

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
WorkFirst New Jersey Partner Focus Group
Wednesday 30, 2022 10:00AM Via Zoom
MEETING MINUTES

Attendees

1. Juanita Vargas, United Way of Greater Union County
2. Christina Topolosky, Division of Individual and Family Support Services
3. Dr Ellaine Sanders, New Jersey Community Food Bank
4. Cathy Hart, Housing Authority for the City of Elizabeth
5. Yunia LaBaut, Workforce Advantage
6. Julio Sabater, Workforce Advantage
7. Colleen Clay, The Gateway Family YMCA
8. Scott DiNardo, Division of Social Services
9. Amedio DiCosmo, Division of Social Services
10. Lillian Roman, American Job Center
11. Gena Haranis, Janus Solutions
12. Ronnie Kauder, Janus Solutions
13. Eva Altidor, Division of Individual and Family Support Services
14. Veronica Mwaniki, International Rescue Committee
15. Dr Lisa Hiscano, Union College
16. Marlene Loff, Union College
17. Cathy Waters, Urban League of Union County
18. LaChelle Thompson, Housing Authority for the City of Elizabeth

UCWDB Staff

Meredith Barracato

Meeting Summary

I. Welcome and Introductions

All participants introduced themselves.

Strategic Plan information:

Meredith Barracato reviewed slides that discussed the various elements of the strategic plan.

WORKFIRST NEW JERSEY Poll Questions:

Throughout the meeting Meredith Barracato released a series of poll questions and shared with the attendees the results.

1. Which of the following are your client's barriers to employment?
 - o Transportation
 - o Childcare
 - o Medical (mental/physical)
 - o Disability
 - o Occupational skills

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2. Are the current outreach efforts to WORKFIRST NEW JERSEY clients sufficient?
 - o 50/50 split yes and no
3. Which are the most effective career service opportunities?
 - o Vocational job skills training
 - o Career guidance
 - o Job search assistance
 - o Basic skills and literacy
4. Which are the greatest Supportive Services needs for your client base?
 - o Transportation
 - o Payment for employment related applications
 - o Childcare
 - o Linkages to community services
5. Does your organization have an effective engagement and retention plan?
 - o Yes
6. Does your organization focus on the development of Career Pathways for WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT Adults and TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES individuals?
 - o Yes
7. Is there a well-established coordinated service model among partners?
 - o Yes and No 50/50 split

Discussion Questions:

What are ways to identify WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT Adult and TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES individuals' barriers to employment?

Scott DiNardo, Division of Social Services, one of the main barriers is people's unwillingness to change without having sanctions to consider them to change. Clients not interested in doing work activity for 35 for the amount of pay they receive but in the past, they have had the sanctions to get them to do it. General Assistance clients are sanctioned but Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are not sanctioned and not interested in complying.

Gena Haranis, Janus Solutions, not every client will say they don't want to do but they might say they have transportation or childcare issues.

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Juanita Vargas, United Way of Greater Union County, the poverty situation magnified by Covid has made it worse for individuals because they are in crisis and require more case management to engage them. They will pick up drop off and also provide them more access to resources

Christina Topolosky, Division of Individual and Family Support Services, need to make sure basic needs are met and before an individual focus on work.

Marlene Loff, Union College it is hard for individuals to concentrate at a worksite when they have a sick child or issues at home. Reoccurring home issues prevent them from focusing. Individuals who have family obligations such as a sick child and the threat of being sanctioned due to absences, creates more problems. There is a revolving door of coming to the program, being sanctioned, and coming back.

Scott DiNardo, Division of Social Services, the Division of Social Services does an initial evaluation and client self-assessment and that's how they identify the barriers.

Amedeo DiCosmo, Division of Social Services, vendors also do an assessment and the more barriers they have to employment then they will refer them to. Social worker will assess them and do referral. Having onsite Temporary Assistance for Needy Families/General Assistance staff helps.

LaChelle Thompson, Housing Authority for the City of Elizabeth, having someone who provides mental health to individuals on site has been helpful identify the barriers.

How often do clients get assessed at Division of Social Service?

Scott DiNardo, Division of Social Services, the initial assessment is once, but every 6 months they do a review. After the first assessment, they will discover barriers and then refer to and then monitor them.

How can Union County conduct outreach to WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT Adult and TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES individuals?

