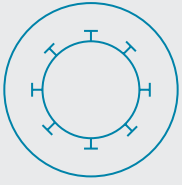# STRATEGICALLY VIRTUAL

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Building Communities of Care in Workforce Development Programs

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Contents

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an economic disaster unlike anything the United States has ever experienced, halting entire industries and creating unprecedented levels of unemployment and economic uncertainty. It has affected workers across all industries and of all educational backgrounds and experience levels. It has accelerated existing challenging work trends, including precarious contract and gig work arrangements, and the concentration of work in low- and high-paying tiers with little work in the middle. The pandemic has also had disproportionate negative effects on people of color, women, and older workers.

Millions of workers have been laid off or temporarily and/or indefinitely furloughed. Millions of jobs have disappeared and other jobs will likely be automated to decrease human contact and potential exposure to the virus. According to **U.S. Department of Labor data**, in March and April 2020, a record 22.2 million jobs were lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent **estimates** show that as of December 2020, total non-farm employment was still below its February 2020 level by 9.8 million jobs, or 6.5%. The Labor Force Participation rate, the percentage of the working-age population that is either working or actively looking for work, hit a decade low of **60.2%** in April 2020. For additional context, approximately 8.7 million Americans lost their jobs in the course of the 2007 to 2009 Great Recession, further illustrating the severity of the current economic crisis. For all these reasons, it can be expected that many newly unemployed job seekers will become long-term unemployed (six months+ unemployed) and potentially experience cyclical employment if and when they do find reemployment opportunities. The instability of today's job market makes the pathway to recovery unclear, and it may take years to return to pre-COVID unemployment rates and job openings.

To effectively face the challenges of these times, state and local workforce agencies are having to adapt to new conditions, requiring workforce organizations to take a more holistic approach in order to support the millions of unemployed Americans beyond those eligible for federal programs such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. As part of a recent **publication** by the Roosevelt Institute, researchers examined the effectiveness of training programs in the United States, concluding that programs that offer adult training "alone" do not tend to produce lasting increases in income or reduced inequality. Researchers concluded that successful workforce interventions include the provision of wraparound services, with supports such as coaching, mental health services, referrals to safety net programs, counseling, job search assistance, childcare and

transportation assistance, and more, typically offered to participants in conjunction with training programs. Provision of holistic wraparound supports to fully address the needs of the job seeker will require community partnership and collaboration. No one state or local agency or organization has the resources or the capacity to adequately serve the numbers of people who are out of work. As such, a coordinated community-wide response is necessary. Further, both unemployment and the stresses of the pandemic and social distancing have far-reaching mental, social, and emotional impacts that must be centered in any strategy.

In order to build the capacity to respond rapidly to help residents in times of economic shocks, such as the pandemic, cyclical recessions, and massive unemployment, a key theme for moving forward can be community. This means harnessing *community* **resources in service of job seeker needs. It also means building** *communities* **of care to support the social and emotional needs of job seekers during these times.**

This issue brief first defines and describes how the idea of community can inform local responses moving forward, drawing on research about the needs of the unemployed, as well as on lessons learned from public libraries where community is at the center of what they do.

It then makes the case for local Workforce Development Boards to broaden and redefine their roles as community organizations, focusing not just on aggregating community resources, but also on ensuring that unemployed Americans have access to safe and supportive community spaces that help them cope with the social and emotional fallout of unemployment. Community care as a service can be an important part of the workforce strategy in local areas. The brief concludes with recommendations for creating communities of care and providing community-focused services.

What is Community and Why Does it Matter in the Economic Recovery?

In considering the idea of community in the context of responding to the economic crisis, there are two possibilities, both of which are critical to an effective response.

First is the more traditional understanding of community in a workforce context — the aggregating of resources and services to address unemployment needs. Certainly, the sheer scope of the challenges workers face in this "new normal" requires an all-out, community-wide effort, guided by a driving question: how do community organizations like government agencies, nonprofits, libraries, secondary schools, faith-based institutions, colleges, and universities, etc. work together to collaboratively respond to what job seekers need? In this sense of community, local areas will need to map available resources, identify gaps, and work together to address the various needs that unemployed residents have. Further, they will have to consider how to provide these in a virtual context, both leveraging the benefits

of technology as well as finding ways to help people who lack access to these technologies. The pandemic is an all-hands-on-deck, crisis situation that requires a coordinated, collaborative response.

