

CONNECT News

Community Support, **N**etworking, and Assistance for **E**nvironmental **C**areer **T**raining

April, 2020

The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute (HMTRI) with a cooperative agreement from the US Environmental Protection Agency provides technical assistance to communities interested in developing and delivering environmental job training. “CONNECT” is HMTRI’s acronym for Community support, networking, and assistance for environmental career training. Each bimonthly e-publication of CONNECT News features topics of interest to organizations delivering environmental training. This issue is the first in a series of newsletters addressing EPA’s FY21 Request for Applications expected this fall and the COVID-19 pandemic. Past CONNECT issues along with a comprehensive collection of environmental workforce resources are available at the HMTRI Toolbox. <https://brownfields-toolbox.org/>

Moving Forward Strategically

Anticipating the next EPA funding announcement

Grantees familiar with EPA’s Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training (EWDJT) program have noticed departures from the traditional funding cycles of previous years. Changes have been associated with the implementation of the 2018 BUILD Act, EPA budget allocations and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. Last year, the FY19 funding cycle was eliminated and replaced with a FY20 RFP increasing the number of grants from 17 to 26. For FY21, EPA is returning to an annual competition with a Request for Applications (RFA, an update of the former RFP format). The FY21 RFA is now likely to be issued this fall. While funding cycles have changed, the substance of EWDJT and funding criteria has basically remained the same. For FY21, significant changes are not expected in ranking criteria, although submission forms will be updated to streamline the grant process. Grants will likely remain at \$200K for three years. The number of grants to be awarded has not been indicated. With the large number of grants

awarded in FY20, organizations interested in developing an EWDJT program or those interested in continuing/expanding their current program are strongly encouraged to apply.

If an RFA is issued this summer or fall, applicants might anticipate the following schedule for application submission, award, and program implementation.

- **Spring to Summer 2020** – Pre-proposal planning
- **Summer 2020** – Community relationship and partnership development
- **Summer/Fall 2020** – EPA request for proposals
- **Fall 2020** – Proposals due
- **Winter 2020/ 2021** – Proposal evaluations
- **Spring 2021** – Awards and work plan approvals
- **Summer 2021** – Authorization to spend funds
- **Summer/ Fall 2021**– First year training cohorts

This rough schedule is today's best guess based on the current COVID-19 public health concerns. Dates may move forward or slip depending on short term and longer term impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. Unlike many grants, EWDJT requires extensive partnership development, community networking, and leveraging support. Establishing community relationships is a long term process requiring solid plans and a roadmap for program success. Now is the time to anticipate how training may look moving forward and consider alternative implementation strategies as COVID-19 subsides.

Moving forward strategically

As a starting point let's review best practices EWDJT programs have used to develop successful workforce development programs. Many of these strategies will not be impacted by COVID-19. Next we can begin a conversation on developing new best practices that will mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Today, EWDJT grantees and prospective grantees find themselves in one of the following situations:

1. Prospective grantees interested in developing an EWDJT program in their community.
2. Funded grantees that have not yet started their first cohort and looking for a path forward.
3. Grantees partially through a training cohort when COVID-19 interrupted their program.
4. Grantees completing a cohort with graduates and returning graduates asking for placement assistance.

The challenge for organizations in each of these situations is how to address public health concerns associated with COVID-19 and still move forward with their grant. How long will this pandemic last? How will this influence our proposal or work plan? Will there be a new normal in workforce training when the crisis subsides? What will conditions be a year from

today? Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are unknown.

During this time of uncertainty and restricted social interaction, consideration needs to be given to alternative approaches as part of a strategic plan moving forward. Because the impacts of COVID-19 may never completely disappear, alternative training strategies under various public health conditions will need to be employed. While some EWDJT activities will not be significantly impacted by the presence of the coronavirus, others will require new approaches. Let's begin by asking questions about activities that will impact program operation:

- What will be the status of training facilities in the fall of 2020 or even the fall of 2021?
- Will class size and configurations be restricted?
- Will mass transit or other travel alternatives be limited?
- Will contact testing and tracing be necessary or required?
- What is the likelihood of a pandemic resurgence accompanied by a new set of public health restrictions?
- What is the best estimate for when a treatment or vaccine will allow for the mitigation of the issues just noted?

Having identified a set of unknowns which keep us from moving forward, what activities or actions can EWDJT programs continue or begin working on independent of public health concerns. Those strategies include the following:

- To what extent can EWDJT programs reduce student to student and student to instructor contact?
- How should virtual vs face to face classroom training be considered?
- How can program planners assure a sufficient demand for graduates? In what occupations?

