

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
AMERICAN JOB CENTER PARTNER COMMITTEE
James Brady, Chairman
Wednesday, May 21, 2025, 9:00AM Community Food Bank of NJ
MEETING MINUTES

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- 1.Lisa Hiscano, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
- 2.Marlene Loff, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
- 3.Nasrene Mondol, Union County American Job Center
- 4.Doris Thomas, Bridgeway Behavioral Services
- 5.Robert Croom, Union County American Job Center
- 6.Ratyeemah Ward, YouthBuild
- 7.Lyle Moseley, Elizabeth Board of Education-Adult Learning
- 8.Patty Banks, Plainfield Public Library
- 9.Marie Alston, United Way of Greater Union County
- 10.Bethany Freeland, United Way of Greater Union County
- 11.Julio Sabater, Workforce Advantage
- 12.Miguel Reyes, NJ Department of Labor- Employment Services
- 13.Yvonne Hendricks, Community Food Bank of NJ
- 14.Elaine Sanders, Community Food Bank of NJ
- 15.Colleen Clayton, The Gateway Family YMCA
- 16.Ingrid Macias, NJ Department of Labor
- 17.Isaias Rivera, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
- 18.Navin Signh, UC Department of Human Services, Homeless Services
- 19.Veronica Vega, Elizabeth Board of Education -Adult Learning
- 20.Maritiza Batista, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
- 21.Elizabeth Paskewich, UC Department of Human Services
- 22.Nazly Sanchez, Elizabeth Development Corp
- 23.Melody Holiday, Urban League
- 24.Maurice McClain, Youth Build
- 25.Oswaldo Arango, NJ Department of Labor
- 26.Cathy Waters, Urban League
- 27.Chairman James Brady, Savor Group

GUEST(S)

None

UCWDB STAFF

Meredith Barracato

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MEETING SUMMARY

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS:

Chairman James Brady called the meeting to order at 9:05 AM and welcomed all attendees.

REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF February 19, 2025 MEETING MINUTES:

Chairman Brady requested approval of the February 19, 2025 meeting minutes. A motion to approve was made by Robert Croom and seconded by Lisa Hiscano. The minutes were approved unanimously.

STANDING AGENDA ITEMS

PERFORMANCE DATA: During the meeting, Meredith Barracato presented data from FutureWorks updated as of May 13, covering three quarters into Program Year 2024, which began on July 1, 2024. She noted that performance data was color-coded, with red indicating underperformance, yellow representing meeting but not exceeding performance, and green showing exceeded performance. She emphasized the importance of timely participant exits once they completed their programs and transitioned into employment. The data showed that employment outcomes for the second quarter primarily reflected exits that occurred at the end of 2023, meaning much of the data was lagging.

Meredith highlighted that the most current participant information fell under the measurable skill gains category, which showed active engagement for 25 adult participants and 52 dislocated workers. Youth data had not yet been updated, but many youth were reportedly enrolled. These figures reflected participants currently in occupational or workplace readiness training, all of whom were meeting or exceeding performance expectations.

She then reviewed workflow data, showing how many individuals engaged with the American Job Center or employment services for various needs such as training, resume assistance, or career exploration. For Program Year 2024, 318 individuals were enrolled in some form of training, including occupational, literacy, or workplace readiness programs. Meredith analyzed trends, noting that typically 0 to 50 individuals were enrolled monthly, but in October 2024 and March 2025, there were noticeable spikes, especially in March when over 100 individuals enrolled. She questioned whether this indicated a return to pre-pandemic patterns or if it was an isolated increase.

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Looking back to 2019, she found only a few similar spikes over the past six years, including 128 enrollments in July 2020, 70 in January 2020, and 89 in June 2021. Activity generally remained within the typical 0 to 50 range until more recent increases in Program Year 2024, indicating promising momentum at the American Job Centers with higher customer engagement and enrollment.

Meredith compared these findings to employment services, another partner of the American Job Center, which consistently served 300 to 400 individuals monthly. She encouraged continued efforts to build on this upward trend by strengthening partnerships and ensuring that intake and follow-up procedures were fully operational and clearly understood by all partners. She emphasized that anyone entering through the college or other access points was ultimately a client of the American Job Center and that partners should be aligned accordingly.

