



MERRIMACK VALLEY WORKFORCE BOARD

Remote Quarterly Meeting Minutes

Via Zoom

Meeting ID: 860 8816 2862

Meeting Password: 060624

Tuesday, January 25, 2022

9:00 am

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Edward Bartkiewicz, Joe Bevilacqua, Ann Marie Borgesi, Mark Forman, Evelyn Friedman, Andrew Herlihy, Robin Hynds, Supt. John Lavoie, Jeff Linehan, Supt. Maureen Lynch, Joselyn Marte, John Person, Carol Riemer, Fred Shaheen, Cal Williams, Juan Yepez,

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Christian Brennan, John Bruno, Ron Contrado, Marko Duffy, Lane Glenn, Rosa Muñoz, Ellen Weinhold, Bob Westcott

STAFF PRESENT:

Rosangela Amaro, Lynda Buote, Robin Del Negro, Varsha Gandhi, Yvette Garcia, Cristy Gomez, Yeang Leng, Tracy Myszkowski, Brian Norris, Mike Paglia, Corina Ruiz

GUESTS PRESENT: Noah Berger, Allison Dolan-Wilson, Donna Drelik, Niorka Mendez, Julie Moran, Linda Rohrer, Jaymi Swarbrick

I. Call to Order

A quorum being present, Chairman Juan Yepez called the meeting to order at 9:06 a.m.

II. Welcome and Introductions

Chairman Yepez welcomed everyone to today's meeting. It's exciting to see the number of participants here today. He appreciates everyone joining today.

III. Approval of the October 26th, 2021, minutes (vote required)

Chairman Yepez called for a motion on the minutes of the October 26th, 2021 annual meeting.

Motion by Cal Williams, seconded by Joe Bevilacqua to approve the minutes of the October 26th, 2021 meeting as submitted. Motion passed unanimously.

IV. Report of Chair

Juan welcomed and thanked participants for attending today's meeting. He recognized our new Chief Elected Official, Mayor of the City of Lawrence, Brian De Peña who we look forward to working with now

and for many years ahead as we continue to provide innovative and effective workforce development programs in the City of Lawrence and throughout the Merrimack Valley.

Juan also welcomed back our Board Members whose terms have been extended and our new Board Member, Mark Forman. We also have a special guest speaker today, Noah Berger from the Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority (MVRTA).

The key issues facing the Board now and through the 3rd quarter of FY22 are:

- i. Both the Career Center and the Workforce Board staff re in the planning stages to relocate by the end of February. Our Chief Elected Official, Brian De Peña has approved a lease extension at 255 Essex Street through the end of February.
 - a. The Career Center will move to 420 Common Street
 - b. The Workforce Board will move to One Union Street
- ii. As reported at our last meeting, we will engage with our Northeast Regional Partners, MassHire Greater Lowell and MassHire North Shore Workforce Boards to develop a new Northeast Regional Blueprint. This planning document will guide Workforce Development efforts in the region over the next two years. Examples of this regional cooperation are:
 - a. The Northeast Advanced Manufacturing Consortium and
 - b. The Northeast Health Care Hub
- iii. We just underwent a Fiscal audit by the State and expect to receive:
 - a. 1 Finding: FY21 WIOA funds are underspent, more on this from the Planning/Career Center committee report.
 - b. 2 Concerns:
 - i. Potential underspending in FY22 WIOA funds
 - ii. Career Center reimbursements are again overdue. Brian Norris will report on this later this morning.
 - c. Workforce Board Re-certification is underway across the State. Our Board staff is engaged in a review of our By-Laws, our CEO agreement, our Board Matrix, and our High-Performance Workforce Board Qualifications.

Juan asked if there were any questions or comments and there were none.

V. Guest Speaker: Noah Berger, Administrator, Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority (MVRTA)

Juan introduced guest speaker Noah Berger. Noah has been at the MVRTA since August. He comes to today's meeting as an employer and a resource. He introduced MVRTA team members in attendance: Jaymi Swarbrick, HR Director and Nio Mendez, Communication Director. The MVRTA has a driver shortage. They finalized a union contract with an increase of 15.78%. The rate for drivers is \$27 per hour. Applicants who don't have a commercial driver's license, can start as a van driver, and can be trained for CDL. Noah hopes everyone will get the word out that the MVRTA is hiring.

Noah is getting out into the community to find out what people need. He has met with political leaders and community groups. He is committed to ride every bus route and talk to riders to get an understanding of what works and what doesn't and has invited elected officials to ride along. The MVRTA has done work to establish relationships with area businesses, the Merrimack Valley Chamber, and local chambers. It's come across that the MVRTA is an afterthought from an old mindset that transit wanted to blend in. The days of blending in are over and the MVRTA wants to be "in your face".

