

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
AMERICAN JOB CENTER PARTNER COMMITTEE
James Brady, Chairman
Wednesday, September 24, 2025, 9:00AM
MEETING MINUTES

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

1. Doris Thomas, Bridgeway Behavioral Services
2. Ratyeemah Ward, YouthBuild
3. Patty Banks, Plainfield Public Library
4. Scott Kuchinsky, Plainfield Public Library
5. Marie Alston, United Way of Greater Union County
6. Julio Sabater, Workforce Advantage
7. Lillian Roman, Union County American Job Center
8. Juanito Chiliuisa, NJ Department of Labor- Employment Services
9. Ingrid Macias, NJ Department of Labor
10. Isaias Rivera, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
11. Navin Signh, UC Department of Human Services, Homeless Services
12. Maritiza Batista, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
13. Nazly Sanchez, Elizabeth Development Corp
14. Melody Holiday, Urban League
15. Maurice McClain, Youth Build
16. Dr James LaBrun, Community Food Bank of NJ
17. Chairman James Brady, Savor Group
18. Anthea Williams, NJ Department of Labor
19. Iesha Armour, NJ Department of Labor
20. Isabel Jimenez, NJ Department of Labor
21. Jeffrey Jackson, Union County Department of Human Services
22. Maurice McClain, Housing Authority of the City of Elizabeth

GUEST(S)

1. Vito Palo, NJ Department of Labor Office of Apprenticeship
2. Carlos Merino, NJ Department of Labor Office of Apprenticeship
3. Samuel Wear, NJ Department of Labor
4. Jeanne Page-Soncrant, NJ Department of Labor

UCWDB STAFF

Meredith Barracato
Gina Tuesta

MEETING SUMMARY

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS:

Chairman James Brady called the meeting to order at 9:08 AM and welcomed all attendees.

REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MAY 21, 2025 MEETING MINUTES:

Chairman Brady requested approval of the May 21, 2025 meeting minutes. A motion to

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
AMERICAN JOB CENTER PARTNER COMMITTEE
James Brady, Chairman
Wednesday, September 24, 2025, 9:00AM
MEETING MINUTES

approve was made by Doris Thomas and seconded by Maritza Batista. The minutes were approved unanimously.

STANDING AGENDA ITEMS

PERFORMANCE DATA: Meredith Barracato reported on the individuals who had been enrolled in occupational training programs and reviewed the chart that tracked participant drop-out rates. She explained that, as a general benchmark, a retention concern typically emerged when drop-out rates exceeded six to seven percent. Anything above that threshold signaled a need to analyze the participant experience and identify why individuals were leaving their programs.

Overall, most trainings were performing within an acceptable range. However, Meredith highlighted that several specific programs required closer attention, particularly the Medical Assistant training. Out of thirty-five individuals enrolled in that program, fourteen percent had dropped out—a significantly high number. She indicated that this warranted a deeper conversation among the training providers and the American Job Center to determine what preventative strategies or preemptive services could be offered to support participants before they reached the point of withdrawal.

Meredith also mentioned that several high-demand trainings continued to perform well, including those in transportation and materials moving—specifically Commercial Driver's License (CDL) programs, which enrolled fifty-nine Union County participants. She emphasized that all data presented reflected Union County only.

Budget: Meredith then provided an overview of the Program Year 2024 closeout and the new allocations for Program Year 2025. She noted that while funding had been received for the WIOA Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth programs, the County was still awaiting official Notice of Awards for TANF and GA allocations from NJDOL. Until those awards were finalized, no new procurements could be initiated.

UNEMPLOYMENT DATA: Meredith Barracato then moved on to discuss the unemployment rate in Union County. She reported that the county's unemployment rate stood at 6%, which was notably higher than both the national and state averages. She noted that during a previous committee meeting, members questioned why Union County's rate appeared elevated. In response, Meredith explained that one significant contributing factor was a major layoff in the City of Plainfield, where the Bed Bath & Body Works headquarters had closed, resulting in approximately 1,300 individuals losing their jobs. This event substantially increased Plainfield's unemployment rate, and when areas such as Plainfield or Elizabeth experience large-scale layoffs, the overall Union County rate naturally spikes.

