ID/No:	AEL 06-20
Date:	September 11, 2020
Keyword:	AEL; Natural Disaster
Effective:	Immediately

3   **To:**   Adult Education and Literacy Grant Recipients
4   Adult Education and Literacy Special Project Grantees
5   Local Workforce Development Board Executive Directors
6   Commission Executive Offices
7   Integrated Service Area Managers

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9   **From:**   Courtney Arbour, Director, Workforce Development Division

10 **Subject:** Adult Education and Literacy Services and Reporting during the COVID-19
11   Pandemic Period

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13 **PURPOSE:**
14   The purpose of this Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) Letter is to provide AEL
15   grantees[1] with information and guidance on the Texas Workforce Commission
16   (TWC)AEL program's response to AEL programs with service delivery challenges
17   resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (pandemic) closures. Additionally, this AEL
18   Letter introduces a new reporting requirement.

19 **RESCISSIONS:**
20   None

21 **BACKGROUND:**
22   Governor Greg Abbott declared Texas a disaster site on March 13, 2020, in response to
23   the pandemic. The declaration brought about the closure of most educational and
24   workforce development institutions across the state. AEL grantees and their providers
25   responded by transitioning service delivery from on-site locations to distance and remote
26   delivery platforms. These events required changes to most aspects of service delivery,
27   including modifying education and training services and testing for performance
28   accountability measures and follow-up services, all of which rely almost exclusively on
29   on-site, in-person activities.
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[1] For the purposes of this AEL Letter, AEL grantees are entities that receive AEL funds through
the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC).

With support from the statewide AEL professional development and resource center—the Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning (TCALL)—TWC and AEL took immediate steps to provide AEL grantees with additional resources and guidance on providing uninterrupted service delivery as brick-and-mortar institutions closed statewide. From the onset of the pandemic, TWC AEL communicated to grantees and providers the need to continue serving AEL participants and new students without concern for the likely negative impact to federal and state performance accountability measures. This focus on continued and modified service delivery extended from TWC leadership to all TWC-administered programs in which employer, employee, and community services were affected.

This AEL Letter provides a timeline of the funding and resources that were made available to AEL grantees during the initial pandemic period in Texas in March and April 2020, as well as a new reporting requirement implemented to provide TWC with up-to-date information on the continued needs of grantees during the pandemic period.

PROCEDURES:

No Local Flexibility (NLF): This rating indicates that AEL entities must comply with the federal and state laws, rules, policies, and required procedures set forth in this AEL Letter and have no local flexibility in determining whether and/or how to comply. All information with an NLF rating is indicated by "must" or "shall."

Local Flexibility (LF): This rating indicates that AEL entities have local flexibility in determining whether and/or how to implement guidance or recommended practices set forth in this AEL Letter. All information with an LF rating is indicated by "may" or "recommend."

Communications on Pandemic-Related Actions

NLF: AEL grantees must be aware of consistent communications that TWC staff has been making available to grantees and their providers during the pandemic.

AEL Pandemic Resource Page

On March 13, 2020, the same day Governor Abbott declared a statewide disaster, TCALL launched the TWC AEL pandemic resource web page for AEL providers and students at https://tcall.tamu.edu/. The page provides an organized list of resources for program directors and instructors to assist and share with students during the transition, including pandemic resource websites, frequently asked questions and answers, information on serving students at a distance, remote testing information, a distance learning help desk, distance learning curriculum providers, and free internet provider options. The page also provides AEL guidance on how to serve current and new AEL students enrolling in the program while brick-and-mortar facilities are closed or operating at a limited capacity.

The resource page offers AEL students easy access to information on the following topics:

- Protection from COVID-19, made available in several languages

- AEL class schedules
- The closure status of local high school equivalency testing centers
- Instructions for applying for unemployment benefits through TWC's website
- Various learning resources for adult students and their family members

During the ever-changing pandemic situation, TCALL continues to add resources to the AEL pandemic resource web page that are relevant to AEL providers and students.

