included employers, groups organized specifically for the America’s Promise partnership, and surveys. While not all employer partners served in advisory roles, the grantee survey suggests that nearly half (45 percent) of employers, on average across grantees, participated in existing or newly developed advisory boards to support grant planning and oversight; 40 percent of employers helped define strategies and goals; 36 percent conducted joint planning; and 34 percent supported curriculum development and program design (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5. Average percentage of employers actively participating in the partnership, as reported by grantees



Source: Grantee survey with all 23 America’s Promise partnerships.

Partnerships perceived employer input as critical to the success of training programs. Respondents of multiple types across all 18 partnerships identified employer advice on grant-related activities as key to designing successful, demand-focused training programs that led to positive employment outcomes for participants. For example, when placement outcomes for one newly developed training program were lower than expected, employer input helped the partnership to understand the reasons for those outcomes and how to restructure the program to improve them. The employer partners explained that demand for that specific occupation was limited because it was needed by only a small subset of employers and suggested that the program shift its focus to a different, related occupation that was in demand by a much larger group of employers.

Grant administrators from 14 partnerships reported that employers most often provided input on the development of training programs and on the occupations and skills that were in demand in their sectors.

This input was provided during grant planning, not only before and immediately after the grant was awarded, but also through the course of grant implementation. For example, one grant administrator of an IT-focused partnership reported that employer input on the need for upskilling of mid-level talent resulted in the addition of new short-term trainings. An administrator from another partnership explained how employer partners helped develop the grant's incumbent worker strategy. In particular, although employers reported that clinical occupations such as surgical technicians were in high demand, they helped the partnership to determine that the training for such positions was too long to be feasible for the incumbent workers (such as hospital janitors) who were the focus of the grant. Instead, the employers provided input into the partnership's decision to focus on training for patient access roles, such as front desk receptionists.

During virtual site visits, interview respondents provided additional detail on how partnerships engaged with employers for advice and guidance. They included the following:

- **Meetings with preexisting groups that represented or included employers.** Administrators from 12 of the 18 partnerships reported that they obtained input from employers via monthly or quarterly meetings of preexisting sector-focused groups (eight partnerships), industry associations or chambers of commerce (five partnerships), and workforce development boards (three partnerships). For example, Central Iowa HealthWorks obtained input from employers via a preexisting health care partnership group that was founded in 2011 and included both employers and community-based organizations.
- **Advisory groups created to support America's Promise grant activities.** Seven of the 18 partnerships developed advisory boards or committees that included employers for the specific purpose of providing advice and oversight of the regional partnerships funded by the America's Promise grants. For example, the City University of New York (CUNY) TechWorks partnership developed an advisory board specifically for TechWorks to provide high-level oversight to the partnership's activities across the entire CUNY system. These boards or committees typically met quarterly, although one committee met as often as weekly during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that all partners (including employers) were informed about what was happening.
- **Employer surveys.** Two grant partnerships reported that their local workforce development board partner conducted a survey of regional employers as part of their broad employer outreach strategy beyond America's Promise. The grant manager from one of these partnerships stated that findings from the employer survey helped her partnership to better understand how participants could best position themselves for employment and whether it needed to adapt the grant-funded services.