She pointed out that historically, the unemployment rate in the county had remained relatively steady, hovering around 4.5% to 5%, but had recently shown an upward

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
AMERICAN JOB CENTER PARTNER COMMITTEE
James Brady, Chairman
Wednesday, September 24, 2025, 9:00AM
MEETING MINUTES

trend. Meredith expressed hope that this increase was temporary and not indicative of a long-term pattern.

LABOR MARKET INFORMATION: Meredith Barracato proceeded to review the labor market data for Union County. She explained that every quarter she received a detailed report—approximately twenty-eight pages—from the New Jersey Department of Labor outlining job postings across New Jersey and specifically within Union County. She noted that the trends had remained consistent over the past several years, with the most in-demand occupations continuing to fall within healthcare, retail, and office-based work.

Meredith emphasized a significant and ongoing theme: the persistent demand for registered nurses and other medical professionals. She reminded the group that New Jersey continued to face a statewide nursing shortage, prompting hospitals to offer various incentives to attract qualified candidates and encouraging school districts to prepare more students for careers in the medical field. Despite these efforts, she pointed out that the posting intensity remained high—out of approximately 2,600 postings, each nursing position was reposted an average of four times before being filled. This indicated that employers were either not receiving qualified candidates or were struggling to attract applicants at all. She referenced the report's listing of top postings to show that nearly all fell within the medical and pharmaceutical fields. Meredith urged staff and partners to use this information when advising participants who asked which industries were actively hiring.

Meredith then highlighted a recent New York Times article included in the meeting packet. She explained that the workforce system would soon see a new demographic of job seekers—individuals who were highly educated, held multiple degrees, had extensive work histories, and were now becoming unemployed due to automation, restructuring, and industry shifts. Many were expected to become long-term unemployed. The article outlined a growing mismatch between the skills these job seekers possessed and the jobs currently available, especially given the concentration of openings in fields such as healthcare.

She stressed the importance of preparing staff and partners for this shift. Historically, many One-Stop participants were low-skilled, low-wage workers, English language learners, or individuals with basic skills deficiencies. As Meredith explained, the workforce system now needed to be ready to support a higher-skilled demographic—individuals who had rarely, if ever, interacted with One-Stops, nonprofits, or public employment services. She added that these job seekers often experienced mental health challenges tied to the stress of unexpected unemployment, and she noted that many in the room had encountered participants who revealed deeper personal struggles during career conversations.

Meredith outlined several recommendations for partners and One-Stop staff. She stressed the urgent need to focus on reskilling, both for internal staff and for job seekers, particularly in areas like AI, automation, and data analysis. She referenced an example from a previous meeting, where she shared a video of an automated Amazon warehouse that had retrained traditional warehouse workers to operate computer-based

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
AMERICAN JOB CENTER PARTNER COMMITTEE
James Brady, Chairman
Wednesday, September 24, 2025, 9:00AM
MEETING MINUTES

systems. She explained that the workforce system needed to begin preparing participants for this new reality, where job applications, hiring processes, and daily job tasks were now fully automated.

She also emphasized the importance of strengthening supportive services and improving how staff identified barriers facing participants, especially those dealing with mental health concerns. Meredith recommended modernizing internal processes so that services were truly seamless—if a participant received support at Union College, that information should automatically be available to the American Job Center without requiring the participant to retell their story repeatedly, which she described as a form of retraumatization.

Meredith stated that the workforce system also needed to shift its branding and public perception. One-Stops and nonprofits were too often viewed as a last resort. Instead, these agencies should be seen as strategic, data-driven partners with expertise in labor market trends, employer needs, and high-demand industries. She encouraged One-Stops to adopt a “recruiter’s mindset” and recommended that all locations offer modern workshops—including AI-based sessions such as using ChatGPT to write résumés, prepare for interviews, and navigate follow-up communications.