Surveys and Transmittals
Beginning on March 12, 2020, AEL sent out weekly, then biweekly, surveys to AEL grantees, covering the pandemic's impact on service-delivery operations as well as the status of remote instruction options that grantees were able to make available to AEL participants. AEL used responses from these surveys to develop pandemic-related guidance and to receive information on anticipated AEL grant expenditures.

On March 16, 2020, TWC AEL began to circulate AEL transmittal emails on pandemic response topics to grantees and providers.

Videoconferencing
On March 19, 2020, TWC AEL staff began conducting weekly videoconference calls to alert field offices of agency updates and answer questions related to transition needs, including questions about full-time distance and remote services and allowable costs related to pandemic response expenses. The videoconference calls are posted on the TCALL pandemic resource web page.

Distance Learning Curriculum Volunteer Help Desk
On March 20, 2020, TCALL developed the TWC AEL Distance Learning Curriculum Volunteer Help Desk for Teachers (help desk) to serve as a resource for instructors developing distance learning curricula. This resource is published on the TCALL pandemic resource web page at https://tcall.tamu.edu/docs/TCALL-AEL-DistanceLearningCurriculumHelpDeskAvailability_32020_nophone.pdf.

Pandemic-Related Guidance
NLF: AEL grantees must be aware of the following unique guidance on service delivery and grant management during the pandemic period. Grantees expressed the immediate need for guidance and best-practice implementation for remote service delivery, and TWC AEL participated in several national webinars to disseminate this information.

Frequently Asked Questions
On March 18, 2020, TWC AEL published the first AEL COVID-19 Response Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sheet on the TCALL pandemic resource web page at https://tcall.tamu.edu/docs/COVID-19FAQ.pdf to answer provider questions related to topics such as class cancellations; methods for contacting TWC AEL staff; paying staff during the pandemic; distance learning requirements; and performance accountability, as the pandemic interrupted service delivery, including the enrollment of new students. This FAQ is updated frequently and serves as a centralized resource to providers for guidance on serving students at a distance and addressing logistical challenges that providers have

encountered during the pandemic. This FAQ is updated to also communicate guidance from the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) related to the pandemic, including guidance found in OCTAE Program Memorandum 20-3: Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and COVID-19—Frequently Asked Questions; OCTAE Program Memorandum 20-4: Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and COVID-19—Frequently Asked Questions, Part 2; and OCTAE Program Memorandum 20-5: Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and COVID-19—Frequently Asked Questions, Part 3.

Guidance on Serving New Students at a Distance
On March 27, 2020, TWC AEL published the first version of guidance on serving new students at a distance, available at the AEL pandemic resource web page at https://tcall.tamu.edu/docs/ServingNewStudentsAtADistance.pdf. This guidance addresses modifying intake and enrollment procedures for serving Pandemic Affected Staff-Determined Eligible Students (PASES)—students who enroll in the AEL program when brick-and-mortar facilities are closed.

TWC AEL staff implemented a Microsoft reporting tool that providers may use to track PASES during the pandemic period, given that these students cannot be tracked in the TEAMS data management system.

Remote Testing
On July 7, 2020, TWC issued AEL Letter 03-20, titled "Remote Testing in Adult Education and Literacy." This AEL Letter provides guidance on the remote testing options available to grantees. A draft version of this letter was shared with grantees in statewide conference calls with providers held on April 23, 2020, and April 30, 2020, in order to provide immediate guidance for grantees. This guidance addresses the following topics: procedures for enrolling new students without a pretest approved by the National Reporting System (NRS), which would impact federal performance; elements that must be addressed in remote testing procedures; and an emphasis on serving students rather than on concerns about performance reporting.

Assessment Guide
On May 28, 2020, TWC AEL published a draft version of the Program Year 2020–2021 Assessment Guide. As of the date of publication, OCTAE had not approved the guide, which is required before official publication. OCTAE notified TWC AEL via email on April 28, 2020, that it was unable to approve such polices at the time because of outstanding issues resulting from the pandemic. In order to provide AEL grantees ample time to review the proposed policy, which does not include remote testing guidance, TWC AEL published the draft version at https://www.twc.texas.gov/files/agency/ael-assessment-guide-twc.pdf.

