

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD  
Adult Education and Literacy Committee  
JULIO SABATER CHAIRMAN  
MEETING MINUTES: January 25, 2024 10:00am Via Zoom

**Committee Members**

1. Julio Sabater- Committee Chair, Workforce Advantage
2. Barbara Bagger, Literacy of NJ
3. Carolina Marin, Union County American Job Center
4. Jonathan Cohen, NJ Department of Labor
5. Leanne Manna, Linden Public Library
6. Marlene Loff, Union College of Union County, NJ
7. Melissa Lespinasse, Union County Department of Human Services
8. Lyle Moseley, Elizabeth Board of Education
9. Nasrene Mondol, Union County American Job Center
10. Perle Almeida, Union County American Job Center
11. Scott Kuchinsky, Plainfield Public Library
12. Isaias Rivera, Union College of Union County, NJ
13. Clarissa Anderson, Plainfield Board of Education
14. Geoffrey Healey, Aztec
15. Carla Donegan, NJ Higher Education Student Assistance Authority
16. Maritza Batista, Union College of Union County, NJ

**UCWDB Staff**

Meredith Barracato

**Meeting Summary**

**Welcome and Introductions:**

Chairman Sabater began the meeting by welcoming everyone and introduced himself as the CEO of Workforce Advantage. Chairman Sabater stated he was excited for the meeting and welcomed the presenters from Aztec and NJ Higher Education Student Assistance Authority. Chairman Sabater asked everyone to introduce themselves.

Meredith Barracato asked everyone to write their name and contact information in the chat box since the Workforce Development Board would be updating the committee members contact list.

**Review and Approval of The September 21, 2023, Meeting Minutes:**

Marlene M. Loff, acknowledged an error in the previous meeting regarding the reference to the community workforce initiative, clarifying it should be the Center for Workforce Innovation. Chairman Sabater confirmed the need to reflect this correction in the minutes. Marlene M. Loff acknowledged

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misspeaking the name of the initiative. Chairman Sabater noted an amendment would be attached to the previous meeting minutes to reflect the correction.

Marlene Loff made a motion to approve the **September 21, 2023 minutes**. Perle Almeida seconded the meeting minutes. Motion carried.

### Standing Items

- a. PY2023 Budget:** Meredith Barracato explained that the budget was not finalized and will be available for review after the February 7, 2024 Workforce Development Board meeting.
- b. Performance Data:** Meredith Barracato reviewed data from Future Works, the database collecting performance information from the American Job Center's database, AOSOS. Meredith Barracato highlighted challenges faced by the New Jersey Department of Labor in collecting out-of-state wages, affecting the latest data from September 30, 2023. The report covered first quarter performance data, focusing on individuals exiting the program 18 months prior, particularly in the adult, dislocated worker, and youth categories.

Chairman Sabater asked where do the performance goals come from. Meredith Barracato explained that the goal for the American Job Center in the Adult category was to achieve 60% employment among participants after the second quarter. This target was set by the New Jersey Department of Labor in negotiation with the US Department of Labor, based on economic trends and past outcomes. Meredith Barracato noted that historically, these goals had decreased significantly due to the pandemic, dropping from 80% before the pandemic in 2019. She emphasized that the achievement of the goal depended on both the denominator and numerator, with higher denominator figures requiring a 60% employment rate in the numerator. Currently, the American Job Center was at 85% in meeting the 60% goal.

Meredith Barracato provided an overview of client flow, noting the data was from September 30, 2023. She highlighted the request from the previous meeting for a separation and identification of clients entering each department. Meredith Barracato presented figures for the Elizabeth and Plainfield one-stop centers, indicating that out of 1,065 individuals seeking services from July through September 30, 505 visited the Elizabeth Employment Service Department and 390 visited Plainfield, including virtual appointments and walk-ins. Additionally, 43 participants received services at the American Job Center in Plainfield, while 127 received

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**c. Unemployment Data:**

Meredith Barracato discussed the unemployment rate in Union County, beginning from January 2023. She noted fluctuations in the rate, ranging between 4.2 to 5.4, with a dip to 3.3 in April 2023 followed by an increase until August 2023. Currently, the unemployment rate reported by the Federal Department of Labor for November stood at 4.6%. Meredith Barracato anticipated receiving the December rate in the next couple of weeks and planned to report it at the following meeting.