A second idea of community is less explored in this setting, but can be equally important. This is the notion of community as a safe, welcoming, inclusive space where unemployed workers can feel a sense of connection and belonging and where they know that they are not alone. Unemployment on its own is socially isolating and can have devastating long-term emotional, mental, and physical impacts. Unemployment in a pandemic that requires social distancing further increases these negative impacts. A failure to embrace this alternative idea of community and find ways to meet these needs for connection may cause unnecessary and avoidable harm.

Communities of Care

One way to think about this second idea of community is to see hosting communities as a core service that can be available to unemployed job seekers.

As observed and documented in previous economic disasters, the duration and intensity of unemployment in an economic crisis can have damaging mental, social, and emotional impacts on job seekers, in addition to financial implications. Even in more robust labor markets, job search can be an isolating process. Often job seekers report feeling cut off from their respective communities, having to navigate distressing circumstances without adequate support. This sense of isolation decreases motivation and negatively affects job seeker confidence and their ability to "sell themselves" to employers. This isolation is magnified in the pandemic with social distancing and quarantine guidance still in effect.

Recently, the U.S. Census Bureau began the Household Pulse Survey, a short online survey designed to collect data on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals. The survey included questions regarding the frequency respondents experienced anxiety and depression. A recent survey in November 2020 showed that 41.4% of adults in the United States had symptoms of anxiety disorder and/or depression. For comparison, a 2019 survey by the National Center for Health Statistics showed that 11% of adults nationally had symptoms of anxiety disorder and/or depressive disorder. Figure 1 illustrates how reports of symptoms of anxiety and/or depression have differed by age group during the pandemic, but have remained consistently high and are recently increasing for most.

Figure 1: Experiences of Symptoms of Anxiety or Depression by Age Group
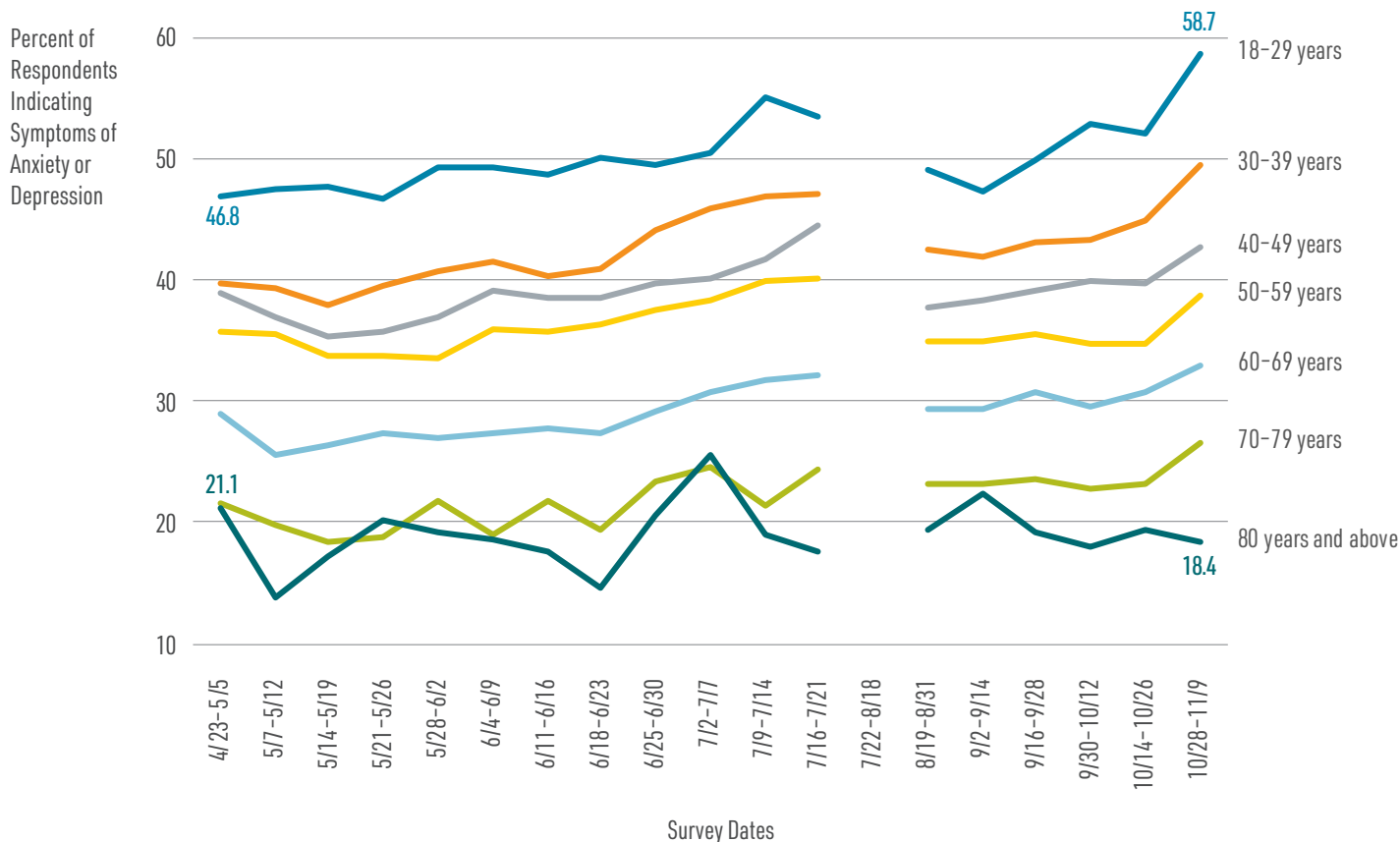
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, 2020
Note: Surveys were not conducted during the period of July 22 to August 18, 2020.

The effects of the pandemic are clear: people are suffering, particularly people who are unemployed.

Attachment to resources and connection to communities of care early in the job search process can potentially lead to better outcomes and help to avoid and/or lessen some of the feelings of isolation, depression, and rejection often associated with unemployment, particularly longer-term unemployment.

This heightened need for community is evidenced by the numerous groups that have formed online during the pandemic. Previously in-person formal job search groups, such as the Professional Service Groups, are now fully operational online, while many informal Facebook groups have also formed within local communities and/or industry sectors to bring together individuals recently laid off. Moreover, the Heldrich Center's New Start Career Network (NSCN), a program serving New Jersey residents over the age of 45 who have been out of work six or more months, has observed drastic upswings in participation rates for online gatherings, webinars, and other virtual events. NSCN's Share and Support group sessions have drawn crowds in the hundreds, with participants gathered to discuss their obstacles and emotions with their peers. The primary

purpose of these sessions is to help people feel encouraged, inspired, and supported in their job search. Additionally, NSCN's partnership with the Mental Health Association in New Jersey has developed creative programming on productive habit formation to address the mental health implications of looking for work at this time. These sessions are in high demand as they reinforce to job seekers that they are not alone in the hardship they may be experiencing.

Overall, attachment to diverse resources, targeted supports, and human connection are all facets of community that can be extremely beneficial in job search. Being part of a community, whether it is specifically related to job search or not, can help throughout different points of the job search process and have an impact on a job seeker's well-being and career more broadly. A community restores a feeling of connection and offers a variety of supports, both in terms of tangible (job search guidance) and intangible (a sympathetic listener) support, and opportunities to create lasting networks. To more effectively and holistically respond to job seekers' needs and the crisis more broadly, forming and maintaining communities of care as a service can become an integral component of the workforce strategy in local areas.

Lessons from Libraries

It can be difficult today to find physical spaces that are free, convenient, and public. Libraries have long served as physical hubs in their communities, embedded as a public good that provides much more than access to books. The American Library Association captures this modern role in its definition of a library: "The word 'library' seems to be used in so many different aspects now, from the brick-and-mortar public library to the digital library. Public libraries — and indeed, all libraries — are changing and dynamic places where librarians help people find the best source of information whether it's a book, a website, or database entry." The United States has a total of 16,568 public library locations, more than the number of McDonald's locations. According to a recent Gallup poll, Americans visit libraries far more frequently than they engage in other cultural activities, outpacing visits to movie theaters, sporting events, concerts, and museums; this was especially true for lower-income households. One

of the fundamental features of libraries is their open nature, welcoming all community members without a requisite purchase. In addition to access to books, most libraries offer free wi-fi, computers, meeting rooms, and a wide range of programming for children, adults, and families. Library services and resources can be especially crucial for low-income community members without access to technology in their homes.

Libraries strive to build lifelong relationships with their community members, providing critical services and programs for people of all ages. They provide children access to books and programming, students access to computers and the Internet and a range of online resources, job seekers support with their résumés and job search, and adults and families with important programming. At present, there are over 9,000 public libraries across the United States, ranging

in size, resources, and services. Some library outlets are bookmobiles that travel around a town to provide access to books and wi-fi, while others are physical spaces that serve towns, cities, and counties. In 2015, Americans visited public libraries 1.39 billion times.

Libraries provide unique one-on-one attention to job seekers, or those looking to reskill or change occupations. While library staff may not be experts in all specific career fields, they are able to use the tools of their trade to support patrons in their search for information and resources, and can provide assistance with résumé and cover letter development, job applications, and job interview preparation. In addition, libraries are welcoming locations for patrons — as a Heldrich Center 2018 library survey respondent commented, "Libraries are integral to workforce development in the state. Public libraries are in nearly every community and even the smallest library will at least have a public access computer to allow the public to fill out job applications and otherwise search for employment. Public libraries are trusted, safe locations where the public feels secure in exploring employment opportunities and frequently the public library is the only place in town where a person can get Internet access if they do not have it at home." Another survey respondent echoed the sentiment that workforce development is inextricably linked to community and is part of the library's mission: "Stated in some way or another, it is part of the general mission of each public library to help improve the quality of life in the respective communities. Being employed adds to the individual's quality of life, which lends the same to the community." Library staff spoke to the unique features of libraries that make them well suited for this service delivery, including prevalence of locations, long hours, and a history as community spaces. Libraries have relied for decades on their experience and expertise to support those most in need of career services, but these services have grown and become embedded since the Great Recession. It is likely there will be a similar shift in the library response to new community economic needs as the effects of the pandemic become clearer.

Libraries are not the only centers of community in their local areas. People can find a sense of community across a range of organizations and groups, such as churches, schools, and gyms. With a dynamic list of community needs, they may not always be the right resource. In the provision of services, however, libraries rely on a philosophy that could benefit job seekers if adopted across workforce development services. The purpose and management of libraries and One-Stop Career Centers are of course different, and at times at odds, but there are important takeaways nonetheless. Specifically, individualized services, longer hours, community location, and lifelong relationship building makes libraries effective community hubs and service providers. Workforce Development Boards could embed some of the unique features of libraries and their philosophies in their own service delivery.

Some potential lessons from the libraries could be:

▶ Promote **individual services for job seekers**, including an initial orientation meeting that creates space for the job seeker to share their personal experiences and challenges and regular personal check-in communication.

▶ Make **well-being a cornerstone** of job seeker evaluations and subsequent programming.

▶ Establish the Workforce Development Board as being **the local entity responsible for the holistic well-being of all residents in search of work**. The Workforce Development Board and its partner services must become known entities in the county, in terms of name recognition and clarity of services offered. At present, a majority of job seekers probably are not familiar with their local Workforce Development Board or its services.

▶ Highlight services that can be used by workers **throughout their careers** to reskill or change occupations, allowing community members to see Workforce Development Boards as a resource in times of calm as well as crisis.

▶ Curate dynamic resources for the job search **across the lifespan**, allowing school-aged children to learn about types of jobs and educational pathways and adults to learn about return on investment of certain training programs.

▶ Invest in having an online presence and utilize virtual programming to allow job seekers to access resources **any time of day**. Meet job seekers where they are and provide greater flexibility to those juggling other commitments and caregiving demands.

▶ Develop practical **community guides and asset maps**, building on community partnerships and services, that direct job seekers to a wide range of organizations and resources during their job search and beyond.

▶ Create **educational and social spaces** for job seekers to connect while learning tools for their job search. Host workshops and events for group skill development that also include time for reflection and create a safe space to share personal experiences and reactions.

Libraries demonstrate a distinct model of service and customer relationship dynamic that exhibits a focus on holistic service, addressing the needs of the whole person. Much can be learned and replicated from this approach to customer-facing services and service delivery.