Finally, Meredith discussed the importance of employer engagement, commending Isaiah for his strong relationships with local employers. She reminded the group that the One-Stop system served two customers—job seekers and employers—and that without employer relationships, job placement outcomes would not be possible. She shared that she had invited the New Jersey Department of Labor’s Office of Apprenticeship to present future opportunities to help both low-skilled individuals and the highly-skilled workers preparing to pivot into emerging industries now that some of their former occupations were becoming obsolete.

Scott Kuchinsky raised concerns about whether the workforce system had the capacity to adequately support job seekers entering emerging, highly technical fields such as artificial intelligence and data-driven analytics. He noted that while staff could comfortably discuss familiar occupations like nursing, they might not be prepared to advise individuals seeking careers in rapidly evolving industries they themselves did not fully understand. He shared a personal experience from years earlier, when as a laid-off teacher he was told by the One Stop that because he had a degree, their services were not designed for someone at his level. With today’s wave of highly educated, mid-career workers losing jobs due to automation, he feared the system was at risk of repeating the same pattern—especially if staff lacked the context and industry-specific knowledge needed to guide someone shifting from a specialized field. Scott cautioned against a “blind leading the blind” scenario, emphasizing that these workers often come in during extremely vulnerable moments, unsure how to pivot from previously stable, well-paying careers.

Meredith Barracato agreed and stated that before the system could effectively train job seekers, it needed to train its own staff. She explained that serving this new demographic required a complete shift in mindset: instead of the traditional guidance model—such as

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
AMERICAN JOB CENTER PARTNER COMMITTEE
James Brady, Chairman
Wednesday, September 24, 2025, 9:00AM
MEETING MINUTES

referring individuals from ESL to ABE to career paths—staff now had to learn how to assist highly educated individuals with multiple degrees who were undergoing complex mid-career transitions. Both Meredith and Scott underscored that specialized fields require equally specialized guidance, and staff must be equipped to understand the value and relevance of industry-specific skills, credentials, and experience. They stressed the importance of identifying or developing true subject-matter expertise within the workforce system to ensure staff can confidently and accurately support job seekers facing fast-changing labor market conditions.

The conversation expanded as other committee members highlighted conditions in the healthcare sector, particularly critical staffing shortages at local hospitals where licensed technicians and nurses were working excessive overtime due to lack of personnel. Julio Sabater added that nursing shortages had existed for decades and were historically addressed through immigration, but new federal policies could restrict that pipeline. He questioned whether high-level professional pathways like nursing fit within the workforce system's mandate, given the high cost and long timeline of training, and cautioned that systemic and legislative limitations constrained what the local area could realistically address. Meredith acknowledged these challenges, noting that shifting the workforce system to meet rapidly evolving labor market demands would take years and require changes in culture, systems, and resources. She emphasized the importance of beginning the conversation now, even if the solutions would emerge gradually. She then moved the meeting forward to remain mindful of NJDOL's scheduled presentation.

NJ Department of Labor-Office of Apprenticeship: Vito Palo, Chief of Business Services for the New Jersey Department of Labor, began the presentation by introducing himself, his team, and the Central Region business services staff, including the regional supervisor, regional coordinator, the On-the-Job Training writer, the Veterans Business Representative, and business representatives. He then introduced Carlos Merino from the Office of Apprenticeship as the primary presenter and framed the session as an opportunity to share how registered apprenticeships could address real workforce challenges for both employers and job seekers.

Carlos Merino then presented an overview of New Jersey's registered apprenticeship system. He explained that registered apprenticeships combined paid on-the-job training with at least 144 hours of related classroom instruction per year and typically required around 2,000 hours of work-based learning annually, with programs lasting from one to five years depending on the occupation. He described the three core partners in each program—the apprentice, the employer sponsor, and the training provider—and highlighted key benefits such as earning wages and benefits from day one, receiving guaranteed wage increases tied to skill gains, and earning nationally recognized credentials, often with college credit and mentorship built in. From the employer perspective, he emphasized that apprenticeships helped address skill gaps, reduce turnover, increase productivity, and build internal pipelines for future managers, citing survey data showing improved culture, loyalty, innovation, and retention among employers using apprenticeship.