Juanita Vargas, United Way of Greater Union County, working with faith base community, working with Pastors. Reach the small faith base not the ones already connected with the county.

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Marlene Loff, Union College, need to consider lack of technology- sending text or email is not a good way to do outreach because you need to consider the digital divide.

Scott DiNardo, Division of Social Services, Phone interviews versus in person interviews have been successful for outreach. Sending letters and cold calling work. Use email more now unlike pre-Covid.

Amedeo DiCosmo, Division of Social Services, clients were more open during phone interviews versus in person interviews. Allow for more honest discussion regarding barriers

Yunia LaBaut, Workforce Advantage, sorting the SNAP outreach list by language allows for them to offer those clients English as a Second Language services to those who have identified English as a barrier. Market to the individuals in their language.

Julio Sabater, Workforce Advantage, welfare to work has been a transactional process and the approach has been more of a policing role based on compliance. The way to communicate with the client should not be a demand or a requirement it should be presented more as a work opportunity. This is a change from what we have done in the past. Need to work on developing the client's awareness on the benefits of improving their skills versus them worried about losing their benefits. Need to see clients more as customers you need to satisfy. Need to be more of a motivator and engaging so the client can see the benefits. Focus on career pathway so clients can see their life beyond welfare.

Gena Haranis, Janus Solutions, working through employers and help the lower level employees move forward in their pathway.

Ronnie Kauder, Janus Solutions, asked if attendees Medicaid clients would be interested in workforce services through the American Job Center?

Scott DiNardo, Division of Social Services, in Sept 2019 Snap clients were mandated but then it stopped now its only voluntary. There would probably a few people who would be interested in getting involved in workforce services.

Veronica Mwaniki, International Rescue Committee, the people who are working and underemployed need to be focused to provide them with those opportunities that lead to better employment.

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How can we ensure we capture client voice in the service delivery model?

Julio Sabater, Workforce Advantage, client voice is essential in program development. Now that many of the services are volunteer and all the mandated services need to be revisited because you have to think of ways to motivate people. Show the clients that they can get something concrete. What are the benefits like learning English or getting their General Education Diploma. Need to be flexible with their schedules because that's what they need.

LaChelle Thompson, Housing Authority for the City of Elizabeth, conduct surveys to capture clients voice and any item that is a problem will be addressed and adjusted so clients can see the problems are evolving. Urban League survey at the beginning and 6 months, they do focus groups with clients.

Cathy Waters, Urban League of Union County, need to survey program participants immediately. The participants have expressed their need on housing and their program is now focused on making sure that is constantly focused on.

Marlene Loff, Union College, Clients need to be included in the conversation on where they would like to be placed for their work experience. For individuals who are coming from another county need to incorporate their experience from their previous county.

How can Partners train and support WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT Adult and TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES individuals with barriers to employment?

Dr Elaine Sanders, New Jersey Community Food Bank The New Jersey Community Food Bank would like to be an active partner and currently offer training job search assistance, emotional learning training

Marlene Loff, Union College Union College offer occupational and soft skills training. The American Job Center and Union College is focused on co-enrolling Title II to Title I programs. They are now focused on outreach and awareness.

LaChelle Thompson, Housing Authority for the City of Elizabeth, Job Plus program has been conducting RISK assessment and based on the results from the Risk assessment they will refer to their partners to fill in the gaps. They also help with the intake and certification process.

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Cathy Waters, Urban League, does a goal service plan and assessment but they work with the American Job Center for education and career assistance. Being in house allows for clients to follow through because everyone is together. There is a need for follow through with the staff to make sure clients are moving along.

Juanita Vargas, United Way of Greater Union County, need to have a better co-enrollment process because intake and certification is intense and many clients don't move forward.

How can Union County expand access to supportive services for WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT Adult and TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES individuals with barriers to employment?

Juanita Vargas, United Way of Greater Union County, need to improve the enrollment for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act services. Need to create a uniform intake and service strategy plan for partners don't have to create multiple copies. To get buss tickets, uniform, or any support the process is very cumbersome.

Veronica Mwaniki, International Rescue Committee, setting up client profiles and uploading documents into a software system is complicated for newly arrive citizens. There are too many steps just to see a client. There is too much time between the certification process and receiving benefits is very complicated.

Dr Lisa Hiscano, Union College The need to identify the various process, streamline the process, and develop a new referral process so the eligibility process is not another barrier. Needs to be more follow up on the system. And develop a consistent comprehensive approach on outreach strategies. There also needs to be a clarification if services are even available for anyone because no one is clear on what funding is available and for who.

