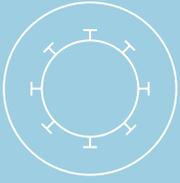


# SUDDENLY VIRTUAL



## Workforce Services, Eight Weeks Later

June 2020

by Michele Martin and Liana Volpe



**HELDRICH CENTER**  
FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

**RUTGERS**

Edward J. Bloustein School  
of Planning and Public Policy

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In April 2020, the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey wanted to understand how the public workforce system was responding to going suddenly virtual in response to the COVID-19 shutdown. The results of this research and additional information are [here](#). The center’s research painted a picture of dedicated professionals scrambling to adapt to an overnight transformation of their work environments where all that they had typically done in-person had to now happen online and from home.

Eight weeks later, the Heldrich Center wanted to understand what progress had been made and to see how the system was now thinking about virtual services, remote teaming, and a potential return to in-person services in a COVID-19 environment. Center researchers administered another survey, conducted two virtual roundtables, and conducted website audits of workforce areas in Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.

# Overall Themes

Forty-eight staff members from six states responded to the second survey. The majority of staff were from Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and Workforce Development Boards. Unlike the first survey, which was evenly weighted between responses from managers and frontline staff, 70% of respondents to the second survey were managers. The two virtual roundtable discussions featured 17 participants; the website audits were conducted to identify what services had been made available to the public through those websites. As a result of this research, the center identified several key themes.

## From Crisis to “New Normals”

For the most part, local workforce areas have emerged from their initial “crisis mode” and have established virtual alternatives and workarounds for most of their existing services. They also report that remote teaming is working more smoothly, although some still note that lack of staff access to technology continues to be an issue for their teams.

The first brief, *Suddenly Virtual: Delivering Workforce Services in the COVID-19 Environment*, found that staff were mostly concerned about issues such as secure document collection, establishing program eligibility, and engaging with current program participants. For those enrolled in training programs, getting access to virtual training had also been a priority. Staff now report that many of these issues have been addressed, although there are still concerns about job seeker access to technology and the impact on services.

Another key issue highlighted in the initial brief was lack of staff technology skills. Eight weeks later, while there are still some concerns, local areas report that staff have been upgrading their skills in using videoconferencing, shared online drives, and other tools, and are becoming more comfortable with using technology to provide services. Several local areas are also working to equip staff with the technology they need to work from home effectively, purchasing and distributing laptops, and ensuring staff have access to key online services.

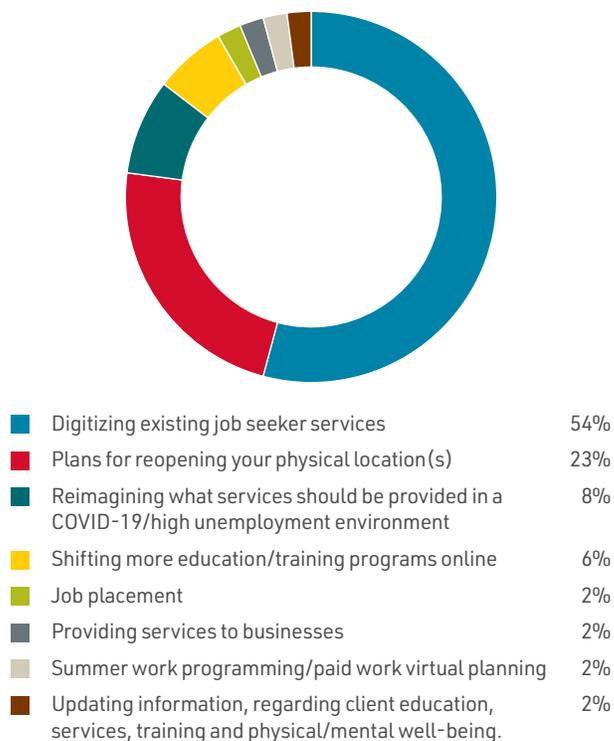
Essentially there has been some settling into the new way of working, although many express a longing for it to end.

