

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
AMERICAN JOB CENTER PARTNER COMMITTEE
James Brady, Chairman
WEDNESDAY, October 25, 2023, 9:00AM Warinanco Sports Arena
MEETING MINUTES

Committee Members

1. Cathy Waters, Urban League of Union County
2. Scott Kuchinsky, Plainfield Public Library
3. Colleen Clayton, The Gateway Family YMCA
4. Iesha Armour, NJ Department of Labor
5. Ingrid Macias, NJ Department of Labor
6. Dr. Lisa Hiscano, Union College of Union County, NJ
7. James Brady, Savor Group LLC, Chairman
8. Lyle Moseley, Elizabeth Board of Education
9. Lily Sanchez Ruiz, Union College of Union County, NJ
10. Juanito Chiluisa, NJ Department of Labor Employment Services
11. Xiomara Hernandez, Inroads to Opportunities
12. Anthea Williams, NJ Department of Labor

UCWDB Staff

Meredith Barracato
Gina Tuesta

Meeting Summary

Welcome and Introductions

Chairman James Brady thanked everyone for attending the last American Job Center Partners meeting for the year. He asked everyone to introduce themselves and organization they represented.

Review and Approval of August 23, 2023 Meeting Minutes:

Motion was made by Scott Kuchinsky to approve the **August 23, 2023** Committee Meeting Minutes. Juanito Chiluisa provided the second motion. Motion was carried.

Standing Agenda Items:

- **Program Year 2023 Budget:** Meredith Barracato explained there were no updates to the PY2023 since the committee meeting in August.
- **Performance Data:** Meredith Barracato provided committee members feedback she received the FutureWorks, who oversees the performance data for the New Jersey Department of Labor. Meredith Barracato explained that as of 10/24/23 FutureWorks was still waiting for the final data set which would be provided to the US Department of Labor. A

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representative from FutureWorks mentioned the data should be updated in a few weeks.

- **Unemployment Data:** Meredith Barracato reviewed the unemployment data from July 2022 to July 2023. Meredith Barracato noted that since April 2023 the unemployment rate has increased and as of July was standing at 5.1% in Union County. The Union County rate was slightly higher than the New Jersey unemployment rate which stands at 4.7%. Meredith Barracato transitioned the conversation to the New Jersey Department of Labor LightCast quarter 3 data set which shows job posting analytics. Meredith Barracato reviewed the latest data which shows the top companies recruiting, the most posted occupations, and top software skills identified in the job postings. Meredith Barracato reported there are a large number of jobs in the healthcare, technology, pharmaceuticals, and financial services industries. She noted companies such as Merck, Atlantic Health System and Fiserv were among the top companies.

Meredith Barracato explained that the top occupations in Union County consisted of Registered Nurses, Software Developers, and retail salespersons. Meredith Barracato noted many of the software skills needed continue to be Microsoft excel, office, and PowerPoint. However, there are a number of postings that require specialized software such as SQL (Programming Language), Java, and Python.

Scott Kuchinsky mentioned the challenges they face in training clients for Microsoft certifications, highlighting the decline in candidates with basic digital literacy skills. He mentioned three certification levels: NorthStar (basic), IC3 (basic office skills), and Microsoft certification. He noted that it's increasingly difficult to find candidates suitable for Microsoft certification, as most already have some job market-ready skills. It takes significant time and effort to prepare candidates for these certifications, with a 6-month timeline being mentioned. The program involves 20 hours per week for about 100 hours in total. Scott addressed the shift in their training program, emphasizing the changing landscape of their clientele. He added they used to work with a diverse range of clients, some of whom possessed varying degrees of digital literacy. To assess their clients' digital skills, they use a test called Spark. Scott acknowledged that the training process is quite intensive. For clients scoring below 350 on a scale of 1000 in their Spark assessments, it takes approximately three months of training just to bring them up to the IC3 level. After that, an additional

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eight to ten weeks of training is needed to prepare them for the actual Microsoft certification. This means a substantial commitment of time, amounting to about six months or half a year.

Dr. Hiscano discussed the challenges faced by their programs, particularly in the context of office administration and accounting technician courses. These programs focused on Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word skills, with the accounting technician program also including QuickBooks certification. One key issue she identified was that the program titles didn't always align with the actual job market demand. She emphasized the importance of understanding the specific job requirements and ensuring that the training provided matches those needs. In essence, her point was that these programs should be more aligned with skill-based training rather than just program titles that may not accurately represent the job opportunities available.

Additionally, Scott discussed the current labor market dynamics, with entry-level, unskilled labor jobs paying a relatively high wage of \$18 to \$19 per hour. Despite the low unemployment rate, many people remained out of the workforce. Scott suggested that these individuals might have underlying issues preventing them from entering the workforce, making the task of helping them find employment even more challenging. Meredith Barracato stressed the importance of participant assessments and relevant policies that the NJ Department of Labor has been issuing to ensure all local areas understand the need for consistency in the intake and assessment process.