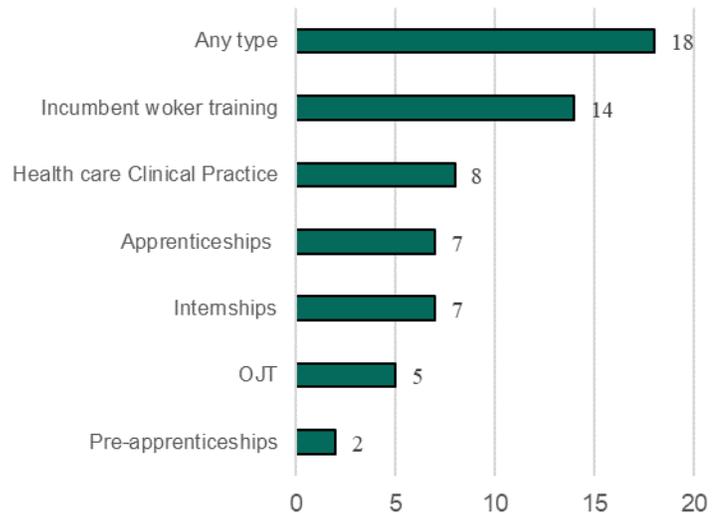
Despite this range of strategies, not all partnership efforts to collect useful input from employers were reported as successful. At least two regional partnerships reported that one or more of their employer partners either did not provide input on training program development as originally promised or provided input that later changed or appeared inaccurate. For example, an educational administrator from one partnership reported how—despite the commitment by high-level managers to assist in developing a new training program—a company later indicated it could not share critical information due to the proprietary nature of its processes and potential harm to the company's ability to compete in the sector. Another partnership developed a training program based on information shared by senior managers from multiple employer partners about strong demand for workers trained in entry-level packaging. However, once the partnership had developed the training early in the grant, they found that most of those companies were using temporary workers supplied by staffing agencies, and thus would not directly hire participants who completed the training for permanent positions. Grant administrators and respondents from one of the partnership's chamber of commerce partners attributed this challenge to a disconnect between the senior

company managers’ advice and the human resource departments’ plans to outsource hiring to staffing agencies.

Employer involvement in work-based learning and other services

Employers played another important role in regional partnerships by providing work-based learning opportunities. All partnerships participating in virtual visits reported that one or more employers hosted participants in different types of work-based learning opportunities (see Exhibit 6). Respondents across all 18 partnerships indicated the importance of these opportunities for helping participants find employment. For example, one grant administrator for an IT-focused partnership asserted that 75 percent of participants found employment as a result of a work-based learning placement. Another grant administrator at a different partnership indicated that it was easier

Exhibit 6. Number of regional partnerships offering each type of work-based learning



Source: Virtual site visits with 18 America’s Promise Partnerships

for health care trainees to find employment because clinical health care training programs are required by accreditation and licensing bodies to include work-based learning as part of their curriculum.

Most regional partnerships (14 of the 18 that participated in virtual site visits) offered training for incumbent workers (workers currently working for an employer partner), although training programs were generally small with relatively few participants⁷. Examples of incumbent worker training efforts funded by America’s Promise grants included:

- Training (primarily provided online) for hospital janitorial and food service workers to help them move into non-clinical, patient-facing occupations in their hospitals.
- Industrial maintenance and welding training for low-skilled railroad workers.
- Training for aerospace manufacturing workers that allowed them to earn college credits while being trained on site at a company facility on advanced manufacturing techniques.
- Organizational leadership and supervision training for entry-level supervisors for an equipment manufacturer.
- Short-term, intensive trainings for IT workers leading to certification on specific IT topics, such as Scrum Master and Scrum Product Owner.

⁷ Note that DOL limited the percentage of grant participants who could be incumbent workers to no more than 25 percent of the total participants served (DOL, 2016).

Respondents from these partnerships highlighted three motivations for incumbent worker training:

1. **High demand by employers.** Staff from five partnerships who engaged with employers reported that incumbent worker training was in high demand. For example, one partnership manager who worked primarily with health care and manufacturing companies reported regularly using incumbent worker training to entice employers to engage with the partnership since it addressed their immediate needs. In another example, health care employers who engaged with another partnership were so driven to develop this type of training that they enabled the partnership to locate grant-funded case managers on site at their workplaces (see Exhibit 7).
2. **Income for workers while training.** Partnerships also viewed incumbent worker training as a good option for low-wage workers since it allowed individuals to access upskilling training while continuing to work and earn income to support themselves and their families. As one program administrator stated, “It is really cool for incumbent workers to... [have this] training because they all work 40 hours a week, a lot have families... [this is] a definite success.”
3. **Ease of monitoring.** A grant administrator from another partnership noted that incumbent worker training under America’s Promise was popular because it was easier to monitor than an OJT educational model (where the employer agrees to hire an individual as a new employee and train them via work-based learning) as there was less need for ongoing monitoring visits or proof of skills gains; this was measured by simple metrics such as a promotion and pay raise after training completion.