## Priorities: Digitizing Existing Services

Respondents were asked to note their priorities and where they are putting their attention and efforts. As illustrated in Figure 1, 54% indicated that their first priority is digitizing existing services. In part, this is because they recognize that virtual services will continue in some form for the foreseeable future. Toward this end, they have focused on activities such as:

- ▶ Recording PowerPoint presentations and posting them online;
- ▶ Using email to send job seekers materials to work on;
- ▶ Emailing job leads;
- ▶ Conducting virtual job fairs to fill COVID-19 essential jobs;
- ▶ Conducting online program orientation sessions, some recorded and some live; and
- ▶ Experimenting with live online job search workshops.

Figure 1: Local Workforce Areas’ Top Priorities



Data as of June 18, 2020.

Some are also using their social media channels, particularly Facebook pages, to share information and resources and to post virtual hiring events and job openings. A few local areas are also using text messaging services to circulate job openings to existing clients.

Additionally, Heldrich Center researchers conducted an audit of workforce area websites in Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. The goal was to learn what information and services were online and how local areas were engaging with job seekers via their websites. While current customers would know about services via contacts with case managers, the Heldrich Center wanted to understand what newly unemployed people would have access to at this time.

Researchers found that many local areas quickly put up designated pages for COVID-19 guidance and resources for customers, including links to social services and public health information. Some are also using their social media accounts to promote upcoming virtual events. In the coming weeks, the Heldrich Center will publish a companion brief with links to these resources.

### **Potential for New Possibilities**

Serving existing customers and transitioning existing in-person services to a virtual environment is a primary focus because, as one roundtable participant noted, "This is the easier lift."

As local workforce areas move out of this crisis period, however, they are recognizing that they need to move beyond these basics. They note that technology provided new opportunities for rethinking services and for engaging with customers who wouldn't normally access their in-person offerings. Some note that program participants who were previously challenged to come into the office for services because of childcare and transportation issues are now actually more engaged because these barriers are removed in a virtual environment. Heldrich Center researchers also heard that videoconferencing has made services more accessible to individuals with hearing loss.

As one frontline case worker noted during roundtable discussions, "Working remotely has given me a lot of new ideas and opened up new possibilities. I think our behavior has fundamentally changed. Are we going to go back to what we had before? Or are we going to use the new skills we have? We need to have ways to get our ideas in front of decision makers."

Prior to the pandemic, most public workforce programs had done little to explore how technology could improve services. In the initial stages of the crisis, the focus was on frantically learning new tools and scrambling to meet the needs of current customers. Now, there is more openness to new possibilities staff hadn't previously considered.

## Plans for Reopening

As states are looking ahead to loosening stay-at-home orders and allowing for more in-person gatherings, the public workforce system is making reopening plans. To varying degrees, they understand that virtual services will still need to be part of the mix, but attention is shifting to a return to in-person services, which brings with it a feeling of “getting back to normal.” Several themes were observed here.

### Siloed Planning and Decision Making

Public workforce services are provided by mostly co-located staff who are employed by different organizations. Some are state Department of Labor employees, some are county employees, and others are employed by private companies contracted to the counties, all under a single banner of “one-stop” services. Even staff employed by the state are employed by different departments, creating additional silos.

Based on the feedback received during the roundtables, much of the planning that is taking place about reopening to in-person services is fragmented, even though these programs share space. Each entity is coming up with its own plan for personal protective equipment, workspace use, social distancing policies, scheduling of customers, etc.

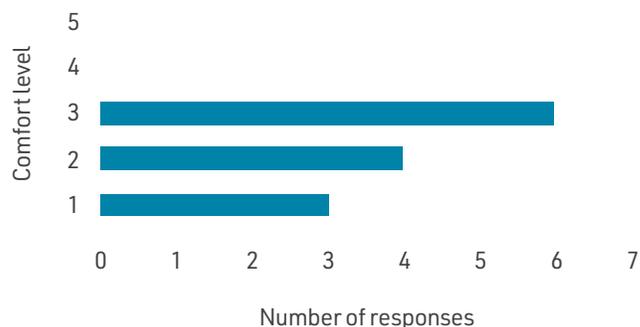
The roundtables consisted primarily of county employees who expressed concern about this fragmented form of planning. In particular, the local areas feel they have little or no feedback or guidance on their state Department of Labor’s plans for reopening, leaving many concerned that they would be expected to pick up the slack. They also are unclear about the provisions that are being made for staff and customer safety, and worried that there might be distinct differences in approaches and policies.

