

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD
STRATEGIC PLAN COMMITTEE MEETING
Friday, January 23, 2026, 1:00pm
MEETING MINUTES

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

1. Scott Kuchinsky, Plainfield Public Library Chairman (Youth Committee)
2. Marie Alston, United Way of Greater Union County
3. Julio Sabater, Workforce Advantage, Chairman (Adult Literacy & Education Committee)
4. Lillian Roman, Union County American Job Center
5. Robert Croom, Union County American Job Center
6. Debbie Ann Anderson, Department of Human Services, AJC Operator
7. Karen Dinsmore, Department of Human Services
8. Melissa Lespinasse, Department of Human Services
9. Juanito Chiliuisa, NJ Department of Labor- Employment Services
10. Maritiza Batista, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
11. Dr. Lisa Hiscano, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
12. Marlene Loff, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
13. Anthea Williams, NJ Department of Labor -Business Services
14. Iesha Armour, NJ Department of Labor- Business Services
15. Isabel Jimenez, NJ Department of Labor- OTWS
16. Jeffrey Jackson, Union County Department of Human Services
17. Dr. Lyle Mosley, Elizabeth Board of Education
18. Yunia Labaut, Workforce Advantage
19. Melissa Lomax, Family Resource Network
20. Colleen Clayton, Gateway YMCA
21. Cathy Waters, Urban League
22. Jennifer Heise, Plainfield Public Library
23. Dr. Elaine Sanders, Community Food Bank of NJ
24. Cyndy Walsh Rintzler, In Roads to Opportunities Chairwoman (Disability Committee)
25. Marc Schweitzer, NJ Department of Labor -Business Outreach Team
26. Kalysha Roberts, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services
27. Azim Gray, ADP
28. Dr. Elizabeth Ramos, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ-CTE Program
29. Gregory Skelley, UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ
30. Dr. Stephanie Falana, Urban League
31. Valerie Hendon, Elizabeth Board of Education
32. Janyah Chavers Visions and Pathways
33. Melqui Mejia, Visions and Pathways

UCWDB STAFF

Meredith Barracato
Gina Tuesta
Antonio Rivera

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MEETING SUMMARY

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS: The meeting was called to order by Meredith Barracato, Union County Workforce Development Board, who welcomed attendees and acknowledged technical adjustments made to the meeting link. Participants confirmed attendance via chat. Meredith Barracato thanked everyone for attending the meeting and noted the chairs of the Disability Committee, Youth Committee and Adult Literacy and Education Committee were all present.

Meredith Barracato explained that the purpose of the meeting was to review the two-year strategic plan modification, currently in the public comment period, and to gather stakeholder input. She emphasized that the plan reflects ongoing collaboration across committees and incorporates feedback from prior committee discussions.

LABOR MARKET ASSESSMENT: Meredith Barracato provided an overview of labor market conditions, noting that Union County's unemployment rate had increased to approximately six percent, with contributing factors including layoffs in manufacturing and retail sectors. She highlighted continued demand in healthcare, transportation, logistics, and technology sectors, as well as persistent gaps in digital literacy, foundational skills, and credential attainment.

Meredith Barracato initiated discussion regarding where participants encounter barriers in service delivery and where digital literacy gaps are most evident.

Cathy Waters (Urban League) stated that individuals within the re-entry population experienced significant digital literacy barriers at intake. She explained that participants returning from incarceration often lacked basic technology skills and required immediate and ongoing support. She emphasized the organization's transition to digital intake processes and the need for expanded training resources.

Dr. Lisa Hiscano (Union College of Union County, NJ) described challenges among English language learners, noting that intake often required one-on-one assistance. She emphasized that digital literacy was embedded across all training programs, including English as a Second Language and General Educational Development programming. She further identified supportive services such as childcare and transportation as critical to participant success.

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Robert Croom (American Job Center Director) explained that reliance on online intake had created challenges, as some participants relied on family members to complete applications, masking actual skill levels. He stated that the American Job Center had shifted back to in-person assessments to ensure accurate evaluation of digital literacy needs.

Julio Sabater (Workforce Advantage) reinforced the importance of digital access and highlighted the success of the laptop loaner program. He noted that the integration of digital literacy and artificial intelligence across programs had improved engagement and outcomes, particularly for immigrant populations.

Scott Kuchinsky (Plainfield Public Library) emphasized that fragmented intake processes created inefficiencies. He advocated for a coordinated, multi-partner intake model where workforce, training, and social services collaborate simultaneously. He cited Middlesex County as an emerging model for integrated case management and stressed the importance of addressing both literacy and supportive service needs concurrently.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT: Meredith Barracato reported strong engagement across committees, including Youth, Disabilities, Adult Literacy and Education, and American Job Center Partners. She noted increased participation from school districts and emphasized the value of partner collaboration in shaping programming.

She identified employer engagement as a key gap and outlined plans to establish an Employer Advisory Council and expand work-based learning opportunities.

Marie Alston (United Way of Greater Union County) shared a best practice involving career pathway mapping, where participants follow structured roadmaps aligned with employer expectations. She noted that this approach supports clearer goal setting and training alignment.

PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES: Meredith Barracato reviewed performance indicators, noting strong outcomes in median earnings and measurable skills gains, while identifying challenges in youth program data accuracy and adult employment rates. She highlighted the implementation of dashboards to improve real-time monitoring and corrective action.

