UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

NATIONAL EMERGENCY GRANT PROMISING PRACTICES SERIES:
PEER SUPPORT SYSTEMS THAT STRENGTHEN OUTREACH AND PARTICIPATION

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About the National Emergency Grant Promising Practices Series

States and local areas that administer National Emergency Grants (NEGs) have developed a growing body of expertise in the effective management of these grants. The *National Emergency Grant Promising Practices Series* is a compilation of ten documents whose purpose is to highlight and share some exemplary approaches that were instrumental in preparing for, planning, and implementing a NEG. The intent of disseminating these effective methodologies on a broad, national level is to facilitate the continuous improvement of NEG project operations and to promote peer-to-peer information-sharing among practitioners.

The information presented in the *NEG Promising Practices Series* was gleaned from a study, which focused on the in-depth review of fifteen NEG projects that varied in type, size, and scope. Collectively, these projects represent an investment of $282,377,589 made by the Department of Labor (DOL) that helped states assist dislocated workers obtain reemployment in the aftermath of a large layoff or disaster-related event. The insights shared by these grantees were synthesized for dissemination, resulting in a set of promising practices that build upon four broad themes:

- *Infrastructure and Readiness.* How grantees have organized state and local delivery systems to ensure effective and efficient use of NEG resources;
- *Planning and Start-Up.* How grantees have mobilized key resources and stakeholders to facilitate effective grant planning and implementation;
- *Program Design and Implementation.* What specific interventions and services have been implemented to support the unique reemployment needs of dislocated workers; and
- *Institutional Results.* How NEG investments have directly or indirectly resulted in an enhanced capacity to respond to unexpected economic events.

Listed below are the ten documents, which comprise the *National Emergency Grant Promising Practices Series*. Each review addresses a specific area of NEG management and has been written to emphasize the specific planning, design, and operational decisions that contributed to successful retraining and reemployment strategies.

- *Working Across Boundaries in Planning a Regional NEG Response*
- *Expanding NEG Training Capacity Through Partnerships with Community Colleges*
- *Aligning NEG Strategies with High Growth Sectors and Occupations*
- *Peer Support Systems that Strengthen Outreach and Participation*
- *Preparing for the Unexpected in Disaster Grants*
- *Establishing and Managing a Temporary Jobs Program*
- *Implementing Transition Teams to Lead the Dislocation Response*
- *Partnering with Organized Labor to Support Reemployment*
- *Coordinating Resources to Meet the Reemployment Challenge*
- *Using Data Strategically to Align Job Seekers and Occupational Demand*

PREVIEW

This NEG promising practice review explains the effective use of peer support to assist dislocated workers as they transition from sudden job loss to the active pursuit of upgraded skills, advanced education, and ultimately new employment opportunities. Peer support workers, who are individuals hired directly from the workforce that was impacted by job loss, can positively impact assessment and enrollment efforts during the start-up phase of a NEG as well as in designing service strategies. These individuals can help to improve other dislocated workers' awareness of workforce program services and available benefits as well as serve as a critical intermediary between affected workers and other workforce program staff. As members of the affected workforce themselves, the peer support workers have firsthand knowledge of the culture and characteristics of the impacted group of employees, better enabling them to recruit participants into the NEG project and to determine what NEG services may be appropriate for these individuals. Promising practices in peer support enhance the effectiveness of a NEG project, contributing to the following broad dimensions:

> ***Peer support workers are individuals hired from the affected workforce who provide outreach, information, and referral assistance to fellow workers as part of a dislocation response effort.***

- *Infrastructure and Readiness.* State infrastructure on peer support helps local areas prepare and respond to large layoffs and implement NEGs. State policies, dedicated Rapid Response funds, and how-to-handbooks provide guidance and financial assistance for temporarily increasing service capacity and strengthening communications with the dislocated workforce.

- *Planning and Start-up.* Peer support workers help to identify important characteristics of the dislocated workforce including the need for services and training that might not otherwise be discovered. This informs and improves the planning for the NEG project. Additionally, peer support workers have close relationships with the dislocated workers, which strengthen outreach and participation.

- *Design and Implementation.* After grant receipt, peer support staff increase dislocated workers' awareness of NEG resources and address their questions and concerns about program activities. This creates informed choices about training, education, and reemployment options and improves retention in program services.

- *Results.* Peer support workers assist dislocated workers in making informed choices about training, education, and other reemployment services. Additionally, they provide support and encouragement for their colleagues to stick with their services options.

