Overcoming the Challenges of Reentry through Grantee Collaboration

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Much of what is learned at new grantee orientations and training conferences happens <u>outside</u> the meeting rooms. The one-on-one conversations that take place during coffee breaks, lunch, and dinner offer wonderful opportunities to share practices and approaches that are being used to solve common challenges. In fact, these informal channels of communication are often cited by conference participants as some of the best aspects of these gatherings. Recognizing the value of these channels of communication, a group of LEAP (Linking Employment Activities Pre-Release) grantees created a multistate, regional coalition to continue these conversations and share best practices with each other. Based in the Pacific Northwest, this informal coalition gathered on two occasions this year to share what they have learned. This bulletin describes how this coalition started, who was engaged in the effort, and some of the lessons learned from their meetings. It looks at methods for promoting collaborations at a distance that are available at no cost.

Training conferences offer participants many opportunities for informal conversations that can identify solutions to common challenges. This bulletin examines how a group of grantees from the Pacific Northwest continued those conversations by forming an informal coalition. It describes how they organized, what they shared with each other, and the takeaways from their gatherings. The bulletin also provides information about several no-cost tools that can be used to facilitate coalition building when face-to-face meetings are not possible.

Online Event Served as a Catalyst for Regional Collaboration

In December 2016, the U.S. Department of Labor sponsored a virtual new grantee orientation that allowed grantees to introduce themselves and describe their projects. The online event also provided a wide variety of workshops designed to help grantees meet the objectives of the projects. Following the event, Jan Filgas, Adult and Dislocated Worker Program Manager of Clackamas Workforce Partnership, a LEAP grantee based in Oregon City, OR, thought it would be beneficial to continue online the dialogue that took place among grantees. She noted that many of her colleagues faced similar challenges, and she had no doubt they could continue to learn from each other. Clackamas and two other LEAP grantees, the Southwest Washington Workforce Development Council in Vancouver, WA, and WorkSystems (Portland Metro Region, OR), were part of a broader, multi-state regional collaborative--the Columbia-Willamette Workforce Collaborative--which was formed to better serve the human resource needs of local businesses through a unified approach. Building on that collaborative effort,

Filgas reached out to the Lane Workforce Partnership in Eugene, Oregon, another workforce development organization that had been recently awarded the LEAP grant. Lane and Southwest Washington were in the implementation phase of their projects. These preliminary conversations led to the scheduling of a meeting which took place in July 2017 at Clackamas Community College in Oregon City.

Sharing Solutions for Common Problems

Filgas reported 25 representatives from four projects attended the July meeting, including partners from corrections and parole agencies. The agenda included a presentation from each grantee and the opportunity to share challenges, solutions and resources. Filgas noted one shared challenge was getting participants fully engaged in post-release services. She learned that the Lane Workforce Partnership offered participants polo shirts (versatile enough to be worn for a job interview) and backpacks as incentives for post-release participation. This served as a catalyst for her organization to do likewise with some success. Filgas noted "small ideas like that can make a big difference." She also learned that WorkSystems was bringing employers into the facility--a practice others were interested in pursuing.

Other grantees participating in the meeting reported they were served well by the knowledge shared. Noel Woods of the Southwest Washington Workforce Development Council said discussions around program sustainability were particularly useful, and she valued hearing what others were doing to sustain the benefits of their project at the end of their grant period. Anna Lookingbill of the Southwest Washington Workforce Development Council said the meeting reinforced "how critical it is to have programs in correctional settings operate as partnerships." For her, this meant fully engaging correctional staff to ensure their project meets security needs as well as the needs of program participants. Attendees noted that the conversations were "robust" and took place in an atmosphere of mutual trust. One said, "it was refreshing to see that others are as invested in serving offenders and hopeful of their success as I am." Sue Thompson of the Lane Workforce Partnership reported that hearing from others who were at different points in the life of their grant provided insights into how to move forward with her initiative.

Follow-up Meeting

One takeaway from the gathering that was endorsed by all participants was "one meeting was not enough." A second session was held at Clackamas Community College on November 14, 2017 giving grantees an opportunity to provide program updates and share what is working along with solutions to challenges and resources. The session covered many topics of mutual interest including challenges related to enrollment, securing documentation needed to obtain employment, certifications, and post-release services. "All of us have slightly different programs," Filgas noted, "yet we were able to offer solutions to common issues we all had." Interest in maintaining the collaboration remains high, and a third meeting is scheduled for February 13, 2018. The focus of that meeting will be program sustainability.

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Jan Filgas

Tools for Collaboration

Because distances between grantee programs--even those located in the same region--may preclude face-to-face meetings, there are many online tools that can be used to facilitate collaborations and conversations at a distance. This list provides a few of these resources, all available at no cost.

FreeConferenceCall.com (https://www.freeconferencecall.com/) – Services include conference calling for a maximum of 1,000 callers, online meetings that make it possible to show video and share computer screens, documents, web links or presentations, and video conferencing for up to five simultaneous video screens. Audio, screen-sharing and video conferencing can be recorded, making it possible to play back, download, and share calls.

Google Docs – An online service that allows you to share a document, spreadsheet or presentation. It's a great collaborative tool for any written project that involves more than one person. The service allows you to see what others have changed by going to File and selecting the revision history. This will bring a sidebar that lists the times the changes were made and who made them. You can also make comments on anyone's contribution to the document by highlighting a sentence, selecting insert, then commenting and adding the text in the area provided. Google Docs is an excellent tool to use if your group wants to create a resource document. For example, if you want to create a document that features strategies for improving post-release outcomes, Google Docs will allow everyone in the group to provide a strategy or strategies they are using along with the opportunity to comment on the contributions of others.

LinkedIn Group – An invitation-only LinkedIn Group can be set up in a few minutes that allows group members to share links to online resources, newspaper articles, and other information of mutual interest. While e-mails can be used to share links of this nature, a LinkedIn Group maintains the information in one place for easy access at any time. It also provides a place for group members to comment on a resource without cluttering the e-mail in-boxes of their colleagues.