She proposed aligning American Job Center outreach with seasonal events like back-to-school periods or New Year's resolutions to capture the attention of parents and individuals looking to improve their circumstances. Additionally, she advocated for solidifying co-enrollment and cross-referral protocols among partners to ensure participants could benefit from complementary services.

Meredith closed by examining occupational training demand in Program Year 2024. Transportation and management occupations (such as supply chain and project management certifications) emerged as the most requested training areas. Out of 118 individuals in transportation-related training, 51 were enrolled, with management occupations also drawing significant interest. She concluded by opening the floor to questions.

During their discussion, Meredith Barracato and Lisa Hiscano explored the classification of "management occupations" and the eligibility of related credentials for workforce training funding. Lisa sought clarification on what specific jobs were included in this category, and Meredith explained that while fields like supply chain and logistics were part of it, the primary credential being issued was project management, which is not tied to a specific occupation. She emphasized that although the Project Management Professional (PMP) certification is widely respected by employers and enhances a résumé, it does not qualify as a legitimate training program under current policy because it is not associated with a high-demand occupation. This disqualifies it from receiving workforce development funding, despite its clear value to employers. Meredith compared it to Excel or Microsoft Office credentials—widely in demand but not industry-specific. She recalled previous advocacy efforts by the Workforce Development Board to expand recognition of high-demand credentials, which did not succeed at the time. However, she noted that the State had recently

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issued a proposal through a non-governmental organization to address this gap, suggesting that county-level advocacy may have influenced this outcome. Both agreed on the importance of foundational skills, with Meredith highlighting the need for digital literacy and Lisa announcing a new two-million-dollar grant awarded to New Jersey's community colleges to support digital literacy training for underemployed and unemployed individuals.

The conversation then turned to concerns about funding consistency. Lisa stressed the difficulty faced by training providers who invest heavily in recruitment and program planning, only to find that funding is unavailable when students are ready to enroll. She explained that this uncertainty not only undermines vendor operations but also discourages participation from job seekers, who often invest time and money in the process only to face delays. Meredith acknowledged these concerns and recommended that encumbered funds be released more efficiently when a participant drops out of training, rather than waiting until year-end reconciliation. She urged that budgeting practices be monitored on a monthly basis to allow unused funds to be reallocated promptly. Lisa emphasized that the situation was especially frustrating given the amount of unused funds reportedly available in Union County, some of which had to be returned to the State in previous years. Both agreed that consistent funding access, clearer policies, and alignment between high-demand credentials and eligible occupations are essential to improving training delivery and better serving unemployed and underemployed residents.

UNEMPLOYMENT DATA: Meredith Barracato provided an update on the unemployment data, stating that the most recent figures were current as of February, with the March 2025 update confirming the rate remained steady at 5.3 percent. She clarified that this data specifically represented individuals aged 16 to 64 within Union County.

LABOR MARKET INFORMATION: Meredith Barracato presented labor market information with a new approach by showing an NBC News video clip featuring a highly automated Amazon fulfillment center in Louisiana. She used the video to emphasize the rapidly evolving nature of the workforce and the increasing demand for digital literacy. The clip illustrated how manual and repetitive jobs were being replaced by robots, with human workers now overseeing, repairing, and programming machines—roles that offer significantly higher pay and demand a new skill set. Meredith highlighted that this shift is part of Amazon's broader national strategy and serves as a model for future manufacturing jobs in the United States. She stressed that manufacturing today requires very different skills than it did in previous decades, particularly digital competencies.

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Following the video, Meredith reinforced the need for foundational digital skills and workforce development strategies that respond to this technological transformation. She noted that even entry-level roles at high-tech companies like Amazon now require basic digital proficiency. As more industries digitize their operations—from warehouses to healthcare—she emphasized that digital literacy is no longer optional. The focus is shifting from traditional reading, writing, and math to technology-based skills necessary for safety, productivity, and efficiency in modern workplaces. Meredith concluded by stating that while automation may eliminate some jobs, it will also create new ones—jobs for which the local workforce must be adequately trained. She closed the segment by noting that she would also include the standard labor market information such as the most posted jobs, in-demand skills, and occupations in New Jersey.