Chairman Sabater asked why did the rate spike after April. Meredith Barracato explained the workforce participation rates, highlighting the number of participants actively employed and those not working. She noted instances where there was an increase in participants eligible for work, speculating that factors such as graduation might have contributed to these fluctuations. Meredith Barracato expressed a willingness to investigate further by researching relevant articles and providing a report in the future.

Meredith Barracato presented data from the NJ Department of Labor, Union County, NJ Job Posting Analysis. Meredith Barracato noted the comprehensive 27-page report will be uploaded to the Google Drive and accessible to all committee members. The report outlined top industries, occupations, employers, required skills, and educational levels for the October through December period, with a total of 32,000 postings, including 14,000 unique ones. Notably, certain occupations, like tractor-trailer truck drivers, exhibited a significant posting intensity, indicating high demand during the retail logistical peak around the holidays. The report also highlighted educational requirements, with many postings seeking candidates with a high school diploma, GED, or bachelor's degree. Meredith Barracato emphasized the importance of analyzing the data to align educational programs with market demand effectively.

Chairman Sabater asked where did the job postings data come from. Meredith Barracato explained that the NJ Department of Labor works with Lighcast who collect job posting data from the internet. Marlene Loff asked if the data is unique to Union County and if the data would be different if they looked at the previous year. Meredith Barracato mentioned it was unique to Union County and the data is based on the specific time period.

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**Aztec:** Geoffrey Healy expressed gratitude for the partnership with the New Jersey Department of Labor and highlighted the collaborative nature of their work with various service providers. He provided an overview of Aztec, emphasizing its learner-centric approach and mission to create equitable access and sustainable impact. He discussed the expansion of Spanish products, including digital software and print materials, aimed at supporting learners across different proficiency levels. He also showcased the Aztec Spanish GED resources, endorsed by the GED Testing Services, and outlined the comprehensive digital continuum available in Spanish, catering to diverse learner needs.

Chairman Sabater asked if the Spanish offerings was part of the Labor Department package that's made available to committee members. Meredith Barracato informed the chairman of the rationale behind inviting Aztec to present, highlighting the ongoing collaboration between the Workforce Development Board and Aztec. She mentioned that the American Job Center currently has access to the Spanish GED services provided by Aztec as a result of recent procurement efforts.

Jonathan Cohen from the NJ Department of Labor clarified the department's stance on using Aztec resources. While the department doesn't officially endorse purchasing or using Aztec materials for ESL students learning English instead of Spanish, they don't prohibit their use either. Jonathan Cohen explained that while they won't fund Aztec resources through NJ Department of Labor services, organizations can use other funding sources to procure them. He emphasized that if organizations have access to Aztec resources through other means, they're encouraged to utilize them if they benefit their students' progress. Chairman Sabater thanked Jonathan for the explanation.

Geoffrey Healy presented the complete digital continuum of learning in Spanish, covering a range from non-reader to high school equivalency. He emphasized Aztec's ability to cater to organizations' budgetary and scaling needs, offering both digital and print solutions. Highlighting the Spanish GED product as a flagship offering, Healy underscored Aztec's exclusive partnership with the GED Testing Service for Spanish GED preparation. He emphasized the authenticity of the Spanish GED prep system, which was organically developed in Spanish by a dedicated team of instructors. The system includes full Spanish audio and is integrated into Aztec's learning management system, providing comprehensive reporting and analytics tools.

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Chairman Sabater asked how the committee members could access the information. Geoffrey Healy noted he is available to do presentations.

Meredith Barracato noted a collaboration with the American Job Center and Aztec, with Aztec providing training to the American Job Center. They are currently developing Spanish marketing materials to promote the Aztec Spanish GED across all partners. During training with the American Job Center, concerns arose regarding assessment and client flow, prompting Meredith Barracato to engage in discussions with Jonathan Cohen from the New Jersey Department of Labor regarding potential flexibility requests, though approval remains uncertain. Meredith Barracato pledged to provide updates on the challenges faced by the American Job Center in delivering Aztec services by the next meeting.