On June 9, 2020, OCTAE released guidance on testing exemptions and remote test proctoring via email, allowing states to submit revisions to Program Year 2020 (PY'20) assessment policies to include these additions. TWC AEL submitted a revision to the Assessment Guide that was subsequently approved by OCTAE on July 16, 2020, to

include these exemptions, also found in AEL Letter 03-20, and will publish that version on the TWC website.

Funding and Expanded Allowable Activities

NLF: AEL grantees must be aware of the four items that the Commission approved on April 14, 2020, in direct response to AEL grantees' immediate funding, program, and resource needs resulting from the pandemic:

I. **Funds Released to Grantees**: Nearly $1 million of a performance-based funding holdback was released immediately to grantees for the Category B measure, which is described in [AEL Letter 02-20, Change 1, issued June 4, 2020, and titled "Program Year 2019–2020 Performance-Based Funding and Performance Allocation Holdbacks—*Update*"](); this letter indicates that these funds must be prioritized for serving participants at a distance.

II. **Expansion of Allowable Initiative Activities**: The scope of allowable activities under the Workforce Integration and Follow-Up Activities initiative, first approved on December 17, 2019, and described in AEL Letter 04-20, Change 1, issued August 31, 2020, and titled "Workforce Integration and Follow-Up Activities—*Update*," was expanded to support the increases in distance and remote learning resulting from school closures. Contracts for the Workforce Integration and Follow-Up initiative require a monthly report, which is submitted through an online survey, as further described in the Pandemic Reporting for AEL section.

III. **Increase of Distance Learning Call Center Capacity**: The existing Student Support Call Center's capacity of serving 1,000 participants a month was significantly increased with the Commission's approval of an additional $240,000 (for Appropriation Year 2021 (AY'21)) to serve an estimated 1,800 participants a month. The call center provides 20- to 30-minute sessions of one-on-one virtual math support to AEL participants via phone calls, screen sharing, and virtual whiteboards.

IV. **Development of Virtual Learning Resources**: An additional $500,000 (for AY'21) was approved for TCALL to develop virtual learning resources (20 units in English and 20 in Spanish) in the areas of basic education, digital literacy, workforce preparation, and job search assistance. These resources will be made available for students and may serve as support material for instructors. By June 2020, a team of eight AEL subject matter experts had surveyed more than 900 AEL field staff members to determine the topics and focus of videos, and a similar team of lesson planners began work on the video content. The first videos are expected to be completed by late fall 2020 and will be made available on the TCALL portal.

Waivers, Extensions, and Exemptions

NLF: AEL grantees must be aware of the following waivers, extensions, and exemptions related to changes to service delivery to support grantees during the pandemic period.

Updates on deliverable extensions, waivers, and extensions will be made to the TCALL pandemic resource web page and communicated to providers via transmittals.

Restrictions Lifted on Computer Costs

On March 19, 2020, in response to an OCTAE finding from a virtual monitoring review of the 2017 TWC AEL statewide competition, TWC lifted a cost limitation for laptop and computer purchases via AEL Letter 05-20, issued March 19, 2020, and titled "Modifications to Grants Awarded under TWC RFP 320-18-01, Adult Education and Literacy Service Provider Grant." Previously, TWC had limited grantees to spending no more than 15 percent of their funds for laptops, computers, and similar items. Computing devices that may be purchased may include machines used to acquire, store, analyze, process, and publish data and other information electronically, including accessories (or "peripherals") for printing, transmitting and receiving, and/or storing electronic information. Examples include, but are not limited to, desktops, laptops, all-in-ones, tablets, and two-in-ones.

Data Validation Extensions

The TEAMS monthly validation for March to June, due on the 15th day of each month, and the Quarter 3 data sign-off deliverables were extended.

Distance Learning Instructor Waivers

TWC AEL waived the requirement for instructors to complete distance learning modules before offering distance learning. This waiver was placed in effect through May 15, 2020.

Professional Development Training

NLF: AEL grantees must be aware of the professional development (PD) and technical assistance (TA) made available by TCALL, TWC AEL, and other entities.

