

Process Evaluation of the Wisconsin Worker Connection Program

Final Report
December 2024



Acknowledgments

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About IPARRT

The Innovative Partnership for Advancing Rehabilitation Research and Training (IPARRT) is a University of Wisconsin–Madison research team focused on studying competitive integrated employment and quality of life considerations of underserved populations, including youth and adults with disabilities. Housed within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, the team is dedicated to fostering breakthroughs in rehabilitation counseling and practice through the development of innovative practices grounded in evidence. At IPARRT, we are committed to advancing knowledge and enhancing skills and outcomes for individuals with disabilities through innovative research endeavors, strong collaboration, and implementation of comprehensive training programs.

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Executive Summary

Researchers through IPARRT in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at University of Wisconsin–Madison were contracted to evaluate the effectiveness of the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development’s Worker Connection Program. The program, initiated by the Department of Workforce Development and funded through the American Rescue Plan Act, aimed to improve employment outcomes for underserved populations through targeted outreach, evidence-based career navigation, and workforce training. The program sought to answer the question: How do we reach and support individuals currently underemployed, not working, disconnected from the labor force, or not interested in engaging with the workforce?

The program was piloted from 2022 to 2024 in two geographic areas within Wisconsin: Workforce development area (WDA) 2 and WDA 5. WDA 2 encompasses Milwaukee County, located in the Southeast region of the state. WDA 5 includes the counties of Brown, Door, Florence, Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Marinette, Menominee, Oconto, Shawano, and Sheboygan in the Northeast region. While Outagamie County was not targeted for outreach, 26 residents of this county enrolled in the program and received service coordination and/or training. The process evaluation, conducted by the UW–Madison’s IPARRT team, addressed key implementation and outcome questions to assess the Worker Connection Program’s alignment with its goals.

Through the efforts of Career Navigators and community partnerships, the program enrolled over 3,100 participants and provided 19,755 career services, with 61% of participants with positive profiles securing employment within six months of enrollment. A positive profile is a tool used to assess and inventory attributes of job seekers that may be relevant to their job search, employability, job match, retention and long-range career goals. It serves as a tool for systematically gathering information from participants through interviews and discussion. In addition, the program’s innovative targeted outreach and WorkAdvance training initiative supported over 500 participants in accessing career-advancing opportunities and strengthened systemic collaboration between workforce systems and community organizations. The model illustrated how public programs can deliver life-changing opportunities for individuals while addressing critical workforce needs.

Evaluation Questions and Key Findings

Evaluation Question 1: Was the Worker Connection Program’s targeted outreach, career navigation, and WorkAdvance training implemented as proposed? Can a fidelity model(s) be developed based on findings?

Findings

Implementation of the program evolved to address participant and regional

needs, with 3,127 participants enrolled and 731 community partnerships established. Outreach efforts and service delivery varied across the two WDAs. Overall, the model was generally implemented as proposed. The most common outreach approaches used by Career Navigators were personal connections and emails (19%), followed closely by networking events (18%) and cold calls (14%). Less frequently used strategies included texting (7%), social media outreach (5%), and mailing physical flyers (2%). In WDA 5, in-person outreach was particularly effective in engaging populations with complex challenges. Our evaluation found that early inconsistencies can be attributed to programmatic start-up issues, which are common with innovative pilot programs, and were resolved as the program matured over time. Staff noted pride in building a complex program and implementing it successfully across two regions within a relatively short timeframe. A strong network of community partners, including WorkAdvance training programs, was established and served an important role in connecting eligible individuals with the program. Opportunities to continue strengthening and improving the program were shared by staff, partners, and participants. Development of a fidelity model is one key strategy to facilitate continued programmatic improvements and promote quality data to inform outcomes and impact.

Recommendations

- Survey data and qualitative inquiry showed that the human-centered approach was considered successful in navigating career goals and services with participants. It is recommended that the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development continue to use this navigational approach either in independent Career Navigator roles or embedded within an existing Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) role such as Employment Training Specialists.
- Continue to strengthen knowledge and capacity by providing ongoing training for program staff on emerging labor market trends, innovative tools, and human-centered approaches. Develop a structured training plan that includes a core set of trainings related to the essential functions of the Career Navigator position and maintain flexibility to provide trainings as needed to meet emerging needs of the Career Navigators. Career Navigators reflected that the trainings related to human-centered coaching, motivational interviewing, and positive profiles were especially helpful on the job.
- Update the Career Navigator job description to accurately reflect the job duties, technology proficiencies, and expectations of the job. This is particularly true for some of the more unique aspects of the position including working hours, remote staff policies, case management, and outreach.

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- Consider establishing mentoring options to support new staff in navigating complex participant needs. This may help expedite the learning curve, and positively support and reinforce understanding and implementation of the human-centered principle and approach.
 - Continue to utilize pre-existing meetings to emphasize continuing education and adherence to training concepts in practice. This may include revisiting trainings to reinforce concepts, role-playing scenarios, case studies, or direct field observations.
 - Consider including post-training/placement supports for participants to promote job retention and facilitate adjustment to new employment settings.
 - Develop a fidelity model centered on the program's core components including formalization of a training structure, clearly defined role and function of the Career Navigator position, clear process and procedures, clear evaluation metrics, and data collection expectations and systems. An example of a rubric to inform development of a fidelity model is available in the [Appendix](#).
 - Improve data collection and monitoring through use of a robust data management system to track participant progress, service utilization, and employment outcomes. Consider incorporating feedback mechanisms for participants, Career Navigators, and trainers to continuously refine program components. Use ongoing evaluation insights to identify and replicate successful practices.
 - Ensure consistent dissemination of materials and communications that clearly describe the program, how and where to enroll, and the partnership with service and training providers.

Evaluation Question 2: Are Career Navigators connecting to all people or a subset of individuals who could benefit from career navigation and WorkAdvance services?

Findings

Career Navigators effectively engaged populations with significant employment barriers (e.g., homelessness, disability) but faced challenges in reaching broader demographic groups, including non-English speakers and rural participants. Career Navigators in WDA 2 (Milwaukee) engaged with broader populations who could benefit, whereas those in WDA 5 effectively engaged with a distinct subset. Career Navigators in WDA 2 were more likely to receive referrals after participating in a special event than individuals from WDA 5. Alternatively, individuals located in WDA 5 were more likely to be referred to the Worker Connection Program as a product of an existing partnership with a

local organization. The differing pathways into the program were also linked to variations among the demographic characteristics of program participants.

Recommendations

- Continue to cultivate and leverage the large, diverse network of community-based organizations and training providers in WDAs 2 and 5. To scale up and expand the program into additional geographic areas in Wisconsin, replicate development of similar referral and partnership networks.
- Expand outreach strategies with multilingual marketing materials and partnerships to enhance inclusivity.
- Increase Career Navigator capacity to reduce caseloads and ensure broader engagement.
- Adopt consistent training content and methods for Career Navigators to promote fidelity in outreach.
- Increase outreach efforts to underrepresented and marginalized groups to ensure equitable access to services. This includes creating marketing materials, including multilingual options, to augment in-person outreach efforts.
- Consider leveraging technology to expand access through social media, virtual workshops, job fairs, and other online platforms.
- Consider including a data collection mechanism to identify and track those individuals referred for the program through the enrollment process. This will support the Department of Workforce Development in tracking those who could benefit from career navigation and WorkAdvance services and provide opportunities to follow up at later times with those currently noted as “Non-respondents” in this evaluation.

Evaluation Question 3: Does career navigation (including referring participants to WorkAdvance training) help get people the services and training they need to reach career goals?

Findings

Participants receiving career navigation demonstrated high engagement, with 68% completing positive profiles and 61% achieving employment within 6 months of enrollment. However, individuals with significant barriers required more extensive pre-training support. The partnering community organizations and trainers were viewed by participants as valued partners, addressing an important and previously unmet need. Building relationships with community partners was

deemed critical for generating referrals to the Worker Connection Program, with over 90% of Career Navigator survey respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing. Initial findings indicated increased employment, earnings, and employment stability of both Worker Connection and WorkAdvance training participants, thereby suggesting support for career navigation services.

Recommendations

- Continue to develop and strengthen human-centered approaches to career navigation within Department of Workforce Development programs. This includes determining whether to continue the Career Navigator role as independent positions or to integrate key human-centered principles and expectations into existing positions.
- Gather longitudinal data within the context of a human-centered approach to career navigation to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between participant training duration, service and support needs, labor market participation, and outcomes.
- Improve data collection and monitoring through use of a robust data management system to track participant progress, service utilization, and employment outcomes. Consider incorporating feedback mechanisms for participants, Career Navigators, and trainers to continuously refine program components.

Evaluation Question 4: Did people get “good”/self-sustaining matches to jobs that were in line with their interests, skills, and abilities? Are there short-term and/or long-term services/supports needed to ensure job matches are “good”/self-sustaining?

Findings

Overall, employment outcomes were positive, with WorkAdvance participants accessing career-advancing opportunities. About 40% of Worker Connection Program participants and up to 50% of WorkAdvance training participants were stably employed within the nine months following their registration in the program. WorkAdvance training participants also achieved 55% higher earnings than Worker Connection Program participants in general. Furthermore, two-thirds (67%) of Worker Connection Program participants employed at the time they were surveyed reported being offered benefits by their employer; 79% reported feeling respected, valued, and treated fairly; 90% described their workplace as safe, healthy, and easy to access; and 75% reported being paid a stable and predictable living wage before overtime, tips, or commissions. Therefore, this study indicates that Worker Connection Program participants with complex challenges may benefit from ongoing access to wrap-around services to sustain these outcomes.

Recommendations

- Consider extending follow-up services and ongoing participant supports to enhance job sustainability and career growth.
- Improve data collection and tracking with this population to better understand longitudinal labor market and individual/household economic outcomes.

Evaluation Question 5: Should the training and work duties of the Career Navigator and the WorkAdvance training be expanded and standardized for other career coaches and service providers? Are Career Navigators implementing services consistent with the training they received?

Findings

Eighty-eight percent (88%) of Career Navigators reported that some of the participants they worked with during the Worker Connection program were also involved in the WorkAdvance component. In evaluating the training providers, staff concurred that many providers were good at their jobs but also felt that in the future there should be a more structured path to become a WorkAdvance provider, and that a system of checks and balances to support data-informed decisions could ensure that all providers demonstrate and maintain the capacity necessary to effectively serve participants. Training providers in general were very positive about the program and strongly endorsed continuing WorkAdvance into the future, noting that the unique flexibility and support offered to participants is critical in promoting successful outcomes in comparison with traditional programs. Career Navigators indicated they communicated with WorkAdvance participants monthly or less 52% of the time, with meetings generally being succinct. They noted that many WorkAdvance participants were task oriented and needed fewer supports than the broader Worker Connection Program population. Participants were generally positive about the program, although there was some confusion about the roles of trainers and Career Navigators. Those who enrolled near the end of the program expressed concern over staffing changes and lack of clarity with the process.

Recommendations

- Create an agreement with participants at the outset of WorkAdvance training to clearly outline roles and responsibilities.
- Evaluate effectiveness of training providers.
- Modify the process and system to avoid repetitive paperwork.
- Require providers to report back with specific outcome data on participants.

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- Create an opportunity to follow up with participants and ensure connection to employment following training opportunities.
 - Develop clear policy for managing Career Navigators that are underperforming or disruptive to guide supervisors and enhance efficiency.
 - Consider expanding employer engagement by fostering partnerships with a diverse range of industries to offer participants exposure to nontraditional career paths.
 - Collaborate with employers and trainers to co-design upskilling programs tailored to current market demands, or actively partnering with other Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act partners already engaged in this area, may expand programmatic access and reach.
 - Focus on long-term outcomes by expanding follow-up services, such as post-placement mentoring and career advancement workshops, to improve job retention and satisfaction. This could be offered through the Worker Connection Program or, alternatively, could be coordinated in partnership with other Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act programs.
 - Conduct longitudinal studies to assess participants' career trajectories and economic mobility.

Conclusion

The Worker Connection Program demonstrated the potential value of human-centered, evidence-based workforce strategies in addressing unemployment and underemployment among marginalized groups. This process evaluation provides actionable insight to enhance program consistency, expand outreach, and support long-term participant and programmatic success. By addressing the recommendations, the program can serve as a scalable model for workforce development initiatives.

Section 1. Introduction

The Worker Connection Program, an initiative administered by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development from 2022 to 2024, sought to match job vacancies with unemployed and/or underemployed individuals representing underserved populations. Funded by a \$10 million grant through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the project's main intervention involved the introduction of Career Navigators to assist individuals in reentering the workforce post-pandemic. The overarching goals of the program were to positively facilitate connections across the workforce system and local communities by amplifying, expanding, and activating efforts to engage participants and provide navigation services to assist these individuals in meeting their career goals.

Through a combination of innovative and evidence-based outreach strategies, service delivery, professional development, local informed choice, and navigational assistance tools, the Worker Connection Program piloted a contemporary approach to identifying and engaging the untapped workforce in Wisconsin, focused in workforce development areas (WDAs) 2 and 5. WDA 2 encompassed Milwaukee County and WDA 5 included Brown, Door, Florence, Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Marinette, Menominee, Oconto, Shawano, and Sheboygan counties. While Outagamie County was not targeted for outreach, 26 residents of this county enrolled in the program and received service coordination and/or training. The program was designed using strategies identified and/or developed through prior research, including Wisconsin PROMISE (2014–2021) and Project E3 (2015–2021), to plan workforce solutions and help Wisconsin households and communities. A [similar evidence-based initiative in Ohio](#) served to inform design of the WorkAdvance components of the program. Furthermore, the Worker Connection Program was intentionally aligned with the federal administration's [Good Jobs Initiative](#) and the Good Jobs principles defined and guided the work. Program improvements included better identification and engagement of individuals from underserved groups, provision of supports necessary to promote career advancement through equitable recruitment and hiring, and fair pay at living wages with benefits that support economic security and mobility. Notably, leveraging and advancing the skills required to effectively meet business needs is an established driver in career advancement.

Key programmatic elements of the pilot included (a) outreach and rapid engagement via directory lists, community networking, and relationship building; (b) strength-based discovery and career planning to re-employment; (c) connecting job seekers to relevant training, employment, and community resources; (d) continuous examination of fidelity and performance; and (e) technical assistance to identify and/or set up quality WorkAdvance sector-based training programs that are based on local community workforce needs and partnerships.

The operational goals of the Worker Connection Program were to:

1. Identify and engage 2,500 diverse job seekers and individuals who were not currently in the labor force at the time of recruitment but wanted to participate if provided the appropriate supports.
2. Engage 2,500 participants to identify their positive profile assessment of personal skills and assets, and conditions of work, as well as provide coaching regarding how to best navigate existing local services and supports helping job seekers reach their career goals within the context of local training and job opportunities.
3. Of the 2,500 enrolled participants, engage 500 individuals in WorkAdvance sector-based training, leading to a good job and/or providing career advancement opportunities

The Worker Connection Program used a holistic, strengths-based approach that initially targeted participants identifying as single mothers, unmarried minority men, immigrants, or individuals without a high school diploma. As the program advanced, target populations expanded to include individuals in rural areas, the unhoused, justice-involved individuals, those in recovery, and people with disabilities.

To reach the goals of the Worker Connection Program, a service delivery model was created to consider the context and complexities of participants' lives through: (a) human-centered rapid engagement, (b) development of a positive profile and identification of work conditions; (c) training, employment, and resources; (d) wrap-around supports; and (e) targeted outreach to community organizations and specific populations.

To enroll the participants in the Worker Connection Program, outreach strategies involved partnership with community organizations and targeted campaigns at locations including career and resource fairs, establishment of "office hours" at community resources (e.g., community libraries, shelters), and presentations at various locales throughout Brown and Milwaukee County. In addition, providers of WorkAdvance trainings, an evidenced-based model focused on career pathways and training, would also refer participants.

Program leadership anticipated cross-enrollment across Worker Connection and other WIOA programs, specifically the Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth Programs (Title I) and Job Service (Title III). However, internal evaluation conducted by the Worker Connection program in October 2023 indicated very low co-enrollment rates. Across both WDAs 2 and 5, 64 (6%) of the 1,160 adults served under Title I and 59 (<1%) of the 6,781 individuals served under Title III were also enrolled in Worker Connection.

As of April 2024, Career Navigators had developed partnerships with 731 organizations; 3,127 participants were enrolled in the Worker Connection Program; and 533 Worker Connection Program participants were enrolled in one of 22 different WorkAdvance training programs. The Career Navigators provided 19,755 services. Of the 3,127 participants engaged in the program, 2,126 participants (68%) created a positive profile. A positive profile tool was used to identify strengths, assets, and positive attributes that highlighted the participant's respective skills, knowledge, and experience relevant to their job search and career development. Of the participants who received the positive profile, 61% were employed within six months of developing their profile.

Researchers through IPARRT in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at University of Wisconsin–Madison were contracted to evaluate the effectiveness of the Department of Workforce Development's Worker Connection Program. Along with the three operational goals, the overarching evaluation goals of the program centered on four key objectives.

Evaluation Objectives

- Evaluate which targeted outreach techniques effectively enroll and engage diverse job seekers, as well as those individuals not in the labor force but interested in joining with the right supports.
- Evaluate Career Navigators' use of a human-centered approach in their work developing positive profiles with participants to inform career goals, service and training navigation, and career-focused service delivery.
- Evaluate whether Worker Connection Program participants' employment outcomes improved relative to their status prior to participating in the program, and to non-participants with similar characteristics.
- Compare Worker Connection and WorkAdvance participants, as well as only Worker Connection participants, with comparable non-participant job seekers.

Section 2. Background

By piloting a coordinated service package that intentionally embedded career navigation professionals within the workforce development system to implement an array of evidence-based practices, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development sought to ascertain whether factors present in the Worker Connection and WorkAdvance models had a positive effect on participant engagement and outcomes.

The aim of this process evaluation was to better understand key program elements and how they influenced outcomes at both the individual and systemic levels. As described below, several theoretical constructs informed and framed the evaluation process. “Individuals” in the context of this process evaluation are the Career Navigator professionals as well as the Worker Connection Program participants.

The importance of considering both personal and environmental factors on employment outcomes is well established in the rehabilitation literature (Parsons, 1909; Soares et al., 2022; Van Vianen, 2018). We examined participant demographics and service referrals to understand need, engagement, and relationship to employment outcomes. Trait and factor theory emphasizes that the person (e.g., needs and values) and environment (e.g., supplies and values) together predict human behavior and that individuals must understand themselves before they pick an occupation (Van Vianen, 2018). When personal traits match the job factor, there is a greater likelihood for successful job performance and satisfaction (Lagon, 2023).

It is also important to understand prior research regarding case worker characteristics (e.g., gender, age, race, education, experience) and their influence on participant outcomes (Behncke et al., 2010a; Behncke et al., 2010b; Cederlof et al., 2021) in the context of the Worker Connection Program. Evidence regarding the ability of caseworkers in general unemployment programs to assign individuals to specific employment and training services is mixed at best. For example, Lechner and Smith (2007) found that Swiss caseworkers did no better than random assignment of services. Other evidence shows that caseworker meetings do speed up the transition of general unemployed workers to employment (Pedersen et al., 2012; Rosholm, 2014). Schiprowski (2020) demonstrated that using data on unexpected caseworker absences and the effects of the meetings with unemployed individuals that were missed varied substantially by caseworkers. This research suggests that differences in knowledge and skill among case workers matters, in addition to any “hassle cost” effects of the meetings. Similarly, the integration of Career Navigator-like positions into employment programs serving individuals with disabilities has demonstrated a positive impact for those experiencing multiple systemic and individual influencers (Anderson et al., 2021; Hartman et al., 2019; Patnaik et al., 2022).

Within the Worker Connection Program, the role of Career Navigators extended beyond that of traditional employment service caseworkers. Career Navigators provided participants with tailored referrals that matched their interests, skills, and abilities. They coached participants in navigating these services and arranged a personalized, seamless handoff with service providers. Career Navigators also provided ongoing motivational supports, including career services when needed, to ensure rapid engagement (prompt initiation of services) and to fill service gaps. To promote these human-centered approaches, Career Navigator professionals received training in a number of evidence-based practices. This involved developing a positive profile, reviewing conditions of work (e.g., work hours and scheduling, job roles, and expectations, physical work environment), and developing clear action-planning steps with participants.

To better understand participant motivation and behavior, we used a theory of change to guide evaluation efforts. Behavioral Activation Theory seeks to identify and promote links between individuals' personal sources of positive reinforcement and specific intervention activities (Hopko et al., 2003; Hopko et al., 2015). The goal of these strategies is to help participants identify and overcome narrowly defined problems and support their progress toward an overarching goal. Understanding the role that additional supportive services play in employment engagement and outcomes can further inform the design of public programs regarding how best to meet the needs of individuals experiencing multiple individual and systemic obstacles (Askew et al., 2012; Carter & Blanch, 2019).

Consistent with this underlying theoretical foundation, the specific programmatic elements of the Worker Connection pilot were anticipated to have an impact on employment outcomes for participants, influenced by the specific evidence-based practices integrated throughout the model. These practices were intentionally selected by Department of Workforce Development leadership and staff given the growing body of research supporting their efficacy in promoting improved engagement, employment, and earning outcomes with varying populations. Through implementation of these practices, the evaluation seeks to identify:

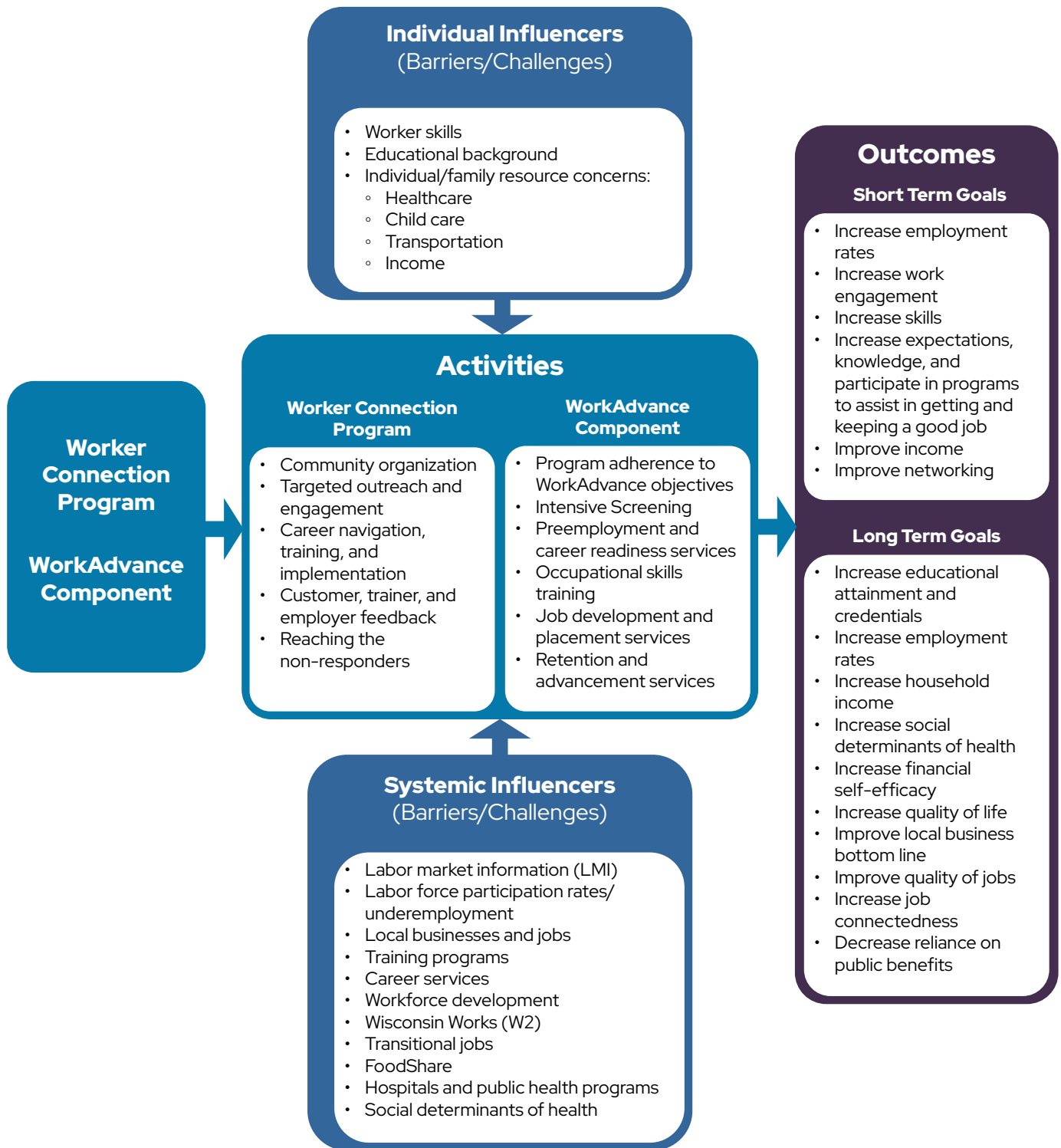
1. key factors that drive change across locations
2. key factors that explain variants for those receiving the services (participants)
3. key factors that explain variants for those providing the services (Career Navigators)
4. key factors that explain variants in targeted outreach, including the connections and relationships developed with community organizations
5. which programmatic factors are important in establishing, or have the potential to establish, fidelity

The Theory of Change Logic Model (**Figure 1**) depicts a series of inputs, contextual factors, and activities (interventional services) that influence the intended short- and long-term outcomes of the program. Issues or circumstances perceived to impede an individual's ability to successfully obtain and maintain employment are often called barriers and challenges—yet these terms often imply that impediments to employment have a harmful influence. However, such factors can also enhance persistence and push workers to develop skills or abilities that certain employers may value. Rather than assume these conditions are barriers, the Worker Connection Program opts to use the more contemporary term “influencers” to identify and describe issues participants face at both the individual and systems levels. Influencers acknowledges the social determinants and related considerations that are important to identify and address to support positive outcomes.

Contemporary research supporting these activities is robust and demonstrates Wisconsin's commitment to promoting the integration of evidence-based practices into broader public policy and employment initiatives consistent with the Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018. The Worker Connection Program involves key service interventions such as targeted outreach, engagement, systems navigation and coaching specialists (i.e., Career Navigators), and connection with wrap-around support services that have demonstrated efficacy in similar populations through prior demonstration projects (Hartman et al., 2019; Mamun et al., 2019; Patnaik et al., 2022; Selekman et al., 2018). Likewise, the five key elements encompassed in the WorkAdvance portion of the program align with those identified by Greenberg and Schaberg (2020).

The theory of change for this program suggested that implementation of the identified programmatic and evidence-based service elements would result in positive, short-term impacts including increased service engagement, employment rate, work engagement, work skills, expectations, income, networking, as well as meet workforce needs. The longer-term goals included: increased educational and credential attainment, employment rates, household income, positive social determinants of health, financial self-sufficiency and quality of life, along with improvements in the bottom line for local businesses, in employment quality and job connectedness, and a decreased reliance on public benefits.

Figure 1. Theory of Change Logic Model



Section 3. Process Evaluation

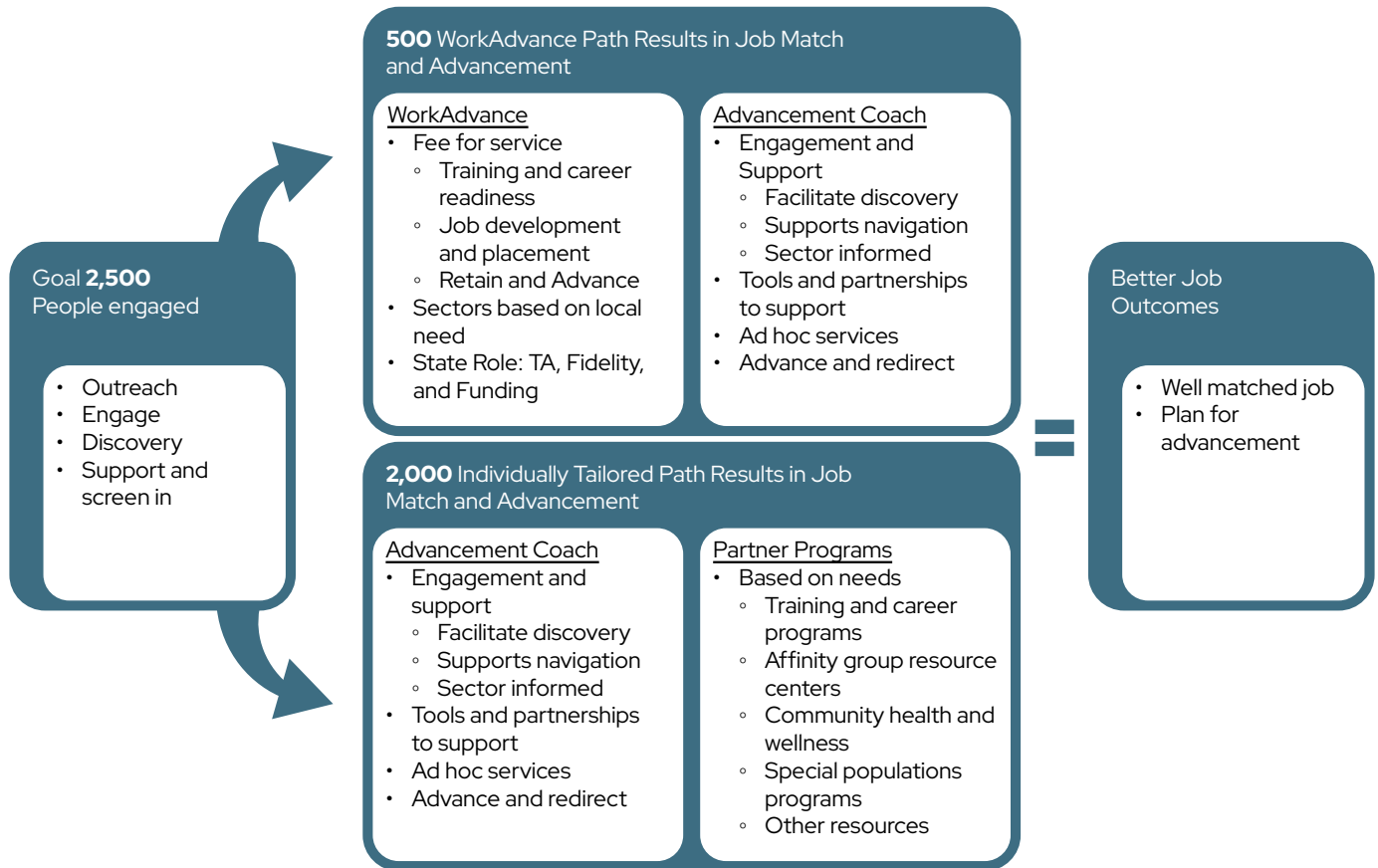
Purpose of the Process Evaluation

The process evaluation for this initiative centered on gathering and analyzing data across multiple stakeholder groups within the program. Specifically, the evaluation team aimed to better understand the role and perspective of the Career Navigators' responsibilities and assess the fidelity of applying knowledge acquired through training in practice. Similarly, evaluators gathered data from community organizations and public programs regarding the effectiveness of targeted outreach and referral to the Worker Connection Program. And finally, data were collected directly from program participants and non-respondents (e.g., individuals referred to the program who did not actually enroll) to better understand their perspectives and the contextual factors influencing their engagement decisions. In addition to specified data collection activities, the process evaluation team analyzed extant administrative data provided by the Department of Workforce Development to address the evaluation questions, as relevant.

The Department of Workforce Development enrolled 3,127 participants through the Worker Connection Program by cultivating connections across employers, families and individuals, community organizations, health organizations, and service providers of all types. Participants received contemporary career navigation services, in addition to other supportive services, from Career Navigators as well as employment and related wrap-around supports through community partner organizations. Of the total participants, 533 engaged in the WorkAdvance component of the program while also remaining eligible for all other Worker Connection services. WorkAdvance offered paid, short-term training to interested participants for occupations with career advancement opportunities in addition to having a training provider that met the necessary criteria. Both programmatic pathways aimed to support participants in achieving better job outcomes that comported with their plans for advancement. Enrollment into both Worker Connection services and WorkAdvance exceeded programmatic goals outlined in **Figure 2**, Worker Connection Participant Engagement Goals.

Figure 2. Worker Connection Program Enrollment and Engagement Goals

The Worker Connection Program



Evaluation Questions

To better understand key implementation and contextual factors of the pilot, along with corresponding outcomes, a series of key questions were identified by the Department of Workforce Development.

Question 1: Was the Worker Connection Program’s targeted outreach, career navigation, and WorkAdvance training implemented as proposed?

- a. Can a fidelity model(s) be developed based on findings?
- b. What are the key components of implemented targeted outreach, career navigation, and WorkAdvance training?

Question 2: Are Career Navigators connecting to all people or a subset of individuals who could benefit from career navigation and WorkAdvance services?

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- Question 3:** Does career navigation (including referring participants to WorkAdvance) help get people the services and training needed to reach career goals?
- Question 4:** Did people get “good”/self-sustaining matches to jobs that were in line with their interests, skills, abilities?
- a. Are there short-term and/or long-term services/supports needed to ensure job matches are “good”/self-sustaining?
- Question 5:** Should the training and work duties of the Career Navigators and the WorkAdvance training be expanded and standardized for other career coaches and service providers funded by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act grants? Are Career Navigators implementing services consistent with the training they received?
- a. How should career navigation, coaching, and WorkAdvance training services be standardized to increase the likelihood of matching people with “good”/self-sustaining jobs?

Data Sources

The evaluation team used a variety of data sources to ensure comprehensiveness across stakeholder groups and methods. In addition to administrative data provided by the Department of Workforce Development, the team gathered data from Career Navigators, supervisors and coordinators, participants, and community organizations and training partners via surveys, interviews, observations, and focus groups. Each of these gathered data sources have been summarized below as well as in **Figure 3**.

Career Navigators

First, a brief survey was administered via Qualtrics to all Career Navigators, followed by direct observation and interviews with the current Career Navigators, to assess how the principles and knowledge acquired through specified training is being applied in practice. The survey was disseminated to both current and former Career Navigators. We received 31 responses including all 19 current Career Navigators, implying a 100% response rate from current Career Navigators. The survey included items addressing key aspects of their navigational support responsibilities, understanding of the key WorkAdvance tenets acquired through training, and self-assessment regarding application of these principles and knowledge in practice. The evaluation team then developed an instrument based on the key tenets and evidence-based practices identified across the multiple training components for evaluators to use when recording observed behaviors, including the prescribed WorkAdvance components. Career Navigators were observed and evaluated using the instrument for approximately one 60-minute participant meeting. Following the one-hour direct observation of each

Career Navigator ($N = 16$, conducted April–May 2024 in person and online), evaluators conducted an open-ended, semi-structured interview with the Career Navigator ($N = 17$) to better understand the Navigator’s actions and rationale during their meeting with the participant. One Career Navigator was not available for observation.

Supervisors and Coordinators

Virtual interviews were conducted with program coordinators, Career Navigator supervisors, and specialists ($N = 8$) to better understand management perspectives as they relate to the evaluation questions. At the time the interviews were conducted all eight current Career Navigator supervisors and specialists were interviewed, indicating a 100% response rate. The aim was to determine the degree to which Career Navigators were implementing targeted outreach and career navigation services as intended and consistent with the training they received.

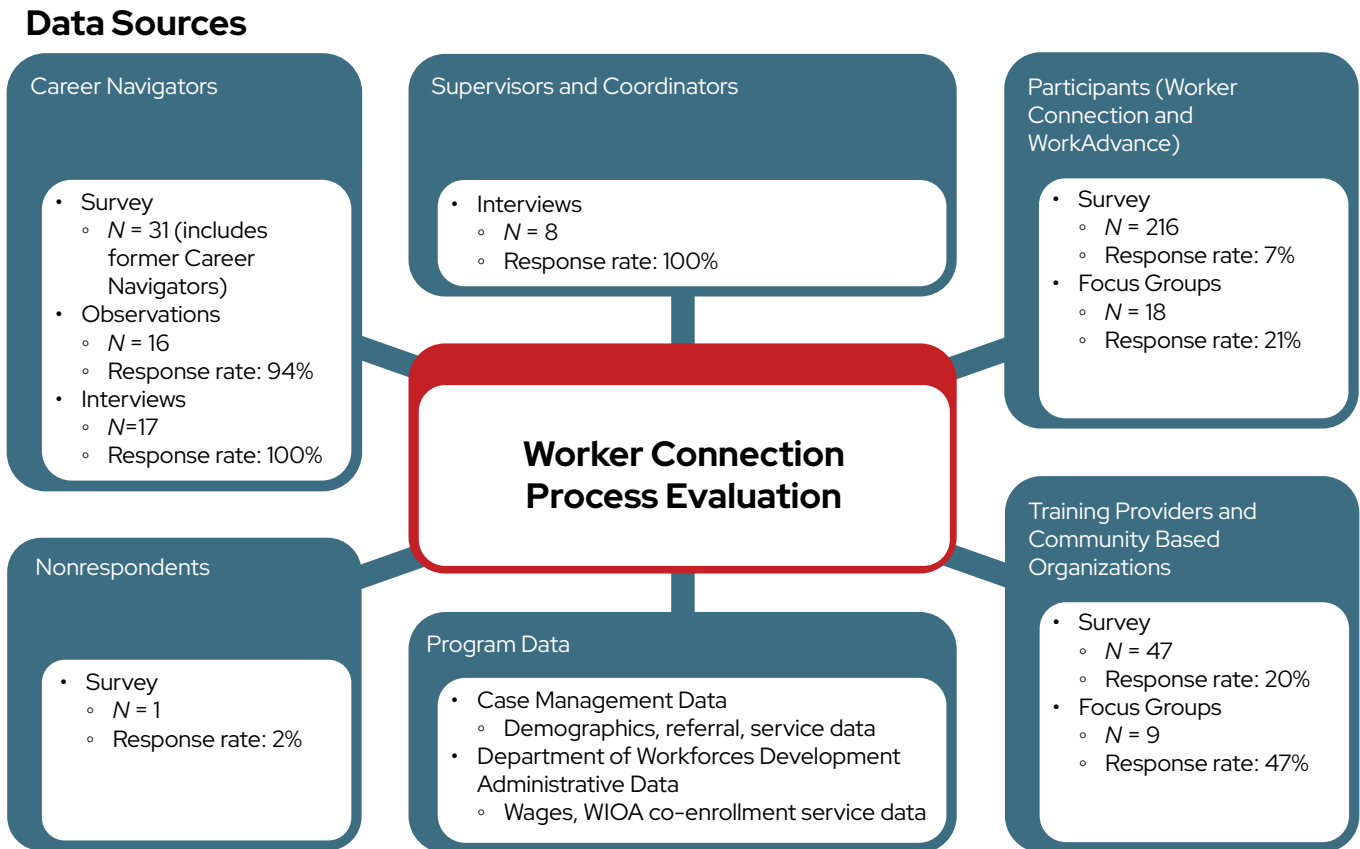
Participants in Worker Connection and WorkAdvance

Surveys were disseminated to 3,123 enrolled participants electronically via Qualtrics. Two hundred and sixteen (216) surveys were completed, representing a response rate of 7%. Respondents indicating interest were then invited to participate in one of six focus groups. Two evaluators co-facilitated each participant group and the team managed participant scheduling, invitations and registrations, follow-up, incentives, recording transcription, and data cleaning. The evaluators worked closely with Worker Connection staff in determining the methods and questions to ask based on the information needed.

Community Organizations and Training Partners

Contacts or representatives of the participating community organizations were surveyed and interviewed to determine their awareness of the Worker Connection Program, particularly its goals and mission. The evaluation team disseminated surveys to 231 training providers and community-based organizations electronically through Qualtrics. We received 47 completed responses, presenting a response rate of 20.35%. Following analysis of the survey results, representatives were invited to participate in one of six focus groups. Two evaluators co-facilitated each group using guided, semi-structured questions. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed for analysis. The evaluators sought to better understand the relationship between these organizations and the Worker Connection Program. Of the 19 training providers and community-based organizations that were interested in a focus group, nine attended—a response rate of 47.37%. Responses to the survey informed development of the focus group questions. The process evaluation team used a phronetic, iterative approach (Tracy, 2018) to analyze the focus group data and identify key themes.

Figure 3. Data Sources



The University of Wisconsin–Madison process evaluation team, comprised of members from IPARRT housed within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research and faculty from the Department of Economics, sought to answer the evaluation questions by implementing a series of strategies across five related projects. Specific evaluation questions were inherently embedded within each project.

1. Evaluation Project A: Community Organization and Targeted Outreach and Engagement
2. Evaluation Project B: Career Navigation Training and Implementation
3. Evaluation Project C: Customer Feedback
4. Evaluation Project D: Reaching the Non-Respondents
5. Evaluation Project E: Program Adherence to WorkAdvance Objectives

Evaluation Project A: Community Organization and Targeted Outreach and Engagement

Question 1: Was the Worker Connection Program’s targeted outreach implemented as proposed?