**NJ Higher Education Student Assistance Authority:** Carla Donegan from HESAA presented on New Jersey higher education financial aid opportunities for adult learners, emphasizing benefits for both employers and learners. Carla Donegan highlighted the importance of financial aid for reducing turnover, retaining talent, and facilitating succession planning for employers. She discussed the New Jersey College Promise, a program designed to support individuals based on income levels, allowing them to pursue associate and bachelor's degrees with financial aid covering tuition and fees. Carla Donegan also addressed the accessibility of financial aid for undocumented residents and the importance of completing the FAFSA or the New Jersey Alternative Financial Aid Application. Additionally, Carla Donegan introduced the Governor's Industry Vocation Scholarship for Women and Minorities, offering scholarships for certificate programs at technical schools or county colleges, including construction-related programs funded by the construction industry. She stressed the significance of accessing information through the New Jersey Financial Aid Management System and highlighted loan redemption programs for workforce development in high-demand fields. Carla Donegan encouraged outreach and collaboration to expand access to low-cost degree programs, aligning with strategic goals for educational opportunities in New Jersey.

Meredith Barracato noted Nasrene Mondol' s chat box comments regarding concerns about individuals entering without social security numbers or being undocumented, highlighting the importance of partnering with HESAA for referrals. Meredith Barracato emphasized the need to connect with Carla and her team to disseminate information, especially for those unable to be served under Title One. Meredith mentioned uploading flyers and presentations to a Google folder for accessibility. Carla Donegan reiterated the availability of

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Spanish presentations and addressed concerns about undocumented individuals' privacy during workshops.

Melissa Lespinasse noted she can have the American Job Center team reach out, and thinks it would be a valuable for their customers.

**Literacy Consortium:** Marlene M. Loff presented a midyear overview of the consortium's progress, indicating that they are on target to serve 988 students, with 607 currently enrolled, 578 of whom are NRS eligible. Performance measures show that most students fall within ESL categories, with some progress noted in ABE Level 3, almost reaching the target of 35%. The state average for such gains is 26%, indicating that they are meeting their performance targets. Data breakdown reveals a majority of Hispanic females among the enrolled students. Midway through the program, they are on track, with upcoming meetings planned to review data analysis and address any minor issues.

**NJ Department of Labor Policy Update:**

Meredith Barracato provided an overview of the New Jersey Department of Labor's new policy, AOSOS partner access, which allows certain vendors to create profiles for data entry in AOSOS, facilitating performance tracking. The policy highlights include identification of specific partners like one-stop operators, career service providers, youth providers, and Summer Youth Employment Program providers. Users must complete various steps, including training, confidentiality agreements, cybersecurity certifications, and background checks. The Office of the Workforce Development Board will manage requests and certifications. Further guidance from the Department of Labor will clarify implementation procedures, with Meredith Barracato initiating enrollment processes for partners.

Chairman Sabater noted the major progress with this new policy and is looking forward for its implementation and asked for a timeframe. Meredith Barracato explained there were a number of items that needed to be clarified such as who will be providing the AOSOS training to the partners. Chairman Sabater asked about giving access to other partners such as Title II. Meredith Barracato explained that the NJ Department of Labor was intentional about the partner access and was also in the process of procuring a new database that would replace AOSOS. Jonathan Cohen mentioned that procurement was still a long way from producing results. Jonathan also mentioned that currently AOSOS could not handle the amount of data collected by the Title II providers and that is why they are currently using Laces.

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Meredith Barracato mentioned the ongoing efforts regarding the memorandum of understanding and infrastructure funding agreement. While the work is still in progress, the deadline for submission to the New Jersey Department of Labor has been extended for all counties until the end of March.

**Committee Member Comments/Updates:** No comments or updates presented.

**Meeting Schedule:**

- Thursday January 25, 2024 10:00am (Virtual)
- Thursday April 18, 2024 10:00am (Virtual)
- Thursday July 18, 2024 10:00am (Virtual)
- Thursday November 21, 2024 10:00am (Virtual)

**COMMITTEE ADJOURNMENT:**

Chairman Sabater thanked everyone for coming to the meeting.