Southwest Michigan Employer Resource Network – Expanded (SWERN-E)

Transcript of Webinar

YouthBuild Webinar Series

Meet the Workforce Innovation Fund Round Two Grantees: Grant Project Presentations

Wednesday, February 10, 2016
SCOTT CUBBERLY: Sure. Thank you, Linda. And again, my name is Scott Cubberly. I'm with the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, and I'm the project manager on the Southwest Michigan Employer Resource Network Expanded or otherwise known as SWMERN-E. Just like to thank the Department of Labor for providing us with this grant opportunity to do the work that we're looking at bringing to our four counties here in Michigan. And thank you to Maher & Maher for pulling this opportunity together for us as well.

So we've got a project team that consists of myself, our compliance monitor, our procurement manager, and then we have James Vander Hulst who is our ERN facilitator with West Michigan team. And he's been facilitating the Employer Resource Networks around our state for several years now and additionally has Employer Resource Networks in several other states. So we were funded as a $3 million level. We have a impact analysis project and our evaluation firm is Social Policy Research Associates and they've done a great job in working with us and preparing our evaluation.

So when we look at kind of our innovative idea and we think about how we can assist our employers in our area with retaining their current incumbent workers and providing them with a more higher skilled and more successful workforce through soft skills and technical skills training by really addressing barrier removal on the work site as well as, if possible, doing that before they get to the employer as well.

And Michigan has bounced back in the economy a little bit better than other areas in the country from the recession, and at the time that we wrote this grant, employers were still struggling to find people. But now after being awarded, we're looking at unemployment rates less than 5 percent in a four-county area, and we have two of our four counties that are actually less than 4 percent unemployment.

So when we're really talking about this shallow talent pool, the people that we're left engaging and trying to help our employers hire is very needy and has a large number of barriers that they're coming to the table with. And so how we can really embrace that workforce and assist them in really getting our companies participating, they value as a culture kind of taking care of their employees, most of them. And now, we're really trying to interface and do a great job of weaving in our workforce system into and providing them the assets that they need to be successful.

So the Southwest Michigan Employer Resource Network is a public-private partnership which is designed to support employers facing a myriad of retention issues. The SWMERN places success coaches on site with member companies to work with employees facing barriers associated with long-term unemployment or situational poverty. So our success coaches are either Department of Health and Human Services case managers or path case managers that are part of our workforce investment system.

And they go on site and they have worked with entry-level assembly individuals or even up to individuals in the accounting department or in sales that have had issues with situational poverty
as a result of divorce or taking care of a loved one and things like that. So we really crossed the gamut of individuals that we're working with and employer companies in that setting.

When we look at the main components of our program – our project, we are looking at – currently at the time that we applied for the grant, we were working with the Employer Resource Networks in two of our four counties and had 10 employers participating, and we're looking at bringing the ERN to all four of our counties that we serve and ratcheting that out from 10 to 35 employers involved.

We want to be able to provide training opportunities to individuals that will lead to positions at our ERN companies. We want to improve the retention rates for companies participating in our ERN, and as a result of that we also want to improve the retention rates for individuals receiving training and placed at our companies and then provide ERN companies with assistance in filling open positions.

The partnerships that we have developed with our Employer Resource Network is we're working with our local community colleges. Again, the Department of Health and Human Services is a significant partner. Our local employers, which we refer to as community business partners, a West Michigan team who facilitates the ERN for us, our Michigan Works Southwest, which is our workforce board.

We work with all the local economic developers at the city level and the regional level as well, and community organizations such as credit unions, childcare providers, the early childhood education system, transportation, housing providers, and such. So we really want to engage the community because we know that there’s going to be a ripple effect in our communities by being able to retain people at companies, keep them employed, keep them off of receiving assistance and utilizing – we want to leverage all community resources possible to get individuals to be self-sufficient and improve the retention in hopes that in later years they will not be a drain on the community.

So when we look at our list of outcomes, again, I'd identified increase in the counties that we're serving and the number of ERN companies participating in our network. So at the time we had a retention rate of 98 percent for those employees that have contact with a success coach, and our target is that 89 percent for the life of the grant.

Our employers will also receive assistance in developing career ladders. We want to make sure that the people that we train are going into the companies that we're working with and having an opportunity and understanding the value of their training. And coming in prepared will result in an opportunity for a career at the company and not just a kind of a stop here temporarily, but they're really looking at ways of becoming valuable members of that company over the long term.

We want to work with our employers in filling 33 percent of their open positions with a target of 355 over the course of our three years. That of the individuals that receive soft skills training, that 90 percent of them – of those 33 percent all open positions will receive soft skills training. The technical skills training we're going to have – provide 300 individuals with the long-term
technical skills training to prepare them for placement, and then we also have 100 OJTs available as well. And that the individuals that remain with our employer post OJT completion will be 90 out of that 100, 90 percent success rate.

Some of the successes that we've had very early on is that we – again, we've really been able to engage our community stakeholders across multiple sectors and bring those multi-sector partnerships to the table to work toward common issues that our employers are facing. And so we've had city leaders, economic developers, private foundations, and employers working together in one of our counties to address the needs of childcare, those childcare barriers.

And so we're trying to develop a 24/7/365 childcare facility and we've been able to pull together these individuals and I think we're building momentum. We're not there yet, but we're working toward a great opportunity that will really provide some benefit to our communities. And then if we can get it established in one community, then could we then duplicate that in the other communities where we have companies involved in ERN?

Additionally, one of the other pieces that our ERN facilitator, one of our – we have a large employer with approximately 2500 employees. It's a large manufacturer, tier one automotive supplier that struggles with transportation as an issue. The community that they reside in does not have 24/7 public transportation available.

So we've taken and had implemented a ride share board and we've taken that concept and moved it and trying to create a closed employer ride share app and then try – test it with that one large employer. And then if that proves to be successful, then we would move that out to all the companies in the ERN and allow individuals needing transportation to kind of work toward resolving their issues together.

Challenges that we faced, we are really trying to make sure that the companies that participate, that typically we're having decision makers and individuals with significant weight at the table at the beginning, but over time they start delegating those attending meetings and participating and some of these decisions to lower level staffers. And it makes the process a little bit longer and far more time consuming to engage them in some of our strategies that we have for the grant.

Additionally, as we want to utilize our BSP model, trying to make sure that we're not adding to the number of contacts that our employers are receiving and making sure that we really implement and we utilize the BSPs that are responsible for our service delivery underneath our WIOA funding to be – kind of use the ERN as a tool in their tool belt as they are working with companies in our area. And that's been a little slow in getting them to buy in and realize that here's this additional thing that – service that they haven't had available previously but can utilize going forward.

Thank you very much for this opportunity. I'll be on for questions later. Thank you.