PROGRAM YEAR 2023/2024 BUDGET: During the meeting, Meredith Barracato provided an update on the closeout of Program Year 2023, noting efforts to finalize expenditures for adult, dislocated worker, and youth categories to avoid returning unspent funds to the State. She highlighted that as of the last reported data in March, significant amounts were still encumbered or unexpended, creating confusion among partners about the true availability of funds. Meredith clarified that while \$2.8 million had been encumbered, not all of it had been disbursed. Only actual payments were reported to the State, and some of the encumbered funds might still be tied to participants who had dropped out of training programs. This raised concerns about the lack of transparency and timeliness in the financial data, which complicated planning for service providers trying to enroll participants in occupational training. Meredith and other attendees agreed that more frequent and clear financial reporting—breaking down disbursed, encumbered, and unexpended funds—was essential for effective program management.

Looking ahead to Program Year 2024, Meredith shared that Union County had secured an additional \$500,000 for the Adult Literacy program and \$1.9 million for the Summer Youth program through recent competitive grants from the New Jersey Department of Labor. These funds would help expand services and promote co-enrollment, allowing participants who start in basic literacy or digital skills programs to advance into occupational training. However, concerns were raised about delays in transitioning individuals from Title II literacy programs into Title I-funded training, particularly when funding gaps or bureaucratic delays stalled progress. Meredith acknowledged that inconsistent timing in contract approvals and fiscal year transitions often contributed to these delays. She also informed attendees that a no-cost extension was granted for Workfirst New Jersey funding, but that allocations for Program Year 2025 might not be announced until October. This delay prompted caution from the State, which advised local areas

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to hold off on issuing new procurements for Workforce New Jersey services. While some attendees expressed frustration over the uncertainty, Meredith noted there were positive signals at the federal level, including discussions around expanding work activity requirements, which could bring in additional resources.

COMMUNITY FOOD BANK OF NEW JERSEY: Meredith Barracato invited Yvonne Hendrick, a long-serving case manager, to provide an overview of the workforce development training programs currently offered. Yvonne shared that the organization runs two full-time programs: a 14-week culinary training and an 8-week warehouse and logistics program, both held Monday through Friday from 8:30 AM to 4:00 PM. Each program includes a two-week life skills component covering topics such as emotional intelligence, financial education, and goal setting. Yvonne explained the eligibility criteria, which require participants to be New Jersey residents aged 18 or older and possess a valid State ID and Social Security card. For individuals without a high school diploma, an alternative assessment—the ability-to-benefit test—is available. Importantly, students do not need to be unemployed or meet income requirements to qualify. The program is tuition-free due to generous donors and sponsors, with culinary training valued at approximately \$10,000 and warehouse training around \$6,000.

Committee members posed several thoughtful questions during the discussion. One member inquired about the funding process and whether applicants needed to be unemployed, to which Yvonne clarified that career changers and underemployed individuals were also eligible. Another participant asked about testing requirements, and Yvonne confirmed that CASAS test results from partner agencies would be accepted, which prompted suggestions to create a formal referral process between Title II literacy providers and the training programs. Questions were raised about age limits, and Yvonne responded that participants could be any age over 18, noting that they had previously enrolled students as old as 88. The conversation also highlighted success stories, including one student who secured a job the day after graduation and another who found family and healing within the program after experiencing a personal loss. Others, like Lisa Reynolds, maintained long-term connections with the staff and went on to complete internships, while another graduate advanced to work at a major hotel and even started his own food truck. Additional details were shared about the certifications earned in each program. Culinary students receive the ServSafe Managerial Certification, and warehouse students earn food handler certifications, forklift and pallet jack credentials, and can test for Lean Six Sigma Yellow Belt and reach truck certifications. When asked about participation in work activity programs, Yvonne explained that such placements would go through their volunteer center, but noted that workforce development programming could still lead to long-term career pathways. Multiple committee members expressed

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admiration for the program's structure and outcomes, emphasizing the importance of continued collaboration.