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
AMERICAN JOB CENTER PARTNER COMMITTEE
James Brady, Chairman
Wednesday, September 24, 2025, 9:00AM
MEETING MINUTES

The presenters explained that individuals could connect to apprenticeships through One Stop Career Centers and online resources, while employers could work with the Department's business engagement and sector strategies team to design and register programs. They outlined two main structural models: a traditional single-employer model and a workforce intermediary model suited for smaller employers that lacked the capacity to run full programs alone. Vito tied this to existing On-the-Job Training (OJT) efforts, noting that apprenticeships represented a deeper, longer-term investment in skill development and retention. Carlos then reviewed the State's fiscal year 2026 apprenticeship investment strategy, noting approximately \$35.5 million across multiple grant programs, including GAINS, PACE, UPSKILL, Opportunity Partnership Grants, Research and Innovation Fellowships, Youth Transitions to Work, NJ BUILD (focused on women and minorities in construction), and Helmets to Hardhats for veterans. He and Vito explained that some of these grants were already in use by partners in Union County and that competitive application processes, information sessions, and technical assistance were available.

In response to questions, Meredith Barracato noted that several local partners already held apprenticeship-related grants and were actively recruiting participants. Carlos described how employers and organizations applied for these grants and received guidance on timelines, requirements, and implementation. Vito connected the discussion back to earlier concerns about nursing shortages and highly educated workers needing upskilling, pointing out that programs like UPSKILL could help incumbent workers gain advanced credentials and move into higher-level roles. The presentation concluded with an overview of support available from the employer engagement and apprenticeship teams, the distinction between employer and apprentice inquiry links on the website, and references to state and federal apprenticeship resources. Vito and Carlos closed by reiterating that apprenticeships offered a practical, scalable solution that simultaneously benefited workers, employers, and New Jersey's overall economy.

STATE/FEDERAL UPDATES: Meredith Barracato provided a state-level update and explained that Union County had entered the process of updating its strategic plan. She noted that the previous plan, developed two years earlier, focused on understanding the needs of Union County and identifying areas for improvement within the workforce system. The New Jersey Department of Labor had since issued new parameters for the required modification, outlining six key components: labor market analysis, stakeholder engagement, performance reviews, policy and initiative integration, reflection of the significant developments from the past two years, and alignment of local goals with state priorities. Meredith emphasized that the initial plan strongly aligned with state objectives, and she intended to continue that approach. She informed partners that she would soon be reaching out with surveys and scheduling focus groups to gather feedback. Because partners represent both job seekers and employers, she stressed the importance of their participation. She also reminded the group that the updated plan was due at the end of October.

Meredith then reported on the Digital Equity Training (DET) grant focused on Workforce New Jersey participants. She announced that Union County was one of only six areas

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
AMERICAN JOB CENTER PARTNER COMMITTEE
James Brady, Chairman
Wednesday, September 24, 2025, 9:00AM
MEETING MINUTES

awarded the grant and that the Workforce Development Board had partnered with Union College of Union County, the Plainfield Public Library, and the United Way of Greater Union County. Plainfield Public Library would begin delivering DET sessions in October and was actively conducting outreach and assessments. Meredith encouraged all partners to refer eligible WorkFirst New Jersey participants to Plainfield, noting that if someone did not qualify for the DET program, they might still be eligible for other training opportunities through partners such as Workforce Advantage or Union College.

Following her update, Scott Kuchinsky added that even individuals who were not WorkFirst New Jersey recipients could still be served under Adult Literacy Innovations funding. They noted that digital literacy was foundational for every training and career pathway, making it relevant to all participants. They anticipated additional rounds of DET training beginning in January and encouraged partners to send as many referrals as possible. Despite having a list of 100 potential candidates, the response rate had only been about 14%, largely due to common barriers such as transportation, scheduling constraints, and difficulty committing to intensive training. They reassured partners that any referrals—even those not yet ready—could be prepared and aligned for future sessions, emphasizing that digital literacy skills would benefit every participant in the workforce system regardless of their ultimate training or employment goals.

