**South Texas College News Center**

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**COVID-19 Training Grant for Businesses**

***COVID-19 Chameleons:* Grant-funded training affords workers the tools to adapt**

In a fast-changing world, sometimes you’ve got to blend in before you can stand out.

As the health crisis threatened to decimate the traditional workforce, the Texas Workforce Commission and its higher education partners were staring down a problem of preparedness. In an instant, the South Texas business environment had shed its skin. And while it might take *years* for workers to properly adapt to the new, socially distanced and sanitized conventions … for now, they needed camouflage.

The TWC launched the Skills Development Fund COVID-19 Special Training Initiative in June, awarding direct-response funding to community and technical colleges across the state. South Texas College was among the institutions receiving grants, with $287,500 earmarked for industry-essential skills and training. Suddenly, as abruptly as the crisis had taken hold, STC was working with local businesses and trade organizations to innovate solutions.

“We have years of experience working under grants,” says Olivia De La Rosa, Director of Professional and Workforce Education at South Texas College. “We’ve developed partnerships with community partners … we quickly reached out to those partners, and said ‘what can we offer you … what can we do?’”

That experience would prove vital, as businesses across all sectors — from healthcare and IT to manufacturing and construction — scrambled to adjust to COVID life. The most pressing concern would be safety — how to evolve procedures and habits to adapt to a “new normal” in post-crisis productivity. Close behind was the urgent need for remote communications training, particularly as it concerned technology.

“Doesn’t matter what industry,” says De La Rosa. “[It’s] how to work with patients under the new guidelines ... how to work with customers while still providing the service safely.”

The COVID-19 Special Training Initiative provides crisis-impacted industries with up-to-the-minute skills for coping and communicating. Specific training topics prescribed by the grant include telemedicine and billing, disinfection training, patient and customer safety, departmental cross-training, and tools for managing stress.

“The grant is for anybody that needs training, to address that need right now,” says De La Rosa.

With an infrastructure for fast-pivoting workforce training already in place, South Texas College and its partners were able to focus on execution. Within weeks, local healthcare and manufacturing businesses were commission-approved and ready to receive critical training on the state’s dime.

Among those taking advantage was Dr. Umesh Pathak, of Mid Valley Pediatric and Allergy Center (MCPAC) in Weslaco. His practice, complicated by its particularly vulnerable categories of clientele, was one of the first regional employers to complete its customized, grant-funded program.

“It’s extremely important to consider the safety of staff and patients,” says Pathak, who attended the training sessions alongside his staff. “It was an intensive 14 hours [covering] every aspect of what we need to know.”

As the crisis began forcing more health appointments online, clinics like the MVPAC had to bolster their capacity to deliver services remotely. Thanks to South Texas College’s decades-deep commitment to workforce readiness, training partners like San Antonio’s Practice Management Institute (PMI) were already on board to help “connect the dots.”

“This allows providers to have confidence in a well-trained staff, which allows them to concentrate on taking care of the people we love,” says Michael Moore, Vice President of Business Development at PMI. “It means absolutely everything.”

“It’s not only a benefit to them – we’re doing it for all of us,” adds De La Rosa. “Eventually we’re all going to need a doctor.”

The initiative has been so successful, in fact, that applications are beginning to bottleneck. Thus far, South Texas College has submitted applications on behalf of 40 healthcare employers, and De La Rosa says the Commission is reportedly working to keep up. “It gets difficult because the medical facilities now are so strained.”

Meanwhile, the grant is making its mark on other essential employment sectors in South Texas. On the manufacturing side, the new funding meant that local businesses like Metal Processing International in Mission could continue paying employees while the state bore the burden of safety and professional development training.

“We know they’re overworked and tired right now, so we’re flexible,” says De La Rosa. “We work with them.”

The COVID-19 Special Training Initiative advances a long-standing collaboration between STC and the Texas Workforce Commission, which granted the College one million dollars last year for customized training through the same Skills Development Fund. The TWC’s broader COVID-19 response entailed a ten-million-dollar commitment, with success depending on input from businesses, economic development boards, and institutions of higher education statewide.

As the TWC collaborated with those partners to develop guidelines for grant eligibility, the questions continued to emerge: What specific training would be needed? Which categories of worker would benefit most from training? Would funding cover equipment and/or PPE? In the end, the partners decided on a flexible, inclusive model that allowed more employees to benefit.

“Texas is a great state to be in business, as such programs go far to support and lift them up, especially in times of crisis,” says Moore.

For Moore’s company, already on the vanguard of web-based training when coronavirus hit, the collaboration with South Texas College and the Texas Workforce Commission was something of a no-brainer. The connections provided by partners like PMI would allow STC to leverage existing infrastructure, essentially killing two birds with one stone.

“Olivia De la Rosa and her team … are unbelievably awesome partners in this pursuit,” declares Moore.

While the challenges have proven unique, South Texas College’s objective of uplifting the regional workforce remains indomitable.

“It’s why we do it,” says De La Rosa. “We work at a community college to serve our communities.”