Scott Kuchinsky mentioned the need to have digital literacy assessment as part of the regular part of career services to ensure everyone understands the participant's skill set before moving them into something they cannot accomplish. Meredith Barracato mentioned the Workforce Development Board has requested that the American Job Center provide the partners comprehensive details of the individuals walking into the American Job Center seeking services to have a better sense of the skill set, needs, and previous occupations they are leaving or being let go from. Meredith Barracato mentioned the discussions they are having today are part of the Memorandum of Understanding and if everyone agrees then it can be part of services offered to program participants. Dr Hiscano discussed the importance in understanding the availability of funding and the of Workforce Development System partners and the American Job Center

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certification process. Dr. Hiscano emphasized the need to assess a client's academic and literacy levels and their eligibility for various funding programs.

Scott expressed his appreciation for Lily Sanchez Ruiz from Union College, who does presentation to his students every Thursday to help them navigate the system for obtaining free schooling. Scott particularly emphasizing the importance of having a face to talk to for those who lacked the skills of self-advocacy and independent information gathering. He emphasized that without guidance, many people might not be able to access the services they needed. Meredith discussed the intent of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the importance of a network of partners, with the American Job Center being the main hub. She emphasized that partners should feed into the American Job Center and be provided access to information via Union County Works.

Since no one from the American Job Center was present, Meredith Barracato moved on to discuss New Jersey Department of Labor's new policies.

American Job Center Presentation: Not Available

NJ Department of Labor Policy Update and Public Notices:

Meredith Barracato reviewed two policies that the New Jersey Department of Labor recently issued. The first policy, known as "Functional alignment in the American Job Centers," aims to streamline services at American Job Centers across the state. The strategy for this policy involved formal supervision, the establishment of functional teams, and functional alignment among partners to ensure seamless services and integration.

The second policy discussed was the "Workforce Service Integration and Co-enrollment policy," which focused on Co-enrollment and systems integration as mandated by law. The policy emphasized the role of the Workforce Development Board in providing guidance and governance, the role of the Operator in setting the standards and accountability, and the importance of leveraging funding streams, sharing data, and coordinating services. Meredith discussed the use of Union County Works and how partners access to the platform allows for full integrations since the eligibility/intake services are now virtual. This system allows for all those in the American Job Center Network Partners to fully engage their participants without losing them in the

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intake/eligibility process. Meredith Barracato continued to outlined key aspects of the policy related to service integration and co-enrollment. She emphasized the role of the operator, the Department of Human Services, American Job Center in Union County, in setting standards and ensuring accountability. Collaboration with partners is crucial, with the aim of minimizing duplication and promoting efficiency.

Juanito Chiluisa asked if all the customers need to be referred back to the American Job Center. He went on to explain a situation with DVRS who does not have access to AOSOS but also provide services to the same participants. Juanito mentioned the fact both departments were unaware of what the other was doing to help the clients and it created a lot of confusion for the client. Meredith Barracato informed Juanito that all clients should be referred back to the American Job Center and explained that with the new co-enrollment policy by the NJ Department of Labor, all WIOA title programs (Title I, II, III, and IV) will need to co-enroll clients. Dr Hiscano asked what happens with the participants in Title II program who are not eligible for Title I services. Dr. Hiscano mentioned the fact the college is actively promoting and recruiting the Title I services but many of the students are not interested in enrolling in Title I services and ask how will co-enrollment be mandated.

Meredith Barracato explained that the NJ Department of Labor policy focuses on participants who are eligible to received Title I services. Scott Kuchinsky asked if there were any updates from the American Job Center on the roll out of UC Works for the partners. Meredith Barracato informed the committee she has not had any updates aside from identifying actions steps at the Literacy and Youth committee meetings. Scott Kuchinsky said that with the roll out of the UC Works it would make co-enrollment easier to do. Meredith Barracato clarified that the American Job Center, serving as both the career service provider and One Stop operator, is the central point for all client information according to the New Jersey Department of Labor. To be included in performance measures and to access additional career services like workshops, training grants, and counseling, clients entering through partner organizations must be registered by the American Job Center staff.

Meredith Barracato provided everyone with a status update and timeline on the Memorandum of Understanding/Infrastructure Funding Agreement. Meredith Barracato added that as part of the Memorandum of Understanding/ Infrastructure Funding Agreement process the NJ Department of Labor has asked local areas to be creative and work with partners on ways to spend and

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leverage the funding. Meredith Barracato mentioned that the New Jersey Department of Labor was honest and fully aware of their deficiency in marketing. They urged local areas to be creative and promote their services because there was a significant amount of unspent money. The New Jersey Department of Labor emphasized the need for co-enrollment, mandating it to ensure the utilization of available funding. Meredith Barracato highlighted the importance of creativity in presenting the advantages of the American Job Center Network services, mentioning the abundance of resources that people often overlook. Meredith Barracato noted Dr. Moseley's challenge of providing services to individuals in his evening classes when the American Job Centers operated from 8:30am to 4:30pm. The need for creativity in service provision was emphasized, especially for those gainfully employed during business hours. Dr. Mosely provided feedback on how his classes operates and the disadvantages his students face due to time constraints.