This blueprint references the insights gleaned from four exemplary NEG projects to demonstrate the varied approaches to developing practice and policy around the use of peer support systems. While these projects vary greatly in size and structure, advantages of using peer support workers in NEG implementation remain constant. Peer support workers can provide critical outreach to their colleagues when the economic and emotional impacts of job loss can be overwhelming, providing support by:

- Offering a "familiar face" to the response effort and a tangible sense of ongoing community;
- Demonstrating credibility through their understanding of the affected company's culture and work environment; and
- Linking dislocated workers to services available through NEGs and other workforce services.

The unique and critical outreach that peer support teams provide can also result in effective NEG implementation and management, resulting in:

- Increased NEG enrollment and participation, stemming from the prior working relationships that the peer support workers have with the affected workforce; and
- Effective matching of worker needs to the appropriate programs and services, enhanced by peer support workers' firsthand knowledge of workforce culture and characteristics.

Learning from NEG Grantees: The peer support teams of the four NEG projects listed below have effectively integrated these outreach, communication, and personal support functions:

North Carolina. The 2003 closing of **Pillowtex, Inc.,** in Kannapolis involved the loss of 4,800 jobs in a "company town." This represented the largest single closure ever to occur in the State of North Carolina and the largest single textile closure in the country. The union that represented this workforce, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), helped to hire former Pillowtex employees on a short-term basis as peer support workers. This proved to be an important component of the response to this closing. NEG Award Amount: $20,655,048.

Maine. The shutdown of **Great Northern Paper's** two mills in 2003 had a devastating impact on the rural communities of Millinocket and East Millinocket, affecting a total of 1,100 workers. Great Northern Paper employed generations of

area residents directly out of high school, forcing many workers affected by the closing to seek employment outside of the local labor market for the first time. In Maine, State law supports the Maine Department of Labor in hiring peer support workers from the affected workforce for all layoffs involving more than 100 workers. Under this provision, eight peer support workers were hired at the onset of the project. NEG Award Amount: $9,298,121.

Oregon. In January 2005, the **Amalgamated Sugar Company** announced that it would no longer be processing sugar beets at its plant in Nyssa, resulting in the loss of 160 jobs. Oregon State policy provides Rapid Response funds for the hiring and training of peer support advocates. Two individuals were hired to assist affected workers. NEG Award Amount: $540,816.

Oregon. In 2005, **Hewlett-Packard (HP)** laid off approximately 500 workers involved in the manufacturing of inkjet printers at its facility in Corvallis. Under the State's Rapid Response provision, one peer support worker was hired from the HP ranks whose experience and skills matched the technological backgrounds of those who were laid off. NEG Award Amount: $1,302,337.

The experience of these grantees offers several promising practices that may help in the development of a successful peer support system. This blueprint will provide an overview of these promising practices related to defining the roles and responsibilities of peer support staff, recruiting and hiring peer support workers, deploying peer support staff to the affected workforce, and providing supervision and training to peer support workers.

Defining Roles and Job Responsibilities

Establishing a peer support system for a large-scale dislocation starts with defining the role that these workers will play as part of the overall staffing effort. Peer support workers have historically performed an array of possible activities, but in general they are responsible for outreach, information dissemination, and referral activities during the start-up phase of a response. While they share this core mission, it is also critical to *customize* the role of peer support workers to reflect the:

> ***Generally, peer support workers are responsible for outreach, information dissemination, and referral activities during the start-up phase of a response.***

- Scale and timing of the dislocation event;
- Number and availability of professional staff;
- Needs and backgrounds of the affected workforce; and
- Amount and type of information to be disseminated.

Maine—Lessons from Great Northern Paper: The Great Northern Paper layoff created an unprecedented need for support resources in its small community. This layoff began at the start of the protracted Maine winter, and the sheer size of the event had a tremendous impact on the local economy. Project staff described the small workforce support center being filled with workers each day, waiting patiently in long lines for an opportunity to discuss their personal situations with a staff person. Peer support workers in this setting were immediately needed to help "triage" the large volume of clients in need of reemployment services. To effectively deal with the crowds of workers seeking assistance, eight peer support workers met with displaced workers in brief fifteen-minute slots, listened to their concerns, and made an initial referrals plan. This typically included referrals to training and employment services provided through the NEG as well as One-Stop Career Center partners that provide health, financial, and social services.

Oregon—Lessons from Hewlett-Packard: In contrast to the immediacy and scale of Great Northern Paper's highly publicized plant shutdowns, Hewlett-Packard's layoffs were staggered, and the timing was uncertain. It was therefore critical to identify a peer support worker who was well-versed in HP communication technologies and culture. The nature of the layoff required a more deliberate and specialized approach to reaching employees impacted by the layoffs. The peer support worker was proactive in her communication approach, responding to dislocated workers' blogs and meeting with small groups of individuals to gather information for those providing services as well as to inform dislocated workers of services available through the NEG.