- What should the core curriculum look like?
- Where should the program be located?
- How should recruitment and applicant screening be updated to address a revised training strategy?
- How do EWDJT grantees fill gaps in the program created by increased training costs that may be disallowed as part of the EPA grant?
- Who are the best prospective partners to fill funding gaps?
- How can EWDJT grantees leverage EPA support with local job programs and economic stimulus programs?

Issues just presented can be addressed independent of COVID-19. Project managers can move forward with best practices as they execute their programs even though externalities may influence their approach to recruitment, training, and placement. Best practices for team building, partnership development and program leveraging can remain similar to strategies that have been successful in the past. The first best practice, independent of COVID-19, is building a solid program staff. EWDJT development requires a team of volunteers and stakeholders to get started.

Establishing an EWDJT development team

The first effort that needs to be taken before a decision is made to move forward with EWDJT is resolving program organizational issues. Establishing an “ad hoc” or working committee is independent of the coronavirus pandemic and represents the very first stages of EWDJT program development:

- Who will be the program advocate, promoting EWDJT and generating program support?
- Will there be a project leader responsible for coordinating grant operations and deliverables?
- How will team members be supported?

- Will bringing on a sub-grantee strengthen the program?
- Who will be the primary grantee organization/ fiscal agent?
- How will administration of the grant be handled?

Every EWDJT program begins with a project advocate. Next, a support team is established to provide the necessary effort to move the project forward. Initially, project advocates may be the only team member “selling” EWDJT. If he or she is successful, candidates will come forward offering “in-kind” support, suggesting resources and introductions to potential partners. As community support grows for expansion or establishment of EWDJT, program development can begin. Because of the unfunded nature of proposal development, efforts need to be supported with in-kind contributions. For this reason, it is important that roles, responsibilities and time commitments are made clear as program development proceeds. An underestimation of the time and effort needed by team members can easily derail the entire project.

Team members need to include individuals with the following skills and responsibilities. In many cases, individuals may share multiple responsibilities:

- Project coordination and project management
- Community outreach
- Governmental outreach
- Employer and advisor outreach
- Community and labor market assessment
- Program development and leveraging
- Student recruitment and assessment
- Graduate placement & job development
- Technical training
- Student services and case worker support
- Grant writing
- Administration and legal support

Once a development team is in place, it's time to begin building EWDJT by recruiting stakeholders and supporting partners. This effort can continue independent of the COVID-19 pandemic and is a best practice for successful EWDJT programs. Planning and developing a fundable EWDJT proposal is more like a jigsaw puzzle than a linear flow chart. All issues need to be worked on and coordinated at the same time. Some activities such as grant writing may have more prominence later in the process but most occur simultaneously requiring close coordination between team members and supporting partners.

Partnership development begins when a commitment is made to EWDJT

While team members will eventually develop and manage the EWDJT program, key partners provide essential support to enhance program operation. The best time to identify and begin recruiting key partners is when the EWDJT program is being "pitched". Once the concept of an EWDJT program is endorsed by community leaders, partner commitments to support the program begin. Key partners are those who will be written into grant proposals providing experience, skills, knowledge and credibility. Understanding the importance partnerships demonstrates why partnership development is the first, most important and time consuming component in EWDJT program development.

Key EWDJT partners can be subdivided into sub grantees, fiscal partners, and in-kind contributing partners. Another characterization called "leveraging partners" can also be applied to these partners. As explained later, these recognized supporters, in addition to their formal role, also have the ability to leverage EPA resources making good programs exceptional. To understand the types of partnerships EWDJT programs need to recruit, we have divided key partners into the following categories. Each supports EWDJT to become larger than the sum of its parts.

- Sub-grantees
- Contract partners
- In-kind partners
- Leveraging partners

Sub-grantees

When an organization is a sub-grantee, the entity is identified in the proposal as such and subject to all of the rules and regulations of the primary grantee. As far as EPA is concerned, sub-grantees are considered an extension of the primary grantee. Funds can freely flow between the primary and sub-grantee bypassing the procurement process. Sub-grantees, however, are subject to regulations and audits as if they were the primary grantee. Examples of sub-grantees may be a college, governmental organization or other non-profit. For instance, a city government may enlist a community college as a sub-grantee to handle recruitment and training efforts while the city handles grant management and administrative activities. Primary grantees must have formal partnership agreements with sub-grantees and must be integrated into proposal budgets and work plans.