Of even more concern is the fact that many job seekers in the current environment are primarily worried about their unemployment payments. Thousands of people are still looking for answers to specific questions and issues about their unemployment claims, and staff in the roundtables expressed concern that they would be flooded with people

trying to speak to unemployment representatives. This would be a challenge for social distancing and also raises concerns about staff safety.

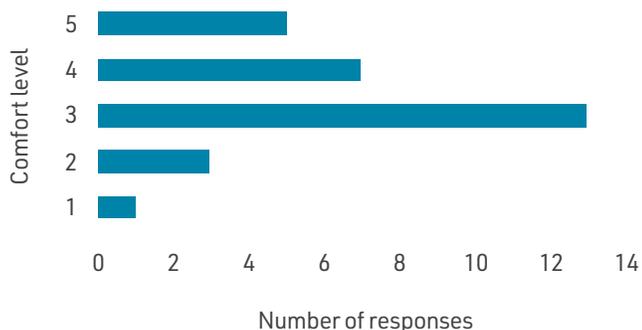
Researchers also found in the survey responses that while managers are aware of the timing and content of reopening plans, frontline staff do not have this information. While a majority of respondents indicated that they are only somewhat comfortable with returning to work, there is a divergence between frontline staff and managers. The survey asked respondents to indicate their comfort with returning to the workplace on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating that they are extremely uncomfortable and 5 meaning that they are extremely comfortable. As shown in Figure 2, of the 13 case managers/frontline staff who responded to the survey, none indicated higher than a 3 in comfort level. The frontline staff’s average rating of comfort for returning to work at their physical locations was 2.2. Alternatively, of the 29 supervisors and managers who responded to the survey, the comfort level skewed much higher than frontline staff with 5 supervisors and managers noting they were extremely comfortable with returning to the office. Overall, the supervisors and managers’ average rating of comfort for returning to work at their physical locations was 3.4. (See Figure 3.)

**Figure 2: Case Managers and Frontline Staff Members’ Comfort in Returning to the Physical Office**



Data as of June 18, 2020.

**Figure 3: Supervisors and Managers' Comfort in Returning to the Physical Office**

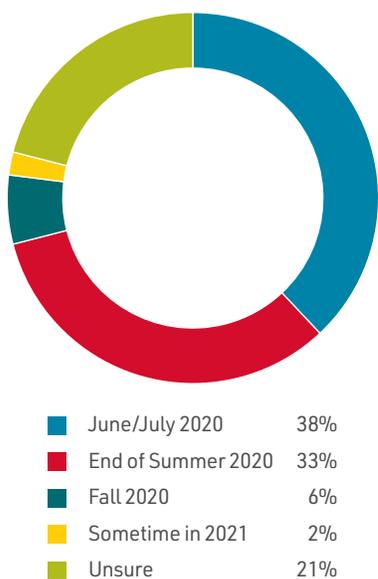


Data as of June 18, 2020.

**How, When, and Why?**

Seventy-one percent of survey respondents report they are working toward some form of in-person services either by June or by the end of the summer, with 8% reporting they would reopen in the fall of 2020 or sometime in 2021. The remainder are unsure of their reopening plans. (See Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Timeframe for Reopening Physical Offices**

