

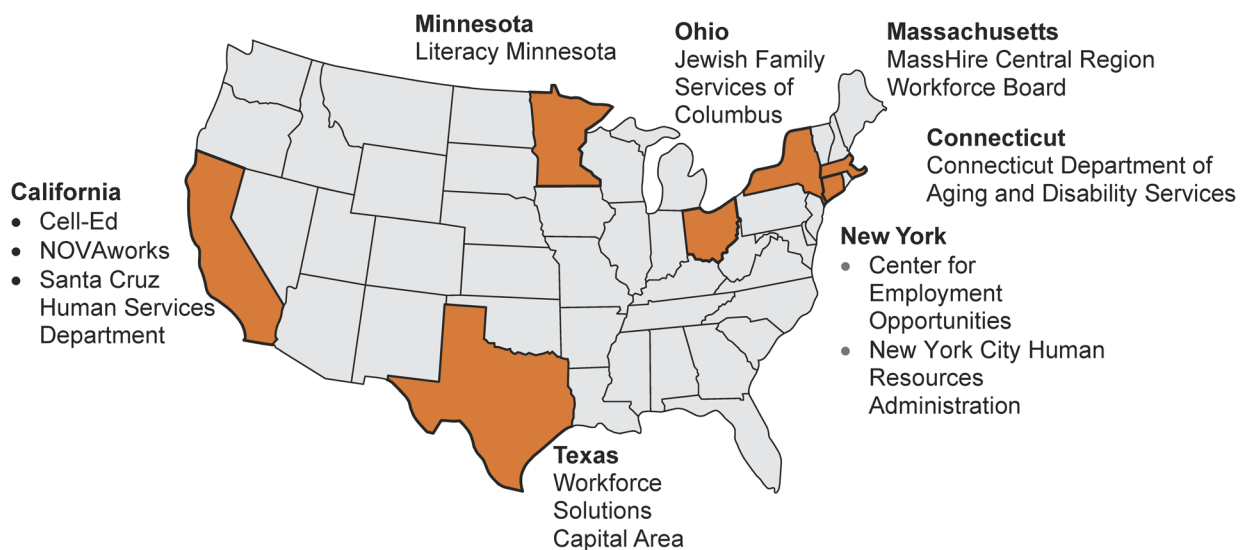
# Innovations in Hybrid Service Delivery: Workforce Programs Combine Virtual and In-Person Strategies

By Shawna Anderson and Danielle Cummings

When the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States in early 2020, workforce programs that provide employment and training services faced new challenges as they responded to public health restrictions and shifts in the needs of employers and job seekers.

As part of the [Building Evidence on Employment Strategies \(BEES\) project](#), researchers from MDRC and MEF Associates conducted virtual interviews from November 2021–April 2022 with staff members at 10 such programs to learn about how they used technology [to adapt their services during the pandemic](#). (See Figure 1 for a map of the programs interviewed.) Anticipating the end of restrictions on in-person service delivery as the pandemic slowed, many program staff members said they intended to maintain some of their newly developed virtual strategies, using a hybrid model that would blend in-person and virtual service delivery. This snapshot highlights three lessons that demonstrate how these programs leveraged a crisis to create important opportunities for streamlining and improving services.

**Figure 1. Ten BEES Programs Interviewed About Hybrid Service Delivery**



## Lesson 1: Digital Services Can Save Clients and Staff Time, Money, and Effort

Staff members at several programs said the pandemic forced them to think creatively about services they had provided in the same way for years. Some said the adaptations they made during the pandemic improved upon their standard way of doing things and they intended to maintain some of those adaptations going forward, even as they were able to go back to more in-person services. For example, some interviewees said that digital adaptations helped them streamline several aspects of service delivery, reduce paperwork, and make caseload management more efficient. Some innovations also offered additional benefits to clients. Interacting virtually with the program team, for example, helped clients improve their computer skills and reduced the travel time, transportation, and child care costs associated with coming into the program offices to receive services.

Table 1 shows a synthesis of examples of how programs shifted gears from a strictly in-person approach before the pandemic to a virtual service delivery model, along with some benefits of those adaptations.

**Table 1. Traditional Service Delivery Compared with Digital Innovations**

Service	Traditional Approach	Digital Innovations
Intake	Staff members conducted in-person meetings with clients to fill out physical paperwork. This required many clients to address child care, transportation, and other logistical challenges to enroll in services in person. Staff members would then enter data into case management systems and file paperwork to complete enrollment.	Staff members developed digital intake processes, including using web meeting platforms such as Zoom coupled with secure document signing programs such as DocuSign. This allowed many clients to enroll in services from home, mitigating some of their logistical challenges. It also reduced the paperwork, data entry, and storage requirements for programs.
Orientation	Programs offered in-person orientations that often lasted hours and required coordination around client scheduling, facility reservation, and facilitator availability. This would sometimes delay the start of services.	Programs created orientation videos that clients could access on demand at home or at other locations. This reduced the amount of coordination required as well as the time lags associated with in-person trainings.
Trainings	Programs delivered training content in person, requiring clients to travel to program locations to participate. These trainings needed to meet the needs of many participants, so trainings were often long and included content that might be more relevant to some participants and less relevant to others.	Programs created (or in some cases purchased licenses to) digital training content that allowed clients to access training on demand, without the need to travel to the office. Some programs also modularized the content, which allowed clients to access the training modules that were most relevant to them. Some staff members said these changes increased engagement in trainings.
Mock interviews	Programs provided interview prep services to clients in person.	Programs offered interview prep services via Zoom and other meeting platforms. This enabled clients to get used to the virtual interview format, which is increasingly being used by employers, and saved them the time and costs associated with traveling to the program office.