- a. What are the key components of implemented targeted outreach, career navigation, and WorkAdvance training?

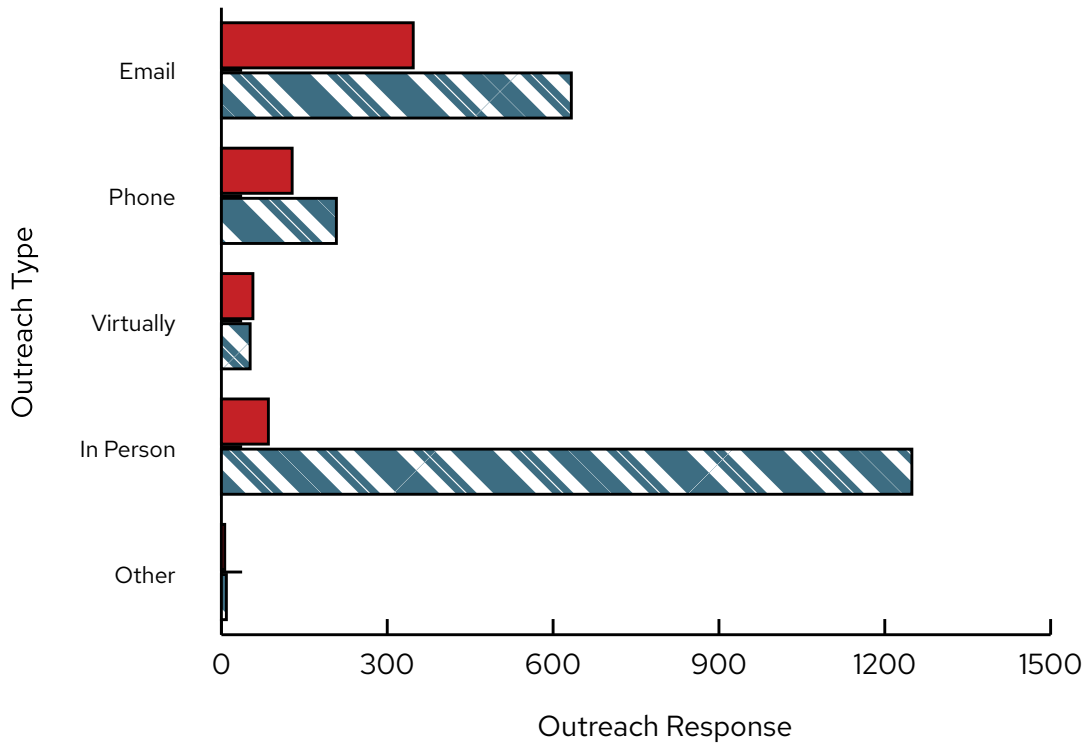
Question 2: Are Career Navigators connecting to all people or a subset of individuals who could benefit from career navigation and WorkAdvance services?



Extant program data were used to identify the reach and effectiveness of targeted outreach strategies in engaging the intended participant populations. The University of Wisconsin evaluation team also conducted mixed-method field studies (i.e., quantitative analysis of extant data and survey data; qualitative analysis of focus group data) in WDAs 2 and 5 to determine the outcomes of outreach efforts to the community organizations by Career Navigators.

Targeted Outreach

In assessing the Worker Connection Program’s targeted outreach, career navigation, and WorkAdvance training and underlying key components, it is clear that different approaches were aligned to the geographic areas rather than a “one size fits all” approach. This is particularly important given the low co-enrollment rate a between Worker Connection and the WIOA Title I and III programs. It may suggest that the unique and flexible strategies used by Career Navigators were better suited to engaging these underserved populations. Organizations were classified into one of nine categories—please see [Appendix](#). Although outreach approaches to organizations in both communities were comparable across four outreach strategies (email, phone, virtual, other), those in WDA 5 received in-person outreach at a greater rate than organizations located in WDA 2 ($\chi^2(1, N = 2,616) = 349.25, p < .001$). The increased utilization of in-person outreach in WDA 5 may have been in response to several factors such as availability of organizations to receive other outreach strategies, hesitancy to engage in the program, geographic distance, or an underlying concern regarding the applicability of the program to individuals served by these organizations.

Figure 4. Outreach Type to Organizations by WDA

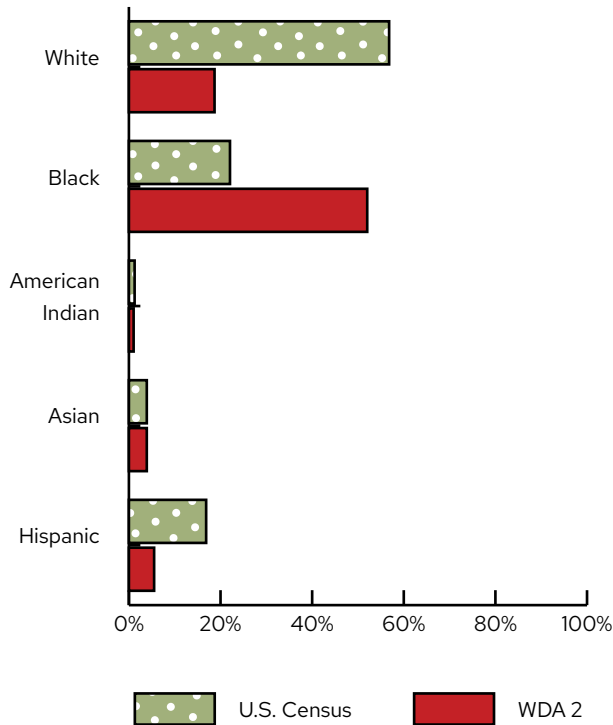


	Email	Phone	Virtually	In Person	Other
 WDA 2	347 (56%)	128 (21%)	57 (9%)	85 (14%)	6 (1%)
 WDA 5	633 (29%)	208 (10%)	52 (2%)	1249 (58%)	9 (<1%)

In response to these approaches to outreach, there was a corresponding effect on the referral process for participants in the Worker Connection Program. Although both geographic areas were observed as benefiting from developing partnerships with local organizations and hosting specific events to build awareness of the program, individuals from WDA 2 were more likely to have referrals after participating in a special event than individuals from WDA 5. Alternatively, individuals located in WDA 5 were more likely to be referred to the Worker Connection Program as a product of an existing partnership with a local organization. As such, those different pathways into the program were also linked to variations among the demographic factors of program participants.

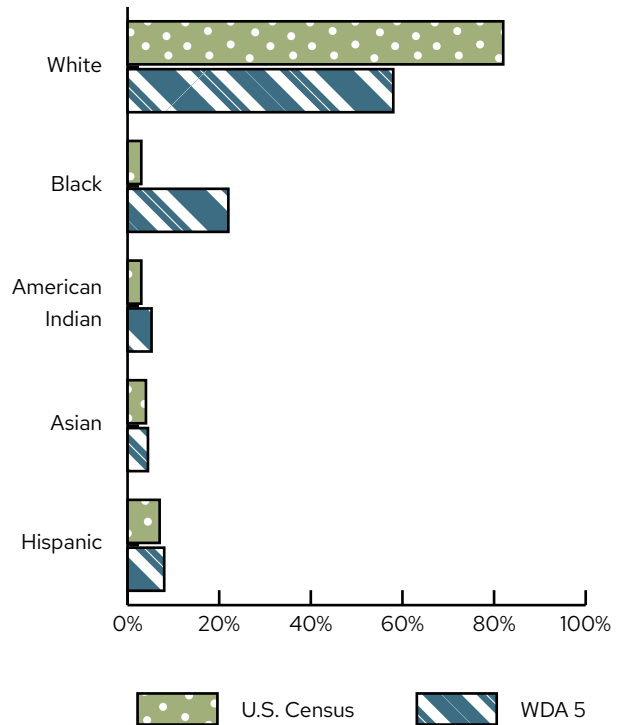
Figures 5 and 6 provide an overview of the representation of individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds in each WDA as well as comparison data of the representation of the population within each community according to the U.S. Census. WDA 2 and 5, relative to the census data, were observed having a high proportion of Black participants in the program. WDA 5 was also observed as having a relatively higher proportion of Hispanic individuals participating in the program.

Figure 5. Race and Ethnicity of WDA 2 Participants compared to U.S. Census



	U.S. Census	WDA 2
White	57%	19%
Black	23%	52%
American Indian	1%	1%
Asian	5%	5%
Hispanic	15%	6%

Figure 6. Race and Ethnicity of WDA 5 Participants compared to U.S. Census



	U.S. Census	WDA 5
White	85%	55%
Black	2%	22%
American Indian	3%	5%
Asian	3%	3%
Hispanic	7%	8%

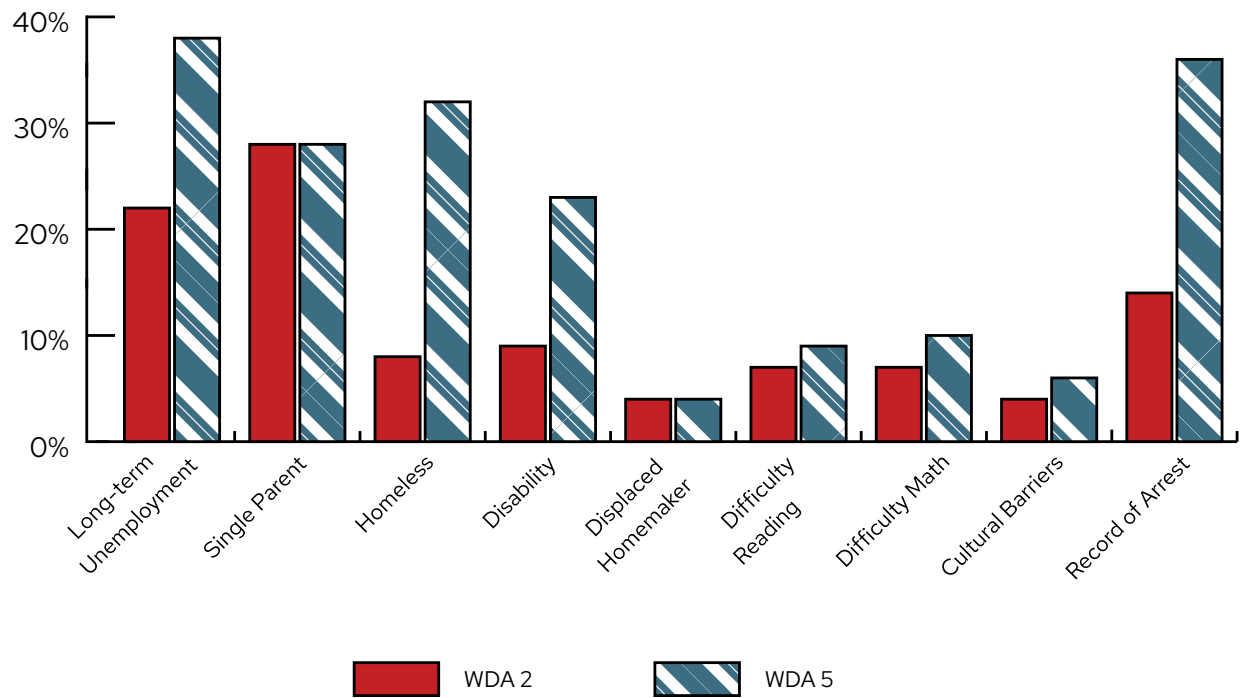
In WDA 2, the percentage of male participants served under Worker Connection Program was 42% and female participants was 42%, with 17% either not reporting or not identifying under one of these genders. The U.S. Census report for WDA 2 indicates the area is comprised of 49% males and 51% females. In WDA 5, the percentage of male participants served under the Worker Connection Program was 56% and female participants was 39%, with 5% either not reporting or not identifying under one of these genders. The U.S. Census report for WDA 5 indicates the area is comprised of 51% males and 49% females.

Participants from both WDA 2 and WDA 5 identified several barriers to employment. However, the representation of different barriers varied among these two regions. For example, participants from WDA 5 were more likely to identify as: long-term unemployed ($\chi^2 (1, N = 2,310) = 67.28, p < .001$), homeless ($\chi^2 (1, N = 2,310) = 262.83, p$

< .001), have a disability ($\chi^2 (1, N = 2,310) = 120.21, p < .001$), have difficulty reading and speaking in English ($\chi^2 (1, N = 2,309) = 8.56, p < .002$), have difficulty with math ($\chi^2 (1, N = 2,310) = 9.21, p < .002$), and have a record of arrest ($\chi^2 (1, N = 2,310) = 135.58, p < .001$).

The variation in the representation of barriers among participants in WDA 2 and WDA 5 may be an indicator of the different outreach strategies and organizations within these two regions. As noted above, in-person outreach activities were more likely to occur in WDA 5. For example, targeted outreach efforts conducted in WDA 5 included visiting homeless shelters, recovery centers, and correctional facilities. These outreach efforts likely resulted in increased representation of justice-involved individuals, individuals who are homeless, and individuals with a disability.

Figure 7. Barriers to Employment Among WDA 2 and WDA 5 Participants

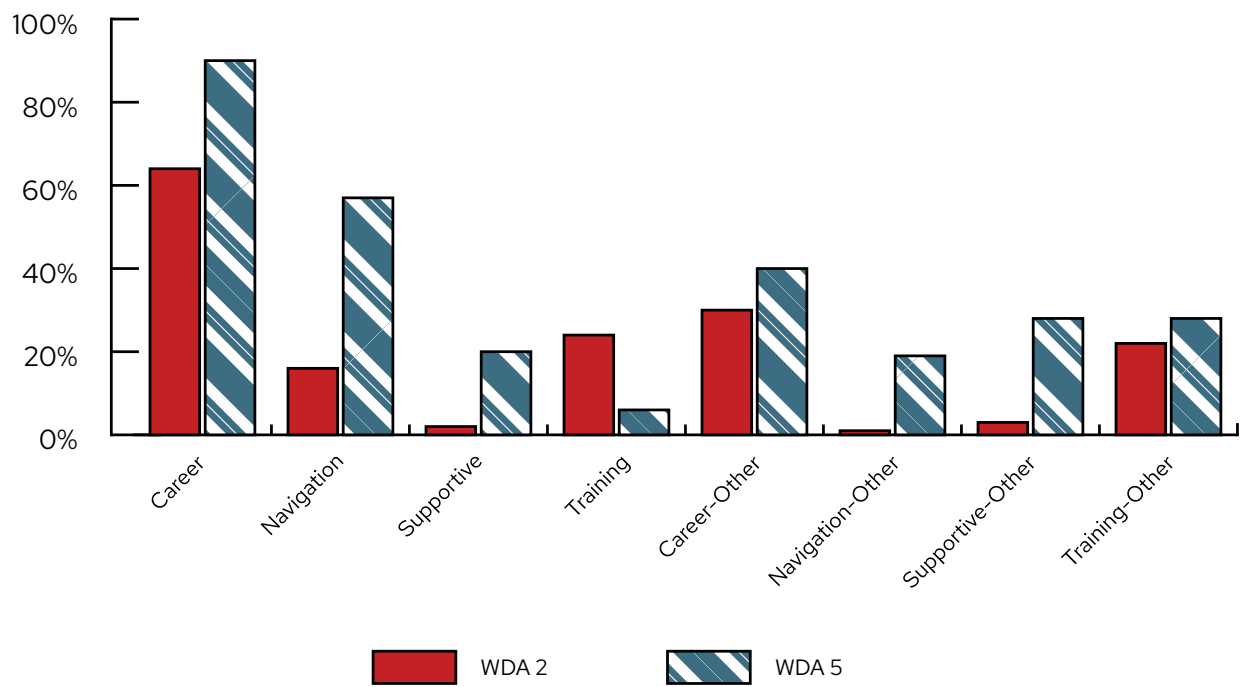


	Long-term Unemployment	Single Parent	Homeless	Disability	Displaced Homemaker	Difficulty Reading	Difficulty Math	Cultural Barriers	Record of Arrest
WDA 2	21%	28%	7%	7%	3%	6%	6%	3%	15%
WDA 5	36%	28%	33%	23%	3%	9%	9%	5%	36%

Although these individuals represent a subset of the larger communities, they also likely represent the population that would have the greatest need, and as such experience the greatest impact, of the Worker Connection program relative to their peers without these vocational barriers.

The demographic data provided above are intended to provide context for these regions and how they differ from each other in terms of both U.S. Census data and the enrollment in the Worker Connection Program. Variations in both the populations of these regions and those served under the program are important to consider when evaluating the fidelity of services provided. In reality, these two regions represent divergent groups of participants with different organizational supports, goals, and service delivery needs. Although the Career Navigators completed the same training modules as part of their orientation (e.g., Guided Group Discovery, Family Advocacy, Markle Human-Centered, Skills-Based, Benefits Cliff), the application of services would necessarily need to respond to the specific needs of participants and their respective sub-geographic areas.

Figure 8. Worker Connection Services by WDA



	Career	Navigation	Supportive	Training	Career-Other	Navigation-Other	Supportive-Other	Training-Other
WDA 2	68%	15%	4%	25%	29%	2%	4%	24%
WDA 5	91%	55%	21%	6%	41%	18%	28%	28%

Evidence in support of the targeted application of career navigation and WorkAdvance training services is apparent when considered within the context of individuals experiencing barriers to employment (e.g., long-term unemployed, single parent, homelessness, disability, displaced homemaker, difficulty with reading, difficulty with math, cultural barriers, record of arrest). Almost uniformly, individuals experiencing influencers to employment were more likely to receive career, navigation, and supportive services than individuals not experiencing these barriers. Career Navigators, likely

recognizing the impact of these barriers on the capacity to obtain and engage in work, sought to develop individual capacity prior to referring individuals into WorkAdvance training. Conversely, WorkAdvance training services were more likely to be provided to individuals with either no or limited barriers to employment. Through identifying individuals who required more limited services in addressing barriers that would impact their ability to work, Career Navigators appear to have engaged in a higher rate of referrals for WorkAdvance training services.

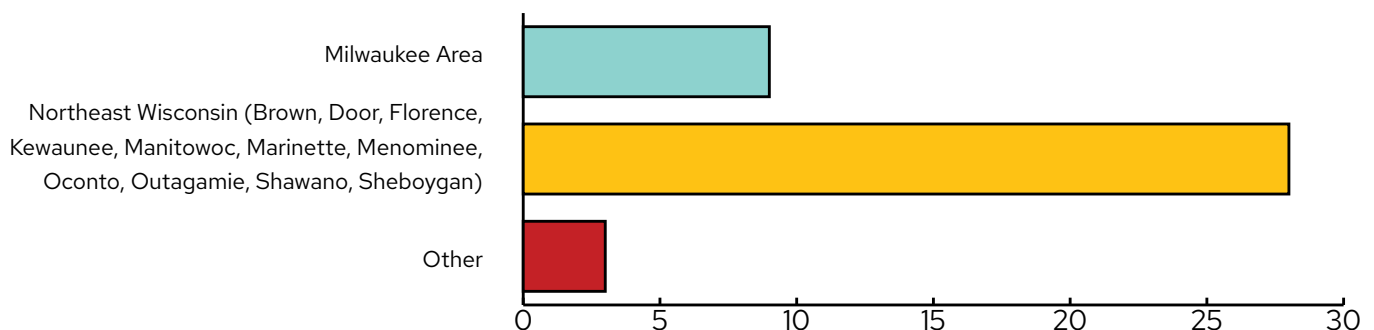
In considering the theory of change guiding the Worker Connection Program and plans regarding the program implementation, the program was implemented as proposed. While the Career Navigators used the same general framework to guide their practice, they were also responsive to the specific needs of individuals referred to the program as a function of the organizations that elected to partner on the project. The responsiveness of the program to individuals' needs underlines the personalized focus of the program.

The Career Navigators, particularly those in WDA 5, connected to a subset of individuals who could benefit from career navigation and WorkAdvance services. Likely an artifact of the outreach strategies, targeted in-person recruitment produced a core constituency of individuals who will experience greater barriers to employment and require more intensive career development and direction services to fully benefit from training services.

Geographic Location of Community-Based Organizations

The majority of respondents (70%) reported that their organization is located in Northeast Wisconsin, which includes regions such as Brown, Door, Florence, Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Marinette, Menominee, and other counties. A smaller proportion (23%) of respondents indicated their organization is based in the Milwaukee area, while only 8% selected "Other" as their location, such as Southeastern Wisconsin. The distribution suggests that organizations had a strong presence in Northern Wisconsin, with a moderate reach in Milwaukee (**Figure 9**).