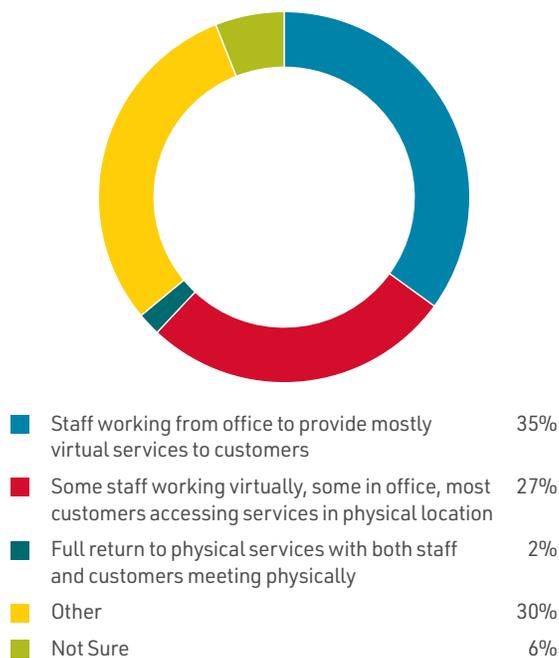


Data as of June 18, 2020.

The configurations for reopening vary. As shown in Figure 5, 35% report they will be working in their offices to provide mostly virtual services while 27% report they will be staggering staff (some at home, some in the office) to provide

mostly in-person services. To ensure social distancing, most areas plan to schedule in-person appointments, although there is a great deal of concern that job seekers will be showing up without appointments to ask questions about unemployment.

**Figure 5: Approaches to Reopening Physical Offices**



Data as of June 18, 2020.

The biggest question is **why** reopen physical offices. Connecticut roundtable participants seem to be considering this question the most thoughtfully, as one participant indicated she is part of a working group where the guiding question is what they hope to accomplish by offering in-person services. She remarked, "If we put everything online and make sure it's functional, then why bring people in?" This group of public workforce programs doesn't intend to reopen until fall 2020 at the earliest, so they are using the time to think carefully about what services really require in-person interaction.

As mentioned above, more than two-thirds (71%) of the local workforce areas are working toward reopening by the end of the summer and much of their discussion centers on how to do so safely, protecting both staff and customers. In these organizations, attention is more split – partially focused on virtual services and remote teaming, and partially focused on getting back to their offices. This split attention makes it more challenging to plan effectively for either scenario.

## Conclusion

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Overall, this follow-up research indicates that the public workforce system is continuing to adapt to the constraints and challenges that COVID-19 has created. Teams are operating more smoothly and more services are being offered virtually. As staff become more comfortable with new technologies, they are beginning to see that there may be other possibilities for services. This is energy that should be harnessed going forward so that public workforce programs are able to incorporate the lessons of this challenging time and use these experiences to adapt and improve toward a new normal.

With states reopening, attention is now turning toward offering in-person services. Local workforce areas are considering a variety of options that will accommodate social distancing and other public health guidelines, although there are concerns about their ability to manage potential crowds of job seekers looking for information on unemployment claims. There are also concerns about the fragmented nature of this planning and how co-located programs will coordinate on policies, procedures, and expectations.

It is important to note that communication and shared decision making with frontline staff will be key to successful reopening. The fact that managers are comfortable with reopening is likely a result of the fact that they are actively involved in the decision-making process and understand the precautions and thought processes behind their plans. Involving staff and communicating with them about the decisions that are being made and how they are being made will be critical in the weeks and months ahead.

It is also important that as this planning continues, public workforce agencies consider how they will build upon and leverage virtual services. They should thoughtfully evaluate where and when in-person services are critical and focus on steadily improving the quality of their virtual services. While concerns about job seeker access to technology are real, there are also many customers who prefer and benefit from virtual services. Local workforce areas can expand their reach and serve customers who find in-person services more inconvenient or inaccessible if they continue to embrace the possibilities that were created when they had to become suddenly virtual.

## Acknowledgments

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## About the Heldrich Center

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The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, “Solutions at Work,” the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center’s work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers’ skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The center’s projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

- ▶ Career and Technical Education
- ▶ Data Collection and Analysis
- ▶ Disability Employment
- ▶ Job Seekers in Transition
- ▶ Program Evaluation
- ▶ Trend Analysis

Learn more: [www.heldrich.rutgers.edu](http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu)