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Disasters

FARMWORKER PROGRAMS RESPONDED TO CALAMITIES

From opening a community laundry to processing payroll from a dining room table, National Farmworker Jobs Program grantees faced a learning year in 2017, responding to national disasters across the country.

The Employment and Training Administration showcased how NFJP grantees, as well as state and federal partners, responded to natural disasters through a pair of seminars held last month through the Workforce3One website.

The nation faced hurricanes, floods, droughts and wildfires in 2017, as well as significant supply shifts in the agriculture and construction labor markets.

When Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, NFJP grantee Pathstone Corporation recognized that it was well situated to reach into rural parts of the territory's interior and could support general disaster recovery efforts, according to Pathstone Regional Administrator Albert Rivera.

"Unemployment skyrocketed because many companies just closed," he said.

With donations and funding from a variety of public and private partners, Pathstone mustered off-road vehicles to cross washed out roads and ended up delivering more than 2,000 food boxes in 29 municipalities, in addition to water filters, solar lights, gas stoves and other supplies.

A highlight of recovery efforts, Rivera said, was the establishment of a community laundry facility in the village of Rio Prieto. As power blackouts extended into 2018, basic needs needed to be met. Stabilizing communities, particularly in agricultural areas, to stem mass exodus to the states became important, he explained.

Many growers in Puerto Rico projected layoffs and reduced hours. Of 161 growers responding to a Pathstone survey, 75 reported \$100,000 or more in crop losses.

In southwest Florida, the Immokalee Technical College and its Farmworker Career Development Program, saw farmworkers and students contribute to recovery efforts after Hurricane Irma, explained Gerald Williams, coordinator of both workforce education and the farmworker program.

Immokalee benefited from the storm's late-September timing as it missed the regional growing season, which can increase the population of the area from about 28,000 to 50,000, he said.

"We were fortunate that Irma came in before the growing season, so the majority of the farmworker population was not here at the time," he said.

The school became a storage facility for supplies being delivered to the area. Farmworker program participants were important to supply distribution efforts in the community because of their Spanish- language abilities.

In the wake of the hurricane, many farmworkers left the agricultural industry to work in construction, roofing in particular, as part of the rebuilding process.

Minerva Figueroa, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity's senior monitor advocate for farmworkers, reported that growers have been reporting labor shortages since last year's disasters. "A lot of the migrant and seasonal farmworkers opted not to return to the state, so what we saw was an increase in the need for workers," Figueroa said.

The state workforce agency is streamlining its processing of emergency applications for H-2A agricultural worker visas. DEO has also stepped up efforts to connect growers with one-stop career centers in order to recruit domestic jobseekers, she added.

Worker Shortage

Stacey Taylor, executive director of Motivation, Education and Training, Inc., shared strategies from how her organization continued operations through the Texas flooding caused by Hurricane Harvey. MET is headquartered about 30 miles north of Houston, in New Caney, close to the San Jacinto River and Lake Houston. The organization is an NFJP provider and runs other employment and training and social services programs in multiple states. Its service areas include 20 Texas counties that received disaster declarations.

“We knew we had a pretty big job on our hands...It became clear very quickly that this rain was going to cause devastating flooding,” Taylor said.

The agency took “an oxygen mask approach,” borrowing from airline safety instructions to secure your own breathing apparatus before helping traveling companions.

The first priority was to account for and support staff, the second was to reopen offices and the third was to begin serving clients, she explained.

Taylor said she processed payroll during the first week of flooding from her dining room table. MET wanted to pay staff in Texas’ flooded areas regardless of whether they were able to get to the office. The agency also needed to keep staff working in other states.

MET’s management team found that group text messaging was a reliable way to keep in contact with senior staff as they worked to reopen. Eight of MET’s offices were damaged and 30 staff had damage to their homes or vehicles. Seventy-five clients became homeless.

MET strategically avoided using its offices as donation hubs for clothing and food, in order to get back into the business of employment and training services as quickly as possible.

“There were a lot of local churches, schools and other community partners that received an influx of donations, so we were able to do that and refer our clients to these partners to meet their needs,” Taylor said.

Another strategy was to secure licensed professional counselors for staff, clients and their families. In the months after the disaster, MET noticed a sharp rise in mental health services being provided through its health insurance program.

Looking ahead to the next disaster, the agency plans to continue mental health services as part of the coverage it provides. It is also insuring against flood damage at all facilities, not just those in flood zones, and preparing to mobilize administrative functions, so the central office can pick up and move if evacuated, Taylor said. Cloud technology is helping in this regard.

Back in Immokalee, Williams said his school revamped an administrative procedure to pay emergency stipends to farmworkers in one to two weeks, where it used to take about a month.

California faced drought, flooding and wildfire in recent years, and its NFJP grantees have contributed to several public employment projects funded by National Dislocated Worker Grants in response.

In 2015, the state received a \$31 million NDWG award to respond to ongoing drought, which continued through last year.

This had a goal of providing temporary employment to 1,000 farmworkers and long-term unemployed individuals. Working with multiple NFJP grantees and local workforce agencies, the project ended up providing jobs to 1,275 people, according to Krister Engdahl, a regional monitor advocate with the Employment and Training Administration.

“Many workers were able to find full-time placements. Many farmworkers have a very strong work ethic and this worked very well,” he said.

Job Placements

Local municipalities and the state highway department hired significant numbers of displaced farmworkers into full-time jobs, after seeing them employed on public works projects, according to

Engdahl.

California's drought NDWG was issued based on a U.S. Department of Agriculture disaster declaration. Traditionally, Federal Emergency Management Agency declarations were needed for disaster grants. The option used for the Golden State's drought award stemmed from new provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, he explained.

"The main take way was recognizing that this was a disaster of a different type ... This took five years to build up," he said. "Work with your states and federal partners to look for other agencies that might be declaring a disaster."

California remains in the business of traditional NDWG projects.

California Human Development (which is a human services provider, not a state agency) is currently working on a disaster grant with a goal of employing 990 farmworkers to rebuild after wildfires last September and October swept across 210,000 acres in eight counties. With the damage centered on Napa and Sonoma Counties, two dozen wineries were significantly damaged. Many farmworkers were displaced.

These experiences taught the NFJP grantee that it is important to build relationships with state, county and municipal agencies to coordinate disaster response in agricultural areas, and also to better communicate to those agencies the needs of farmworker populations, explained Paul Castro, director of California Human Development's Farmworker Services Division.

Large numbers of farmworkers in the region are undocumented. The agency has been able to use its federal resources to provide emergency assistance, but it cannot offer subsidized jobs to these workers, he explained.