Figure 9. Organizational Location

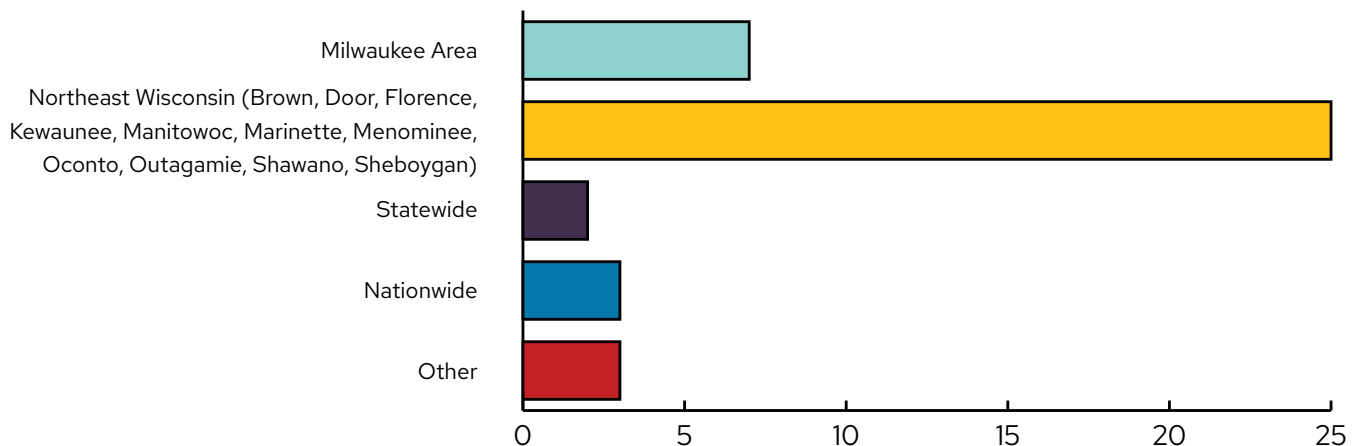


Which of the following best describes where your organization is located?	Percentage	Count
Milwaukee Area	23%	9
Northeast Wisconsin (Brown, Door, Florence, Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Marinette, Menominee, Oconto, Outagamie, Shawano, Sheboygan)	70%	28
Other	8%	3

Service Areas

Similarly, the primary area served by these organizations largely mirrors the location data. Around 63% of respondents noted that their organization served individuals in Northeast Wisconsin, while 18% indicated that they primarily serve the Milwaukee area. Interestingly, a small portion of organizations operate on a broader level, with 8% reporting that they serve individuals nationwide, and 5% serve statewide, as shown in **Figure 10**. The findings reflect a diverse range of geographic service scopes, from local to national.

Figure 10. Service Areas



Where does your organization primarily serve individuals?	Percentage	Count
Milwaukee Area	18%	7
Northeast Wisconsin (Brown, Door, Florence, Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Marinette, Menominee, Oconto, Outagamie, Shawano, Sheboygan)	63%	25
Statewide	5%	2
Nationwide	8%	3
Other	8%	3

Career Navigator Perspective on Targeted Outreach

Overall, the targeted outreach efforts of the Worker Connection Program were rooted in personal engagement and strategic partnerships. Career Navigators used various methods to build trust and establish connections with community partners. The survey findings indicated that the most frequently used outreach methods were personal connections and emails, each chosen by 19% of Career Navigators. Networking events, which were cited by 18%, were also significant, with Career Navigators finding them particularly effective for face-to-face interactions.

One Career Navigator emphasized the effectiveness of face-to-face interactions: “Literally stopping in the organization, unannounced, worked best, as it seemed like I connected with a person who has true passion to help people, rather than sending an email or making a formal presentation.”

Another Career Navigator mentioned the value of networking events, stating: “Networking events worked best. By attending these events, I was able to find out what services potentially partners offered...This [method] helped to determine if a partnership would be a good fit.”

Overall, the targeted outreach efforts of the Worker Connection Program were rooted in personal engagement and strategic partnerships. Career Navigators used various methods to build trust and establish connections with community partners. The survey findings indicated that the most frequently used outreach methods were personal connections and emails, each chosen by 19% of Career Navigators. Networking events, which were cited by 18%, were also significant, with Career Navigators finding them particularly effective for face-to-face interactions.

Despite these successes, Career Navigators did face challenges in outreach, particularly related to resource constraints and language barriers. One Career Navigator remarked on the need for better outreach materials and bilingual support, stating “outreach-ability was hindered without marketing tools or consistent access to multilingual support.” This gap limited the ability to engage non-English speakers effectively and hampered broader community reach.

Connecting With Community-Based Organizations and WorkAdvance Trainers

Through conversations with the Career Navigators, it was evident that connecting and collaborating with area community-based organizations was an important part of the Worker Connection Program. Career Navigators discussed how learning more about the resources provided by community organizations helped avoid duplication of services and led to “referral reciprocity.” Many individuals noted that networking through email was less successful than physically meeting contacts out in the community. Efforts in community organization outreach also worked toward addressing gaps in the system. A Career Navigator provided this example: “Yeah, I think connecting with the community-

based partners improves our strategy or improves our outreach efforts. Because again, if our job is Career Navigator, we're trying to connect people with other resources... 'We can do this for you. We will do X, Y, and Z and we'll try to find housing for you. We'll get that resume done for you. We'll find a job for you.'" Career Navigators noted that the flexibility of the position allowed for creativity in this realm and helped participants avoid difficulties in accessing and navigating services.

Having a consistent physical presence at partnering organizations increased collaboration and created a natural opportunity to connect. In building their organizational networks, Career Navigators discussed the importance of identifying the "needle mover" in organizations. Taking the time to determine the needle mover allowed the Career Navigators to better understand how the partnering organization worked, which allowed them to create targeted discussions about the Worker Connection Program, and thus finally created opportunities for collaboration. Relationship building also helped to address the perceived threat of competition for participants. Career Navigators felt it was important to clarify that they were not there to compete for participants but rather to work together to appropriately address participant needs. One Career Navigator summed up their interactions with organizations nicely by using an analogy of "Three cups of tea—the first one is just introducing, the second is learning more about you, and finally the third is 'Will you send me clients?'" Additionally, Career Navigators found it most successful to participate in warm handoffs, such as personal introductions, when making referrals and to consistently follow-up with the participant afterwards.

Career Navigators had success in delivering on the promise of rapid engagement with community partners. One Career Navigator highlighted this by stating, "[Worker Connection] has the fastest turnaround on processing of any agency that I've dealt with in the last seven years."

Another individual complimented the program, "They're experts in the employment piece and they know who needs what and they're not competitive. That's another thing that I like."

In gathering data from community organizations and trainers, community organizations had positive comments and support for the Worker Connection Program and strongly recommended that it continue into the future. The additional flexibility and resources were key in reaching and engaging underserved populations experiencing multiple barriers/employment influencers. Challenges with the program centered around the initial start-up. The community organizations had a lack of clarity about the role of the Career Navigators, what community resources were available, how to make connections, and programmatic policy and procedure. However, once the program was underway, community organizations noted that things ran much more smoothly, including referral processes and ongoing work with participants. The Career Navigators were viewed as valued partners in the community who addressed an important and previously unmet need.

Career Navigators also agreed with many of the experiences discussed by the organizations. Building relationships with community partners was deemed critical for generating referrals to the Worker Connection Program, with over 90% of Career Navigator survey participants strongly agreeing or agreeing. One Career Navigator noted that “building positive partnerships (trust) is the single most important component in generating referrals to the Worker Connection Program.”

Another emphasized that “establishing strong connections with community partners can indeed foster collaboration and support, potentially leading to increased referrals. This [relationship] is beneficial as it enables mutual understanding, trust, and shared goals between organizations, enhancing the likelihood of successful partnerships and referrals.”

Several Career Navigators acknowledged the key role that referrals from trusted community partners played in the success of the program. As one Career Navigator put it, “99% of the individuals I worked with were not currently engaged with [the Department of Workforce Development] but learned of how they could personally benefit from our program only through their association with another community partner.”

Another highlighted the need to maintain reciprocal relationships with partners, stating, “Yes, it did [result in referrals], but if you don’t send them back to the community partner, that becomes bad business on our end and stops growth of trust with the community and the community partners.”

Despite the general success, some Career Navigators noted that referrals varied depending on the partner, with one Career Navigator mentioning, “Some community partners are almost ‘feeders’ for referrals. Others are hit or miss—it just depends [on] who walks through the door.” Nonetheless, it was widely recognized that maintaining strong, trusting relationships with community organizations was essential for continued success in generating referrals and ensuring the long-term effectiveness of the Worker Connection program.

Regarding how Career Navigators typically communicated with the organizations, email was the dominant method (88%), followed by phone calls (53%) and drop-ins (38%). Similar to the findings for the initial contact, the importance of email communication was evident, and many Career Navigator respondents highlighted the ease and flexibility of this method. Other ways to connect with the Career Navigator were having a Career Navigator on site, text messaging, and LinkedIn. The Career Navigator survey also explored how often organizations had contact with Career Navigators. Around 24% of Career Navigators reported multiple weekly interactions, and 26% noted weekly connections. However, 29% had less frequent contact, occurring less than monthly, and 6% reported never interacting with a Career Navigator (**Figure 12**). The findings suggest that while many organizations experience regular interaction, there is still room for improving engagement frequency. Most organizations (59%) rated their relationship

with Career Navigators as strong, feeling valued as partners. A smaller percentage (26%) reported their interactions as “working okay,” while 9% noted that they had no relationship with a Career Navigator (**Figure 16**). This data suggests overall positive relationships, though some organizations could benefit from stronger connections.

Career Navigation Implementation

When we asked community partners how well Career Navigators understood the challenges experienced by the individuals they serve, 41% rated their understanding as “extremely well,” and another 24% rated it as “very well.” Only 6% felt that the navigators understood these challenges “not well at all.” (**Figure 17**). In addition, organizations emphasized that Career Navigators who maintained strong relationships with program participants were better able to understand the complex barriers to employment, such as navigating systemic challenges or overcoming personal obstacles. This finding suggests that Career Navigators are largely empathetic and informed about the struggles faced by the individuals the organizations serve.

Community organizations and WorkAdvance trainers were asked to rate their understanding of the Worker Connection Program, including its goals and missions. A majority, 38%, rated their understanding as “very well,” with another 12% indicated an “extremely well” grasp of the project. However, 32% felt they had a “moderately well” understanding, and 12% rated their understanding as only “slightly well.” Notably, 6% reported having no substantial understanding of the program’s goals. This mixed level of understanding suggests the need for clearer communication or additional resources to ensure all organizations feel fully informed about the program’s objectives. The qualitative responses highlight this point by showing the appreciation organizations have for the program’s impact. One organization stated, “We are grateful for the Worker Connection and Career Navigators’ partnership. We know we are providing opportunities that positively impact individuals’ ability to improve their lives with new career opportunities.”

Another commented, “Worker Connection has changed a lot of individuals’ lives,” which reflects the belief that the program has tangible positive effects on the communities it serves.

Overall, organizations had positive things to say about the program and strong appreciation for its staff, with several comments praising individual Career Navigators for their dedication and effectiveness. For instance, one organization stated, “[Career Navigator] was a great resource for us and excellent communicator,” while another organization commended the program’s ability to connect non-English speaking participants with appropriate support, citing the assistance of [Career Navigator], a Spanish-speaking navigator. Some feedback also pointed to the need for ongoing and expanded support. One organization suggested that cultural dissonance remains a challenge, proposing more targeted services to help individuals assimilate into the workforce and interact smoothly with local employers. Another organization emphasized

the importance of continued funding for the Worker Connection Program, indicating the long-term value it has brought to the community.

Recommendations

- Continue to include in-person outreach efforts, which proved to be successful in relationship building and led to increased referrals.
- Continue to cultivate and leverage the large, diverse network of community-based organizations and training providers in WDAs 2 and 5.
- If the program will scale up and expand into additional geographic areas in Wisconsin, replicate development of similar referral and partnership networks.
- Ensure consistent dissemination of materials and communications that clearly describe the program, how and where to enroll, and the partnership with service and training providers.
- Increase outreach efforts to underrepresented and marginalized groups to ensure equitable access to services. This includes creating marketing materials, such as multilingual options, to augment in-person outreach efforts.
- Consider leveraging technology to expand outreach through social media, virtual workshops, job fairs, and other online platforms.

Evaluation Project B: Career Navigation Training and Implementation

- Question 1:** Was the Worker Connection Program career navigation and WorkAdvance training implemented as proposed?
- Can a fidelity model(s) be developed based on findings?
 - What are the key components of implemented targeted outreach, career navigation, and WorkAdvance training?
- Question 3:** Does career navigation (including referring participants to WorkAdvance) help get people the services and training needed to reach career goals?
- Question 4:** Did people get “good”/self-sustaining matches to jobs that were in line with their interests, skills, abilities?
- Are there short-term and/or long-term services/supports needed to ensure job matches are “good”/self-sustaining?

Extant program data provided by the Department of Workforce Development were analyzed to determine the extent to which the career navigation services provided helped participants access services and training as well as successfully achieve “good”/self-sustaining job matches in line with their interests, skills, and abilities. Gathered data included a one-time online Qualtrics survey that was disseminated to Career Navigators to gather input and perspective on the training they received through the program as well as their confidence in applying this knowledge in practice. Similarly, Community Organizations/Trainers were surveyed to gather perspective on their relationship with the Career Navigators and the effectiveness of this role. Career Navigators were observed and interviewed, and Community Organizations/Trainers were invited to participate in focus groups. Worker Connection Program Supervisors and Coordinators were individually interviewed to gather their perspective on implementation of the program, including the Career Navigator role.

Career Navigator Demographics

The Career Navigator survey provided valuable insight into the Worker Connection Program. A total of 31 individuals participated in the survey, with 65% representing currently employed Career Navigators and 35% representing former Career Navigators. Length of time employed as a Career Navigator varied, with 18% (2 respondents) having served for less than 6 months, 55% (six respondents) for 6 to 12 months, and 27% (three respondents) for more than 1 year. Just over half of the Career Navigators identified as female (55%) and varied in age with 39% between the ages of 35–44, 23% between 45–54, 25% ages 55–64, and 3% over 65 years of age. The racial and ethnic distribution

of Career Navigators included White or Caucasian (58%), followed by Black or African American (24%), American Indian/Native American or Alaska Native (9%), Asian American (3%), and Other (6%); 7% identified as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish, while 93% did not. The educational achievements of respondents were notably high; 20% had some college experience without a degree, 17% held an associate's or technical degree, and over 60% held a bachelor's, graduate or professional degree.

The evaluation team conducted field studies in WDA 2 and WDA 5 to ascertain how well the Career Navigators utilized the concepts learned through their training within the Markle platform, including Skills-based Coaching, Human-Centered Coaching, Effective and Equitable Career Navigation, and Skills for Navigating a Digital World as well as additional training such as Guided Group Discovery, Family Advocacy Training, Trauma-Informed, Mental Health First Aid, and Motivational Interviewing coaching models.

Findings

One of the unique features of the Worker Connection Program was the role and philosophy of the Career Navigator, which extended beyond that of traditional employment service caseworkers. Using a human-centered approach, Career Navigators aimed to use positive profiles to inform career goals, service and training navigation, and career-focused service delivery. The Career Navigator role was evaluated using several different data sources including direct observation and interviews with Career Navigators, interviews with supervisors and coordinators, focus groups with program participants, focus groups with collaborating organizations, and surveys of Career Navigators, participants, and organizations. Overall, the Career Navigator position fulfilled its mission of meeting individuals where they are and addressing previously unmet career needs in the Wisconsin community. Positive highlights and successes of the position's success along with opportunities for improvement are further described in Section 3.

Career Navigator Perspectives of Their Role

The evaluation team directly observed all the current Career Navigators at the time of data collection and rated their interactions with participants. Average scores across Career Navigators in all areas of ratings ranged from 1.69 to 2.94 (0 being the lowest score possible and 3 being the highest possible score). Average combined total rating= 2.73/3, Mode=3. When we compare the average combined ratings by WDA, Career Navigators in WDA 2 scored an average of 2.65 and Career Navigators in WDA 5 scored an average rating of 2.82. Notably, Career Navigators scored highest (2.94) in two areas: supporting the choices participants made for themselves and asking relevant questions to obtain the information necessary for an accurate referral. Evaluators noted Career Navigators' abilities to actively listen and empathize with the participants' situations and encourage participant strengths and ability to achieve career goals. Most participant meetings were observed to be clearly person-centered, however, evaluators also noted that a few of the meetings, particularly WorkAdvance meetings, were more

directive and task-oriented, and less conversation-based. This finding highlights a potential opportunity for additional navigational services with participants prior to referral.

The observations were supported by the Career Navigators' self-reflection survey and interviews. The vast majority of Career Navigators reported having strong relationships with their participants. All Career Navigators agreed that the participants trusted that they were there to help them, and many navigators expressed a deep commitment to building rapport with their participants, with one Career Navigator noting, "People like to feel heard and known. When you spend time with a person, this tends to naturally build a relationship."

Navigators also largely enjoyed supporting their participants' career progress, with 79% strongly agreeing and 18% agreeing. One navigator stated, "I love working with the individuals that I work with—they trust me and look for me while I'm not at work."

Another mentioned, "I commit to using motivational interviewing techniques to empower and motivate individuals, create a safe, judgment-free space for clients to be understood in order to find the best ways to get people on the right path for them."

When it came to respecting participants, even when their choices did not align with the Navigator's views, one Career Navigator summed it up well, saying, "Participants were typically highly responsive to the navigation I provided. However, in some instances, my clients were resistant to accept accountability for putting the work in to achieve their goals. Empowering clients is a highly personalized task, and what works with one won't always offer another the same results."

One challenge that was voiced by the Career Navigators in relation to their position was staffing, with one navigator noting, "We have let Career Navigator resources deplete considerably since the start of the program, while at the same time, the demand for Worker Connection services has increased significantly."

Another suggested that the program was under-resourced and needed more navigators to effectively meet the needs of the participants: "My observation would be to staff the program accordingly to meet the program objectives, whatever they become."

Career Navigators were asked to provide their perspective on the position in general. Many Career Navigators felt the system structure was working well and stated it was effective in meeting the objective to address participants' needs. They also noted that they were able to successfully place people in work. Career Navigators appreciated the job flexibility. They also enjoyed the supervisors' supportive approach without micromanaging, and thus the trust that was given to them to go out into the community. As one individual stated, "We have good leadership ... they're not afraid to jump out and come and help us if we need help." Finally, Career Navigators felt that the uniqueness of the program was a strength and the program often allowed for quicker turnaround of service provision to participants.

Overall, the qualitative responses indicated that while the Worker Connection Program's trainings were generally viewed as beneficial, there were notable concerns about its implementation and alignment with the actual needs of both Career Navigators and participants. One Career Navigator expressed frustration, stating, "We were told to bring our previous skills to the table then had our hand slapped back for doing that. [...] People are in real need of something to know they can and will truly help them."

Despite these critiques, others acknowledged the program's success, with one Career Navigator stating, "The Worker Connection Program is unlike anything ever done in the Department of Workforce Development and has resulted in numbers unparalleled by traditional agency approaches." These findings from the Career Navigator survey illustrate a broad spectrum of responses regarding the training's effectiveness, applicability, and overall impact. While the training provided valuable tools and knowledge, the qualitative feedback emphasized a need for ongoing assessment and adaptation to continuously align with the needs of Career Navigators and the communities they serve.

