CARES Workforce Development

Introduction and Program Description

Workforce Solutions (WFS) received $15 million, or 16% of the total direct allocation of federal funds through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. WFS developed a series of Emergency Purchasing Informal Quotes (EPIQs) to solicit requests from community agencies.

Agencies were asked to provide resources for programs targeting employment services for most severely COVID-19 impacted communities with the CARES allocations. The purpose of these contract opportunities was to address and help mitigate the economic and workforce gaps of Ramsey County residents most impacted. CARES strategies and target populations included the following:

- **Learn, Earn, Lead -** Partnering with community youth (ages 14-19) employment providers to pivot programming that would fill existing service gaps for at-risk youth.
- **Young Adult Transition Program -** Providing culturally-specific quality summer or fall employment and early career transition services to young adults (ages 18-24).
- **Generation Future: Youth Life Skills -** Providing services and training to youth (ages 16-19) in areas of workforce development, learning and life skills. Career exploration and pathways.
- **Community CARES Employment Services -** Providing employment and career services targeting specific populations impacted by COVID-19.
- **Virtualization of Training -** Transformation of current workforce skill-building curriculum to digital platforms and providing virtual training opportunities to COVID-19 impacted residents.
- **Community Innovation and Inclusion Fund -** Organizations where the mission is rooted in the culture(s) and identity(ies) of BIPOC communities most impacted by COVID-19.
- **TechPaks -** Brought computers, internet and digital literacy training to residents who have experienced economic impacts due to COVID-19.

Goals
1. Ensure access, in person and virtual, for residents to connect with employment resources.
2. Work toward closing some of the tech gap for residents who lack technology and digital literacy.
3. Invest in community-based organizations including supporting the pivoting of more training opportunities online with a focus on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) organizations.
4. Provide gap services for youth/young adults in partnership with community stakeholders

Research Questions
1. Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of CARES workforce Development programming?
2. Did the project achieve the outcomes the community was seeking?
3. How can Ramsey County better attract, retain, and support community partners with county contracts?

The full report can be found at the CARES Evaluation web page. More information about TechPaks can be found at the TechPak web page.

What We Learned

Are Ramsey County Residents Better Off Due to Workforce CARES Programs?
Overall, Ramsey County residents engaging in the CARES Act Workforce Development funded programming are better off. More than 6,000 residents engaged in more than 13,000 services. Most notably two groups experiencing the most severe job losses during the pandemic, young adults and BIPOC residents, accounted for nearly 60% and nearly 90% of the residents served.

Nearly 300 CARES participants are known to have secured employment. An additional nearly 300 participants increased the number of hours worked or wages paid while actively engaging with CARES Workforce Development services.

A survey of more than 500 program participants found that about 84% felt the services they received matched their employment-related needs. Summaries of the reflective listening sessions with CARES community partners also included numerous accounts of residents improving their employment, health, education, housing, and overall well-being.

Many unmet needs do remain. About 35% of survey respondents reported support services as an unmet need, which are defined as housing, food assistance, cash assistance, childcare, clothing and transportation. An additional 27% reported education, 18% reported job search assistance and 15% reported technology as unmet needs at the time of the survey.

Did the Projects Achieve the Outcomes the Community Was Seeking?
Most of the CARES Workforce Development funding was invested directly to community-based organizations and focused on the needs expressed in the Town Hall meetings and from existing community networks. Workforce Solutions also supported additional career labs to ensure broader availability of workforce services would be available throughout 2020 as most traditional career labs were closed to the public.

Both qualitative and quantitative data collected illustrated that Ramsey County did what the community was asking for. The technology supports assisted in providing a holistic approach to employment, food, and shelter, particularly with the responses of the TechPak recipients, many of whom indicated that their abilities to access employment, food, education, shelter and medical care were enhanced.

How Can Ramsey County Better Attract, Retain, and support Community Partners through Contracts?
CARES partners describe challenges with establishing appropriate accounting and reporting processes to provide the information the county requires. Partners felt that a team similar to the Back Office Team that provided contract management and administrative support for some CARES projects should be maintained to provide liaison and technical assistance to current and prospective community partners so that entry into working with the county is streamlined.

Community partners would like the county to take a stronger leadership role in gathering community partners, so the partners are better positioned to work together. These regular sessions could also include technical assistance and trainings to prepare community organizations to better partner with the county. This request is more urgent during an emergency response as many partners feel the need in the community is much greater than any organization alone can support. This is the one area where the community partners universally felt the county missed an opportunity early in the pandemic to enhance the CARES services.

Recommendations

Short-term recommendations

- **Opportunities for collaboration and networking** with other agencies doing similar work.
- **Convene community partners in a pre-program launch.** Partners believe community would be better served with a more coordinated approach across all services.
- **Develop cohorts that include technical assistance**. Partners feel they are better served when they are involved in the development of cohorts.
- **Simplify the reporting and monitoring requirements** and be clear about all requirements prior to launching.
- **Develop and deliver more holistic, family-focused approaches to providing assistance.** This recommendation broadens the scope of what workforce development services traditionally offer but aligns with how community organizations deliver services.
- **Focus more resources on improving Tech Equity**. The pandemic further amplified the need for tech literacy, access to technology, reliable internet and overall tech equity.
- **Video/digital community engagement** particularly around solicitation of feedback, service delivery, input and training opened opportunities for community partners to engage with the county and with program participants more efficiently and more frequently.
- **Housing stability** has to come before employment stability.

Recommendations for ongoing improvement

- **Earlier engagement with community-based organizations** so as to be involved earlier on in the planning processes.
- **Ability to collaborate with others** was expressed as a need, particularly for smaller community-based organizations.
- **Allowing more flexibility in the existing programming** to allow for culturally-specific, and ethnically appropriate programming is desperately needed.
- **Have less onerous process monitoring and reporting requirements** for contract awardees and focus more on outcome measures.
- **Consider creating and maintaining a county resource team** dedicated to developing community resources.