

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD YOUTH COMMITTEE  
SCOTT KUCHINSKY, CHAIRMAN  
Wednesday, September 18, 2025, 10:00AM  
Warinanco Sports Complex  
MEETING MINUTES

**Committee Members**

1. Crystal Ahearn, Elizabeth Board of Education CTE
2. Alyssa Milanes, Elizabeth Board of Education CTE
3. Juanito Chiluisa, NJDOL Employment Services
4. Chairman Scott Kuchinsky, Plainfield Public Library
5. Cassandra Casella, Simon Youth Academy
6. Jennifer Heise, Plainfield Public Library
7. Valerie Kerrigan, DVRS
8. Kalysha Roberts, DVRS
9. Clarissa Anderson, Plainfield Board of Education
10. Elizabeth Ramos, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
11. Kendall Givens, Housing Authority of the City of Elizabeth
12. Marie Thelusma, Boxwood Learning Academy
13. Elizabeth Clark, Plainfield Board of Education
14. Beren Delgado, Groundwork Elizabeth
15. Maurice McClain, HACE Youth Build
16. Marie Alston, United Way of Greater Union County

**UCWDB Staff**

Meredith Barracato  
Gina Tuesta

**Guest**

Carla Donegan, New Jersey Higher Education Student Assistance Authority  
Sara, Youth Advocate

Meeting Summary

**Welcome and Introductions:**

The Youth Committee of the Union County Workforce Development Board convened its quarterly meeting at the Warinanco Sports Complex. Chairman Scott Kuchinsky opened the meeting by welcoming members and guests. He expressed appreciation for the strong turnout and emphasized the importance of in-person collaboration among partners working across youth programs and educational systems in Union County. Each committee member introduced themselves.

**Review and Approval of April 30, 2025 Meeting Minutes:** Valerie Kerrigan made a motion to approve the **April 30, 2025 minutes**. Crystal Ahearn seconded the meeting minutes. Motion carried.

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**Standing Items:**

**A. Performance Data:** Meredith Barracato from the Union County Workforce Development Board reviewed the quarterly WIOA Title I Youth performance data provided by the New Jersey Department of Labor. She explained that the data reflected outcomes for participants who had exited the system in mid-to-late 2024, many of whom were graduates of the Simon Youth Academy and United Way's Out-of-School Youth (OSY) programs. Meredith acknowledged ongoing data-entry lags in AOSOS, noting that while local providers were actively serving youth, many of these services were not being reflected in the state database.

Chairman Kuchinsky asked whether the problem stemmed from data capture or entry, to which Meredith clarified that it was primarily an entry issue that would need to be addressed at the provider level. She emphasized the importance of accurate and timely data input, as NJDOL performance evaluations rely heavily on these figures.

Committee members discussed the challenges of re-engaging youth after program exit, particularly those who had graduated from high school or earned equivalency diplomas but had not yet secured employment or entered postsecondary education. Meredith shared that her the United Way of Greater Union County team was working to reconnect with former participants to capture their measurable skill gains and placement outcomes.

**B. 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.

Kendall Givens from the Housing Authority of the City of Elizabeth asked for clarification on how residents who met the age criteria could be referred to these programs. Meredith confirmed that individuals could be referred directly to the United Way, which currently served as the County's contracted youth provider. She further clarified that participants over age 18 could alternatively access Adult Program funds for training and supportive services, ensuring continuity of service across funding streams.

**C. Unemployment Data:** Meredith then presented the Union County unemployment statistics, noting that the County's unemployment rate stood at

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approximately 6%, notably higher than both the New Jersey statewide average.

She explained that this disparity was largely due to concentrated job losses in municipalities such as Plainfield and Elizabeth, which had experienced major layoffs following the closure of Bed Bath & Beyond's headquarters in Plainfield, resulting in more than 1,300 displaced workers. Additionally, retail and manufacturing sectors in Union County had seen multiple business closures, further contributing to local unemployment.

Chairman Kuchinsky questioned whether the reported rate accounted for individuals who had lost employment but were no longer collecting unemployment benefits. Meredith responded that official unemployment data generally reflects individuals actively filing claims, meaning the true number of jobless residents might be higher.

Clarissa Anderson from Plainfield Public Schools expressed concern about the longer-term impact of these layoffs on youth entering the workforce, particularly those from households affected by recent closures. Meredith acknowledged that the County had been monitoring local labor fluctuations closely and would distribute a comparative report ranking Union County's unemployment rate against adjacent counties, such as Morris, Middlesex, and Essex, to provide a fuller picture of regional economic trends.

