

Contact Tracers Program National Dislocated Worker Grant



Background

On March 13, 2020, the president declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national emergency. That same day, with confirmed cases of COVID-19 in multiple Texas counties, Governor Greg Abbott declared a state of disaster for Texas.

The pandemic forced many “nonessential” businesses and services to close and lay off workers or reduce workers’ hours. In the first week following the national and state emergency declarations, 3.3 million Americans filed unemployment insurance claims. The number of claims filed in Texas increased more than 12-fold, from an average of 13,000 a week to more than 158,000 a week. In less than a month, more than a million Texans filed unemployment insurance claims, far exceeding the 750,000 total claims filed in 2019.

Workforce Solutions Borderplex (WSB) responded quickly by applying for a Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) grant to assist the residents of our community who had been displaced from their jobs. The National Dislocated Worker Grant (NDWG) was geared towards combating the spread of the disease and contact tracing became the state’s primary resolution to help end the pandemic. WSB’s Contact Tracing Program allowed a group of El Pasoans to find temporary work from the safety of their homes during this daunting period in history.

The COVID-19 pandemic came full force and changed the infrastructure of the workforce we had come to know. It created many challenges and force many of us to quickly adapt, including the way we served our customers.

Challenges



The Contact Tracers Program faced the following challenges:

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the local economy as it forced workers who were capable of working, to file for UI benefits. The occupations affected the most were Sales & Related, Food Preparation & Serving Related, and Production. Research has found that higher-paid employees are more likely to have the option to work from home. Hispanics, which is El Paso’s predominant ethnicity, are less likely to be able to work remotely. Initially, the pandemic created challenges for El Pasonan’s to transition to working remotely.



Challenges with the contracted employer of record arose as they were not familiar with working with workforce programs and the eligibility determination requirements that come with such programs. The priority populations we serve are English language learners and the military populations which are 70% and 8.2% of our population. Assessments for these special populations and their needs were done after placement. However, WSB was able to address the needs of each client and with our partner.

In February 2021, Texas faced an extreme winter storm resulting in disruption to its electrical power grid and roadways as it was not built for such extreme weather. Thankfully, El Paso’s power supply was the least impacted county. However, the result of the storm caused deliveries to be delayed impacting the support services for our customers. Support services impacted were work-related expenses such as computers, headsets, and printers. Although this resulted in delays in participant start dates, participants were able to participate in the contact tracer program successfully.



WSB has served the El Paso community for over 20 years. The COVID-19 pandemic brought the challenge of transitioning our services from a primarily brick-and-mortar setting, with our two main offices in Northeast and North Loop, to serving clients remotely. Our center operator faced the challenge of providing all workforce services virtually. However, the Contact Tracer Program, proved WSB was able to successfully adapt to the changing global business environment.

Solutions

Our Business Services contractor assisted by scrubbing the UI claimants list and referred to the project’s employer of record for eligibility. This created a warm handoff between partners.



Career Navigators expanded their knowledge and capacity on the National Dislocated Worker Grants as they were crossed trained for back up support.



Participants reported how thankful they were for the opportunity to be in the program during a time of job uncertainty and global pandemic.



TWC allowed for support service flexibility by allowing for the purchase of laptops and office equipment to assist participants with remote work.



Provided our customers the opportunity for to work remotely which is a service we had never coordinated before.



Assisted the state by combating the spread of the virus by tracking COVID cases which ultimately helped direct resources that eventually lead to vaccinations.



Lessons Learned



The Department of Labor provided technical assistance which proved to be very beneficial as it helped us improve and clarify the expectations regarding monitoring site visits. The site visits are needed to be done on a monthly basis, which was learned through the course of the TA. Thereafter, site visits were performed in accordance with the guidance, and a handoff was made to the contractor. The lesson learned was to ensure contract stipulations are understood.



During SRMs annual monitoring review performed in February 2021, an area of concern was noted due the employer of record’s supporting documentation for participant’s hours worked. The supporting documentation is necessary for data validation purposes and proof of Board fiscal disbursements. TWC Contracts TA and assistance were very important to ensure all necessary documentation was compliant and provided us was many lessons learned for the NDW grant.



Participant assessments are key indicators of a participant’s successful completion of a workforce service. During the handoff, the employer of record interviewed and concluded if the participant was an optimal candidate for the contact tracer position. In this case, the center operator assessment was bypassed until after they were chosen for the position. The lesson learned in this situation was that the center operator’s assessment should have come first or performed concurrently to properly assess if the client is a fit for the position.

Successful Outcomes

Although the Contact Tracer Program faced challenges and many lessons were learned through the duration of the program, the program has many notable achievements to be celebrated.



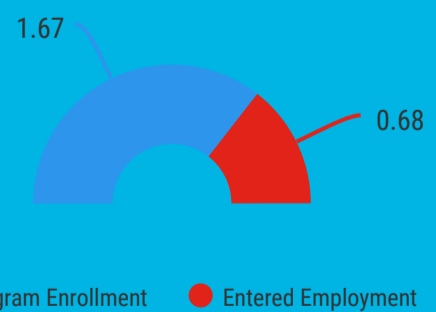
Program Enrollment - Our targeted enrollment was 15 contact tracers. Our records indicate we were able to make 25 participants eligible for the program exceeding program enrollment by 167%.



Entered Employment - The purpose of this program was to provide our clients with temporary employment during the pandemic and to eventually transition our clients to permanent employment. Our records indicate that 68% of the contact tracer participants have found employment when exited.



In addition, this program provided good wages and experience for our participants to continue with unsubsidized remote work. In the end, this program provided a critical need (contact tracing) and the participant learned valuable skills that allowed to find or expand employment opportunities at self-sufficiency wages.



Recommendations for Similar Grants



The success of this project has proven that WSB can remain agile and meet our work needs. If NDW or similar grants are needed in the future, this model can be adopted and provide useful information to properly manage the project.

This project’s model provided the following:



- It showcased the allocation and allowability of support services for remote work;
- It provided a roadmap on how to offer remote work-based learning assignments; and
- It helped us learn how to work with employers and how to prepare our participants to meet their needs and expectations.