

Families Forward Washington Faced the Pandemic, and Didn't Turn Back

December 2020 Jorji Knickrehm, [Kyla Wasserman](#)



In January 2020, Washington state grabbed national headlines with news of the nation's first COVID-19 case. As organizations and businesses scrambled to adjust to virtual environments, an employment program operating in the southeast region of the state, run by the Washington State Division of Child Support (DCS), managed to keep providing services despite the statewide closure of all nine DCS offices. The program, Families Forward Washington (FFW), was able to rally mostly because its original design included many resources that allowed it to quickly deliver its high-quality programming remotely. The example of Families Forward Washington, which targets low-income parents whose wages make paying support a challenge, may offer other states some useful cues for adapting to the difficult circumstances of the pandemic and contribute to future improvements when the pandemic is over.^[1]

Families Forward Washington had to stop its in-person occupational skills training, sector-focused employment support services, and enhanced child support services in Benton, Franklin, and Walla Walla counties in March, when the pandemic began to spread from the Seattle area, where the first cases appeared. As operations resumed virtually, leaders at FFW and its operating partner, Goodwill Industries, realized their framework was well suited to a rapid transition.

Building strong organizational partnerships and communication before the crisis

The program launched in 2018, incorporating a unique blend of child support professionals, workforce development council leaders, and Goodwill workers under contract between the state child support agency and local workforce development council that formalized the working relationship. The cross-agency setup got these partners accustomed to troubleshooting and talking regularly as the program began operations. Staff phone meetings

several times a month cultivated the practice of sharing program information and addressing its issues. That included creating new outreach strategies when enrollment numbers flagged and troubleshooting when training providers stopped offering FFW courses. As the pandemic took hold, program leaders quickly seized on the importance of remote employment training and used their networks to identify and adopt a new online occupational training option. This nimble maneuver succeeded because of tested local relationships.

Establishing remote enrollment procedures for parents with a range of technology access

Many FFW intake procedures were easily implemented by phone, such as providing program and associated employment study information, as well as learning about candidates' job training interests and how they might fit with the program. However, it took creative thinking to develop remote procedures for completing the program's many required forms and releases that met the needs of parents with varying access to technology and internet connectivity. Applicants used Skype, phone calls, and email to complete the required forms. If the applicant was able to use Skype, the Goodwill career counselor turned control of the meeting over to the applicant to sign documents on the screen. Applicants could also print, sign, and scan forms by taking a photo or using a free app recommended by the program or arrange contactless pickup and drop-off of printed forms.

Drawing on experience delivering child support and wraparound services remotely

By May, the program could enroll parents again and adhere to the governor's stay-at-home order, keeping program staff and community members safe.

FFW offers child support and supportive services through Alternative Solutions, a DCS program that connects noncustodial parents to employment, legal, medical, and other resources, while working with them to remove barriers to meeting their child support obligations. Since most Alternative Solutions services were already provided by email and phone, its program specialists already had these skills, and had tested them through well-established FFW relationships.

Consent forms from participants already allowed the agencies to share information, so, for example, monthly client meetings created opportunities for the Goodwill career counselor to discuss individuals' hardships. Program staff said this proved especially useful to help with hearings on debt forgiveness and Economic Impact Payment (EIP) intercepts during the pandemic. As EIP checks — federal payments made during the pandemic — were issued, counselors and specialists quickly explained to participants that they could get one-on-one help with child support questions.

The partnership framework prompted some FFW participants to revise their previous negative views of DCS, staff members reported. They now view Goodwill as the primary services provider and DCS as a helpful secondary partner that is sincerely interested in the success of their whole families. Many participants told FFW staff they were previously unaware that they could explain their situations to DCS and make payment arrangements.

Developing virtual skills training opportunities for in-demand occupations

Because the program's in-person training vendors closed their doors in March as the pandemic worsened, FFW added online computer IT support training, which participants could do while staying home. Computer IT support workers remain in demand in areas served by FFW, even during the COVID-related economic slowdown, and the course offered participants a recognized professional certification. The program's socially distant in-person truck-driving and welding classes also reflect some positive adjustments spurred by the pandemic. Commercial driver's license course instructors say frequent one-on-one interactions allow students to ask questions without feeling embarrassed, so they ultimately learn more effectively.

One participant, Lewis, had a felony conviction and lacked postsecondary education or career training until he enrolled in FFW in early March. The father of seven faced a constant struggle to find well-paid work and fell behind on paying his child support.

A few weeks later, FFW training courses were stopped as the pandemic surged. When FFW pivoted to online IT support training, Lewis immediately signed on, seizing an opportunity to pursue a career that had long interested him. Since he had children at home in need of daily care, the online IT training gave him the flexibility to earn a professional certification while still being an active father.

Lewis completed the basic IT training certification in four weeks, then completed a Python programming certificate program. In September, he landed an IT support job at a nearby Amazon data center, which pays a good wage with excellent benefits, helping his entire family. Lewis continues to mentor current students through video calls with the program's IT peer learning group, telling them, "If I can complete the training, you can too."

Conclusion

The approach, supported by technology that helped maintain contact and deliver individualized services on a local scale, sustained FFW's enrollment, retention, and training during the pandemic. Students of the new online IT course, for example, need help along the way with curriculum questions and motivation. Weekly virtual group sessions allow them to share challenges and work on team building. Weekly check-in calls and texts with participants have also been more popular, and participants respond more quickly and comprehensively. A biweekly newsletter highlighting community resources for participants has helped reduce isolation and uncertainty, with tips that included how to sew masks, where to find the local food bank, and how to check on IRS Economic Impact Payments. The importance of FFW's partnerships, training, and engagement remains especially relevant during the pandemic, showing the strength of the program's pre-pandemic structure, and may yield positive results post-pandemic. At a time of increased economic vulnerability, nonresident parents with low incomes have taken advantage of FFW's free occupational training, responsive child support help, and job placement assistance because its tested approaches showed flexibility under particularly difficult circumstances.

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^[1]*Families Forward Washington is one of five Families Forward Demonstration projects operated by child support agencies across the United States. Families Forward is supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) of the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service through a waiver under section 1115(a) of the Social Security Act.*

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