

Tulsa Community WorkAdvance

Health Care Training in Oklahoma During the COVID-19 Pandemic

An Interview with Karen Pennington and Dawn Slinkard

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Sector-based workforce development programs train individuals for jobs in industries where there is strong labor market demand and the opportunity for career advancement. MDRC research and other studies suggest that sectoral programs that offer career readiness training, job placement services, and advancement coaching can increase employment and earnings for low-income adults. In the wake of significant unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, programs like these will likely play an increasingly important role.

Madison Strategies Group (MSG), which operates [Tulsa Community WorkAdvance](#) (TCW) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, participated in [MDRC's study of WorkAdvance](#), a sector-based training and career advancement program that prepares people for jobs in manufacturing and transportation. In 2015, TCW also began a health care training program in partnership with CAP Tulsa, a community organization that provides early education and support services for young children and their parents.

The TCW health care training program is funded by [Health Profession Opportunity Grants](#) (HPOG), which was created to provide education and training for occupations in the health care field that pay well and are expected to be in high demand. HPOG is administered by the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

In this interview, Karen Pennington, executive director of MSG, talks about the impact of COVID-19 on program operations and the opportunities she sees in the future to help Tulsa residents advance in their careers and achieve long-term economic stability. In addition, TCW graduate Dawn Slinkard talks about her experience with the program.

What's it like to operate the program during COVID-19?

Karen Pennington: Well, it's been really interesting, and it has presented new challenges and opportunities for our organization.

Right now, the health care and manufacturing industries are booming because they have remained in operation as essential businesses. Luckily, these are two sectors that we're training and placing people in. Even when Oklahoma declared a mandatory shelter-in-place order at the end of March, we continued to place

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people in jobs. In March and April alone, we verified over 40 placements for our participants, and many were promotions. The good news is that some people are still getting jobs and getting raises and getting increased hours.

But the emergence of COVID-19 has definitely impacted our training classes. We partner with area technical schools that conduct our classes, so we don't have control over the schedules and what will be delivered online instead of in person, even though we work closely with each provider. Most of the classes were temporarily suspended while safety measures were put in place to continue some in-person learning and to move other classes to online platforms. Some classes have moved online faster than others. As a result, some people are still in school and others have put their classes on hold. Finally, there are people we had recruited who were supposed to start classes this summer that have now been postponed. Given all this change, we are not currently taking any new applicants or recruiting for any upcoming classes.

Several people who graduated from our program have now lost their jobs. Sometimes the job losses weren't because people were laid off, but because their children's school was canceled, and they had no other child care options. There are a lot of moving pieces that cause people to have to resign their positions or take unemployment insurance instead.

Due to the essential nature of our work, the TCW office never shut down. We moved to having half the staff in the office every other day, so we could serve existing customers by appointment only, with social distancing protocols in place. We had incredible recruitment momentum prior to COVID-19, with most orientation sessions at capacity, and then we had to abruptly stop. The next three to six months will be challenging as we look to regain that momentum and plan for future recruitment.

Longer term, what impact do you think the pandemic will have on your program? How will you adapt the program?

We really need to think about the kinds of training that we should provide in the future. In partnership with our state and city governments as well as with our training providers, we need to have thoughtful conversations with employers about where they see their future workforce needs — in the short term and the long term. Based on that, we anticipate there will be new and updated technical training that will be more relevant post-COVID. This will give us the opportunity to not only train new TCW customers but to upskill our existing participants that we've already trained and get them ready for the new reality.

What do you think will happen in terms of labor market demand?

I do not think there's going to be a decrease in demand for health care workers. I also think more people are going to want to work in health care because they are going to realize that those are the jobs that have long-term stability.

More people may go into the health care field, but we have to be careful to identify the occupations or skills that are most in demand. Not all of them will be. Some of our training participants, such as monitor techs and phlebotomists, for example, were laid off. They were in hospital jobs that were considered nonessential at the time. Fortunately, as Oklahoma has started reopening, those positions are now being rehired.

We know that hospitals were trying to keep as many people safe as possible and to free up rooms and equipment to treat COVID-19 patients. I think it will be interesting to see if some of the jobs we train people for are no longer as in-demand, in the short term, as an unintended consequence.

We could have a skills gap once again, because training was discontinued while everyone was reacting to COVID. But the illnesses and the reasons people were going to hospitals that needed these positions before the pandemic

haven't actually gone away. So it will be interesting to see, a year from now, if there will be a shortage of some health care positions because training programs decreased classes in order to train for something more in demand because of COVID. It's going to be a tricky dynamic to understand in the long term. We're going to have to use industry and economic data and input from employers to accurately and proactively plan for future industry needs.

Dawn Slinkard, a TWC graduate, talks about the program and the impact it has had on her life.

Can you tell us what your experience was like at TCW and what you're doing now?

Dawn Slinkard: I moved to Tulsa four years ago from St. Louis. I had never heard of a program like Tulsa Community WorkAdvance. I took advantage of the opportunity to set myself on a career path in the medical field. It has opened so many doors for me. A lot of it had to do with all of the support TCW provides. My biggest hurdle was child care. Being a mother of eight, we have four small children who still require child care. TCW helped me cover child care tuition. They covered all my school needs — tuition, tests, scrubs, shoes, books, and transportation. They have a great support team, including Family & Children's Services, who have been amazing with personal needs. There have been a handful of times when money was tight, and F&CS would help by dropping off care packages that included groceries, diapers, wipes, and clothes.

I completed two programs. The first was Certified Nursing Assistant, and now, more recently, Certified Medical Assistant. And I have been able to secure a position in a pulmonary specialist's office. It is so gratifying to be able to help patients every day. I see patients with lung issues ranging from asthma to cancer. I am able to help our patients by simply getting them settled in their exam rooms, or by helping them get more extensive testing to ensure they have the proper oxygen therapy. I know I am making a difference in their lives, such as having basic conversations about improving their lung functions. I also send prescriptions in for patients and schedule their appointments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been extremely important to provide a safe space for our patients. It has had its obstacles — from wearing continuous face masks to ensuring that patients who show signs of COVID-19 test negative before they can be seen. Our office has stayed open during this time. Yes, we take risks every day, but it is just part of my day-to-day. Our main goal is to continue patient care. It's a career where I know I am helping someone improve their quality of life. It is a career I can truly be proud of.