Meredith Barracato provided an overview of recent federal updates, noting that significant shifts had taken place over the past several months. She offered a brief timeline to recap previous discussions. In March 2025, a major executive order was issued that initiated a restructuring—though not a dismantling—of the U.S. Department of Education. Several of its units and functions were transferred to the U.S. Department of Labor. Then, in April 2025, two additional executive orders were released, one focused on preparing individuals for high-paying trade jobs and the other centered on advancing artificial intelligence education. Most recently, in September, a new federal guidance fact sheet was published emphasizing a strengthened partnership between the U.S. Department of Education and the New Jersey Department of Labor.

Meredith explained that, in theory, all of the changes outlined in the federal guidance were positive. They proposed streamlining the workforce system, reducing redundancies, and improving employer engagement while strengthening pathways for youth, job seekers, and low-skilled individuals. The federal updates also emphasized reducing reporting burdens and shifting more authority, monitoring responsibilities, and program oversight to the state level rather than the federal level. She noted that NJDOL was already expanding its role in response to this shift, taking on programs such as Adult Literacy and Career Training and Education. Meredith closed by noting that more information would be forthcoming and that she would share a link to the federal guidance letter for partners who wished to review it.

COMMITTEE UPDATES:

- **Youth Committee:** The Youth Committee recently met and received a presentation from the New Jersey Higher Education Student Assistance Authority on expanded

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
AMERICAN JOB CENTER PARTNER COMMITTEE
James Brady, Chairman
Wednesday, September 24, 2025, 9:00AM
MEETING MINUTES

student aid and federal grant opportunities. The United Way also presented and highlighted its Summer Youth Experience Program, with one student sharing her success story after completing services. Additionally, the Union County Vocational-Technical School discussed its new Out-of-School Youth grant, through which it planned to serve approximately 20–25 students at the Mills at Jersey Gardens high school site.

- **Disability Committee:** During the Adult Literacy Committee meeting, members focused on ongoing data reporting challenges and the importance of accurately capturing participant information. The group also discussed the recent freeze on Title II funding—an issue expected to be addressed at the October meeting—and explored ways to strengthen co-enrollment between Title II (adult education) and Title I (workforce programs) to improve service coordination.
- **Adult Education and Literacy Committee:** The Disability Committee featured a presentation from Orchard Friends, a school serving adults with disabilities and autism, which shared best practices and emphasized person-centered approaches. The committee reviewed federal and state guidance letters affecting disability, DEI, and workforce programs and discussed how to better support individuals who may be hesitant to disclose disabilities due to fear of discrimination. The meeting concluded with strategies for improving service delivery for job seekers with disabilities.

PUBLIC/PARTNER COMMENT: During the comments and updates portion of the meeting, partners were invited to share announcements, initiatives, or questions. The Urban League of Union County announced that, in partnership with the Union County Probation Department, it would be hosting a job fair on **October 17 from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at Union College**, and agreed to send a flyer for distribution. Meredith Barracato confirmed she would circulate a Google Drive link after the meeting with the NJDOL presentation, her presentation, and all related materials.

Additional comments centered on the ongoing federal transition of workforce and education functions. One partner emphasized that New Jersey had already integrated many programs—such as Adult Education and Title II—into the Department of Labor years earlier, positioning the state ahead of national changes. They noted that, although some Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs under the Department of Education were uneasy about the shift, New Jersey’s long-standing structure should minimize disruptions.

A question was raised about whether Related Technical Instruction (RTI) providers in apprenticeship programs must appear on the Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL). The response confirmed that yes, they do. With no further comments or questions, the meeting moved to closing remarks

MEETING SCHEDULE 2025 and COMMITTEE ADJOURNMENT: Chairman Brady encouraged all partners to actively collaborate.