FEDERAL UPDATES: During the latter portion of the meeting, Meredith Barracato provided a comprehensive federal policy update and engaged with the committee in a discussion about national workforce trends and advocacy efforts. She highlighted a new executive order focused on preparing Americans for high-paying skilled trade jobs, with a specific emphasis on apprenticeships in manufacturing, technology, and artificial intelligence. This federal directive calls for one million individuals to be enrolled in registered apprenticeships and shifts oversight of career and technical education (CTE) programs from the Department of Education to the Department of Labor. Meredith stressed the administration's renewed focus on industry-recognized credentials, alternative pathways to employment, and collaboration with employers to define in-demand skills. She noted that updated federal guidance on workforce development policy is expected within 90 days, which could influence funding levels, service expectations, and data accountability measures.

Committee members posed several thoughtful questions and comments. Julio expressed interest in how these changes might positively influence local efforts, and Meredith confirmed that she had already invited the New Jersey Department of Labor to present at the next meeting in September to explain available apprenticeship pathways. Another member raised concerns about budget threats to Title II programs—particularly those serving English language learners and GED students—and Meredith acknowledged that the federal budget proposal included potential cuts to these essential services, as well as to Job Corps and Title I supportive services like childcare and transportation. One member asked whether there was any confirmed funding guidance, and another shared that Title II providers had not received clear updates and were now organizing a letter-writing campaign led by students. Meredith confirmed that New Jersey Literacy Coalition members had begun meeting with elected officials, and some had already received supportive responses from congressional representatives.

Meredith shared her own advocacy experience, including a recent meeting with Senator Cory Booker's and Representative Rob Menendez's offices, both of whom requested personal stories from program participants to strengthen their arguments in Congress. Marlene Loff stressed the importance of equipping legislators with real stories and materials to counter opposition—especially from those who may misunderstand the depth of literacy needs. The discussion concluded with a focus on continued advocacy and preparing for the possibility

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of federal funding reductions. Meredith reiterated the importance of data reporting and story collection, encouraging all partners to contribute.

COMMITTEE UPDATES:

- **Youth Committee**
 - The April 30 meeting included a presentation from Boxwood about their support services for justice-involved youth, focusing on both academic and mental health support.
 - United Way reported that 485 youth will be employed through the Summer Youth Employment Program, earning \$17/hour, with a large concentration of placements in the City of Elizabeth.
 - Partners were encouraged to host youth interns, with testimonials highlighting the long-term impact of early work experiences on participants' career development.
- **Disability Committee:**
 - The May 13 meeting focused on recent federal executive orders that threaten disability inclusion by eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and weakening workplace protections.
 - A key positive takeaway was that New Jersey state law currently offers stronger employee protections for individuals with disabilities than federal law.
 - The committee affirmed its commitment to maintaining inclusive practices and ensuring continued community engagement opportunities for individuals with disabilities.
- **Adult Education and Literacy Committee**
 - Union College provided a positive update on the consortium's progress, indicating that most literacy goals are being met across partner programs.
 - The importance of timely and accurate data entry into the state database was emphasized, with a warning that delayed entries may result in delayed payments, as funding allocations are increasingly tied to reported data.
 - The committee discussed recent grant opportunities from the New Jersey Department of Labor and highlighted ongoing partnerships with Workforce Advantage, Union College, and Plainfield Public Library to deliver adult literacy services.

PUBLIC/PARTNER COMMENT:

Chairman James Brady noted that there had been a great deal of discussion throughout the meeting and invited Robert Croom to provide an update. In

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response, Robert Croom acknowledged the transition to the new location at 342 Westminster Ave building and explained that, although walk-in services had not yet been established, appointments were still being taken. He added that once operations at the new site were fully stabilized, a more structured and controlled walk-in process would be implemented.

MEETING SCHEDULE 2025 and COMMITTEE ADJOURNMENT: Chairman Brady thanked everyone for their participation. The meeting was adjourned at approximately 10:20.