(continued)

**Table 1 (continued)**

Service	Traditional Approach	Digital Innovations
Job fairs	Program staff members organized in-person job fairs, coordinating with local employers and with clients who had to travel to the job fair venues.	Staff members organized virtual job fairs that lowered the barriers to participation for both employers and clients, primarily by eliminating the time and expense associated with traveling to the job fair venues. Staff members said some clients also felt more comfortable participating in a virtual job fair because it was less intimidating. Staff members could also cast a wider geographical net to include employers and clients for whom in-person fairs were too distant.

## Lesson 2: Some Clients Will Need Extra Resources and Support to Access Digital Services

While digital innovations created opportunities, they also presented new challenges. For example, only clients with digital tools, digital skills, and broadband access could access the virtual services being offered. To ensure equitable service delivery, it is vital that programs accommodate the needs of individuals who have limited digital experience and skills or lack the proper devices and broadband access. Table 2 includes some program staff members’ reflections on barriers to digital engagement that could worsen existing inequities as well as some of the creative solutions developed to reduce those barriers.

**Table 2. Solutions to Common Digital Access Challenges**

Topic	Challenge	Solution
Broadband access	Weak or inconsistent Wi-Fi access at home impeded client participation in web-based services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clients were provided with Wi-Fi hotspot devices.</li> <li>• Programs set up public Wi-Fi zones for clients to use, such as in the organizations’ parking lots.</li> <li>• Programs provided services that did not rely on internet access. For example, Cell-Ed, a mobile education technology provider, developed a training program that delivers micro lessons via mobile devices with no internet required. The California Department of Social Services partnered with Cell-Ed to provide clients access to the Essential Skills and Pathways Program and allowed clients to count the micro lessons toward training hours to meet state benefit requirements.</li> </ul>
Device access	Some clients couldn’t access the newly created digital resources because of unreliable access to cell phones, tablets, or computers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programs purchased laptops and other equipment using state and federal funding freed up during the pandemic.</li> <li>• Programs partnered with local organizations and nonprofit groups to develop digital device loaner programs.</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 2 (continued)**

Topic	Challenge	Solution
Digital skills	Some clients were intimidated by or unable to participate in virtual programming because they had limited computer skills. This was especially true among older, formerly incarcerated, or disabled clients.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Programs developed training materials, hosted training sessions, and offered one-on-one technical assistance to clients who needed more support to participate in virtual programming.</li><li>• Staff members created physical copies of virtual training materials and delivered these materials to clients' homes to ensure that individuals with limited mobility and limited technological access and skills could participate in the program.</li></ul>

Program staff said the solutions in Table 2 helped their programs reach individuals who wanted to participate in services, regardless of their technological barriers. Looking ahead, some staff members said they wanted to continue providing at least some of their services in a digital format, even as in-person services resumed. These interviews suggest that accounting for broadband and digital device access along with improved technical skills should remain an area of focus in the long term.

### **Lesson 3: A Mix of Digital and In-Person Services is Ideal**

Staff members suggested that programs should consider strategically designing hybrid services that combine the best of digital and in-person services. Some noted that the advantages of virtual services—increased flexibility, customizability, reduced time and expense of participation—can come at the cost of some of the benefits derived from relationships formed through in-person engagements. For example, some interviewees noted that in-person interactions generally improve their relationships with clients and clients' comfort with staff, which can make them more likely to share important information about themselves. Further, some staff members reported that during fully in-person services before the pandemic, they regularly sought to identify mental health issues, experiences with trauma, or recovery challenges their clients faced. This was more difficult to do in a virtual setting.

During the pandemic, program staff members developed temporary solutions that could approximate the benefits of in-person engagement, including more frequent one-on-one virtual meetings with clients, smaller group activities, and personal check-ins at the beginning of substantive meetings and workshops. Early in the pandemic, one program focused on assessing whether clients needed services such as medical care, housing, or food access. Clients responded positively to this approach, which led to the staff routinely checking in on clients' needs to help maintain contact, even if wraparound supports or job search assistance services were not immediately needed. While this approach does not replace the full benefits of in-person interactions, expressing interest in clients' lives outside the context of the program helped the staff build strong relationships with their clients during a time when in-person contact was impossible.

### **Summary**

Overall, the program staff members interviewed by the research team anticipated that pandemic-era digital innovations would play a role in long-term service provision. They viewed many of these innovations as unequivocally positive, such as digitizing paperwork, while others came with a caveat: Programs must make an intentional effort to design hybrid services in a way that allows clients and staff to build strong relationships and ensure equitable service delivery. Keeping these lessons in mind, programs can design hybrid services that benefit from the strengths of both in-person and virtual services.

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