

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
LITERACY COMMITTEE
JULIO SABATER CHAIRMAN
MEETING MINUTES: July 24, 2025 10:00am via Google Meet

Committee Members

Lillian Roman, Union County American Job Center
Marlene Loff, Union College of Union County, NJ
Robert Croom, Union County American Job Center
Maritza Batista, Union College of Union County, NJ
Philip Sabater, Workforce Advantage
Julio Sabater, Chairman, Workforce Advantage
Isaias Rivera, Union College of Union County, NJ
Juanito Chiluisa, NJ Department of Labor
Veronica Vega, Elizabeth Board of Education

UCWDB Staff

Meredith Barracato
Gina Tuesta

Meeting Summary

Welcome and Introductions: Chairman Julio Sabater opened the meeting at 10:05 a.m. and welcomed members and guests. Attendance was taken via the chat function for recordkeeping. The Chairman thanked everyone for their time and participation, noting that the Literacy Committee typically convenes as a smaller, focused group.

Approval of Meeting Minutes: The minutes from the February 13, 2025 and the April 24, 2025 meeting were reviewed. A motion to approve the minutes was made by Marlene Loff and seconded by Robert Croom. The committee voted unanimously in favor, and the motion carried without any abstentions.

STANDING ITEMS:

Budget: Meredith Barracato provided a comprehensive update on the closeout of Program Year (PY) 2023 and the transition into the PY 2024 and PY 2025 budgets. She explained that PY 2025 remained temporary due to delays at the federal level, specifically from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which had not yet finalized allocations for TANF, GA, and SNAP programs. As a result, the New Jersey Department of Labor (NJDOL) and local partners had to pause RFP processes and program planning until final figures were received.

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Meredith noted that the Workforce Development Board (WDB) continued to administer multiple grants, including the Adult Literacy Innovations Grant and the Summer Youth Work Experience Program. She also referenced the new Digital Equity Training (DET) Grant, which the Board had recently been awarded. Meredith emphasized the importance of continued compliance, accurate invoicing, and timely data entry to ensure alignment with NJDOL and federal reporting standards.

FutureWorks Data: Meredith Barracato presented updated performance data, noting a slight increase in the number of program exits among Adult and Dislocated Workers. She explained that these data reflected outcomes from individuals who had participated in training activities during 2023 and early 2024. While the results showed steady progress, Meredith observed a recurring concern with premature exits being entered into AOSOS before participants had fully completed their career services.

She emphasized that several partners were closing participant records as soon as the training course ended, without accounting for ongoing job search, coaching, or credential attainment activities. This practice, she noted, could negatively impact overall performance outcomes, as the system would not capture post-training engagement or employment follow-up.

To address this, Meredith referenced the NJDOL guidance on participant exit, placement, and follow-up procedures, reminding partners that each exit must be supported by clear documentation, case notes, and evidence of completion. She encouraged providers to maintain communication with the American Job Center (AJC) to verify ongoing services before submitting any exit in AOSOS.

Following Meredith's presentation, Lillian Roman explained that NJDOL's management information system automatically tracks "planned end dates" and generates alerts when those dates approach. She shared that her team receives notifications when participants appear ready for exit and must verify the individual's activity status before proceeding. Lillian emphasized that providers should notify her team immediately if participants continue to receive services after a training program concludes. This ensures AOSOS entries remain accurate and prevents NJDOL from prematurely flagging participants as inactive.

She added that while some exits are automated based on end dates, her staff regularly reviews and adjusts these dates when notified by training providers. Lillian encouraged everyone to send an email or an updated training letter if a class or service period is extended, explaining that such proactive communication helps the AJC maintain accurate records and prevents data discrepancies during audits.

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Lillian also clarified that there is a 90-day “soft exit” period following a participant’s last recorded service, during which additional activities or case notes can be added to maintain the participant’s active status. After this period, if no engagement is recorded, the participant is automatically given a “hard exit.” Lillian underscored the importance of using this window to document continued job search support, credentialing, or employer contact efforts.

Chairman Julio Sabater noted that the lack of a formalized communication process between the AJC and training vendors caused inconsistent data reporting. Meredith and Chairman Sabater recommended that the matter be escalated to the Operator meetings, where a standardized exit and follow-up protocol could be developed for all programs.

Chairman Sabater concluded that the discussion highlighted the need for a formal, documented workflow outlining each partner’s responsibilities at the point of program completion. Robert Croom noted he would bring the issue to his Director for inclusion in the September Operator meeting agenda. Chairman Sabater emphasized that improved data coordination would lead to more accurate performance outcomes across all literacy and workforce programs.

Unemployment Data: Meredith Barracato reported that Union County’s unemployment rate had experienced modest fluctuations throughout 2025, reflecting the shifting dynamics of the post-pandemic labor market. As of May 2025, the unemployment rate stood at approximately 5.0 percent, which represented a slight increase from earlier in the year when it had hovered around 4.6 percent. Meredith noted that while the county continued to maintain a relatively stable employment base, some sectors particularly retail, administrative services, and healthcare support occupations had shown volatility due to seasonal employment cycles and ongoing automation in certain industries.