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Exhibit 7. Supporting employers through incumbent worker training

Work Systems, Inc. reported specifically looking for employer partners who were “willing to play a real role in the grant and participate meaningfully in incumbent worker training programs.” Their team then placed case managers funded by the America’s Promise grant on site at employer locations where incumbent worker trainings were offered to provide more convenient support for trainees.

Source: Virtual site visits ▲

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However, respondents from five partnerships discussed challenges they faced during implementation of incumbent worker training. Respondents from three partnerships noted that they faced challenges in reporting incumbent worker training to DOL. Specifically, one grant administrator discussed the complexity of reporting related to incumbent worker training; another stated that employers were often resistant to providing the information required for such reporting; and grant administrators from a third partnership stated that they had been unable to provide as much incumbent worker training as planned because they ended up collaborating mostly with smaller companies that often lacked the administrative capacity to handle reporting requirements. Beyond reporting challenges, one grant administrator indicated that his partnership had difficulty providing incumbent worker training because of its emphasis on low-wage and low-skilled workers that did not align with employers’ desires to train their higher-skilled workers. Finally, one regional partnership administrator stated that many employers balked at the expectation that their workers should get a pay increase after completion of incumbent worker training, which was one of the suggested outcomes in the America’s Promise Funding Opportunity Announcement from DOL incumbent workers.⁸

⁸“Applicants proposing incumbent worker training will also need to demonstrate strategies for how they will:

- Collaborate with employers and/or training providers in identifying skill advancement strategies; and
- Set goals for each incumbent worker training participant for achieving outcomes such as credential attainment, skills gains, job retention, career advancement, and wage gains.” (DOL, 2016)

Health care “clinical practice” (often shortened to “clinical”) was the second-most common type of work-based learning opportunity (after incumbent worker training) and was offered by eight of the nine partnerships visited that were focused on the health care industry. Because clinical practice is required for most clinical occupations—such as certified nursing assistant (CNA)—by state licensing and accreditation bodies, this type of work-based learning was provided to all participants within those programs. Clinical practice often lasted between 75 and 100 hours. Partnerships reported that clinicals were relatively easy to set up because most large health care employers have long provided such placements. However, unlike most other types of work-based learning, clinical practice placements were often unpaid, unless the training was being provided as part of an apprenticeship or for incumbent workers, as it was by four partnerships. Indeed, according to a recent report (California Department of Consumer Affairs 2020), some accreditation bodies even prohibit paying wages to students completing required clinical training hours.

Seven of the 18 partnerships offered registered apprenticeship programs and two had pre-apprenticeship programs. As required by DOL or the state apprenticeship agencies that certify them as registered, these apprenticeships included both paid on-the-job learning (usually in the form of wages paid by the employer) and classroom learning, and they led to a nationally recognized credential (usually “journeyman” status). Health care-focused partnerships more commonly reported offering apprenticeships (four partnerships), followed by two manufacturing-focused partnerships and one IT-focused partnership. The paid work-based learning provided as part of apprenticeship programs typically lasted for a year or more, and thus allowed for much more skill development than other types of work-based learning. Examples of the apprenticeships offered by regional partnerships included:

- A customized IT apprenticeship that took approximately a year and a half to complete and led to apprentices being able to move into middle-skilled IT positions.
- A health care apprenticeship sponsored by a county hospital that provided apprentices with training on hospital work culture and career paths plus basic and advanced CNA training.
- A competency-based machining apprenticeship sponsored by a large, advanced manufacturing employer.