Contract partners

When EWDJT programs pay for goods and services with federal funds, partners are considered as contractors. They may be consultants, trainers, vendors, suppliers, or professional service organizations. When EPA grant funds go to organizations other than sub-grantees, the federal procurement process is engaged. With very few exceptions, recipients must follow EPA procurement guidelines to purchase supplies, equipment and professional services for purchases that exceed the "micro-purchase" threshold of \$10,000. EPA procurement guidelines include a public competitive bid, RFP, or quotation with at least three vendors. Bids, contracts, and receipts need to be retained for audit purposes. Contractor selection does not have to wait until the grant is awarded. Qualifying consultants, contractors, and vendors prior to proposal submission can be of great benefit

allowing applicants to include contractor qualifications and experience as part of the proposal. Check out the following website for best EPA procurement guidelines:

<https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2018-09/documents/best-practice-guide-for-procuring-services-supplies-equipment.pdf>

In-kind partners

In-kind partners are those contributing resources to the EWDJT program with no federal EPA money exchanging hands. In-kind partners are also referred to as leveraging partners. As long as federal funds do not exchange hands, in-kind partners are not subject to federal procurement guidelines, subject to audit and free to operate without federal oversight. In-kind contributors may, however, be subject to rules and guidelines of their organizations or funding entities. If in-kind partners are written into the proposal, a Memorandum of Understanding needs to be included as part of the application describing the leveraged in-kind contribution provided. If support is withdrawn, EPA project coordinators need to be informed.

Leveraging partners and supporters

Leveraging partners are those contributing resources to the EWDJT program without charge. Leveraged partners are an integral part of any comprehensive EWDJT program. Leveraging fills essential voids in EPA EWDJT funding. As previously noted, in-kind partners are considered leveraging partners as they donate goods and services without charge. Other types of partners may also become leveraging partners including sub-grantees, contractors, vendors, or nonprofit organizations providing unpaid contributions to the program. Here are examples of activities undertaken using leveraged partners:

- Life skills training
- Counseling services
- Drug testing services
- Day care

- Non environmental related training
- Scholarships, stipends, and internships
- Student transportation
- Recruitment and placement services
- Testing services
- Administrative services
- Facilities
- Instructors
- Curriculum
- Instructional materials
- Remedial education
- Supplemental electives
- Equipment
- Administrative services
- Financial support

Whenever EWDJT programs are able to enhance or replace program offerings with leveraged resources, the overall program becomes stronger and more effective. Here are a few examples of leveraging partners providing unpaid contributions to EWDJT programs:

- Local community colleges and universities
- Training consultants
- Potential employers and equipment vendors
- Local, state, and federal agencies
- Local utilities and municipal facilities
- Fire and first responder teams
- Workforce Investment Boards and affiliates
- Philanthropic foundations
- Faith based organizations
- Goodwill and Salvation Army
- Other non-profits
- Governmental organizations
- Training and outreach organizations such as Youth Build, Strive, or Conservation Corps

While key partners may provide essential services to the EWDJT program for a fee, others contribute services, facilities, instructors, and equipment at no cost. Among our most important partners are those that

simply provide advice, visibility and community support. Included in this group are politicians, government, faith based, and community leaders. Partnership development is a long term effort that begins during the earliest stages of program development and continues throughout the grant.

Community and Labor market assessments continue regardless of COVID-19

Community and labor market assessments help determine when and where environmental training programs are feasible. COVID-19 does not need to inhibit best practices for conducting labor market or community assessments. However, the results of assessments may be different than in the past. Demand for certified workers may emphasize health and safety occupations including worker protection, cleanup, and sanitization related skills. While outcomes of the labor market assessment may change, the process for conducting the assessment remains unchanged. HMTRI will discuss that process in future Professional Learning Community (PLC) calls and CONNECT newsletters.