Remote Proctoring

On April 13, 2020, OCTAE notified all AEL state programs that the BEST Plus 2.0 test may be administered virtually, as allowed by the test publisher CAL's guidance. TCALL immediately scheduled training webinars for test administrators of the BEST Plus 2.0 to become certified to conduct remote testing. TCALL trainers conducted two virtual trainings on April 24, 2020, and more than 600 AEL test administrators from local programs became certified to conduct remote testing of the BEST Plus 2.0. Shortly after those trainings, TCALL and TABE test publisher Data Recognition Corp organized virtual trainings on remote testing for TABE administrators on May 1, 2020, and May 5, 2020. More than 300 test administrators were trained to administer the TABE 11/12 test virtually. On June 5, 2020, TCALL held a remote testing training for Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) test administrators, and the webinars were recorded and posted in the PD portal. More than 300 CASAS test administrators have been trained to deliver CASAS testing remotely.

TCALL continues to offer training opportunities and information on how providers may become certified to conduct remote testing for NRS-approved tests for performance accountability purposes, as outlined in the Texas AEL Assessment Guide for Program Year 2020–2021.

Webinars on Remote Instruction

TCALL hosted the first webinar on options for communicating with students remotely on March 17, 2020, and more webinars on similar topics were subsequently held. Webinars on a variety of remote instruction delivery platforms such as Cisco Webex, Zoom, Google Sites, WhatsApp, and others have been developed and made available on TCALL's PD portal, with more than 5,000 individuals attending such webinars to date.

Midcourse changes have been made to both the Administrator and the Instructor Leadership Excellence Academies to incorporate developments in AEL that are related directly to the pandemic, especially within the groups' individual and joint projects.

Segments on Teacher Tuesday PD webinars have had a central theme of conducting AEL business amidst the pandemic. Topics have included the future of remote instruction.

Additionally, the Texas Peer Network Mentor's virtual conference, Transforming Crisis into Critical Opportunity, held on June 12, 2020, and June 19, 2020, focused on how AEL program administrators and instructors may navigate issues posed by the pandemic, what AEL operations after COVID-19 might look like, and how to prepare.

Reporting on Unplanned Pandemic-Related Expenses

NLF: AEL grantees must report by the 24th of each month, or as requested by TWC, on pandemic-related purchases or expenses and respond to open-ended questions related to operations and service delivery for both the AEL core contract grants under RFP 320-18-01 and the Workforce Integration Initiative grant in the reporting templates provided, as follows:

- The AEL core grant contracts reporting template is available at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/AELPandemicDeliverables.
- The Workforce Integration Initiative grant contracts reporting template is available at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/WIIDeliverables.

AEL Letter 04-20, Change 1, issued August 31, 2020, and titled "Workforce Integration and Follow-Up Activities—*Update*," provides more information on deliverables and reporting requirements under the Workforce Integration Initiative grant. Reporting templates will be updated and modified as needed to collect information requested by TWC leadership or the US Department of Education. Grantees may direct any questions about these reporting template surveys to AELTA@twc.state.tx.us.

INQUIRIES:

Send inquiries regarding this AEL Letter to AELpolicy.clarifications@twc.state.tx.us.

REFERENCES:

OCTAE Program Memorandum 20-3, issued March 27, 2020, and titled "Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and COVID-19—Frequently Asked Questions"

OCTAE Program Memorandum 20-4, issued April 17, 2020, and titled "Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and COVID-19—Frequently Asked Questions, Part 2"

OCTAE Program Memorandum 20-5, issued May 29, 2020, and titled "Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and COVID-19—Frequently Asked Questions, Part 3"

AEL Letter 03-20, issued July 7, 2020, and titled "Remote Testing in Adult Education and Literacy."

AEL Letter 02-20, Change 1, issued June 4, 2020, and titled "Program Year 2019–2020 Performance-Based Funding and Performance Allocation Holdbacks—*Update*"

AEL Letter 04-20, Change 1, issued August 31, 2020, and titled "Workforce Integration and Follow-Up Activities—*Update*"