Partnership administrators from all seven of these partnerships noted that because of federal or state registration requirements, the length of apprenticeships, and the fact that apprentices are typically hired by an employer before starting their training, the process of setting up apprenticeships was lengthy and complex. For example, administrators from one manufacturing-focused partnership reported that it took two and a half years to develop its registered apprenticeship program, which was a heavy burden not just on staff who were paid out of grant funds, but also on employer staff involved in the program’s development.

Further, only small numbers of participants were served, ranging from just two or three to about 10 participants per apprenticeship program.

Two partnerships (one focused on manufacturing and one on IT) also offered pre-apprenticeships that fed directly into a registered apprenticeship. In one case, a grant manager reported that the regional partnership developed an IT apprenticeship program several years after developing its three IT training “boot camps” to address the employer demand for middle-skilled talent. The partnership then configured the three boot camps to serve as pre-apprenticeships for the newly created IT apprenticeship.

Paid internships, offered by 7 of 18 partnerships, were typically available to small numbers of participants in advanced manufacturing and IT programs. Internships—unlike both clinical work experience and the work-based component of apprenticeships—typically were not a required component

of a training program. Rather they were an “add-on” that allowed participants to apply the skills they had studied in their training programs in a workplace while earning income. Respondents reported that these internships lasted from just a few weeks to a full year.

OJT was less common, offered by 5 of 18 partnerships, most commonly those that focused on advanced manufacturing (four). Employers hired participants for OJT, with 50 to 90 percent of participants’ wages subsidized by the partnership. The length of OJT ranged from as short as four weeks to as long as six months. As part of OJT provided by one partnership, participants were able to earn industry-recognized credentials, while another provided OJT participants with college credits for their training.

Beyond work-based learning, employers played other roles in service provision as indicated in Exhibit 8.

Employers as hiring partners

Respondents across all partnerships indicated that engaging with employers as hiring partners was critical to help participants achieve successful labor market outcomes and begin or progress in career paths in middle- to high-skilled industries and occupations. According to the grantee survey, an average of 69 percent of employer partners across the 23 grants gave hiring preference to participants who completed training. Importantly, not all employers that hired participants were active partners in America’s Promise. Respondents discussed efforts to engage businesses as hiring partners whether or not they were actively engaged in the regional partnership. These efforts included reaching out to employers about whether they had open positions; sharing participant resumes with employers; and setting up hiring events and job fairs, including virtual fairs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Job development and business services staff engaged employers about individual job placements for participants. All 18 partnerships that received site visits reported engaging with employers to assist individual participants with finding employment. This type of engagement was typically quite limited in scope and often entailed communication solely via a brief email or phone call regarding the specific participant being placed or a specific job opening.

Regional partnerships focused on health care and advanced manufacturing also often developed one or more employer hiring partnerships where the employer interviewed multiple participants for positions. Twelve of the 14 partnerships that targeted advanced manufacturing, health care, or both reported that they were able to develop one or more arrangements for “large-scale” placements in which an employer would agree to interview and possibly hire multiple participants in a single hiring cycle. Indeed, in two partnerships, grant administrators reported having to mediate disagreements among

Exhibit 8. Employer involvement in other types of services beyond work-based learning

1. Helping select training participants (13)
2. Providing a location for classroom training (4)
3. Providing equipment such as goggles and gloves (4)
4. Serving as instructors or guest speakers (4)
5. Covering some of classroom training costs (3)
6. Conducting mock interviews (3)
7. Offering projects for classroom training (2)
8. Providing tours of worksites (2)

Source: Virtual site visits to 18 partnerships. ▲

America’s Promise “was the poster child for what workforce should support...[because] it allows us to address employers’ critical hiring needs.”

– Grant program manager

employer partners when one or more employers perceived that other employer partners had hired more than their fair share of program graduates. In contrast, respondents from one IT partnership asserted that their partnership had been unable to establish any large-scale placement partnerships because most employers in their sector were small start-up companies.