**D. Labor Market Information:** The discussion transitioned to an overview of labor market data compiled by NJDOL's Office of Research and Information. Meredith reported that between January and August 2025, Union County employers had posted nearly 40,000 unique job openings, representing a posting intensity ratio of 3:1—meaning each position was reposted, on average, three times before being filled.

She explained that the majority of these postings came from the healthcare and medical sectors, including roles such as registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, home health aides, physical therapists, and pharmacists. Meredith added that while healthcare remained the top driver of local job growth, the repeated postings signaled a shortage of qualified candidates within the region.

Chairman Kuchinsky noted that this shortage reflected not only a skills gap but also a lack of foundational math and literacy preparation at the K–12 level, which limited students' ability to pursue healthcare training programs. This observation led to a robust discussion among several committee members, including Crystal Ahearn and Alyssa Milanes from the Elizabeth Board of Education, who shared that state regulations restrict each certified nursing instructor to teaching 20 students per year, limiting enrollment capacity. Valerie Kerrigan from DVRS

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echoed these concerns, citing similar limitations caused by licensing and accreditation rules for pre-employment transition programs.

Kendall Givens proposed that community organizations could partner with school districts to host Saturday healthcare exploration programs, leveraging volunteer registered nurses or healthcare professionals to expose middle and high school students to medical careers earlier. Clarissa Anderson supported the idea, noting that such partnerships could also help keep youth engaged and off the streets during weekends.

Chairman Kuchinsky suggested forming a Healthcare Workforce Subcommittee to further develop this proposal, inviting representatives from Union College, Plainfield Public Library, and Elizabeth Public Schools to participate. The committee agreed to reconvene for this subcommittee in mid-October 2025, with Meredith Barracato coordinating logistics. Meredith added that pending federal changes placing Career and Technical Education (CTE) oversight under the U.S. Department of Labor could help streamline certification and funding processes for such collaborative efforts.

**New Jersey Higher Education Student Assistance Authority (HESAA):** Guest speaker Carla Donegan from HESAA provided a comprehensive overview of state and federal financial aid programs available to both traditional and nontraditional learners. She outlined major grant opportunities such as the Tuition Aid Grant (TAG), Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG), and Garden State Guarantee (GSG), emphasizing that students who begin at a New Jersey community college and later transfer to a four-year institution can often complete their degree with little or no debt.

Carla explained that undocumented students who meet state residency and graduation criteria can also qualify for assistance through the New Jersey Alternative Financial Aid Application. She also discussed the Governor's Industry Vocations Scholarship (NJ-GIVS), which provides up to \$2,000 per year for women and minorities pursuing certifications in fields such as construction, cybersecurity, drone technology, and graphic design.

Committee members asked clarifying questions regarding independent student status, income eligibility, and the pending Pell Grant expansion for short-term CTE programs. Carla described the 2026 expansion as "transformational," as it would make financial aid available for short-term credentials requiring as few as 150 instructional hours, thereby addressing long-standing funding gaps for certificate-level training programs. HESSA informational materials were handed out to all committee members.

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**Student Advocate:** Marie Alston from the United Way of Greater Union County introduced Sarah, a youth participant who shared her personal story of perseverance and transformation. Sarah explained that she had left high school due to disengagement but later reconnected with education after contacting United Way through a program flyer. With support from Marie and her team, she completed her GED, earned certifications in EKG and phlebotomy, and began working as a medical assistant. Her emotional testimony underscored the power of mentorship, encouragement, and follow-through in helping young adults reclaim their educational paths.

**WIOA ISY & OSY Youth Program Updates:**

**United Way of Greater Union County:** Marie Alston then presented comprehensive updates on United Way's In-School Youth (ISY) and Out-of-School Youth (OSY) programs, reporting that the organization had exceeded contract goals. She highlighted success stories, including participants who had overcome significant personal and legal barriers to obtain their diplomas and certifications.

Marie also described the implementation of the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), which served over 400 youth countywide. The program provided paid work experience, career-readiness training, and workshops on financial literacy, civic engagement, and mental health awareness. While she acknowledged logistical challenges in payroll and timesheet processing due to the program's size, she noted that 93% of participants reported feeling supported and safe, and overall program satisfaction scored 4.4 out of 5.

Meredith commended Marie and her team for their successful administration of a \$1.9 million grant, noting that the project had grown from an initial concept into a full-scale countywide initiative.