Scott Kuchinsky mentioned his experience with taking on the intake process during Covid since the American Job Center was closed but the library was open. Scott acknowledged, it was just an additional aspect of their jobs, something they were trained for but unable to replace the role of a counselor. He suggested a change in American Job Center's position structure to include individuals capable of handling various tasks, making universality a standard. While he acknowledges this may not be the current structure, it should be. Although the partners can distribute agency information and suggest contacts, they are not the American Job Center. He faced this issue when collecting client documents; his team lacked the authority to make determinations or offer advice on complexities. Scott stressed that the American Job Center should adapt to meet clients where they are in terms of understanding and assistance.

Meredith Barracato indicated that these suggestions will be reviewed and used to develop new initiatives and or be incorporated into the Memorandum of Understanding/Infrastructure Funding Agreement. Meredith Barracato noted that the New Jersey Department of Labor is looking for strategies that can help meet the clients where they are especially in a post Covid environment. Juanito Chiluisa commented that the New Jersey Department of Labor has set Employment Service hours based on their union contract and that is why they work certain hours and they do not get comp time for any hours extra.

Lily Sanchez Ruiz mentioned the need for more inclusive language that is careful of certain terminology that can scare individuals away. Lily Sanchez Ruiz went

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on to explain that equity, diversity and inclusion needs to be considered when talking to, discussing, or marketing to diverse populations.

Meredith Barracato discussed ongoing meetings hosted by the New Jersey Department of Labor, providing guidance for the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). She highlighted the upcoming circulation of the Memorandum of Understanding and Infrastructure Funding Agreement for partner review by November 20, with a goal to submit the draft to the Department of Labor by December 8. The Memorandum of Understanding is expected to be finalized with all signatures by January 1, 2024.

Additionally, Meredith Barracato mentioned the public notice for two Requests for Proposals (RFPs) for youth services, targeting in-school and out-of-school youth aged 14 to 21. The RFPs seek service providers to offer elements like tutoring, work experience, leadership guidance, and supportive services.

Community College Opportunity Grant, Union College of Union County, NJ:

Lily Sanchez Ruiz began the presentation by reviewing Union College of Union County, NJ slides providing statistical data, college background, and various diversity initiatives. Presentation materials were uploaded to the Google Drive meeting folder.

In her presentation, Lily Sanchez Ruiz began by addressing the audience with a greeting and a question about choices, specifically referencing the landmark legal case of Brown vs. Board of Education. She identified herself as an admissions counselor for the Community College Opportunity Grants, emphasizing the importance of the grant's \$472 million investment in New Jersey's education system.

Lily Sanchez Ruiz highlighted Union County's history as the first community college in the state, emphasizing its commitment to open access education. She discussed the institution's recognition in the Aspen Prize, drawing parallels to prestigious awards like the Oscars or Grammys for higher education. Lily Sanchez Ruiz shared insights into the changing demographics of colleges and universities, emphasizing the increasing presence of working adults. She challenged the audience to adapt their language to be more inclusive of this majority, noting the importance of addressing adult learners' needs. The presentation included a discussion on Union College's affordable education options, payment plans, and diverse degree programs. Lily Sanchez Ruiz shared a poignant example of the

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financial challenges faced by some students, highlighting the sacrifices made by those earning \$9 per hour to access education.

Overall, Lily Sanchez Ruiz presented a comprehensive overview of Union College's commitment to open access education, affordability, and inclusivity, urging the committee members to consider the diverse needs of their constituencies.

Committee Updates:

Due to timing Meredith Barracato provided a brief update on the three committees noting that Adult Education and Literacy, the disability, and the youth committee have been focusing on specific strategies that have been brought up as initiatives in past committee meetings and included in the strategic plan. Meredith Barracato mentioned each Chairman/woman's request to focus on one initiative at a time and develop specific action steps in completing those initiative. Meredith Barracato highlighted the need for UC Works training and partner access as a major initiative for the Literacy and Youth Committee.

- **Disability Committee:**
- **Adult Education and Literacy:**
- **Youth Committee:**

Partner Updates: No Updates were shared due to timing.

Meeting Schedule 2024:

Meredith Barracato noted the 2024 committee meeting schedule will be released soon after meeting with committee chairs.

COMMITTEE ADJOURMENT