SUMMARY

In 2021, the Chief Evaluation Office (CEO) partnered with the Employment and Training Administration and commissioned the Urban Institute and its partner Capital Research Corporation to conduct the Older Workers Study. This study aims to build evidence about the implementation of the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP), and other DOL workforce programs serving older workers (defined as age 55+), to inform the continuous improvement of SCSEP.

The SCSEP is a community service and work-based job training program for older Americans. The program provides training for low-income, unemployed seniors and provides participants access to employment-based assistance through American Job Centers. Participants must be at least 55, unemployed, and have a family income of no more than 125% of the federal poverty level. SCSEP grantees include state agencies and 19 national nonprofit organizations.

This Department of Labor-funded study was a result of the annual process to determine the Department's research priorities for the upcoming year. It contributes to the labor evidence-base to inform employment and training programs and policies and addresses Departmental strategic goals and priorities.

The Older Workers Study includes (1) a review of existing knowledge and data to inform evaluation activities, (2) an implementation evaluation design, (3) an early implementation study and in-depth implementation study of programs receiving the 2020 DOL SCSEP grants, (4) an impact evaluation that identifies training strategies/interventions for a pilot intervention and rigorously evaluates the impact of the intervention on older workers' employment outcomes (primarily placement outcomes), and (5) an evaluability assessment and potential future research options for DOL to consider that would address important gaps in the evidence base related to employment services for older workers. This will include conducting feasibility assessments of different ways to evaluate and learn from the SCSEP program.

This report *From Crisis to Opportunity: A Snapshot of Strategies Adopted during the Pandemic by Senior Community Service Employment Program National Grantees* summarizes the findings from the early implementation study component of the project, and offers insights from the grantees interviewed about how the SCSEP grantees adapted and implemented strategies in response to challenges, and the strategies and practices programs might retain going forward.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The nine national Senior Community Service Employment Program grantees interviewed for this study described several challenges beginning in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the following:

- Many participants could not return to their Community Service Assignments (CSAs) because supervisors worked remotely, host-agency sites limited in-person capacity because of social distancing, or host agencies permanently closed. The return to in-person CSA training varied by service area because of local business closures and local and state health requirements.
- Grantees had limited engagement with partners, such as host agencies, employers, and American Job Centers, because of the closure of businesses and other local organizations.
- It was difficult to provide remote services to participants who lacked the technology or skills to take advantage of these services. SCSEP grantees had to find new ways to provide services to older adults looking for work that lacked digital access and skills.

Despite the multiple ongoing challenges, grantees interviewed for this study also indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic created opportunities to build capacity, adapt services, and adopt new strategies to meet the needs of program participants. Examples of new or adapted strategies described by grantees interviewed are included below:

- *Adopting new recruitment outreach, intake, and engagement activities*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees adopted new strategies for marketing the program to participants, often leveraging social media platforms and technology to target participants who might be a match for the program.
- *Promoting digital access and technology loaner programs*. Grantees interviewed for this study shared that by providing digital access to participants, they felt they were helping participants compete with younger workers by giving them the opportunity to build and practice their digital skills.
- *Providing training remotely*. Several grantee staff interviewed shared the perspective that digital skills and job-readiness trainings developed during the COVID-19 pandemic can complement a return to in-person training by providing flexibility to participants who can take advantage of remote training options.
- *Adopting new host agency and employer strategies*. Grantees reported they could not rely on existing partners for CSA placements and subsidized employment. To attract new partners, they instead relied on new strategies, and

expanded existing engagement strategies, to get prospective community-based organizations and employer partners interested in the program.

- *Implementing staffing strategies to support SCSEP participants' needs*. The COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations to make changes to infrastructure and staffing to start remote delivery. SCSEP grantees interviewed developed strategies for supporting staff experiencing stress and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic while ensuring that the organization met demands and responded to participant needs.

SEE FULL STUDY

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