What are the procedures necessary to operationalize the authentic engagement and service retention of WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT Adult and TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES individuals with barriers to employment?

LaChelle Thompson, Housing Authority for the City of Elizabeth, increase student support and conduct monitoring especially in the beginning to ensure success early on in the program. A need for use and sharing of information on client progress.

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Juanita Vargas, United Way of Greater Union County, need to have an impact strategy- what's the goal, how is each partner contributing to that and how can we strengthen this collaboration. This needs to be a Union County wide

Amedeo DiCosmo, Division of Social Services, the job search program was very helpful to clients and helped many individuals get help.

Cathy Waters, Urban League, implement a certificate base workshop so clients get something they can share with others on showing their completion. Need to highlight and share success stories for engagement.

Yunia LaBaut, Workforce Advantage, help clients manage their own time. Provide them with flexible schedules and offering them laptop and internet. Help the clients apply to other grants.

Julio Sabater, Workforce Advantage, Clients need to receive a lot of support at the beginning of their program. They have a student support strategy which helps the students especially during the first two week of their activity. This includes calling them when they are absent. Connect them with services and agencies. This support is critical for academic success.

How are career pathways strategies aligned with serving WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT Adult and TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES individuals with barriers to employment?

Marlene Loff, Union College, Career pathway begins upon enrollment, there is a review of assessment scores and career interest surveys. The conversations continue in the classroom.

Juanita Vargas, United Way of Greater Union County, New Americans need to access to career pathway development.

In what ways can we strengthen integrated service models for cross-training of staff, technical assistance, use and sharing of information, and other coordination efforts utilized to support service integration across required One-Stop partners?

Julio Sabater, Workforce Advantage, there are steps being taken within the Literacy Committee to integrate Title I and Title II clients but its been slow moving and needs to expand to all the partners.

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Gena Haranis, Janus Solutions, Integration conversation should be conducted at the WorkFirst New Jersey Operations meetings and certain aspects have been focused on but there is room for expanding the conversation.

Veronica Mwaniki, International Rescue Committee, need to close the loop with referring agencies. Many of the clients do not understand how to navigate the system and staff are running around trying to get information to understand the client progress.

Marlene Loff, Union College, need to measure how each partner is contributing toward the goals of getting individuals employed and reduce their barriers.

What are some lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, what actions have been taken, and how/whether they will be maintained?

Lillian Roman, American Job Center Customers have chosen to do things virtual even if many of the centers are open. Many of the systems and processes have become virtual and will continue to be virtual unless the individual needs to come in person. Virtual services helps those individuals who might have childcare or transportation issues.

Scott DiNardo, Division of Social Services, Telephone interviews have helped social services

Juanita Vargas, United Way of Greater Union County, need to have a better understanding of how vulnerable people are because many are suffering from mental health concerns because many families are doubling up living together due to income losses.

How can we expand the implementation of a variety of work-based learning opportunities and programs, including Incumbent Worker Training, On-the-Job Training, Transitional Jobs, Pre-Apprenticeship, and Registered Apprenticeship opportunities?

Amedeo DiCosmo, Division of Social Services, Job search program was extremely helpful and the state is pushing away from the job search program that helped those individuals who are interested in finding a job. Clients were assisted by helping them create a resume and get ready for working. The current job search activity now is not useful and clients need more one on one support.

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Dr Lisa Hiscano, Union College, American Job Center should be providing job search and would be an opportunity for co-enrollment. If WorkFirst New Jersey clients are eligible for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Title I services why are they not being enrolled immediately.

Julio Sabater, Workforce Advantage, Job search is available as a service and not requirement and agencies need to change the client's mindset.

Scott DiNardo, Division of Social Services, Social services have to assign people to very specific regulations and requirements for participation for General Assistance clients. Based on the requirements clients are not able to co-enroll due to the hourly requirement. Even though there is no Temporary Assistance for Needy Families sanction they are still supposed to do the 35-hour requirement but social service can not sanction them. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is a voluntary program. There is a sanction for General Assistance clients. Dr. Hiscano, Union College, mentioned the hourly requirements create co-enrollment challenges due to WorkFirst New Jersey requirements.

Meredith Barracato discussed the next steps in the strategic planning process. Meeting adjourned.