Community Organization and Trainer Perspectives

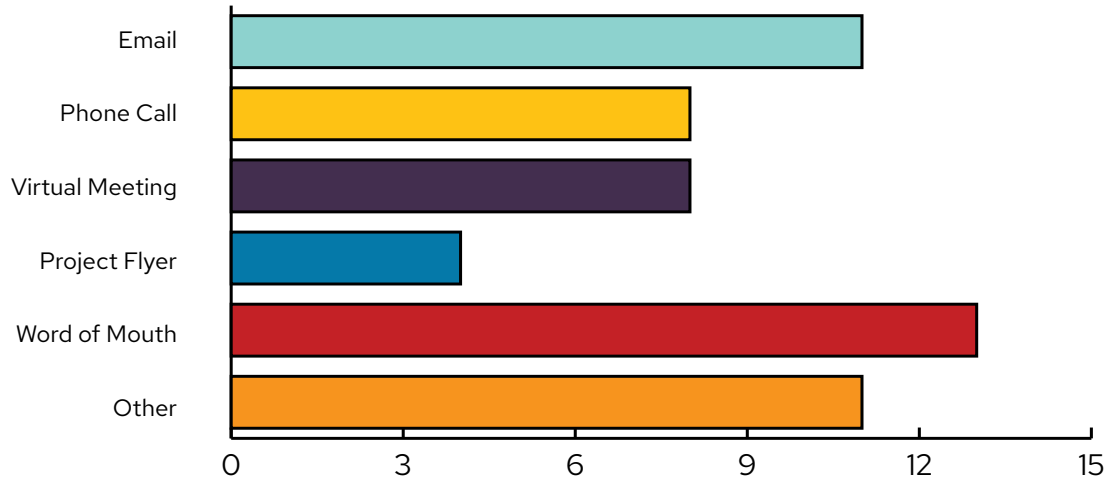
The survey of participating community-based organizations provides an essential overview of key demographic, operational, and engagement metrics. This survey aimed to gather insights into the geographic locations, service areas, staff experience, organizational roles, and the overall relationship between these organizations and the Worker Connection Program. By understanding how organizations initially learned about the program, their methods of interaction with Career Navigators, and their reasons for referrals, the survey establishes a foundational understanding of the program's reach and effectiveness. Additionally, the survey highlighted critical factors such as leadership support, the strength of partnership, and the frequency of referrals, all of which are crucial for improving ongoing collaboration and program impact.

Initial Contact With Worker Connection Program

When asked how their organization first learned about the Worker Connection Program, 38% of community organization representatives indicated "word of mouth" as the most common method. Email (32%), phone call (24%), and virtual meetings (24%) were respectively the second, third, and fourth most used methods for learning about the Worker Connection Program. Note that respondents were able to select more than one response so totals will not add up to 100%. The importance of email communication is evident, and many respondents highlighted the ease and flexibility of this method

(**Figure 11**). When “other” was selected, organizations stated that they initially learned about the Worker Connection program through Facebook, their administration team, visits from Career Navigators to their organization, and business services meetings.

Figure 11. Initial Contact with Worker Connection Program

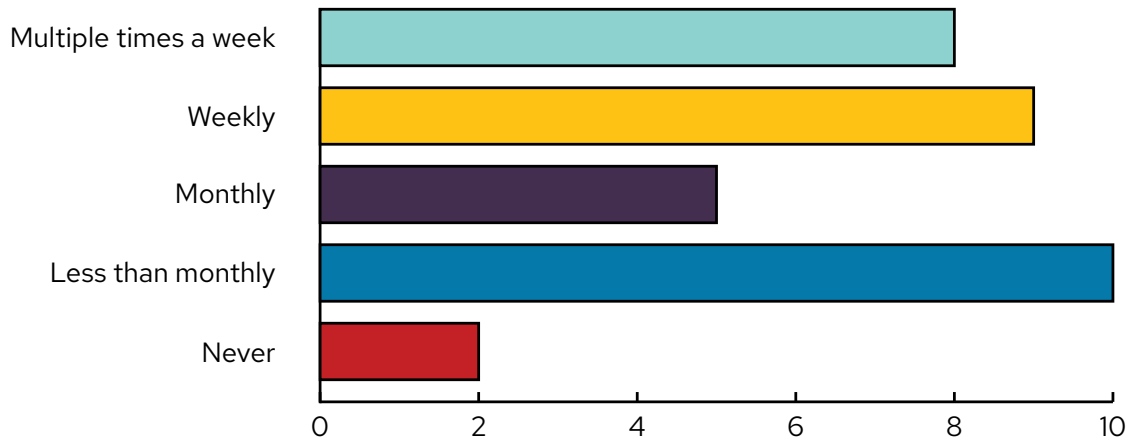


How did your organization initially learn about the Worker Connection Program?	Percentage	Count
Email	32%	11
Phone Call	24%	8
Virtual Meeting	24%	8
Project Flyer	12%	4
Word of Mouth	38%	13
Other	32%	11

Frequency of Career Navigator Interaction

The community organization survey also explored how often organizations were connected with Career Navigators. Around 24% reported multiple weekly interactions, and 26% noted a weekly connection. However, 29% had less frequent contact, occurring less than monthly, and 6% reported never interacting with a Career Navigator (**Figure 12**). The findings suggest that although many organizations experience regular interaction, there is still room for improving engagement frequency.

Figure 12. Frequency of Career Navigator Interaction

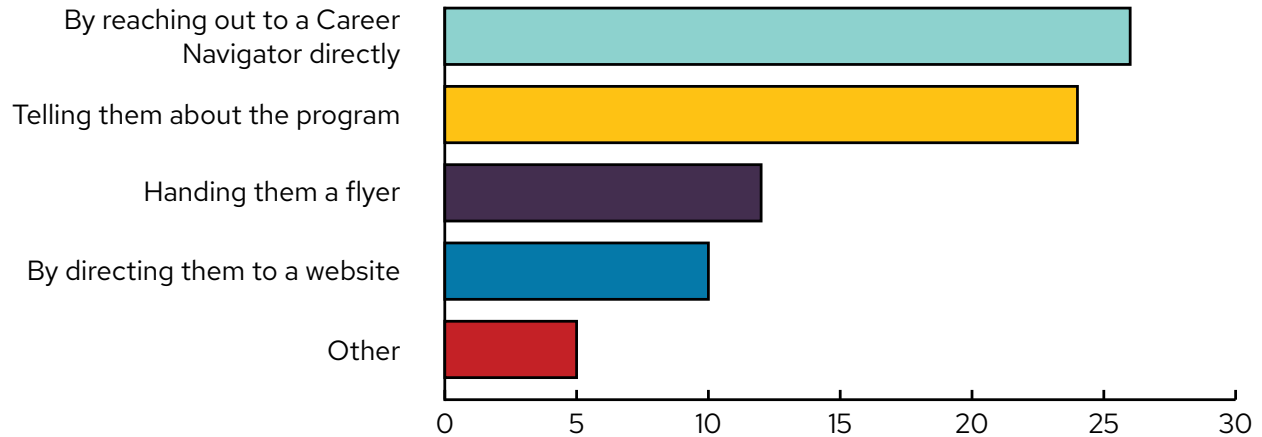


To the best of your knowledge, how often has a Career Navigator connected with your Organization to discuss potential Worker Connection referrals?	Percentage	Count
Multiple times a week	24%	8
Weekly	26%	9
Monthly	15%	5
Less than monthly	29%	10
Never	6%	2

Organizational Involvement in Worker Connection

Most organizations (76%) reported that they directly reached out to Career Navigators to connect individuals with the Worker Connection Program, while 71% also shared information about the program. Handing out flyers (35%) and directing individuals to the website (29%) were also common methods of involvement (**Figure 13**). These findings indicate that many organizations are proactive in engaging with the program.

Figure 13. Organization’s Involvement in Worker Connection

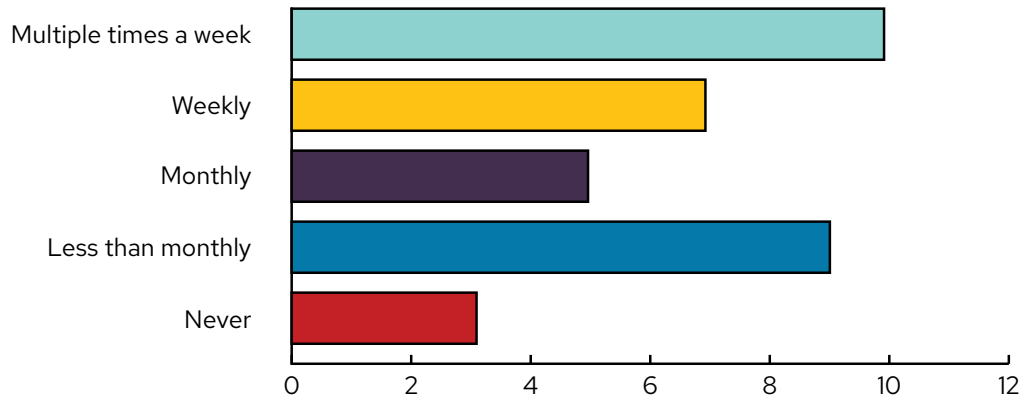


How has your organization helped individuals connect to the Worker Connection Program? (Check all that apply)	Percentage	Count
By reaching out to a Career Navigator directly	76%	26
Telling them about the program	71%	24
Handing them a flyer	35%	12
By directing them to the website	29%	10
Other	15%	5

Referral Frequency

When it came to referring individuals to the Worker Connection Program, 29% of organizations reported making multiple referrals each week, while 26% did so less than monthly. Around 21% made weekly referrals, suggesting that although some organizations actively made referrals, others did so sporadically or not at all (**Figure 14**). Additionally, analysis of qualitative data reveals that referrals were often made to help with obtaining essential resources such as driver’s licenses, social security cards, or access to email, which are critical for entering the workforce.

Figure 14. Referral Frequency

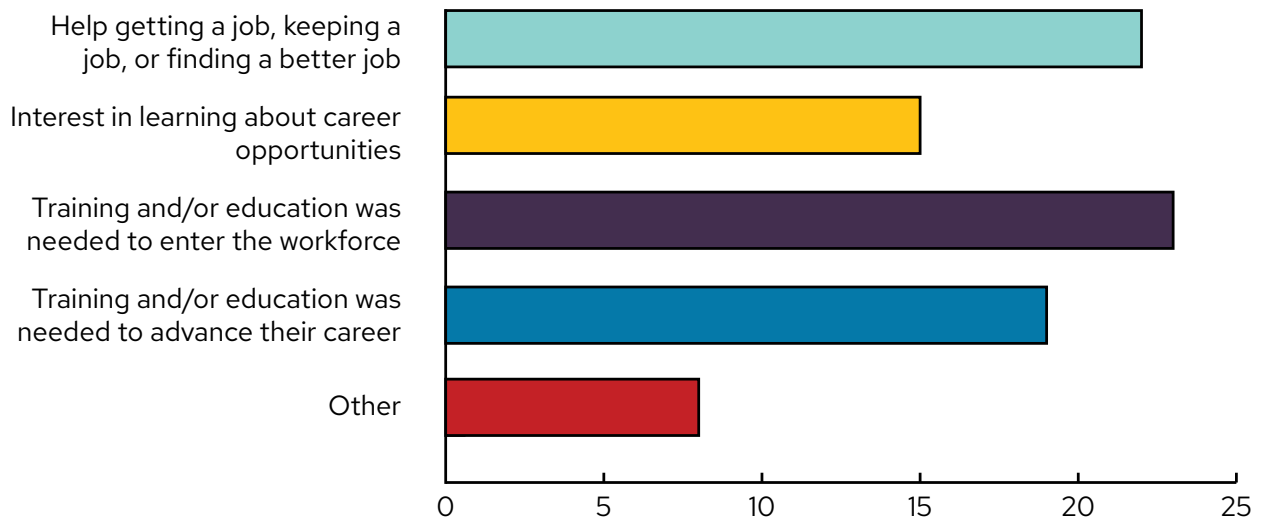


How frequently have you typically referred individuals to the Worker Connection Program?	Percentage	Count
Multiple times a week	29%	10
Weekly	21%	7
Monthly	15%	5
Less than monthly	26%	9
Never	9%	3

Reasons for Referrals

Respondents indicated that the top reason for referring individuals to the Worker Connection Program was to aid in obtaining training and education needed to enter the workforce (68%), followed by helping individuals get a job or keep a job (65%). The need for career advancement through additional training was also a significant factor (56%). These responses (**Figure 15**) highlight the importance of workforce development and education as key reasons for referrals.

Figure 15. Reasons for Referrals

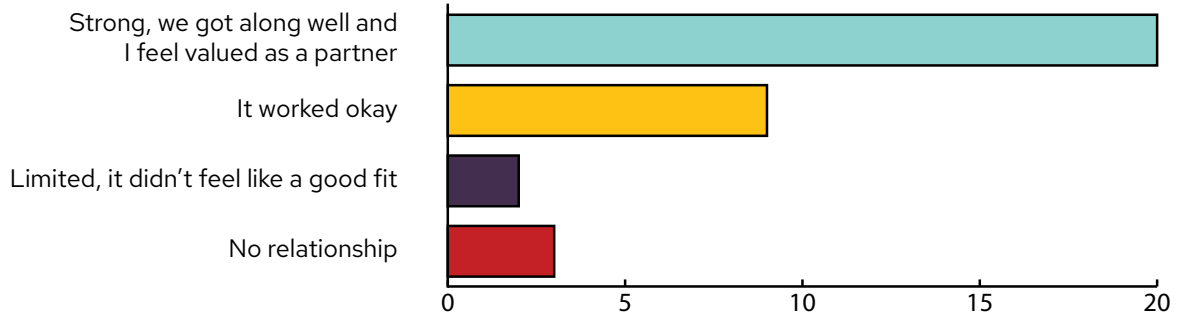


Why have you referred individuals to the Worker Connection program? (Check all that apply)	Percentage	Count
Help getting a job, keeping a job, or finding a better job	65%	22
Interest in learning about career opportunities	44%	15
Training and/or education was needed to enter the workforce	68%	23
Training and/or education was needed to advance their career	56%	19
Other	24%	8

Relationships with Career Navigators

Most respondents (59%) rated their relationship with Career Navigators as strong, feeling valued as partners. A smaller percentage (26%) reported their interactions as “working okay,” while 9% noted that they had no relationship with a Career Navigator (**Figure 16**). These data suggest overall positive relationships, though some organizations could benefit from stronger connections.

Figure 16. Relationship with Career Navigators

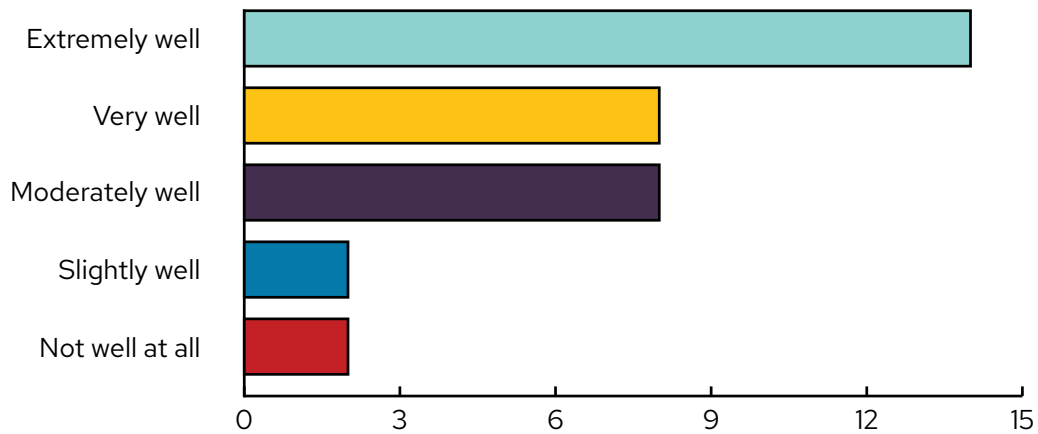


How would you rate the strength of your relationship with the Career Navigator(s) you interact with?	Percentage	Count
Strong, we got along well and I feel valued as a partner	59%	20
It worked okay	26%	9
Limited, it didn't feel like a good fit	6%	2
No relationship	9%	3

Knowledge About Participant Challenges

When asked how well Career Navigators understood the challenges experienced by the individuals they serve, 41% said they understood “extremely well,” and another 24% responded “very well.” Only 6% felt that the Career Navigators understood these challenges “not well at all” (**Figure 17**). In addition, organizations emphasized that Career Navigators who maintained strong relationships with their participants were better able to understand the complex barriers to employment, such as navigating systemic challenges or overcoming personal obstacles. This finding suggests that Career Navigators are largely empathetic and informed about the struggles faced by the individuals the organizations serve.

Figure 17. Knowledge about Participant Challenges

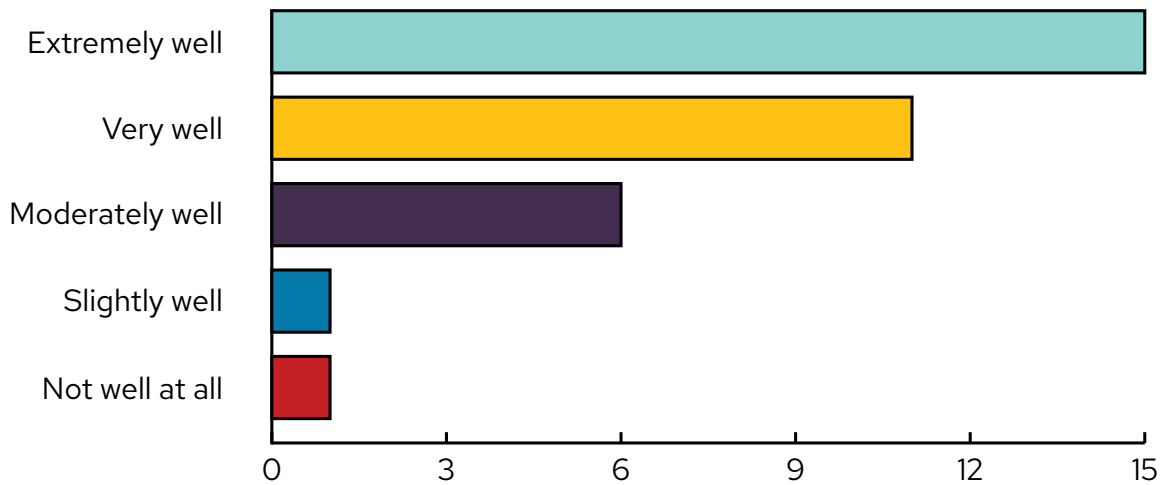


In your opinion, how well does the Career Navigator(s) you interact with understand the challenges experienced by the individuals you serve?	Percentage	Count
Extremely well	41%	14
Very well	24%	8
Moderately well	24%	8
Slightly well	6%	2
Not well at all	6%	2

Leadership Support

Regarding the leadership’s support for the Worker Connection Program, 44% of respondents believed their organization’s leadership supported the program “extremely well,” while 32% said “very well” (**Figure 18**). The qualitative responses revealed that this support often translated into formal processes for referring individuals to Career Navigators or hosting informational sessions about the program. For example, one organization mentioned that they hosted “info sessions via Zoom,” which provided a structured platform for individuals to learn more about career opportunities through the program. This illustration shows strong leadership endorsement of the initiative, which is essential for its success within organizations.

Figure 18. Leadership Support



In your opinion, how well does leadership at your organization support your association with the Worker Connection Program?	Percentage	Count
Extremely well	44%	15
Very well	32%	11
Moderately well	18%	6
Slightly well	3%	1
Not well at all	3%	1

Influencers and Challenges Experienced by Participants

Organizations identified a range of barriers that the individuals they serve face when attempting to enter or advance in the workforce. There were several themes that emerged from the qualitative responses in the survey:

Basic Skills Deficiency: One organization noted that many individuals lack essential computer skills and struggle with online job applications. This challenge was echoed by another, who stated that, “while job positions may not require advanced technical skills, individuals they serve they lack the basic skills (typing, computer searching, email) needed to apply for these jobs.” Another participant mentioned that individuals often struggle with “filling out applications online” and cited language barriers as another obstacle.

Legal and Cultural Barriers: Several organizations reported that individuals with legal records, or those from different cultural backgrounds, faced specific barriers. One organization highlighted “cultural dissonance” and expressed a desire to assist participants in navigating challenges related to assimilation or re-entry into standard employment environments. This issue was also prominent among immigrant and refugee communities, as noted by another respondent who served immigrant and refugee women, highlighting that their primary challenges were “language and lack of work experience.”

Transportation and Housing: A recurring issue in the qualitative responses was the lack of transportation and stable housing, with respondents noting these as foundational barriers to employment. Some individuals did not have basic necessities such as “a phone or address,” which complicated their ability to seek and secure work. Additionally, access to transportation, which is essential for attending work and training programs, was repeatedly mentioned as a challenge.

Limited Training and Advancement Opportunities: Many organizations mentioned that individuals lacked the necessary training and resources to advance in their careers. One organization shared that funding for training including commercial driver’s license permits and other certifications, is a significant barrier: “finding the funding to be able to advance their career with training. The no limit of income to receive the funding was critical.” Several other organizations also mentioned the need for soft skills development and growth opportunities in small, family-owned businesses, emphasizing the need for professional development beyond just entry-level positions.

Confidence and Forward Thinking: Interestingly, one organization highlighted a psychological barrier to career advancement, the lack of confidence and forward-thinking skills among individuals living in poverty. The organization explained, “many families live in the moment, and forward thinking is difficult.” This understanding presents a unique challenge, as individuals may need additional support in building their confidence to take proactive steps toward their career goals.

