



Engaging Employers: Lessons from the COVID- 19 Pandemic

Presentation at the 2021 virtual TANF National
Directors' Meeting

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The NextGen project



Focus

- Innovative employment programs for people facing complex employment challenges



Research questions

- How are programs designed and operated?
- How much do they cost?
- How effective are they at improving participants' employment, health, and other outcomes related to economic self-sufficiency and well-being?



Funding

- ACF's Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in partnership with the Social Security Administration





Engaging employers during the pandemic

- / Engaging employers is a critical part of many programs in the NextGen Project
- / The pandemic restrictions disrupted relationships and made it difficult to make new connections
- / We set out to learn how programs were adjusting to these challenges



Objectives for this presentation



Describe how employment programs in the NextGen Project adapted their employer engagement activities during the pandemic



Offer lessons about promising strategies for working with employers that might endure beyond the pandemic



The programs

/ **Individual Placement and Support (IPS)**

- Serving people with mental health issues

/ **Families Achieving Success Today (FAST)**

- Serving TANF recipients with disabilities, or those caring for people with disabilities

/ **Bridges from School to Work (Bridges)**

- Serving young adults with disabilities as they transition from high school to work

→ All share an objective of matching program participants to employers in a way that benefits both



Pre-pandemic: employer engagement was almost exclusively in person

IPS: Employment specialists made 6+ face-to-face contacts with employers per week

FAST: Career navigators networked in person to develop jobs for their clients

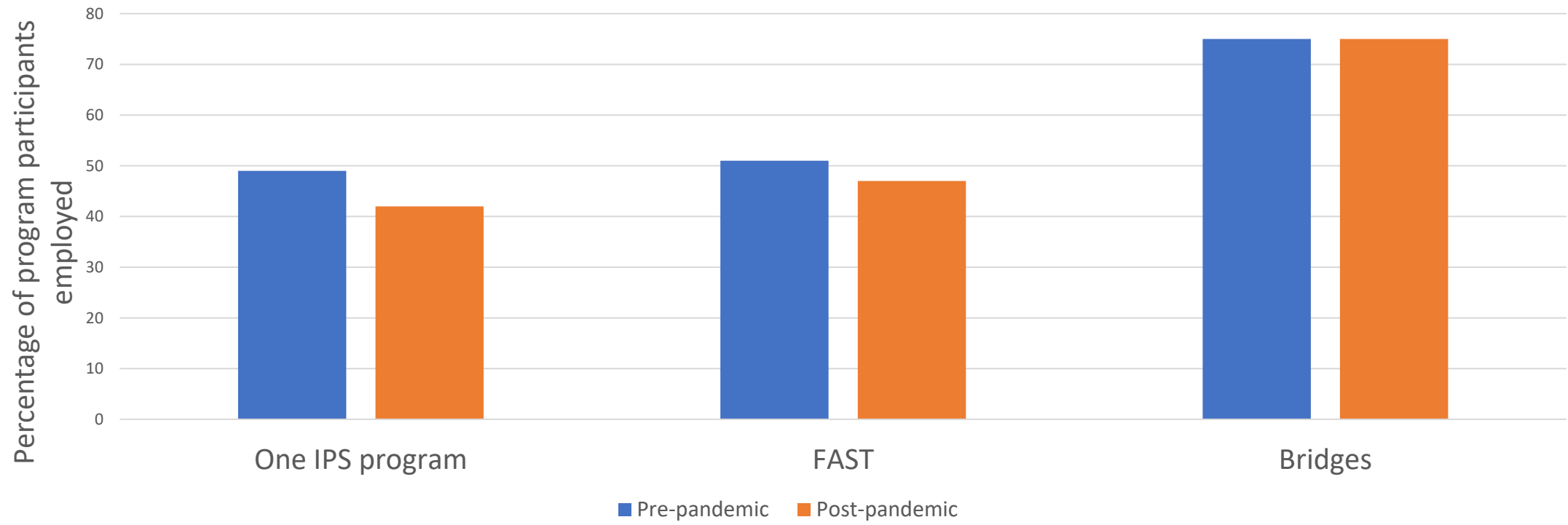
Bridges: Employer representatives visited work sites to assess employer needs and the work environment and provided follow-on support to young adults placed with employers





During pandemic restrictions: no in person engagement but continued success

Employment rates of program participants





How did they continue to have such positive participant outcomes?



Leveraged the benefits of virtual communication

More time with employers



Access to a larger group of employers





Enhanced their focus on employer customer service

- / **Asking rather than assuming what employers need**
- / **Including employers on program steering committees or advisory boards**
- / **Taking advantage of informal interactions with employers**



Expanded their networks by tapping employers' networks

- / **Personal references from employers already in their network**
- / **New connections beget additional connections**





Moving forward

/ **When the pandemic restrictions end, several programs envision:**

- Using technology to make the initial connection with a new employer
- Then building trust through an in person meeting
- Then continuing to use the employer's preferred way to communicate

“Since [our program] is about solutions for employers, and since hiring managers have many other responsibilities, they should be able to communicate in the way that’s easiest for them.”



Moving forward

/ **Continue focusing on employer needs**

- Employers who thought the program understood their needs were more likely to engage with the program when job openings arose
- This could lead to more or better opportunities for program participants

/ **Encourage the employers who are already engaged to spread the word through their networks**