Large-scale placement partnerships involved more up-front investment, but then usually made placement easier. According to various respondents from six regional partnerships, large-scale placement relationships typically required one or more meetings with employers. Once established, however, these respondents reported that such partnerships generally made it easier for staff to assist participants in finding jobs and required the partnerships to work with fewer employers overall. However, two other partnerships that had initially set up large-scale placement partnerships reported that those partnerships had not worked out as planned. In one case, an employer had short application windows that created challenges, and in another, the partnership found it too difficult to work with the employer on hiring. In the latter case, partnership staff had to engage with other, smaller employers to find placements. Three partnerships further reported that the number of participants that large-scale placement employers could hire fluctuated due to the economy or the employer's own circumstances. As a result, partnerships reported needing to engage with employers for placement-related purposes on an ongoing basis.

Three partnerships that focused on narrow industry subsectors reported challenges identifying hiring partners. These partnerships perceived that their training programs were too narrowly focused on small subsectors of a broader industry, such as advanced manufacturing. In one of these partnerships, training graduates were reported to “flood” the market for positions in those narrow sectors and thus had great difficulty finding employment. In another partnership, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic created a major downturn in the specific subsector of manufacturing that the partnership had focused on, again resulting in poor placement outcomes. To remedy this challenge, the partnership's grant administrators had to “expand the concept of [their industry focus], identifying what within [the broader] industry were the additional sectors” that needed the skills for which their participants had trained.

Lessons learned about employer engagement

Importance of devoting sufficient time and resources to employer outreach to successfully recruit enough employer partners for participant success. Respondents from three partnerships (two grant administrators and the director of a chamber of commerce) reported that their partnerships struggled to develop sufficient employer connections for work-based learning opportunities and placements for participant success. They stated that these challenges stemmed from insufficient staff time or resources allocated to engaging with employers. All three partnerships also indicated that they wanted an industry association partner or economic development partner to be more engaged in reaching out to employers.

Use of incumbent worker training as an effective way to engage with employers. More than three-quarters of the regional partnerships visited (14) were able to establish one or more incumbent worker training partnerships with employers using America's Promise grant funds. This proportion is much higher than has been achieved by local workforce development boards (WDBs) and their adult program service providers using Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I funding (Dunham 2015; Dunham et al. 2020). In addition to employer demand for such assistance (which was also reported to be strong by multiple local WDB and WIOA adult program respondents in Dunham et al. 2020), respondents asserted that the reason for their success was due to the relative administrative ease that partnerships experienced in setting up incumbent worker training compared to other work-based learning.

Ease of engaging small businesses in internships and OJT as opposed to other types of work-based learning. Respondents from four regional partnerships noted that it was difficult to set up apprenticeships and incumbent worker partnerships with small employers. However, these same four partnerships did report success in developing OJT contracts and internships with such employers.

Need to engage with potential new employer partners throughout the grant. Administrators from eight grant partnerships reported that one or more of the employers that had committed to supporting their partnerships at the outset of the grant had dropped out of the partnership by the time of the virtual site visits. While employer partners in two of these cases stopped participating because the partnerships shifted their industry focus, four of the other grant partnerships indicated that employers did not follow through at least partly because only some of their key internal stakeholders had actually committed to the partnership. As a result, partnerships reported that it was important to continue reaching out to potential new employer partners on an ongoing basis throughout a grant's life cycle.

Review of the employer pool in the region when selecting industry or sector focus. As mentioned earlier, three partnerships reported that a narrow industry focus created significant challenges for placing participants in employment upon training completion. Respondents from these partnerships indicated the importance of considering the number and size of employers in the target industry when developing training to ensure that participants are learning skills that will be needed in the workforce, even with changing economic conditions, and that sufficient employers are available in the region to serve as hiring partners.

Importance of both small- and large-scale hiring partnerships with employers. Although 12 partnerships developed large-scale hiring partnerships, participant placements did not always materialize as anticipated, and the hiring needs of large-scale employer partners sometimes fluctuated due to the economy. As a result, these partnerships also sought to work with employers that could hire just one or two of their participants on an ongoing basis to round out their participant placement strategy.

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