Labor market assessments need to begin early and continue throughout the program. Here are expected outcomes from a good labor market assessment:

- An understanding employer needs
- Assesses the demand for certified environmental workers
- Guides recruitment and applicant selection
- Provides a path for placement
- Assists in development of a strong advisory board
- Assists in building partnerships
- Expands potential leveraging partners
- Guides curriculum development
- Contributes to program awareness
- Creates leveraging opportunities

- Opens internship and apprenticeship opportunities

Outcomes from community assessments will also likely be influenced by COVID-19. As with labor market assessments, best practices for conducting community assessments remain similar to those used in the past. Community assessments often provide the following guidance:

- A general neighborhood overview – location, demographics, and environmental justice concerns
- Stakeholder and neighborhood partnership opportunities
- Community access to transportation services
- Access to employers
- Special factors and designations attributed to target areas

Depending on the prevalence or resurgence of COVID-19, the location of training centers and access to those centers may be critical to program success. EWDJT participants need easy access to training. After graduation, transportation to available jobs may become a major issue in graduate placement. To the extent that COVID-19 restricts travel, EWDJT placement will need to be located close to the target community and potential employment opportunities.

Training in the age of COVID-19

The only mandated training for EWDJT grantees is HAZWOPER (1910.120 health and safety training). Additional instruction is guided by EPA offices supporting the EWDJT program. Those programs include the following:

- Brownfields hazardous waste assessment and cleanup training, including petroleum cleanup training
- Solid waste management or cleanup training

- Superfund site cleanup and innovative and alternative treatment technologies training
- Wastewater treatment training
- Emergency planning, preparedness, and response training
- Enhanced environmental health and safety training
- Integrated pest management (IPM) training
- Alternative energy technologies training (e.g. solar installation, preparation of formerly contaminated sites for renewable energy purposes, etc.)

Training supported by EPA in the categories presented cover a variety of occupations. Employment opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic may be easily incorporated into EPA curriculum guidelines depending on local labor market assessments. Additional instruction requested by employers can also be offered but must be delivered using leveraged resources.

Perhaps the biggest impact the coronavirus pandemic may have on curriculum is how training is delivered. Training delivery includes the following issues:

- Training while keeping students at a safe distance perhaps requiring alternative facilities
- Introduction of computers or tablets paired with classroom instruction
- Introduction of computer literacy as part of the core curriculum
- Development of instructional materials
- Expanded use of social media platforms

If EWDJT programs shift towards online or distance learning strategies, important life skills habits and team building skills will have added importance. Simple issues such as class attendance, dress codes, presentation skills, and group networking will need to be resolved.

Program and partnership development are long term and essential efforts regardless of public health conditions. With regard to training, COVID-19 presents a new set of issues that will have great influence on program operation and outcomes. Thinking strategically, in the era of COVID-19, poses new questions. The answers to which have not yet been resolved:

- Will COVID-19 influence the recruitment process and acceptance standards?
- Will screening methods need to be revised?
- Will class size need to be reduced?
- How will curriculum need to be revised?
- Do grantees need to consider supplementing or replacing classroom training with distance learning strategies?
- How can training cohorts build resilience into their programs in case training is disrupted in mid-session?
- Will COVID-19 introduce new employment opportunities for EWDJT graduates?

Graduate placement and COVID-19

With proper attention given to labor market assessment, student recruitment, screening and skill development EWDJT graduates may find themselves more in demand than they have been in the past. Having certifications associated with health and safety related to the remediation of hazardous materials, EWDJT graduates receive special skills not normally found in the general population.

In the near term, COVID-19 may have a larger impact on how placement offices interact with potential employers. Coordination with potential employers may shift to online interaction and interviews with graduates may employ social media platforms such as zoom.

Moving forward strategically

This CONNECT issue has addressed a few of the questions that will impact the manner in which EPA grantees deliver environmental workforce training. Unfortunately, we are not yet able to provide best practices that will mitigate all COVID-19 issues. Until that time, best practices that can be used during the coronavirus pandemic will be discussed among successful grantees. As EWDJT grantees share ideas, new alternative strategies addressing COVID-19 training will be developed to move forward during the course of this crisis. In future CONNECT newsletters and PLC sessions, HMTRI will be taking a deeper dive into strategies grantees are developing to enhance the effectiveness of their programs.

Join Our Listserv

HMTRI is part of Eastern Iowa Community Colleges and has provided environmental workforce development technical assistance since the inception of EPA's Brownfields Initiative.

CONNECT notes presented represent individual opinions and ideas from Professional Learning Community participants and EWDJT grantees. They do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such.

For more information on HMTRI technical assistance services or to be added to our Grantee and Community Outreach Listserv, please contact Heather Ballou at hkballou@eicc.edu.

HMTRI

Eastern Iowa Community Colleges
201 N. Harrison Street, Suite 101
Davenport, IA 52801