Community-focused Service Provision

Recommendations for Creating Safe Spaces and Providing Community-focused Services

▶ Establish ground rules or guidelines that are accepted and owned by the whole community.

▶ Consider how to integrate trauma-informed care practices in service delivery.

▶ Hold space for conversations that address the needs of the whole person.

▶ Make listening a core community value.

▶ Acknowledge the value each member brings to the community.

▶ Foster community diversity and inclusivity.

▶ Implement a supportive learning environment.

▶ Encourage healthy group behaviors, such as group motivation, affirmation, and accountability.

Workforce Development Boards and other local entities with job seeker services could consider what constitutes effective programming at this time. As previously noted, it is important that a holistic and community-driven approach to job seeker needs, including physical and mental safety and stability, be embedded in workforce programming going forward.

Communities of care as a service can take many forms. To foster an effective community of care, members must feel safe in the community. Ensuring physical and psychological safety and stability is paramount to creating trust amongst community facilitators and community members. A sense of safety can be created by establishing community guidelines for participation, fostering respect amongst members, guaranteeing anonymity, establishing community procedures and/or rules of decorum, etc. As the Heldrich Center found

in operating such services through its New Start Career Network, when a safe space is created for all to openly participate, devoid of judgment, honest conversations can take place. It is important to acknowledge that Workforce Development Boards and One-Stop Career Centers have greater restrictions on their ability to pivot and individualize services to address the social and emotional needs of job seekers. However, with the current state of the job market and the fundamentally changing nature of job search, all entities with job seeker services could consider how to respond differently to the challenges ahead.

Job search can be a long and arduous process, often consisting of a series of rejections, which can affect job seekers' resilience. A community of care can offer respite, comfort, and support for those navigating job search.

Below are some recommendations for creating safe spaces and providing community-focused services:

▶ **Establish ground rules or guidelines that are accepted and owned by the whole community.** In order to operationalize a safe community space and create a shared expectation and understanding among community members, the group must establish ground rules or guidelines to govern community interactions, procedures, and more. This set of community rules should be reflective of community members' priorities. It is critical that community members take part in the process of creating these shared guidelines so that all participants have a stake in and ownership of the expectations of the collective group. One core tenet of any community formation is to treat community members with care and compassion. The tone of the whole community will ultimately be set by the community leaders and facilitators. For this reason, it is vital to establish care and compassion as leading values that inform all activities and interactions within the community.

▶ **Consider how to integrate trauma-informed care practices in service delivery.** Trauma-informed care is a "holistic, systematic approach grounded in an understanding of, and responsiveness to, the impact of trauma on the individual." Trauma-informed care acknowledges the role past trauma can play in an individual's emotional health and life overall. This is particularly relevant to job search, which can be a triggering event due to the associated emotional and financial stress. Integrating trauma-informed care practices often involves a paradigm shift in framing interactions with participants and service delivery structures. An example of operationalizing trauma-informed care practices is reframing the question, "What is wrong with this person?" to "What has happened to this person?"

▶ **Hold space for conversations that address the needs of the whole person.** As previously mentioned, job search, particularly prolonged job search, often negatively affects the mental, social, and emotional health of job seekers. For this reason, a community of care should hold space for discussions about mental health as well as be generally responsive to what participants are communicating that are needs and priorities for them. From these conversations, the community can become aware of the kind of supports people need to stay afloat. To effectively address the needs of the whole person, the community will need a diverse set of resources at its disposal. In this way, the role of community resource aggregator becomes vitally important in addressing the range of job seeker needs and barriers by holding the responsibility of coalescing recommendations, referrals to other community resources, and more.

▶ **Make listening a core community value.** Job search is an isolating process. Job seekers often want and need the opportunity to tell their stories, which requires a listening ear. Many job seekers are in search of a receptive ear as much as, if not more than, they are in search of job search advice. Ensure that there is designated time and space in the community for listening and acknowledging the stories of others. Participation in a community of care will offer community members the chance to feel seen, heard, and understood.

▶ **Acknowledge the value each member brings to the community.** Every job seeker has knowledge, experience, and expertise that should be acknowledged in the community. Job seekers often lose their sense of self-worth, which is commonly tied to one's job or career. In this way, job search can be a demoralizing process, which can require direct intervention to break the cycle of negativity

surrounding job seekers' estimations of self-worth and value to society. An effective community strategy would be to remind community members of the inherent value they have as people, not just as workers. An example of operationalizing this strategy is to have group members in every meeting say one positive thing about themselves that is not associated with work or job search. Reminding and highlighting the value that community members have as human beings is an important service in addressing the emotional and mental health components of job search.