In the final section of the survey, organizations had the option to provide additional feedback about their experience with the Worker Connection Program. The qualitative responses revealed a strong appreciation for the program and its staff, with several comments praising individual Career Navigators for their dedication and effectiveness. For instance, one organization stated, “[Career Navigator] was a great resource for us and excellent communicator,” while another organization commended the program’s ability to connect non-English speaking participants with appropriate support, citing the assistance of [Career Navigator], a Spanish-speaking navigator.

Some feedback also pointed to the need for ongoing and expanded support. One organization suggested that cultural dissonance remains a challenge, proposing more targeted services to help individuals assimilate into the workforce and interact smoothly with local employers. Another organization emphasized the importance of continued funding for the Worker Connection Program, indicating the long-term value it has brought to the community.

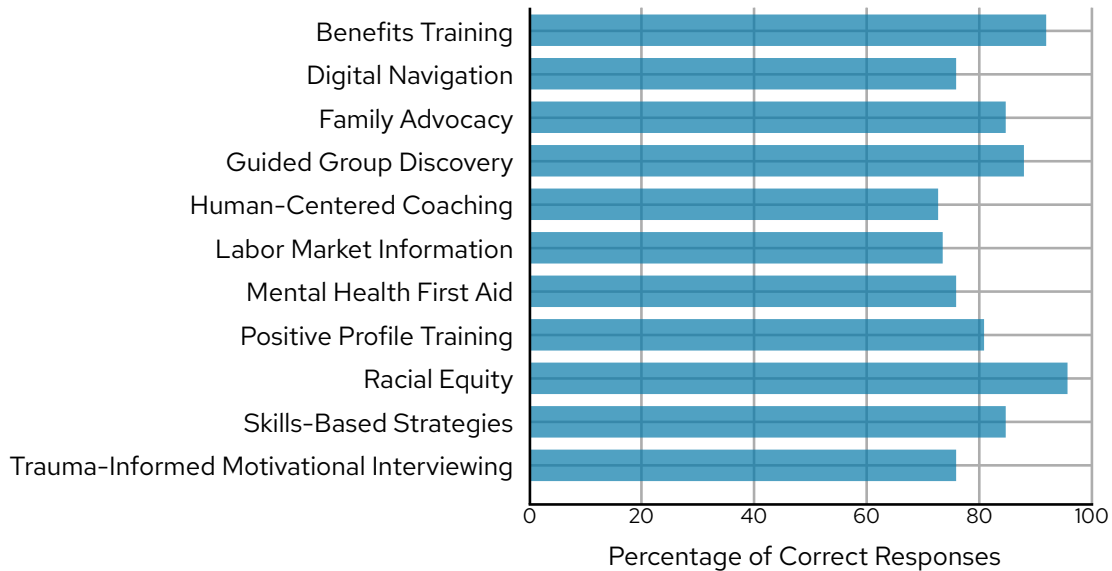
Career Navigator Professional Development and Training

Career Navigators received training in a number of evidence-based practices and used a structured framework to guide the career navigation process with participants. This involved key steps with corresponding work products including development of a positive profile, reviewing conditions of work, and creating clear action-planning steps with participants. The training equipped Career Navigators with essential skills and knowledge to guide participants through the complexities of workforce entry and career advancement. The training emphasized key areas such as relationship building, motivational interviewing, and problem-solving techniques, allowing Career Navigators to offer personalized support based on each participant’s unique needs. By applying these skills in real-world situations, navigators were prepared to effectively address barriers to employment, foster trust, and empower individuals to take ownership of their career paths.

Career Navigators were generally positive about the trainings they received throughout the program and provided examples of putting the training principles into practice. They especially found motivational interviewing, the positive profile, and human-centered coaching trainings helpful in assisting participants. One way the Career Navigators were assessed on their understanding and application of training was through scenario-based questions. Results show an overall high level of understanding of the concepts and highlight some areas where additional training or reinforcement could be beneficial (**Figure 19**).

Figure 19. Career Navigator Training Knowledge Application

Career Navigator Training Knowledge Application - Correct Response Percentages



	Percentage	Count	N
Benefits Training	92%	24	26
Digital Navigation	76%	19	25
Family Advocacy	85%	23	27
Guided Group Discovery	88%	23	26
Human-Centered Coaching	73%	19	26
Labor Market Information	74%	20	27
Mental Health First Aid	76%	19	25
Positive Profile Training	81%	21	26
Racial Equity	96%	26	27
Skills-Based Strategies	85%	23	27
Trauma-Informed Motivational Interviewing	76%	19	25

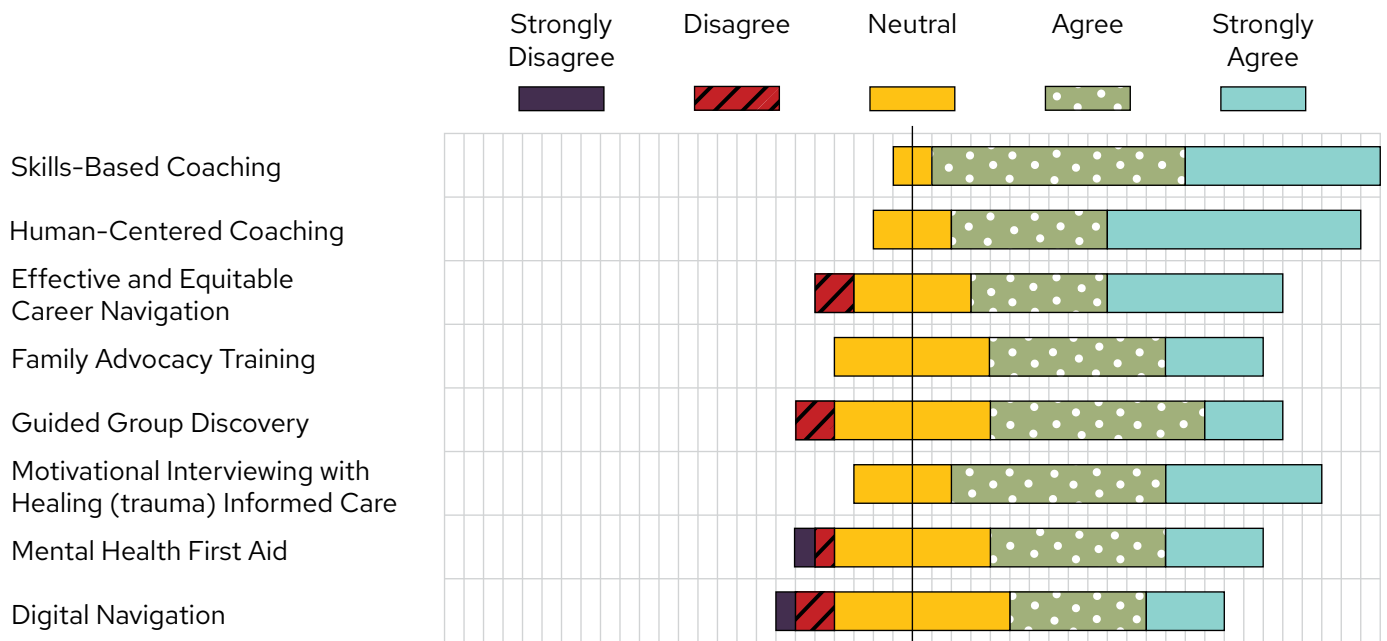
When asked whether the training provided valuable information that helped them in their jobs, Career Navigators generally “agreed” across the various training modules (**Figure 20**). For instance, a significant number of Career Navigators found the “Effective and Equitable Career Navigation” training to be useful, and the “Mental Health First Aid” training was similarly well received, with many agreeing that it offered valuable insights for their roles. In addition, qualitative feedback highlighted the impact of the training on personal and professional development. One Career Navigator stated, “We have helped so many participants discover their own strengths and skills. This program has done the same for our Career Navigators; we have all been able to apply all

the trainings and tools to become better at connecting with individuals.”

This sentiment was echoed by another Career Navigator, who remarked, “The empowerment we gained as Career Navigators on ourselves is why we are so effective at what we do.” Some Career Navigators expressed concerns about the relevance of the training to their roles.

One Career Navigator specifically reflected, “Overall, I felt like the training was kind of out of sync with the job market—participants were more interested in how they could succeed immediately in the job market than in career advising/therapy.”

Figure 20. Training Effectiveness



	Skills-Based Coaching	Human-Centered Coaching	Effective and Equitable Career Navigation	Family Advocacy Training	Guided Group Discovery	Motivational Interviewing with Healing (trauma) Informed Care	Mental Health First Aid	Digital Navigation
Strongly Agree	10	13	9	5	4	8	5	4
Agree	13	8	7	9	11	11	9	7
Neutral	2	4	6	8	8	5	8	9
Disagree	1	0	2	0	2	0	1	2
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

Reflecting on specific trainings, many of the staff members noted that human-centered training was especially beneficial for Navigators. Part of the success with the human-centered coaching was attributed to the fact that it established the desired mindset from Day 1 and was then reinforced throughout the program. Motivational interviewing was credited with helping the navigators with burnout and providing a specific format to structure regular meetings with participants. Finally, a suggestion was made that although the digital literacy training provided interesting information, it did not necessarily improve the navigation of digital resources and may not be necessary in the future.

Career Navigator Confidence in Applying Training Principles

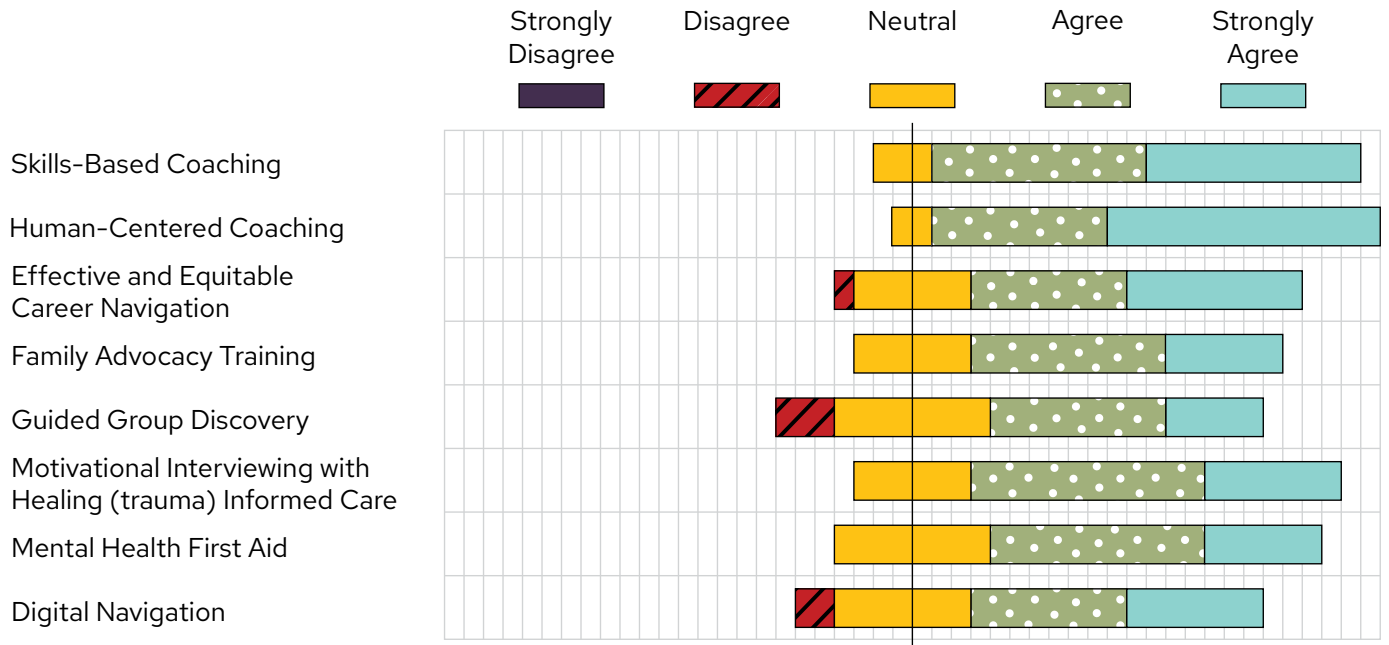
When asked about their confidence in applying the principles learned in training while working with participants, responses varied across training modules (**Figure 21**). Open-ended feedback further illustrated complex feelings regarding confidence. When thinking about applying the skills-based resume training, one Career Navigator recalled working with a participant and helping them to see, "Cooking is not just cooking. You have a lot of skills."

Another Career Navigator noted, "Motivational interviewing training was provided too late. By that time, Career Navigators should have known and applied the principles."

Another stated, "I wanted to connect with employers and explain to them the large percentage of employees that they are missing out on because of their hiring practices." These responses indicated a perceived gap in aligning training with immediate, on-the-ground challenges faced by Career Navigators.

Feedback concerning these areas reflected a sense of both accomplishment and frustration. A Career Navigator remarked, "The position-related training I received was overall beneficial in serving Worker Connection clients," while another expressed, "The depletion of Career Navigator resources combined with an increasing demand for Worker Connection services has diminished the opportunities to more fully utilize the excellent training we received." This dichotomy illustrates the challenges in operationalizing the training effectively amidst external pressures.

Figure 21. Confidence in Application



	Skills-Based Coaching	Human-Centered Coaching	Effective and Equitable Career Navigation	Family Advocacy Training	Guided Group Discovery	Motivational Interviewing with Healing (trauma) Informed Care	Mental Health First Aid	Digital Navigation
Strongly Agree	11	14	9	6	5	7	6	7
Agree	11	9	8	10	9	12	11	8
Neutral	3	2	6	6	8	6	8	7
Disagree	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	2
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Career Navigators also had suggestions for ways to improve the position and program. They suggested having more staff to meet participant needs and combat navigator burnout, establishing a marketing and advertisement plan to assist with outreach, increased training, and a consistent reporting system. Almost all the Career Navigators stated that they would like to continue as a Career Navigator, although some had caveats about improvements to the position, including a stronger sense of job stability, which is notably more difficult when relying on grant funding. Some also expressed concerns about funding restrictions, stating they did not always know what assistance they could provide. Additionally, salary concerns came up regularly and salary was named as a factor for whether individuals wanted to continue in the position.

In supporting “good fit” employment opportunities for participants, Career Navigators found several embedded supports to be helpful for identifying interests, developing a resume, and engaging in the job search. These included creating or updating resumes, establishing a positive personal profile, asking the participant about their passions and dreams to explore career options, assisting with the online application processes, teaching how best to utilize job search engines, utilizing career assessments such as the O*Net interest profiler, and engaging in active listening. Many of the Career Navigators shared experiences about the factors that contribute to participants achieving their career goals. For example, persistent, systemic challenges such as family matters, support systems, transportation, housing insecurity, and child care all factored into participant success and could not always be addressed within the program. Career Navigators would then often help participants with goal reappraisal, utilizing accountability and even providing actionable steps as strategies to encourage progress. Finally outreach strategies, consistent communication, and working with participants to determine their vocational aspirations, were all noted by Career Navigators as contributing factors in helping participants persist.

When asked about their biggest challenges for staying in the workforce, participants also highlighted a wide range of personal and structural barriers. Common themes included caregiving responsibilities, criminal records, and age discrimination. One respondent explained, “Being a caregiver for elderly family members while raising school-aged children” made balancing work and personal life difficult. Furthermore, one participant shared their struggle, noting that “Work–life balance of a single mom with no family support” was a primary barrier to sustained employment. Another participant noted that their justice involvement was a significant obstacle, stating, “my justice involvement from 20 years ago” continues to affect their job prospects.

Similarly, ageism was a recurring concern, with one respondent lamenting, “I always receive a message that I was not selected. I believe it’s because of my age.” Health issues also emerged as a significant challenge for many participants. One individual shared that they had undergone an open-heart double bypass surgery recently. Others mentioned the challenge of juggling multiple jobs, low wages, and the need for better qualifications. These responses underscore the complex, multifaceted challenges that individuals face, which are often deeply rooted in personal circumstances and societal structures.

Supervisor Perspective on Career Navigator Training

One Worker Connection Program goal was to assist participants in finding good, sustaining jobs. In their interviews, leadership staff all agreed that the data will help to explain the story, but they felt the program fulfilled this goal. Individuals who wanted help received it. Importantly, participants found job matches for their interests, skills, and abilities rather than just any job stating, “If Career Navigators took the time to build the plan with the client, the client will find their success.”

Overall, staff were proud of the program and reiterated that they hoped the connections would not end with the program. Staff highlighted their thoughts stating, “This program is so important”; “It afforded the system to try something different”; and that the Worker Connection Program has “done a lot of good work.” The hope of the staff was to leave a positive legacy with this project.

Leadership staff were asked about the effectiveness of the trainings provided to the Career Navigators, yielding important insights. Overall, leadership was positive about the benefits of training to help get everyone on the same page, especially because Career Navigators came from a variety of different backgrounds. Training also helped to communicate a baseline for everyone and was seen as particularly helpful for newer staff that may not have previously worked in case management roles. Importantly, the navigational approach to service delivery and the trainings provided were seen as setting up the intention of the program and served as building blocks to the unique delivery style of worker connection. When thinking about areas for improvement of the training, some staff pointed out that Career Navigators would have benefited from consistently revisiting some of the trainings to reinforce the concepts learned. It was also noted that there was a missed opportunity, likely due to timing challenges, to use a more hands-on approach with staff through activities such as direct observations in the field.

Supervisors provided specific strategies they found helpful in encouraging use of training concepts in practice. Several ideas focused on repetition of training that had been helpful, including quick refreshers of key training information after some time had passed; repeating training concepts; talking through scenarios; and conducting role-playing activities. Many of the supervisors talked specifically about utilizing the team meetings when everyone was together for these activities, or to talk about specific situations a Navigator may be working through. Using team meetings was helpful for getting feedback from peers, and one-on-one supervisor meetings were beneficial for Navigators to troubleshoot difficult situations or ask how to handle specific situations. Some of the supervisors also mentioned helpful tools for encouraging use of training concepts, including feedback loops and blueprints, such as a script for making connections during outreach activities. One supervisor shared that it was a challenge to be “figuring out the playbook while still creating the playbook” in terms of communicating to Career Navigators during the initial months of the program. The navigators were asked to learn a lot all at once and onboarding sometimes felt continuous as new staff joined the team. This method made sense given the time constraints of a pilot project. Ideally, the resources and timing will be different, should the program continue.

Each of the supervisors acknowledged that it is natural for there to be differences in the style and quality of navigation by various Career Navigators. Differences were noted in approaches, learning styles, and uptake of training concepts. Some of these differences were also attributed to differences in supervisory styles of the leadership staff. One of the practical reasons for these differences could be that navigators came

to the job with diverse backgrounds and past experiences, and those who had prior connections to community organizations knew how to contact various community resources. One example that demonstrates differences in quality of navigators was related to follow-up with participants. Supervisors recalled that some navigators could not be relied upon to follow up with the referrals that were assigned to them via the management system, which meant those individuals tended to slip through the cracks or be missed in emails. There were also notable differences in documentation of cases, which could be managed with ongoing training support on how best to take case notes and document activities within the management system. Another supervisor suggested that reinforcement from the supervisory team about standards, consistency, and methodology could help reduce differences in quality of navigation across staff members.

Flexible components of the Worker Connection Program included the remote staffing model and utilization of multiple methods of communication. Evaluating how well this model worked from the standpoint of the supervisors and coordinators was assessed. Multiple methods of communication (e.g., texting, meeting via Teams) allowed Career Navigators to meet at the participants' convenience, thereby addressing time and travel concerns and allowing Career Navigators to work with participants in distant locations. Staff felt that working remotely helped them reach the intended population and fulfilled the mission of the program. Overall remote work was thought to be effective. Remote work did not always mean being at home. Getting "out and about" was a benefit to seeing participants, meeting with training providers, connecting with community-based organizations, and developing effective partnerships.

Supervisors also noted challenges with technology use and management of remote staff. It was a requirement of the job to utilize technology proficiently and some Career Navigators had stronger skills in this area than others. One staff member commented that some Career Navigators leaned on email too much for outreach and did not follow up with additional methods. Email was great for connecting with many participants, but program staff also discovered that some people opt to ignore emails from state government because they have been conditioned to assume it is spam. There was also difficulty in adherence to the data entry software. Staff felt it may have been cumbersome and noted one example of how data may have suffered. When responding to items, there were questions that populated additional drop-down menus. While these were great for gathering detailed data, they had an opposite effect and may have encouraged Career Navigators to choose alternative options to avoid additional follow-up questions.