Roles & Responsibilities of Peer Support Workers

- *Performing outreach to fellow workers*
- *Providing dislocated workers with access to accurate and current information on program services and available benefits*
- *Serving as an intermediary between the workers and workforce program staff*
- *Assisting program staff in understanding the jobs, work environment, and culture of the affected company*
- *Advising workers on how to access services*
- *Helping overcome worker resistance to retraining, career transition, and reemployment activities*
- *Advocating for workers*
- *Assisting in the development of training plans.*

North Carolina—Lessons from Pillowtex: The roles of peer support workers may be well-defined from the outset, but they may also change over the life of an emergency response. The Pillowtex NEG demonstrates the importance of consistently monitoring the immediate and prospective needs of the workforce and ensuring that the roles of peer support workers

are flexibly defined. Given the complexities that resulted from changing Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program regulations, the first priority of the peer support workers responding to the Pillowtex dislocation was to inform workers about the latest TAA program benefits. An extensive outreach effort was done via phone, using a phone tree established to reach all affected workers. The aim was to provide consistent, accurate information on benefits while minimizing the spread of "misinformation" and rumor.

Upon completion of this communication task, the emphasis shifted to the design of TAA and NEG reemployment services and the outreach to and enrollment of workers. To facilitate this phase, a peer support worker with a Pillowtex Human Resources background was hired to provide direct peer counseling and to serve as a knowledgeable company "intermediary" for program staff and workers. As a result of the large-scale dislocation, the State of North Carolina had leveraged resources from local workforce boards from around the State, and many of the project staff members were brought in from outside the area. In this situation, the peer worker was able to provide a consistent link for workers in accessing the available resources as well as providing workforce agencies with information about the workforce. This role aided in developing more customized NEG training, which in turn provided the basis for encouraging dislocated workers to seek out and enroll in services.

Recruiting and Hiring Peer Support Workers

Grantees who are expert in establishing and implementing peer support systems widely agree that hiring the right individuals is critical to the success of a peer support system. Identifying prospective candidates can be challenging, but the grantees showcased in this blueprint relied on two important channels, organized labor and Rapid Response, that proved effective. This section describes how to recruit peer support workers and also describes hiring vehicles and compensation policies.

Organized Labor: Organized labor played a pivotal role in recruiting peer support workers at Pillowtex and Great Northern Paper. In the case of Pillowtex, UNITE represented workers at the plant, and its leadership was able to quickly identify individuals who were both well-known among the affected workforce and who had the experience and temperament to provide information and referrals to peers. At Great Northern Paper, recruitment was coordinated by the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) Dislocated Worker Program, which has statutory statewide authority in Maine to manage peer support initiatives for layoffs of more than 50 workers. Maine's Peer

Oregon's Advice on Identifying Peer Support Workers

"Look for someone who has credibility, someone people are willing to trust. Someone who has been at the company for a while, has been able to make friends, and has an understanding of Human Resources."

– Hewlett-Packard, Peer Support Worker

Support Worker Program is well established and has dedicated staff to manage the recruitment and hiring of peer workers. In the case of the Great Northern Paper dislocation, twelve different unions were involved, and the AFL-CIO contacted each union's leadership to identify individuals who met the criteria for the position and encouraged them to apply. The AFL-CIO also posted the available position through the local One-Stop Career Center.

Rapid Response: In Oregon, recruitment for peer support workers, particularly at Amalgamated Sugar, was facilitated by the State's "how-to" guide and hands-on technical assistance from the Rapid Response team. The guide contained a sample job description and templates to help local staff recruit for the peer support positions and identify effective candidates. The guide emphasized these critical steps:

- Identify a selection method:
  - Volunteers
  - Union appointments
  - Transition Committee selection
  - Employer selection;
- Empower and support Transition Committees to make informed selections of peer support workers;
- Observe candidates in their work environment to identify leadership qualities and relationships with fellow workers; and
- Develop a position description and a formal contract.

In the Amalgamated Sugar project, the State Rapid Response staff representative together with a union representative used Oregon's "how-to" guide to customize a hiring process for the peer support position. An available template supplied by the State was used by local staff to develop a job description and interview questions. Seventeen dislocated workers expressed interest in applying for the position. As part of the screening process, candidates were with given a pre-orientation "training" to help them fully understand the responsibilities of the position. Ultimately four, two regular and two alternate, peer support workers were hired.

Sample Duties for Peer Support Workers

- *Identify and contact fellow workers*
- *Explain and refer peers to appropriate services*
- *Organize and co-lead weekly job clubs*
- *Document contact with peers in participant files*
- *Attend staff meetings*
- *Survey peers as to satisfaction with services being offered*

Hiring Peer Support Workers: Typically, peer support workers were hired through a short-term contract written by the local Workforce Investment Board (WIB) or a project operator. Since the majority of outreach and referral services occur at the onset of a dislocation response, the contracts tend to be of limited duration, one to three months, depending on the number of workers affected by the layoff. To establish a rate of pay, grantees considered the following factors:

- Equity relative to others working for the WIB or service provider;
- Comparability with wages earned prior to layoff; and
- State regulations or policy that may establish the wage.