Robert Croom explained that co-location of social services within the American Job Center improved participant engagement and follow-up. He noted that dual engagement between social services and workforce staff enhanced communication and retention.

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Dr. Lisa Hiscano emphasized that training programs must ultimately lead to employment outcomes. She expressed concern that some participants completed training but did not pursue employment, indicating a need for earlier identification of barriers.

Marie Alston highlighted the impact of mental health challenges on participant retention and employment outcomes. She stressed the importance of cross-agency collaboration to address these barriers.

POLICY INTEGRATION: Meredith Barracato outlined significant updates from the New Jersey Department of Labor, including over thirty new policies emphasizing co-enrollment, functional alignment, and system integration. She noted that local policies were being revised to align with these requirements and to eliminate inconsistencies across partners.

Jeffrey Jackson (Department of Human Services) identified challenges related to data sharing and system access, particularly for partners such as Vocational Rehabilitation Services, where privacy restrictions limited participation.

Marc Schweitzer (New Jersey Department of Labor) confirmed that confidentiality requirements presented barriers to full system integration.

Dr. Lisa Hiscano acknowledged improvements in collaboration but cautioned that multiple data systems created administrative burdens. She emphasized the need for streamlined processes to support effective communication.

Julio Sabater raised concerns regarding delays in co-enrollment, particularly for Title II participants. He noted that waiting periods for training enrollment often resulted in participant disengagement and recommended the development of expedited processes.

STATE ALIGNMENT: Meredith Barracato confirmed that the strategic plan aligned with state priorities, including service to priority populations, expansion of co-enrollment, and focus on in-demand industries such as healthcare and logistics. She emphasized the advantage of co-location within the Department of Human Services and the role of integrated partnerships in service delivery.

She outlined upcoming actions, including policy updates, employer engagement initiatives, and continued monitoring of youth corrective action plans.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS: Antonio Rivera (Director, Union County Workforce Development Board) emphasized the need to break down institutional silos and

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adapt to evolving federal and state expectations. He highlighted the importance of accountability and system-wide collaboration, noting that failure to adapt could limit the effectiveness of workforce programs.

Mr. Rivera also discussed efforts to bridge the gap between policy and frontline implementation, including the use of technology and artificial intelligence to simplify complex requirements and improve communication across partners.

Robert Croom added that progress had already been made toward developing a faster co-enrollment process and expressed confidence in continued system improvements.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE & NEXT STEPS: Meredith Barracato provided a detailed overview of the implementation timeline, emphasizing that the next phase of the strategic plan would focus on structured execution, system alignment, and measurable accountability across all partners.

She explained that implementation would occur in coordinated phases to ensure that policy, operations, and service delivery are aligned with both New Jersey Department of Labor requirements and local workforce priorities.

In the immediate phase, the Workforce Development Board will prioritize comprehensive policy updates and partner training. This includes revising local policies to reflect new state guidance related to co-enrollment, service integration, eligibility, and performance expectations. Partners will receive targeted technical assistance and training to ensure consistent understanding and application of these policies across the American Job Center network, adult literacy providers, youth service providers, and disability partners. This effort is intended to eliminate inconsistencies in service delivery and establish a unified, compliant system.

Concurrently, the Board will advance fiscal and administrative alignment, ensuring that all funding streams are properly coordinated and that expenditures are directly tied to participant outcomes. This includes strengthening internal controls, standardizing documentation requirements, and reinforcing expectations that funds are utilized efficiently to support training, supportive services, and employment outcomes. Additional attention will be given to aligning fiscal reporting with program performance to support monitoring and audit readiness.

A critical priority will be the continued monitoring and implementation of the Youth Program Corrective Action Plan. Meredith Barracato noted that efforts will focus on addressing previously identified gaps in service delivery, documentation,

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and data entry within AOSOS. The Board will work closely with the youth service provider to ensure that program elements are delivered consistently, services are accurately recorded, and participants remain engaged throughout the program lifecycle. This work directly supports improved outcomes in measurable skills gains, credential attainment, and long-term participant success.

In parallel, the Board will move forward with the establishment of employer roundtables and an Employer Advisory Council. These efforts are intended to strengthen employer engagement by creating structured opportunities for employers to provide input on workforce needs, validate training programs, and support the development of career pathways aligned with in-demand industries. The roundtables will also serve as a platform to expand work-based learning opportunities, including on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and incumbent worker training, ensuring that programming is directly connected to labor market demand.

Meredith Barracato further emphasized the importance of enhanced monitoring and compliance efforts, which will be embedded throughout all phases of implementation. This includes the use of real-time dashboards, ongoing file reviews, and regular performance tracking to quickly identify and address gaps. Monitoring will extend beyond participant outcomes to include partner performance, ensuring adherence to federal, state, and local requirements. The goal is to shift from reactive to proactive oversight, allowing for timely course correction and continuous improvement.

Looking ahead, she outlined that upcoming phases will include the rollout of updated policies at Board meetings, expanded employer engagement activities, and the development of additional technical assistance resources to support partners in operationalizing new requirements. Special attention will be given to strengthening co-enrollment processes, improving participant flow across programs, and reducing delays in service delivery.

Meredith Barracato reiterated that the public comment period would remain open through January 27, 2026, and encouraged all stakeholders to provide feedback to ensure the strategic plan reflects the needs of the community and the realities of service delivery. She emphasized that stakeholder input would continue to play a critical role in refining implementation strategies and ensuring long-term success.