Supervision of remote workers proved more challenging than anticipated from a management point of view. Although metrics and staff performance could be monitored remotely, it was more difficult to manage expectations and observe participant interactions. Not watching over individuals freed up supervisor time and afforded a level of trust to the Career Navigators, but also meant there were fewer checks on staff location. One staff member spoke of utilizing a master schedule to know where

navigators expected to be for outreach regularly and utilized that time to perform drop-ins. Another staff member noted that not having people in the office prevented some of the natural team building that can occur in person. Staff agreed that remote service delivery only works if the right environment is built.

Development of a Fidelity Model

The findings from the Career Navigator observations, interviews, and surveys indicate that a fidelity model for the Worker Connection Program is feasible and could be developed to ensure consistent quality and adherence to best practices. The recommended model would be designed around core components, and include a formal training structure and evaluation metrics, each of which is integral to improving and strengthening the program's efficacy.

Core Components

The fidelity model should highlight the central techniques and practices that have proven effective in the Worker Connection Program, such as person-centered support, motivational interviewing, and empathy and active listening. Career Navigators and program supervisors and coordinators repeatedly emphasized these elements as vital for building trust and providing impactful guidance. Examples and supporting evidence:

- **Person-Centered Support:** Career Navigators were consistently rated high during direct observation by the UW–Madison IPARRT evaluation team in applying person-centered techniques (i.e., their ability to identify participants' strengths, needs, and preferences), with an average score of 2.75 out of 3. In the Career Navigator survey, one Career Navigator remarked: "I am to ensure that participants feel heard and seen, creating an environment where they are motivated to take ownership of their career paths."
- **Motivational Interviewing:** This technique was highlighted in the Career Navigator survey, responses as a cornerstone of the training that enabled navigators to empower participants. A Career Navigator stated: "Motivational interviewing has helped me build rapport and encourage clients to set and achieve realistic goals."
- **Empathy and Active Listening:** Career Navigators were observed using active listening and empathetic engagement, scoring 2.63 on average in this area during direct observation by the UW–Madison evaluation team. One observation highlighted how "the navigator maintained eye contact, listened attentively, and acknowledged the client's concerns, creating a supportive intersection."

While these core components were widely utilized, challenges such as inconsistent application and varying levels of expertise among Career Navigators were observed. One Career Navigator noted; “Some of us needed more reinforcement to fully master motivational interviewing and person-centered approaches, especially when managing complex cases.”

Training Structure

A fidelity model would benefit from an organized training framework that moves beyond the current staggered approach to a more comprehensive curriculum. While Career Navigators appreciated the training provided, survey feedback revealed areas that needed more structure. Examples and supporting evidence:

- **Staggered Training Limitations:** The Career Navigators mentioned that training came up “as needed,” which was helpful but sometimes challenging to implement consistently. A Career Navigator expressed: “It felt like we were building the airplane as it was flying. More structured initial training could help us prepare better.”
- **Training Recommendations:** Respondents suggested pre-scheduled foundational training followed by ongoing reinforcement sessions to solidify learning and address emerging needs. For example, training on cultural competencies and self-care was highlighted as an area for improvements. One Career Navigator recommended: “We need more training on understanding different cultures and setting boundaries to prevent burnout.”

Proposed Training Enhancements

The program should create a comprehensive training plan that covers motivational interviewing, active listening, and person-centered techniques as essential skills for all new Career Navigators. In addition, it should provide monthly or quarterly workshops to reinforce training and introduce updated practices based on real-time feedback and challenges reported by Career Navigators. Lastly, trainings should be focused on working with marginalized populations and complex cases, such as justice-involved individuals or those facing language barriers.

Evaluation Metrics

To monitor and ensure fidelity, the model would include a set of robust evaluation metrics. The current assessment data from observations and interviews highlight potential areas for continuous evaluation. Examples and supporting evidence:

- **Metrics for Career Navigators and Participant Rapport:** Observations showed an average rapport score of 2.81, indicating high levels of trust and relationship building. Evaluation tools can track these scores to identify areas for improvement.

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- **Feedback on Professionalism and Cultural Appropriateness:** Career Navigators received an average score of 2.75 out of 3 for responding to participants in a culturally appropriate manner. This aspect should be a key focus in fidelity assessments to ensure consistent, unbiased support.
 - **Participant Feedback Mechanisms:** Surveys revealed that while most participants felt support, some noted variability in their experiences. One participant mentioned: "My navigator was very supportive, but at times, it felt like there were delays due to caseload and availability."

Proposed Evaluation Enhancement

To enhance the evaluation process within the Worker Connection Program, several measures are proposed. Regular, documented observations of Career Navigators should be conducted by direct supervisors, to monitor adherence to core practices, ensuring that Navigators consistently apply essential techniques such as active listening and motivational interviewing. Additionally, implementing periodic participant satisfaction assessment would provide insights into the participant's experiences and identify areas for potential improvements. To complement these external assessments, navigator self-assessments are recommended to encourage self-reflection and help navigators identify areas where they might need further training or support. This combination of consistent observations by supervisors, participant feedback, and self-assessment will create a comprehensive evaluation framework that encourages improvement and maintains high service standards.

Challenges in the evaluation process were highlighted by Career Navigators, emphasizing the need for a more structured approach. One Career Navigator pointed out that while the existing feedback system is beneficial, it falls short. They stated: "The feedback system is useful, but it could be more structured to capture the real-time issues we face, like fluctuating workloads and external pressures." This suggests that current evaluation methods may not fully address the dynamic nature of the navigators' responsibilities, impacting the program's ability to make timely and effective adjustments.

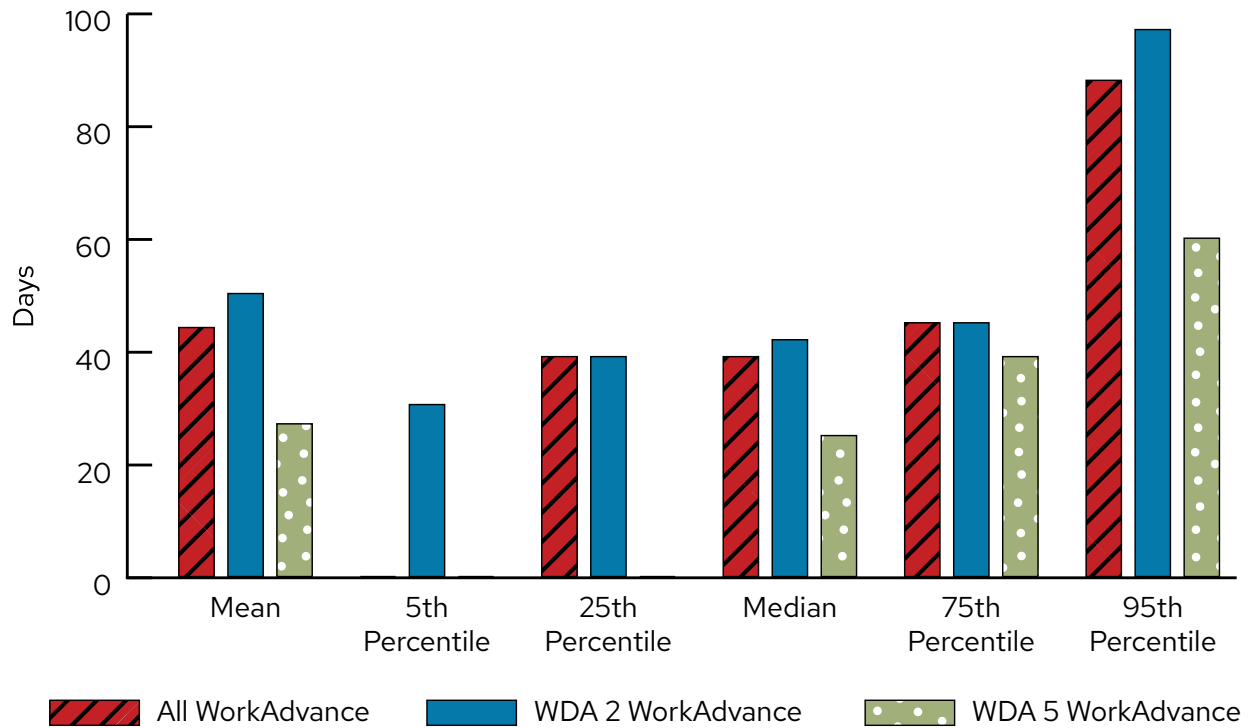
The development of a fidelity model for the Worker Connection Program is highly feasible, given the established practices and existing metrics outlined in the observations and surveys. The core components of person-centered support, motivational interviewing, and empathy and active listening are critical for maintaining service quality. However, enhancing the training structure and refining evaluation methods are essential steps to ensure consistent application across all Career Navigators. Implementing these measures will help maintain the program's high standards and improve outcomes for both participants and navigators.

Effectiveness of WorkAdvance Training and the Worker Connection Program in Attaining Good Jobs Aligned With Participant Interests, Skills, and Abilities

Having described the career navigation services that Worker Connection Program provides, we now narrow our focus to consider the amount of training that registrants engaged in WorkAdvance received. We constructed the training durations by counting the number of days from the training start date recorded in the WorkAdvance administrative data to the training end date recorded in those data. This gives the duration in calendar days. Presumably, most training courses did not convene on weekends, and some may not meet on all weekdays either, so these durations represent upper bounds on the number of days of training. A handful of registrants had a second training episode. In those cases, we combined the durations of the two episodes. We focused on number of days because the WorkAdvance administrative data do not provide information on training hours. The training day measure also does not reveal whether the trainee completed the training in any institutional sense. Finally, the training duration data were missing for about one-third of the WorkAdvance registrants. The discussion here implicitly treats these as missing unconditionally at random.

Figure 22 describes the training durations. The first row reports statistics for all WorkAdvance registrants, the second reports on just those registrants in WDA 2, and the third on just those registrants in WDA 5. The columns, from left to right, give the mean, the 5th percentile, the 25th percentile, the median, the 75th percentile, and the 95th percentile, of the corresponding durations.

Figure 22. WorkAdvance Training Durations



	Mean	5th Percentile	25th Percentile	Median	75th Percentile	95th Percentile
All WorkAdvance Participants	44.16 days	0 days	39 days	39 days	45 days	88 days
WorkAdvance Participants in WDA 2	50.19 days	30.5 days	39 days	42 days	45 days	97 days
WorkAdvance Participants in WDA 5	27.08 days	0 days	0 days	25 days	39 days	60 days

Notes: Authors’ calculations using Worker Connection Program and WorkAdvance administrative data. We combine the durations of two episodes for the handful of registrants who have them. Days refer to calendar days from training start to training end.

The WorkAdvance training durations revealed several interesting patterns. First, the durations include some remarkably short values. Indeed, in WDA 5, more than one quarter of the sessions lasted zero days, indicating that the data provided identical start and end dates. In many cases, this signals participation in a 1-day course in forklift operation, though this course was not considered “formal” Work Advance training by the Navigators as the other programmatic criteria were not met. Second, most

training episodes lasted between 3 weeks and 3 months. Third, the duration data featured a long right tail, implying a bit of skew, as revealed by the fact that the mean duration consistently exceeded the median duration. Can a few months of training make a difference to the labor market outcomes of those who receive it? The literature suggests “sometimes” as the answer, but our data do allow us to say that the program puts at least some of its participants in a position to realize meaningful earnings gains.

The U.S. Departments of Commerce and Labor offer a stirring (and remarkably long) definition of job goodness in the context of their “Good Jobs Initiative.” We lacked the data to engage deeply with their definition, and so instead considered more traditional measures of job match quality that the available data supported. We focused here on three measures: First, we considered whether earnings in the third quarter after Worker Connection registration exceeded the amount a worker would obtain by working full time at the Wisconsin minimum wage. That value equals \$13,480, obtained by multiplying 12 weeks times 40 hours per week times \$7.25 per hour. Second, we considered employment stability, defined as non-zero earnings in the three calendar quarters (9 months) following the calendar quarter of Worker Connection registration. The focus on these quarters reflected a tradeoff between the number of quarters post-registration and the number of observations, as we had only one, two, or three calendar quarters of post-registration data for participants who registered toward the end of the initiative. Third, we looked at earnings in the third quarter following the quarter of registration.

Figure 23 displays the unconditional means of these measures for various groups. The rows provide means of the measures for all Worker Connection Program registrants in both WDA 2 and WDA 5, for Worker Connection registrants in WDA 2, for Worker Connection registrants in WDA 5, for all WorkAdvance registrants, for all WorkAdvance registrants in WDA 2 and for all WorkAdvance registrants in WDA 5. The first column provides the number of observations while the three subsequent columns correspond to the three job match quality measures.

Figure 23. Labor Market Outcomes of Worker Connection and Work Advance Participants Overall and by WDA

	Population	Percent Greater Than Full-Time at Minimum Wage	Percent Stably Employed	Mean Earnings in the Third Calendar Quarter After Worker Connection Registration
All Worker Connection Participants	1,605	7%	40%	\$3,836.02
Worker Connection Participants in WDA 2	669	9%	39%	\$4,172.81
Worker Connection Participants in WDA 5	581	6%	40%	\$3,550.82
All WorkAdvance Participants	193	14%	51%	\$5,931.13
WorkAdvance Participants in WDA 2	155	14%	47%	\$5,878.48
WorkAdvance Participants in WDA 5	16	6%	75%	\$4,997.61

Notes: Authors' calculations using Worker Connection and WorkAdvance administrative data linked to Wisconsin Unemployment Insurance earnings data. Includes only registrants with at least four quarters of earnings data, inclusive of the quarter of registration. Worker Connection registrants include those who do and do not register for WorkAdvance. Stable employment is defined as non-zero earnings in the three calendar quarters following Worker Connection Program registration. It does not require a single, persistent employer.

In reviewing the data, roughly 7% of Worker Connection registrants earned at least the equivalent of full-time work at Wisconsin's minimum wage in the third calendar quarter after registration. The data revealed a slightly higher fraction in WDA 2 than in WDA 5 and modestly higher values for the subset of Worker Connection registrants who took part in WorkAdvance. About 40% of Worker Connection registrants had stable employment in the three quarters following registration as we defined it, with the subset who participated in WorkAdvance reaching up to 50% (noting the very small number of WorkAdvance participants in WDA 5 for whom we can construct this outcome). Looking

at earnings in the third calendar quarter following Worker Connection registration, we see higher earnings for WorkAdvance participants than for other Worker Connection registrants and (not at all surprisingly) higher mean earnings in WDA 2 (i.e., Milwaukee) than in WDA 5. The overall average equaled just over \$3,800, or about \$15,300 per year.

The values in **Figure 23** do not provide an impact estimate for either Worker Connection or for WorkAdvance. However, they do provide upper bounds on the mean impacts and signal that the program did not have transformative effects on the labor market outcomes for more than a small fraction of its participants. Over time, and with larger numbers should the program continue, this analysis should be revisited.

The existing literature on active labor market programs in the United States signals clearly that the sorts of relatively low-intensity services that Worker Connection provides on its own, though often useful and sometimes sufficiently effective to pass cost-benefit tests, will likely not produce large enough effects to detect given the program's sample size, even putting aside issues of causal identification.

In contrast, the literature offers some hope of finding traces of impacts in the data from the more intensive services that WorkAdvance registrants receive; for example, Kanengiser & Schaberg (2022) document such impacts for model WorkAdvance programs in New York and Ohio. To look for such traces in Wisconsin, we estimated linear regression models using the three outcomes defined above. The three job match quality proxies defined above served as the dependent variables.

We coded WorkAdvance training into three distinct categories based on its duration: (1) zero days; (2) 1–40 days; and (3) 41 days or more, with the zero days category serving as the as omitted, baseline category. Tested models included training duration categories two and three as well as earnings from the four calendar quarters prior to Worker Connection program registration. The literature demonstrates that conditioning on past earnings goes a long way toward addressing the problem of non-random selection into training. To further help with selection, we took account of our earlier findings of strong differences between those Worker Connection registrants who do and do not get referred to WorkAdvance by estimating our models using only those referred to WorkAdvance. Thus, our models described differences in outcomes between groups of WorkAdvance registrants who receive different “doses” of training.

This exercise yielded only imprecise estimates of our parameters of interest. Given the small numbers of observations, and the high variance of earnings in this population, it is not surprising that the data did not provide clear evidence on these evaluation questions.

Participant Perspective on the Attainment of Good Jobs

As part of the participant survey, evaluators asked individuals to self-report perceptions of their employment experience.

Figure 24. Worker Connection Participants’ Perceptions of Working Conditions

	Yes	No	N
When you applied, did you feel like you were treated fairly and not discriminated against?	68 (79%)	18	86
Were you offered benefits like health insurance, retirement plans, workers’ compensation, or paid leave by your employer?	56 (67%)	28	84
Do you feel respected, valued, and treated fairly at work regardless of your background?	66 (79%)	18	84
Do you have the option to join a union or have a say in work decisions and company direction?	24 (28%)	61	85
Is your workplace safe, healthy, and easy to access?	76 (90%)	8	84
Do you feel like you belong at work and that your contributions matter?	56 (67%)	28	84
Do you have opportunities to move up or get promoted at your job?	50 (59%)	35	85
Are you paid a stable and predictable living wage before overtime, tips, or commissions?	64 (75%)	21	85

Respondents that indicated they were working full time, part time, or retired were then asked about the quality of their employment with questions based off the “Good Jobs Initiative” parameters published by the Department of Labor. Apart from the item related to joining a union, more than half of participants answered yes to each of the questions. The highest majority (90.48%) indicated that their workplace was safe, healthy, and easy to access. Additionally, in line with the goals of the program, over 75% of participants feel they are paid a stable and predictable wage. While it should be noted that participants did not specify whether they obtained their current employment as a result of the program, these perceptions of employment quality show promise for individuals’ work.

Recommendations

- The philosophy of navigating career goals and services with participants was considered successful. It is recommended that the Department of Workforce Development continue to use this human-centered, navigational

approach either as independent Career Navigator roles or embed it within an existing Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act role such as Employment Training Specialists.

- Continue to strengthen staff training and capacity by providing ongoing training to program staff on emerging labor market trends, innovative tools, and human-centered approaches.
- Continue to utilize pre-existing meetings to emphasize continuing education and adherence to training concepts in practice. This may include revisiting trainings to reinforce concepts, role-playing scenarios, case studies, or direct field observations.
- Establish mentorship options to support new staff in navigating complex participant needs. This may help expedite the learning curve, and positively support and reinforce understanding and implementation of the human-centered principle and approach.
- Develop a training plan that includes a core set of trainings related to the essential functions of the Career Navigator position and maintain flexibility to provide trainings as needed to meet emerging needs of the Career Navigators. Career Navigators reflected that the trainings related to human-centered coaching, motivational interviewing, and positive profiles were especially helpful on the job.
- One practical recommendation from the data would be to include updates to the Career Navigator job description to accurately reflect the job duties, technology proficiencies, and expectations of the job. This is particularly true for some of the more unique aspects of the position including working hours, remote staff policies, case management, and outreach.
- Develop a fidelity model centered on the program's core components including formalization of a training structure, clearly defined role and function of the Career Navigator position, clear process and procedures, clear evaluation metrics, and data collection expectations and systems.
- Improve data collection and monitoring through use of a robust data management system to track participant progress, service utilization, and employment outcomes. Consider incorporating feedback mechanisms for participants, Career Navigators, and trainers to continuously refine program components. Use ongoing evaluation insights to identify and replicate successful practices.

Evaluation Project C: Customer Feedback

Question 3: Does career navigation (including referring participants to WorkAdvance) help get people the services and training needed to reach career goals?

Question 4: Did people get “good”/self-sustaining matches to jobs that were in line with their interests, skills, abilities?

- a. Are there short-term and/or long-term services/supports needed to ensure job matches are “good”/self-sustaining?

The evaluators also conducted field studies in WDA 2 and WDA 5 to gather feedback from Worker Connection participants about their experience and perspective regarding targeted outreach, career navigation, and WorkAdvance. The process evaluation team worked closely with the UW–Madison IPARRT evaluation team regarding the determination of methods and findings for customer feedback specific to WorkAdvance training. The primary goal was to learn about participants’ experiences and their opinions regarding interactions with their Career Navigator. Using methods including a survey, qualitative interview methods, and focus groups, the evaluation team asked enrolled participants to share feedback regarding their working alliance with their Career Navigator and experience in WorkAdvance, including recommendations for program improvement.

Findings

The degree to which participants felt their Career Navigator understood their challenges varied. Although 61% of respondents agreed that their navigator understood their challenges, 28% were neutral, and 11% disagreed. The division suggests that while many participants felt supported, a significant portion either felt unsure or disagreed that their navigator fully grasped the obstacles they faced. Some participants expressed deep appreciation for their navigators’ understanding and empathy. One respondent shared, “[Career Navigator] understands my feelings, needs, and struggles better than anyone in my family. It is a blessing to know her.”