In Oregon, peer support workers at Amalgamated Sugar and Hewlett-Packard were hired by local service providers under short-term contracts. According to the policies of the providers, peer support workers from both companies were paid their previous wages. The peer support workers for the Great Northern Paper response were hired through the WIB and paid at a rate comparable to their wages at the plant. Because Maine's Peer Support Worker program is a mandated initiative under State law, the funds for peer worker salaries were known from the outset. The AFL-CIO then contracted with the local WIB to handle the payroll for these positions.

Deploying Peer Support Staff

The overall effectiveness of a NEG project can be impacted by the ability of states and local areas to respond immediately to provide information and initial services to dislocated workers. Peer support workers can help to reach workers in the first critical days and weeks following a layoff, benefitting the prospects for workers enrolling in NEG services. Two critical factors are the ability of peer support workers to access the affected workforce and be able to reach workers quickly.

Geographic Reach: Peer support workers must be deployed in a manner that makes them readily accessible to all dislocated workers. Having peer support workers located where workers will first seek services ultimately benefits NEG enrollment levels and ability to ramp-up a project quickly. In the case of Amalgamated Sugar, fifteen to twenty of the 160 affected workers were living across the border in Idaho; therefore, it was necessary to plan for peer support across State lines. Oregon's Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development coordinated with the Idaho Department of Commerce and Labor to station two peer support workers at the nearest Idaho Employment Service office for two days each week. The peer support workers also worked with a representative from the Idaho TAA office to coordinate TAA and NEG program benefits for the workers residing in Idaho.

Most Immediate Needs: There is a critical window following a layoff in which to reach dislocated workers to address the immediate need for retraining and job placement. Peer support workers can help to maximize the use of NEG services by connecting with as many workers as possible during this crucial timeframe. Following the Pillowtex layoff, ten peer workers were quickly hired soon after the plant closing. Operating out of the union hall, the peer support workers mobilized using a previously-established phone tree and successfully provided affected workers with consistent, accurate information about benefits and services.

Providing Supervision and Training

Peer support workers offer an in-depth understanding of the workforce, work environment, and company culture that can be invaluable to fellow workers and staff; however, they are generally not experienced service providers and can benefit from regular supervision and training.

Grantees used two key sources for the supervision and training of peer workers: union leadership and professional project staff at operating agencies. The content of the training varied, but the emphasis in each was on building a basic understanding of key workforce development and social service resources, including:

- Operation of One-Stop Career Centers;
- Dislocated Worker programs;
- TAA (where applicable) and Unemployment Insurance (UI);
- Health Coverage Tax Credit (HCTC) benefits for Trade-impacted workers; and
- Community resources.

Staff from Maine have developed an organized and thorough approach to training peer support workers. For example, newly hired peer support workers in Maine received direct supervision from the AFL-CIO Peer Support Coordinator who spent two days training them on the One- Stop Career Center system, including the TAA and UI Programs and the Workforce Investment Act. An AFL-CIO/United Way Community Service Liaison then provided training on all the community services in the area. Managers from the One-Stop Career Center arranged for additional training sessions for all staff, including the peer support workers, on topics such as the referral procedures used for domestic violence and mental health services.

> *"I trained and supervised the peer support workers, visiting the Center initially two days a week and then once a month, constantly directing them by phone. The Center staff would call me with any issues I needed to address, and we would work them out."*
>
> *– Christine Greenleaf*
> *Peer Support Coordinator,*
> *Maine AFL-CIO*

REEMPLOYMENT THROUGH NEG PROMISING PRACTICES

The NEG grantees discussed above have materially strengthened their service strategy and infrastructure by effectively hiring and deploying **peer support workers**. A careful screening and hiring process ensures that peer support workers have the credibility and temperament needed to effectively reach out to workers whose lives may be in considerable turmoil. Effective training and strategic deployment ensures that they are able to work efficiently within a time sensitive window where workers are most likely to pursue reemployment services. Collectively, peer support workers will improve workers' awareness of NEG resources and their capacity to make informed choices about training, education, and reemployment services. More informed decision-making at the front end ultimately leads to the improved likelihood that a dislocated worker will select a productive training and education path that will ultimately result in successful reemployment. While many factors contribute to successful outcomes, project staff widely agree that peer support workers were an important part of the achievement of superior placement rates at Amalgamated Sugar and Great Northern Paper.

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