

UNION COUNTY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD DISABILITIES COMMITTEE

Cyndy Walsh Rintzler, CHAIRWOMAN

MEETING: January 13, 2025 10:00AM via Zoom

Committee Members

1. Carolina Marin, Union County American Job Center
2. Cyndy Walsh Rintzler, In Road to Opportunities
3. Manny Ramirez, Union County Bureau of ADA Compliance
4. Marc Schweitzer, NJDVRS Business Outreach Team
5. Melissa Lomax, Family Resource Network
6. Nasrene Mondol, American Job Center
7. Dr. Reinaldo Santiago- Herreno, Arc of Union County
8. Samia Haridi, DVRS
9. Luke Koppisch, Alliance Center for Independence
10. Lindsay Rawls, Goodwill Industries NYNJ
11. Lauren Weishaar, Hudson Community Enterprises
12. Lillian Roman, Union County American Job Center
13. Carolina Marin, Union County American Job Center
14. Willie Mae Bryant, Community Access Unlimited
15. LA Rawls, Goodwill

Union County Workforce Development Staff

Meredith Barracato

Gina Tuesta

Meeting Summary

Welcome & Introductions: Chairwoman Cyndy Walsh Rintzler welcomed all attendees and opened the meeting with personal greetings, followed by roundtable introductions facilitated by Meredith Barracato. The meeting began with 14 participants and grew as more joined. Attendance was recorded via chat for documentation.

Approval of October 8, 2024 Meeting Minutes: The meeting minutes from October 8, 2024 were unanimously approved. Marc Schweitzer made the motion to approve, which was seconded by Manny Ramirez. The minutes were approved unanimously with no comments or corrections.

Standing Items:

Budget: As of October 31, 2024:

- Over **\$1.5 million in PY23 funds** remains unspent and must be obligated by June 30, 2025.
- **PY24 funding exceeds \$3 million**, but cannot be tapped until PY23 funds are depleted.

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Meredith stressed that **unspent funds risk being returned to the State**, which may trigger reductions in future allocations due to performance-based budgeting practices. She encouraged agencies to partner with the AJC for supportive services, which include:

- Transportation vouchers
- Childcare subsidies
- Housing or rent assistance
- Training stipends

She urged agencies to contact her directly to explore possible program funding collaborations.

Performance Data: Meredith Barracato presented PY24 Q1 performance data (as of September 30, 2024). She emphasized that many outcomes, such as employment rates and credential attainment, were currently in the red due to time-lagged data collection from the AOSOS and FutureWorks systems. These metrics largely reflect outcomes for individuals who exited the system as early as mid-2023.

A positive highlight was the **Measurable Skills Gain (MSG)** indicator, which showed that a notable number of participants were actively engaged in training and demonstrated improvements through test scores or educational advancement. This is a positive trend that reflects stronger program engagement.

Meredith also urged committee members to promote **co-enrollment** practices. By referring eligible clients to the American Job Center (AJC), agencies can help participants access a wide range of services including digital literacy, soft skills training, and occupational certifications.

Customer Flow & Disability Self-Identification

Between July and December 2024, 1,258 individuals were enrolled through the AJC system. Among these, only 27 self-identified as having a disability. A deeper analysis revealed:

- 10 had mental health disabilities
- 3 with chronic illnesses
- 2 with hearing impairments
- 1 each for cognitive, mobility, and learning disabilities
- 12 chose not to specify the nature of their disability

Meredith emphasized the need to cultivate a welcoming environment where participants feel safe disclosing their disabilities, as this is key to accessing comprehensive, supportive services.

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Unemployment Data: Union County's unemployment rate as of November 2024 was 4.4%, representing approximately 13,000 individuals actively seeking employment. While the rate declined in Q4 2024 due to seasonal hiring, the committee anticipates an increase post-holidays.

Employment Data from N.TIDE

Meredith shared national trend data from the National Trends in Disability Employment (N.TIDE), highlighting that:

- **Employment-to-population ratio** for people with disabilities has reached 38%, the highest since 2008
- **Labor force participation rate** is at 41%

These indicators show that people with disabilities are increasingly engaged in the workforce, a trend that should be encouraged and protected amid changing federal policy.

She also introduced digital literacy and internship initiatives from **AT&T and the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)**, offering free online training and paid remote internships respectively.

Labor Market Information Between October and December 2024, over 13,000 job postings were identified in Union County. High-demand sectors included:

- Healthcare (e.g., nursing assistants, home health aides)
- Retail
- Food service and hospitality

Meredith urged partners to utilize this data, which will be shared via Google Drive, to explore employment pathways for their clients. She recommended agencies reach out to frequently hiring employers to discuss potential partnerships, particularly to promote hiring of individuals with disabilities

Division of

Samia Haridi ("Sammy"), Lead Transition Counselor for DVRS, presented a detailed overview of DVRS services:

- **Eligibility & Application Process:** Individuals age 14+ with documented disabilities may apply for services online or by phone. Walk-ins are not currently accepted due to office transitions.
- **Services Offered:**

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- Diagnostic evaluations (e.g., psychological, physical therapy, substance use)
- Job readiness and career counseling
- College tuition assistance (based on need)
- Transportation subsidies
- Assistive technology and workplace accommodations
- Job coaching and placement services
- **Customized Employment:**

Sammy shared that her favorite service is **customized employment**, due to its personalized and strengths-based approach. This includes at-home evaluations and creative job-matching strategies for clients with complex needs. Chairwoman Rintzler added that only three agencies in New Jersey currently offer this and that In Roads to Opportunities is actively pursuing certification.

Sammy concluded by stressing that **coordinated referrals and awareness-building** are essential for reaching underserved populations, especially high school students.

Committee Comment/Updates: Community Access Unlimited – Willie Mae Bryant

Willie Mae Bryant described their partnership with DVRS on a **paid internship program** for youth aged 14–21. The program includes:

- 3 weeks of paid job readiness training (\$100/week)
- A 150-hour paid internship at \$18/hour
- Clothing and transportation stipends
- Post-internship wrap-up sessions

She expressed concern over **difficulty placing students** due to employer stigma regarding disability, and limited awareness in Union County schools. Meredith Barracato offered to connect her with the **WDB Youth Committee**, which includes education stakeholders and will meet next on **February 4**.

Union County ADA Compliance – Manny Ramirez

Manny reported ongoing ADA upgrades at:

- **Warinanco Sports Center**
- **Union County Judicial Complex (courtrooms)**

He is also coordinating with the Workforce Board to evaluate and improve the **Plainfield One-Stop Career Center**, particularly as previous accessibility audits noted significant deficiencies.

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Committee Adjournment: Meredith reminded attendees that the next scheduled meeting (April 1, 2025) will be **rescheduled**. She and Cyndy Walsh Rintzler will coordinate on a new date.

Chairwoman Rintzler concluded by thanking all attendees and encouraging continued feedback and engagement throughout the year. She commended the group's strong start and expressed confidence in their collaborative progress.