Another respondent mentioned that their navigator was instrumental in helping them navigate government job applications, though they also noted the broader systemic challenges of securing such roles: “She helped me with a State of Wisconsin application, but it’s nearly impossible to get a government marketing job unless you’re already in their system.”

However, other participants felt that their Career Navigators did not fully comprehend their unique challenges. One participant noted, “She tried to understand, but I don’t fit in a box. This program works well for uniquely skilled people with diverse backgrounds.” Another respondent expressed frustration with the perceived lack of personalized

attention, commenting, "I don't know if any of it was personalized or mass mailing." These responses highlight the need for a more tailored approach to addressing the diverse challenges participants faced in entering or staying in the workforce.

Participant survey results reveal significant insight into participants' engagement with their Career Navigator and their perceptions of the support received. Regarding how often participants connected with their Career Navigator, the responses indicate a varied level of engagement. A notable 50% of participants in the survey connected less than monthly, 16% met monthly, 21% meet weekly, and 13% connected multiple times a week. Some participants reported positive experiences, such as one individual stating, "I received lots of information via email to support me but only one in-person/phone call." Conversely, others expressed frustration: "Past worker would barely touch base with me. It was frustrating to get things started and have to chase after my own Career Navigator!"

Another noted, "My navigator kept rescheduling, so I gave up."

Ultimately, there were mixed results about communication with the Career Navigators. Several participants expressed a lack of communication, with one stating, "I haven't gotten anyone to reach out to me in over a month." However, others had more positive sentiments, such as, "Highly recommend and respected," and "[Career Navigator] has been very helpful."

When asked about their relationship with their Career Navigators, participants overall expressed positive sentiments. A majority (70%) felt listened to and heard, and 75% agreed that their opinions and feelings were respected. Trust was slightly lower, with 60% of respondents indicating they trusted their Career Navigator. In follow-up comments, participants expressed deep appreciation for the connection they had formed with their navigator. One respondent remarked, "This was one of the best parts, the counselor listening and mining my experience and goals during the first meeting. She got to know me, my history, and where I want to go."

Another participant said their navigator was more than just a professional resource, stating, "I feel I had a friend, a sister, and an instructor who cares about my employment and my self-esteem." One participant specifically noted the impact of creating a positive profile stating, "The positive profile [the Career Navigator] and I created was instrumental in so many ways... and assisted me into tapping into my skills, my true passion, and my strengths to move on and follow my dreams."

There were also participants who did not rate their Career Navigator experience as positively. For example, one participant noted good communication with her current navigator but felt that "past two navigators were absent quite often, and I was always the one chasing them, which was tiring and stressful." Communication in general was also noted as a concern when several participants only met or spoke with their Career Navigator one time and then only communicated via email or did not receive follow-up. Another respondent expressed concern over the limited capacity of their navigator to

affect meaningful change, commenting, “She’s limited in what she can do to help me. The companies hiring need to value older workers.” These varied responses point to the importance of consistent, meaningful engagement between participant and Career Navigator to foster trust and support.

The survey results demonstrate the varying levels of participant satisfaction with the services and training they received to help them achieve their career goals. Of the 134 respondents, 33% strongly agreed they were receiving the necessary support, while 28% agreed, indicating that a slight majority (61%) felt positive about the program’s offerings. However, 30% remained neutral, suggesting that a significant portion of participants were either undecided or indifferent about the effectiveness of the services. Notably, 9% expressed dissatisfaction, with 6% strongly disagreeing and 3% disagreeing. Some participants had highly positive experiences with their Career Navigators, describing them as supportive and instrumental in their career progression. One participant stated, “She was always there for me when I needed her. She gave me hope that I would eventually find my dream job.”

Similarly, another participant praised their navigator for being “positive and encouraging,” indicating a strong sense of motivation and support. For some, the tangible benefits of the program were clear, with one respondent proudly stating, “I was able to get my commercial driver’s license for free!”

However, not all experiences were as positive as others. Several participants expressed dissatisfaction with their level of engagement with their Career Navigator. Some reported not having met their navigator at all, while others mentioned a lack of follow-up or communication, with one participant stating, “I have not heard from her in months.” Another participant felt the program did not provide adequate value, commenting, “I didn’t feel it helped, and it was not a good use of my time.” These contrasting experiences highlight the variability in how well the program’s services were being delivered and received.

Responses highlighted a mixture of optimism and concern about participant career goals. Some participants expressed strong appreciation for the support they received with one respondent noting, “The team that I had the pleasure to work with was absolutely awesome!” Another participant shared a personal story of transformation, thanking their Career Navigator for guiding them through a significant career change: “Thank you, [Career Navigator], for the positive impact in my life. After spending years as a finance director, I transitioned to a project manager role thanks to her guidance.”

These success stories illustrate the program’s potential to inspire confidence and provide meaningful career transitions. However, several participants raised concerns about the program’s limitations. These comments suggest that while the program was transformative for some, others felt that it fell short in providing the necessary support and realistic pathways to career success. Among the focus group participants, those who experienced an opportunity to develop a relationship with their Career Navigator

spoke very highly of the Navigators and gave positive feedback. A few participants had experiences of not hearing back from their navigator or feeling like their experience was incomplete.

Recommendations

- As noted earlier, pre-existing meetings can be used to intentionally and continually reinforce human-centered approaches and best practices regarding ongoing communications and strengthening relationships and trust with participants.
- Development of a fidelity model centered on the program's core components, including Career Navigator competencies and practice expectations, will help provide a practical framework for guiding and strengthening human-centered principles and practice.
- Consider incorporating mechanisms for participants to continuously provide perspective and insight such as satisfaction surveys that can be used to refine program components.

Evaluation Project D: Reaching the Non-Respondents

Question 2: Are Career Navigators connecting to all people or a subset of individuals who could benefit from career navigation and WorkAdvance services?

The evaluation team made a good faith effort to contact individuals who were referred to the program but ultimately did not enroll. The referral documentation system used was not designed to track individuals who did not then enroll, which required Department of Workforce Development staff to manually review each file to identify these individuals. A Qualtrics survey was distributed to a sample of 57 individuals, with a follow-up reminder email sent to encourage responses. Only one survey was completed (response rate = 1.75%) with a timing issue noted as the reason for not enrolling, although the individual indicated interest in enrolling in the future if the opportunity were to be available. It was determined that subsequent inquiry with non-respondents was not necessary.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that future case data collection systems include a mechanism to identify and track those individuals referred for the program through the enrollment process. This will support the Department of Workforce Development in tracking those who could benefit from career navigation and WorkAdvance services and provide opportunities to follow up at later times. It is understandable that accurate tracking may not be feasible in all environments (e.g., referrals from libraries and others with similar confidentiality considerations). However, including this feature in the data collection process would strengthen programmatic engagement and outcomes and expand reach and accessibility to those who could benefit.

Evaluation Project E: Program Adherence to WorkAdvance Objectives

- Question 5:** Should the training and work duties of the Career Navigators and the WorkAdvance training be expanded and standardized for other career coaches and service providers funded by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) grants?
- a. Are Career Navigators implementing services consistent with the training they received?
 - b. How should career navigation, coaching, and WorkAdvance training services be standardized to increase the likelihood of matching people with "good"/self-sustaining jobs?

The evaluation team sought to understand the degree to which Career Navigators adhered to the components of the WorkAdvance program in practice. As outlined by Greenberg and Shaberg (2020), the WorkAdvance approach includes intensive screening, sector-appropriate pre-employment and career readiness services, sector-specific occupational skills training, sector-specific job development and placement services, and postemployment retention and advancement services. Survey, direct observation, and interview methods were used to assess how the principles and knowledge acquired through specified training was applied in practice.

Findings

Evaluation Project E focused on utilizing the perspective of the Career Navigators to determine program adherence to the WorkAdvance program in practice. Much of the perspective of the Career Navigators regarding other aspects of their position have been previously discussed. This section will focus specifically on WorkAdvance and include additional insights garnered from the other data sources as well.

Career Navigators were asked to think about how the support needs of WorkAdvance participants may have differed from general Worker Connection Program participants. WorkAdvance participants were described as having a mindset to do something, as they often came to the program with a specific training goal already in mind. One Career Navigator pointed out that WorkAdvance "is different because somebody has a defined career path. They have their heart set on pursuing this opportunity that ends with this credential. So, there's a lot less exploration happening there." There were sometimes reciprocal referrals where participants were connected to the Worker Connection Program from the training partners in order to receive supports needed to complete the training. It was noted that Career Navigators felt WorkAdvance participants often just needed encouragement throughout the program and tracking of progress rather than career development support. They often had jobs waiting upon completion of the training, particularly for in-demand positions. General Worker Connection

Program participants, on the other hand, typically sought out longer-term support and identifying their career paths naturally took longer. Career Navigators and participants worked to define and redefine participants' goals and next steps in their career path. They also typically had additional communication needs throughout the process. A Career Navigator noted that Worker Connection Program participants would often want to "meet with [me] every week. And every week is building... sharing with me, being open enough for me to really gain an understanding of who they are."

During observations of the Career Navigator meetings, the evaluation team had an opportunity to observe several WorkAdvance participant meetings. There did seem to be a clear distinction between interactions with WorkAdvance compared with general Worker Connection participants; WorkAdvance meetings tended to be much more task oriented, focused on only obtaining the information necessary to move forward, and less conversation based.

For the WorkAdvance program, the leadership staff experienced additional fiscal hurdles that they had to overcome to implement the program as originally proposed. Going through the procedures of an already established state system takes time. As a result, it sometimes felt like an uphill battle to get things done in a timely manner. Some supervisors noted this was particularly difficult when trying to explain to the "boots on the ground" navigators why it was taking so long for their requests to go through.

When evaluating the training providers, the staff agreed that many of them were good but also felt that in the future there should be a more structured path to become a WorkAdvance provider. One staff member also suggested that the structure could include a clear protocol for ending partnerships that are not working out. They felt a system of checks and balances to be able to make data-informed decisions could ensure that all providers demonstrate the necessary capacities at application but also throughout their duration as a trainer. Staff recalled that it was often difficult to know what was happening with the trainings after the referrals happened, which made it harder to assess retention and advancement of participants who went through the various programs. Overall, it was difficult to track post-training outcomes among the providers because the program was not set up to measure the outcomes after services.

WorkAdvance participant needs differed slightly from general Worker Connection participant needs. Individuals seeking WorkAdvance training may have been underemployed and looking for additional training to bolster their skillset or pivot into a new career field. One staff member also noted that the main navigation service for WorkAdvance participants was to get them into the training program, and that this seemed especially true for WorkAdvance participants that were referred from WorkAdvance partners. This may have been an indication that they just needed more financial support to gain access to the trainings they were interested in. Worker Connection participants, on the other hand, were seen as usually addressing other needs in addition to work. They may be seeking more navigating and wrap-around services. Importantly, it was noted that if a participant started out being placed in a

WorkAdvance training without the Career Navigator getting to know the participant and building that profile, they were not as successful.

Another evaluative question regarding the WorkAdvance program is how well it fits within the Worker Connection model. Staff spoke highly of the value of a program segment like WorkAdvance, agreed that it does fit, and found that the tenets to get participants back into the workforce fit well within the model. They also noted that these are separate programs. Overall, staff felt that Career Navigators did an okay job managing the two pieces of the program but also stated it was a big ask and a lot to handle for the team of navigators, who are also doing broader navigation with participants and going to events each week. One staff member noted an opportunity for improvement through evaluating case notes stating, "Case note says interest in XX but now they're being placed in training for YY—is this really what they're interested in?" Using the notes as a case study could ensure the case notes accurately reflect the conversations.

Participant Perspective

The participant focus groups also provided insights into the implementation of the WorkAdvance program. While the focus group opportunity was offered to all participants that completed the survey, most focus group participants were Worker Connection Program participants that were also in WorkAdvance training and many had specifically taken the project management training. When asked about the Worker Connection Program, many equated these outside training providers as an extension of the Worker Connection Program. There was also confusion about roles and titles (Job Coach vs. Career Navigator). This lack of clarity points to an opportunity for better explanation of the program at the outset and making sure that participants have a clear understanding of how the Worker Connection Program, and specifically the WorkAdvance component, work and the roles of the Career Navigator while they are going through a training.

Among focus group participants, many stated they were still looking for work. They spoke highly of the interactions they did have with Career Navigators but also noted these interactions were brief. Some participants felt that the trainings provided transferable skills, but the skills were not always tied to work after the training was completed. A suggestion from another participant included follow-up connection with Career Navigators after training to get placed in employment. One participant felt they had been steered in a specific direction to take a training that was not a good fit for them and were told it was the only option. To help increase communication and clarity about WorkAdvance trainers and their connection to the Worker Connection Program, another participant suggested an agreement about who is committed to doing what would be helpful. They further described, "Once I got into the Generator program—I didn't really hear from my navigator again ... some confusion on how the program actually worked ... global view would have been helpful."

Recommendations

- Create an agreement with participants at the outset of WorkAdvance enrollment to clearly outline staff roles and responsibilities of training providers (e.g., Job Coach vs. Career Navigator).
- Evaluate effectiveness of training providers and develop clear policy and process for discontinuing contracts, if needed.
- Create a system to avoid repetitive paperwork.
- Require providers to report back with specific outcome data on participants.
- Create an opportunity to follow up with participants and ensure connection to employment following the completion of training opportunities.
- Consider expanding employer engagement by fostering partnerships with a diverse range of industries to offer participants exposure to nontraditional career paths.
- Expand programmatic access and reach by collaborating with employers and trainers to co-design upskilling programs tailored to current market demands, or establishing active partnerships with other WIOA partners already engaged in this area.
- Focus on long-term outcomes by expanding follow-up services, such as post-placement mentoring and career advancement workshops, to improve job retention and satisfaction. This could be offered through the Worker Connection Program or alternatively, could be coordinated in partnership with other WIOA programs.
- Conduct longitudinal studies to assess the program's long-term impact on career trajectories and economic mobility.

Section 4. Conclusion

The process evaluation of the Worker Connection Program highlights the successes and challenges in piloting an innovative employment initiative to marginalized groups in Wisconsin. The evaluation focused on assessing implementation fidelity, participant engagement, and stakeholder perspectives to understand how the program's design translated into practice.

Key Findings

Implementation Success

The program successfully delivered key components, including implementation of the new Career Navigator position; formative implementation of an innovative, human-centered, employment and career advancement program grounded in evidence-based practices; and development of an effective network of community-based organizations and trainers that facilitated participant identification and referrals. Establishment of a strong, capable, responsive leadership team was instrumental in informing and guiding complex program implementation within a short timeline. The "flexibility within structure" approach supported program staff in meeting and exceeding enrollment goals with a population that can be challenging to engage. Initial participant employment and earnings outcomes were generally positive and suggest that continuation and/or expansion of the program may be warranted. Continuation and/or expansion would further support additional data collection, including building in credible identifying data, which is key to evaluating longer-term outcomes and impact. This is particularly important if the program grows and uses an existing Department of Workforce Development data collection system, such as that used by the Employment and Training Specialists. Having parallel data on program participants and non-participants is paramount in conducting credible causal evaluations.

Engagement and Satisfaction

Key stakeholders reported high satisfaction with the program's ability to support participants in achieving their training and career advancement goals. Specifically, responsiveness and flexibility beyond that available in other WIOA employment programs were highlighted as critical factors. Career Navigators, participants, supervisors and coordinators, and community organizations and trainers all provided valuable insight into which elements of the program worked well and could continue or be expanded upon. Likewise, these stakeholders also offered important perspective into opportunities for improvement as program leaders consider sustaining the model in Wisconsin.

Challenges in Delivery

Key stakeholders noted that there was limited time to adequately develop key resources such as outreach materials and policy prior to hiring staff and implementing the program, which presented initial operational challenges. Furthermore, varying communication approaches and styles used by individual Career Navigators may have hindered the program's full potential with some participants. Although many of these challenges were addressed and resolved as the program progressed, they highlighted opportunities for improvement when expanding and/or replicating the program in other regions.

Improved Outcomes

Initial findings indicate improved employment and earnings for both Worker Connection Program and WorkAdvance participants. About 40% of Worker Connection participants and up to 50% of WorkAdvance participants had stable employment in the three quarters following registration. WorkAdvance participants also achieved 55% higher earnings than Worker Connection participants in general. While the context of these findings must be considered, they serve as preliminary evidence of the effectiveness of career navigation services and model. These analyses can be revisited should the program continue, to evaluate longer-term impact.

These insights underscore the value of innovation in improving engagement and outcomes in employment services while emphasizing the need for continuous adaptation. To maximize the program's effectiveness and scalability, recommendations are to continue to strengthen resources, enhance staff training, and foster strong partnerships with community-based organizations and trainers.

Future evaluation efforts should examine long-term outcomes, such as employment retention and career advancement, to determine the Worker Connection Program's broader impact. By refining delivery strategies and maintaining a commitment to innovation, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development can continue to serve as a model for addressing workforce challenges and promoting inclusive economic growth.

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Appendix

Community Organization Categories for Worker Connection Targeted Outreach

Alternative Organization and/or Program Type	Worker Connection Definition
Libraries	Library (e.g., Mead Public Library)
Government Agencies	<p>Government program or organization at the federal, state, or local level (e.g., Division of Vocational Rehabilitation).</p> <p>This definition did not include non-profit organizations that were affiliated with the government but acted (largely) independently (e.g., Bay Area Workforce Development Board).</p>
Educational Institutions	<p>Organizations whose main service was educating/training individuals (e.g., Assata High School)</p> <p>This definition did not include education organizations with a WorkAdvance approved program.</p>
WorkAdvance Organizations	Any organization that had a WorkAdvance approved education program (e.g., ProCDL).
Housing Insecurity and Recovery Organizations	Organizations whose main services were to providing housing assistance (including financial assistance) or working with clients that are currently recovering from drug/alcohol abuse (e.g., New Community Shelter).
Workforce Organizations	Organizations whose main services are related to employment (e.g., Maximus, Bay Area Workforce Development Board)
Immigrant Organizations	Organizations whose main services address the needs of immigrants (e.g., Wisconsin Ukrainians)
Other Support Organizations	Organizations who provide services such as social supports, but don't fall into the other categories (e.g., St. Vincent de Paul Green Bay)
Miscellaneous	Organizations that don't fall into any of the previous categories, typically a for-profit business or health care provider (e.g., Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center)

Matching Wisconsin Residents with Good Jobs Rubric

Note: Assign one point for each applicable item unless indicated otherwise.

Each participant receives a single score.

Improved Connection to Underutilized Talent Pools.

- Referral from community-based organization.
- Individual from underutilized talent pool (point for each that apply):
 - Person with a disability
 - Veteran
 - Long-term unemployment (27 weeks or more)
 - Low income
 - Homeless
 - Single parent
 - Justice-involved
 - Foster care youth
 - Refugee
 - Immigrant

Implement Evidence-Based Activities and Promising Practices.

- Identified participant's interests, skills, and abilities (sometimes referred to as a "personal or positive profile").
- Assessed conditions of work (e.g., work hours, transportation needs, childcare concerns, etc.).
- Matched the participant's interests, skills, abilities, and conditions of work with a local, high-demand, job.
- Applied human-centered case management principles.
- Engaged participants where they are (e.g., flexible, community-based outreach).
- Facilitated rapid engagement (e.g., quick follow-through between referral, enrollment, employment planning, and action steps; action steps implemented in a short time frame).
- Provide trauma-informed (healing-centered) care.
- Used motivational interviewing techniques to address ambivalence.
- Provided career, training and support service navigation (tracked through referrals to local community-based organizations).
- Connected participants to wraparound services (e.g., housing, food, transportation, childcare, health insurance, mental health services).
- (+5 points)** Facilitated paid work experience (e.g., on the job training, internships, apprenticeships).
- Earned measurable skill gains (MSG) (one point per MSG).
- (+5 points)** Achieved credential attainment (e.g., associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, post-master's degree, vocational/technical certificate, vocational/technical license, or other industry-recognized credential).

Employed in a High-Demand, Local, and Quality Job

- Employed two quarters after program exit.
- Employed four quarters after program exit.
- Earned wages at or above the economic self-sufficiency threshold two quarters after program exit.
- Employed in a job that provides benefits (e.g., health insurance, retirement plan, worker's compensation, paid leave, caregiving support).
- Employed in high-demand occupation (based on employer input and local labor statistics).
- Employed in a job that offers skill training and career advancement opportunities.