**Union County Vocational Technical School:** Cassandra Casella provided a comprehensive report. She explained that the Simon Youth Academy at the Jersey Gardens Mall was now in its second week of the new school year, serving students aged 16 to 21. The Academy operates as a partnership between Simon Youth Foundation and the Union County Vocational-Technical Schools (UCVTS).

Cassandra shared that the program currently served 16 students from Union, Roselle, Hillside, Linden, and Elizabeth, and was expecting a 17th student to enroll within the week. Of the current enrollees, three students were co-enrolled with YouthBuild, and a potential fourth would join pending confirmation. Three additional students had secured employment, while others were actively applying for jobs with the Academy's assistance.

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She highlighted that mental health counseling continued to be offered five days a week through contracted vendor sessions and that monthly career sessions had resumed. These sessions feature guest speakers from various industries who discuss their career paths and professional experiences with students. Cassandra mentioned her goal of securing more guest speakers who could offer direct job pipelines, connecting students immediately to employment or internships.

She also praised the ongoing partnership with Union College, particularly acknowledging Denise from the admissions team, who helped 13 Simon students register for college last year, with two currently enrolled. Cassandra expressed deep appreciation for the College's continued support in assisting her students with postsecondary enrollment and transition planning.

Meredith Barracato noted that the Union County Vocational-Technical Schools had recently been awarded the WIOA Out-of-School Youth contract through a new competitive RFP issued by the Workforce Development Board. This ensured continued funding for the Simon Youth Academy program through August 2026.

**NJDOL/USDOL Update:** Meredith followed Cassandra's remarks by referencing a September 8, 2025 guidance letter jointly issued by the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) and the U.S. Department of Education (USED). She explained that this document built upon executive orders issued earlier in the year emphasizing high-skill, high-demand occupations—including healthcare, manufacturing, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI).

The federal guidance, Meredith summarized, aimed to unify the national workforce and education systems by transitioning oversight of Career and Technical Education (CTE), Adult Literacy, and related programs from the Department of Education to the Department of Labor. This realignment sought to reduce bureaucratic barriers, enhance employer engagement, and ensure education aligned directly with workforce needs.

Meredith stressed that federal agencies were urging states to assume greater responsibility for workforce programming while minimizing federal micromanagement. "The message is clear," she said, "we need to prepare youth for in-demand industries as many experienced workers retire and as employer needs evolve rapidly."

She also discussed changes within the New Jersey Department of Labor (NJDOL), noting that all new funding opportunities must now be competed through Requests for Proposals (RFPs) rather than awarded directly to local areas. Meredith highlighted that this shift had prompted Union County to aggressively pursue new funding streams to sustain and expand programming.

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**Digital Equity Training Grant Update:** Meredith proudly announced that Union County had recently been awarded \$1 million under the Digital Equity Training (DET) Grant, a highly competitive statewide initiative with only six awards out of 28 applicants. The funding supports WorkFirst New Jersey recipients—including TANF, SNAP, and GA participants—through digital skills training provided in partnership with the Plainfield Public Library and Union College of Union County, NJ.

Training will include IC3, Microsoft Office, and Northstar Digital Literacy courses. The first cohort is scheduled to begin October 6, 2025, at the Plainfield One Stop. All participants will be referred through the Division of Social Services, and eligibility is limited to WorkFirst NJ recipients aged 18 and older.

Meredith emphasized that digital literacy remained a critical skill gap, even among younger populations. She observed that while most youth were comfortable using social media, many struggled with completing online forms, resumes, or timesheets—skills essential for workplace success. She also mentioned that digital literacy challenges were not limited to youth, as many adults in the workforce face similar challenges.

**Committee Member Comments/Updates:** Chairman Kuchinsky announced that the Plainfield Public Library's GED testing center was currently under construction but remained operational with limited scheduling. He asked that referrals for testing or Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes be made directly to him. The ABE offerings, funded through the New Jersey Department of Labor, are available at no cost and serve adults seeking high school equivalency or remedial skill-building for college or training readiness.

In response to a question about youth eligibility, Chairman Kuchinsky clarified that minors aged 16–18 could also be accommodated, provided parental or guardian consent was obtained and that staff ensured coordination with Youth Corps for those needing more intensive services.

**Meeting Schedule and Adjournment:** Before closing, Chairman Kuchinsky reiterated the importance of continuing the newly proposed Healthcare Workforce Subcommittee and asked interested members to contact Meredith to participate.

Chairman Kuchinsky thanked all attendees for their continued partnership and commitment to serving Union County's youth. The meeting was adjourned at 12:15 p.m.