▶ **Foster community diversity and inclusivity.** As a community, it is important to highlight that individual members' inherent value and uniqueness will add to the rich diversity of the group as a whole. There is immense value in community diversity that should be prioritized through purposeful inclusivity efforts. Diversity will enrich the community and enhance the wealth of shared knowledge and experience that all community members can both add to and benefit from in a safe inclusive space. Building diverse and inclusive spaces requires thought about creating a space that has no or minimal barriers to entry and maximizes member participation. Considerations include location (applies to in-person and virtual meeting locations), accessibility, timing, availability of childcare and other supports, etc. Moreover, it is important to build inclusivity into the community's shared guidelines and empower community members to call out any forms of discrimination. Communities of care cannot consciously or unconsciously make people feel unwelcome or create conditions that foster intolerance, injustice, and/or fear within the group.

▶ **Implement a supportive learning environment.** Supportive learning environments encourage member participation through validation, constructive feedback, and more direct positive involvement of the community's organizers and facilitators. Encourage community members to be expressive in their own communication and participation, but also to be encouraging of others. In this way, every community member will be afforded the opportunity to feel valued, included, and empowered in a safe and supported learning environment.

▶ **Encourage healthy group behaviors, such as group motivation, affirmation, and accountability.** As a whole, the community can commit to engaging in healthy group behaviors to provide support and encouragement for members throughout the job search process. As previously mentioned, the global pandemic will continue to affect

the job market for the foreseeable future, thus resulting in people being out of work for longer periods of time or only finding cyclical employment. It must be noted that the difficult realities of the current job market and the impact it has at an individual job seeker level could make it easy for a community to devolve into a negative space, solely focusing on the difficulties, traumas, and injustices people may be experiencing in their search for work. Community organizers and facilitators should work to keep the group motivated, encouraged, and positive while also still leaving space for sharing and acknowledging negative experiences.

The community-shared guidelines could also stipulate group procedures for when community dynamics lean negative, and how the group has decided it will pull itself out of the darkness and back into the light.

Overall, in all future programming, there should be an active call for creating communities of care, fostering collaboration and strategic partnerships to enhance service effectiveness, and more deliberate efforts to address job seekers' needs holistically.

Redefining the Role of Workforce Development Boards

This brief identifies Workforce Development Boards as the ideal entity to spearhead efforts to take lessons from libraries and guidance for creating communities of care, and apply them in a workforce context. Workforce Development Boards have the authority and reach to coalesce the necessary partners and resources required and to foster community-building as a service. Moreover, the role of Workforce Development Boards has traditionally been to serve as a connector of local assets and entities, in addition to being responsible for developing strategic plans and priorities for their respective local areas. Now, the pandemic has presented the need for a shift in the strategies of Workforce Development Boards to redefine and broaden their responsibilities and in doing so, be even more responsive to the needs of residents, particularly job seekers, as they continue to navigate the fallout of this global crisis.

Workforce Development Boards can take a leadership role to serve in the dual role of community resource aggregator and community creator to respond to the changing demands of the public workforce system. There is a pressing need to develop a variety of new programming and form virtual community spaces at this time. Programming can be targeted to the physical and psychological safety and stability of job seekers, as well as more traditional job search supports and skill development. Programming to help sustain job seeker motivation is vitally important, since the duration and intensity of this economic disaster will likely result in job seekers being out of work for longer periods of time. Moreover, Workforce Development Boards can ensure that

forming communities of care is embedded into their local area's workforce strategy and implemented by partner organizations and local entities.

While libraries illustrate a distinct model of service and serve as an important hub and community resource, more organized and higher-level partnerships could be arranged via the Workforce Development Boards' coordination, in order to strategically guide programming, create effective communities of care, and minimize duplication of services. To generate an all-out community-wide response to this crisis, strategic partnerships could be forged across sectors and levels of government.