She further explained that the 5.0 percent unemployment rate remained slightly above the New Jersey state average of 4.6 percent, though still below pre-pandemic levels recorded in 2020 and 2021. Much of Union County’s employment recovery, she noted, had been driven by growth in transportation, logistics, warehousing, and healthcare, while hospitality and food services continued to experience labor shortages.

Labor Market Information: Meredith introduced committee members to a new interactive data tool available through the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development’s website, which provides real-time labor market analytics. The tool allows users to explore trends by industry sector, occupation, median wage, educational attainment, and demographic variables such as age and gender. She encouraged partners to use this platform to better understand

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employer demand, wage differentials, and training needs specific to Union County.

Meredith also highlighted that occupations in information technology, healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and logistics showed strong long-term growth potential in the region. In contrast, clerical and low-skill administrative positions were declining due to increased automation and artificial intelligence integration across multiple industries.

She reminded committee members that these data trends directly inform the WDB's funding priorities and the design of workforce development programs, emphasizing the importance of aligning adult literacy and digital training efforts with the county's emerging industries. Meredith concluded that the WDB would continue monitoring monthly updates and sharing sector-specific snapshots during each committee meeting to ensure that local literacy and training programs remained responsive to evolving labor market needs.

Title II Literacy Consortium Updates: Marlene Loff delivered a detailed update on the Title II Consortium. She reported that, as of July 3, 2025, NJDOL had issued a directive to temporarily cease all Title II activities due to the federal government's hold on funds. The delay prompted New Jersey and several other states to file a lawsuit against the federal administration for unlawfully withholding appropriated funds.

Marlene explained that this funding freeze forced local literacy providers to lay off staff and suspend classes. She noted that Senator Andy Kim held a roundtable meeting with representatives from multiple counties to discuss the severe impact on Adult Education, ESL, and GED programs. The Senator committed to supporting efforts to release the funds and asked providers to share outcome data demonstrating the importance of these programs to the state's workforce.

She expressed concern that if funds were not released by September 30, they could expire, leaving programs unable to serve students. Marlene concluded that consortium partners remained in limbo, awaiting federal action.

NJDOL/USDOL Updates: Meredith Barracato provided several state and federal updates. She explained that the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor had begun transitioning oversight of Title II and certain CTE programs to the U.S. Department of Labor to streamline operations, reduce duplicate reporting, and strengthen alignment with workforce needs.

Marlene noted that New Jersey had already integrated Title II under NJDOL,

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though the transition remained significant nationally. Chairman Sabater reflected that this shift could reduce bureaucracy and improve funding efficiency, potentially offsetting federal cuts. Both Meredith and Marlene agreed that the change appeared promising and aligned with the broader push for workforce-driven education models.

Meredith also discussed a new federal Training and Employment Guidance Letter (TEGL) requiring verification of work authorization for all participants. She explained that programs must now document eligibility and maintain supporting evidence on file. Participants with temporary status must undergo periodic re-verification to maintain eligibility.

Committee members, including Isaias Rivera and Juanito Chiluisa, raised questions about participants awaiting renewal of their work authorization. Meredith clarified that while some flexibility had existed previously, NJDOL had not yet issued updated state guidance. The group agreed to await clarification but emphasized cautious compliance with the federal directive.

Meredith shared that the White House recently released a 28-page national plan focused on integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into workforce and education programs. She highlighted that AI literacy would soon be considered essential across occupations and that the federal government would incentivize employers to upskill workers in this area. She also announced that Union County had received a \$1 million Digital Equity Training Grant to provide digital literacy instruction to TANF and GA SNAP recipients.

Chairman Sabater inquired whether additional partners could be included in the DET program. Meredith responded that the program was still in its planning phase, but expansion could be considered later as implementation progressed.

Adult Literacy Innovations Grant:

- **Plainfield Public Library:** No updates available
- **Workforce Advantage:** Chairman Sabater provided an update on the Adult Literacy Innovations Grant. He stated that his organization had enrolled approximately 30 participants and was preparing to launch its third cohort in early August. He mentioned that they were addressing supportive service procedures and coordinating with Meredith to ensure consistent implementation.
- **UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ:** Isaias Rivera shared that Union College had begun recruitment for its cohort, with 25 candidates identified. Testing and interviews were scheduled for late July and August, and classes were expected to begin on September 15, 2025.

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Meredith commended the progress and noted that NJDOL had highlighted Workforce Advantage's success in placing participants into employment.

Partner Comments/Updates:

- **UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ:** During open discussion, Marlene added that the Title II application process had also been affected by the suspension of civics education funds, previously included in the Integrated Civics Literacy Education (ICLE) component. Applicants had been asked to revise budgets excluding those funds before receiving the July 3 suspension notice.

MEETING SCHEDULE: Chairman Sabater announced that the next committee meeting would take place on October 30, 2025.

COMMITTEE ADJOURNMENT: Chairman Sabater thanked all participants for their continued dedication to adult literacy efforts despite ongoing funding and policy challenges. He wished everyone a pleasant summer.