- ▶ **At the state level**, Workforce Development Boards can be enlisted to engage in long-term partnerships with the state Department of Labor, Department of Human Services, Library, and Library Association, in order ensure residents have access to up-to-date programming forged through collaborative program development and a holistic job seeker approach.

- ▶ **At the county level**, Workforce Development Boards can engage in program development and service delivery partnerships with county libraries, the local American Job Center or One-Stop Career Center, county-level agencies, and county community colleges. While these organizations typically have representatives on the Workforce Development Boards and their committees, service coordination can be improved and result in a more robust network of service provision for job seekers.

▶ **At the local level**, more broadly engaging community partners, such as local food banks, nonprofit organizations, homeless shelters, local libraries, and more, will start to create a lasting network of providers and services for the benefit of the community as a whole. Local-level and neighborhood-based service providers may also use higher-level partnerships to increase training opportunities and the use of trauma-informed care to more effectively guide productive customer interactions and service delivery, especially given the mental health implications of the pandemic and economic recovery. As defined by Trauma Informed Oregon, "Trauma-informed care is an approach, based on knowledge of the impact of trauma, aimed at ensuring environments and services are welcoming and engaging for service recipients and staff." This customer care approach was recently exhibited by the Washington County Cooperative Library Services in Oregon in its series, *Being Trauma-Informed During a Pandemic: An Introduction for Library Staff*. As this example illustrates, local-level organizations can work together to create powerful networks for care and community for customers.

Creating partnership and a greater sense of community in a time of isolation, despair, and hardship can be a worthwhile endeavor for the community and all of its members. Partnership will also alleviate the potential capacity and fiscal constraints necessary to implement this approach.

It is important to acknowledge the budget and staffing constraints of the Workforce Development Boards and One-Stop Career Centers. For this reason, Workforce Development Boards could set priorities among these many program suggestions and scale up over time. Alternatively, Workforce Development Boards could initially identify and offer the programming that presents the least financial burden, and as additional funds become available, continue to embed the lessons from the libraries in job seeker service delivery.

Additionally, while these partnerships are vitally important in times of crisis, they can also be maintained and adapted during times of prosperity. Even when unemployment is low, there remains a demand for a robust network of services and communities of care to be available to populations in need, such as those individuals who were already searching for work or long-term unemployed before the recent economic downturn. Maintaining these partnerships in better economic times guarantees that the infrastructure, processes, networks, and players are in place if and when a sudden economic downturn occurs. The lessons learned during the course of this pandemic regarding job seeker supports can therefore be carried with operators and decision-makers of the public workforce system and applied in times of greater prosperity in an effort to make the system as a whole more robust and resilient.

Conclusion

Community presence and provision of holistic job seeker services is likely to be vital to the long economic recovery ahead. The economic disaster brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic is unlike any other in history, due to the sheer collapse of demand in the labor market and the ongoing necessity for stringent safety protocols in rethinking what work looks like in the future. Due to the nature of the pandemic and the likely ramifications for job seekers in the length of their unemployment, a community response is critical to effectively serve the wide-ranging issues and areas of need for job seekers.

Workforce Development Boards are in a unique position to bring together community assets and form strategic partnerships with local, state, and national organizations to provide a comprehensive series of holistic support in their local areas. These supports should pay particular attention to addressing job seekers' physical and psychological safety and stability, in addition to job search skill development materials. Workforce Development Boards can ensure that duplication of efforts and reinventing the wheel are avoided,

so that workforce development professionals, librarians, and other local area staff can focus on the high-touch tasks that require human intervention and support.

While the road to economic recovery still remains unclear, it is likely that traditional job seeker service models and mechanisms will not be enough to effectively help the millions of newly unemployed people, many of whom will soon become long-term unemployed. Rethinking, reorganizing, and redeploying job seeker services to account for and address holistic job seeker needs can be part of the path forward. Additionally, it is important that a community-driven response, one that creates communities of care and lasting support networks, be employed to ensure that every community member in search of assistance be able to be served and connected to the public workforce system in some manner. Workforce Development Boards have the authority and oversight to manage such transitions in workforce strategy, and can use their role as a connector, aggregator, and collaborator to spearhead community formation for the betterment of local residents, especially job seekers. The COVID-19 pandemic has offered an unprecedented opportunity to reset the system.

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About the Heldrich Center

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:

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▶ Data Collection and Analysis

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