COVID has had a negative impact on transit systems across the country. The MVRTA is under 70% of pre-COVID ridership. They are looking forward with the following initiatives:

- Beginning in March, the MVRTA is going fare-free with a two-year commitment. Transit systems in other states have done this, and it's proved to be a viable method. They conducted an analysis and found that for every dollar in the fare box, the MVRTA only sees \$.23. It's not just societal benefits, but it also makes sense fiscally. The MVRTA Board will determine what they will do after the two-year mark and work with federal, local governments, philanthropic organizations, etc., to look for resources to help them sustain this important contribution to the economy.
- The MVRTA will be working to making things easier to understand. This includes adding bus stops, shelters, and signage to be more transparent. We serve some of the most vibrant and diverse areas in the state, watch for more bold colored buses.
- The MVRTA will work with business and community groups, and cities and towns to make sure the buses go where people need to go and streamline the service.
- They will also be looking at span of service. How early and late the buses run. Haverhill nurses have reached out because buses don't run when they need to get to work.
- There is a plan to educating the public and get the word out the MVRTA is here, and we take people to work. There is a stigma or perception about riding public transit. Noah is encouraged by youth who see transit as cool. Boldly colored buses may take away that stigma.
- Developing a strong partnership with the business community and cities and towns with how we think about land uses and where we build businesses.
- The MVRTA wants to highlight transit and make it something that's not just for those with no choice but for all of us and a key tool to have the economy grow and thrive.

Noah asked if there were any questions. Juan said that Noah brings a valid point regarding businesses starting to look at transportation. A new company has opened at the Industrial Park with over 300 employees, and some may need to use public transportation. As a business owner, Juan's company has some employees who use public transportation. He asked if the MVRTA offers service to business owners who are willing to pay for van service to drive workers to work and home? Noah said that they have two primary business lines. One is the fixed route bus, and the other is the demand response vans. They have a hybrid for some employment runs on the demand response vans. For large groups of people, the fixed route is the most efficient and easiest to navigate. If there is a large segment of employees that might be better served by a van than a bus, we can talk about it.

Cal Williams likes the idea of making the buses cooler for youth and offered his assistance.

Brian said that the MMVWB is engaged in a regional partnership with the Greater Lowell Workforce Board and North Shore Workforce Board and discussion includes the intersections of where people live, where they go to school, where they work and how they get there. We find that we train a participant and then find that they can't get to where the jobs are. How do we reach out to you to discuss new routes? Are there connections you have with Greater Lowell and North Shore transit authorities to get people from one region to another? Noah said that there are municipal boundaries. It's something they

are trying to break down. We have a bus that goes to downtown Lowell and into New Hampshire. They are looking to go even further into New Hampshire.

Rosangela Amaro asked if buses will have bike racks. Noah said that all buses have bike racks. Nio added that there are videos that she will share that show how to use the bike racks and how to use the transit system. Rosangela also asked if there is an inner-city loop bus. Noah said there is an inner-city loop bus that goes to Essex Street, Broadway, and other key destinations.

Joe Bevilacqua thanked Noah for the presentation. He added bus stops and shelters to the city council agenda. He likes the idea of brightening the buses and he appreciates Noah's willingness to work with the business community to see how the transit system can serve businesses.

Juan asked if there were any questions or comments. Nio informed the group that she posted the link for the MVRTA travel training videos in the Zoom chat. <http://www.mvrta.com/how-to-ride/>.

VI. Reports of Executive Director

Brian welcomed new Chief Elected Official, City of Lawrence Mayor Brian De Peña. Mayor De Peña was not at today's meeting, but we are anxious to hear his thoughts on workforce development. Brian welcomed new Workforce Board member, Mark Forman from Bake n' Joy. We added three new staff at the Workforce Board, Joe Eid, Director of Information Technology. Lynda Buote, Office Manager, and Valerie Luque, Grants Accountant. Staff total at the Workforce Board is now 15. The MMVWB lease is due to expire at the end of January. We've undergone an office space procurement process and we conducted a formal evaluation and have chosen One Union Street for our new office space. We visited the space yesterday and met with the architect and discuss the floor plan. Thank you to Mayor De Peña, who has allowed us to extend our lease at 255 Essex Street for another month.

Performance at the Career Center in terms of people served continues to be at or near plan, but we are falling behind our goal in WIOA Youth, Adult, and Dislocated Worker training and funds. There is some danger that we may lose funding because of the shortfall in spending. We hope to address this by partnering with a variety of organizations to deliver more WIOA training programs for youth and adults. We have put out for bid a procurement for WIOA Youth Group Training and we expect to received bids by mid-February. Today we're going to ask this group to approve a new request for proposal for WIOA Adult training. We're recruiting for various non-WIOA training programs at Whittier Tech and Greater Lawrence Technical School. We are providing an ESOL (English for Students of Other Languages) Enhanced Manufacturing training program at Greater Lawrence Technical School and a state-run Adult Advanced Manufacturing training program at Whittier Tech beginning in February.

We are engaged with the Northeast Health Care Hub, executing on three grants:

- Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and Medical Assistant (MA) training in partnership with several Merrimack Valley healthcare providers. The Career Center is recruiting candidates for training and placement at these healthcare providers. Once placed, the plan is to continue training to put participants and incumbent workers on a career path.

- We have a grant to establish healthcare apprenticeships throughout the northeast region and the state of Massachusetts. This is a new initiative, and you'll hear more about this at upcoming meetings.
- We're also working on a grant from Commonwealth Corporation in partnership with Link House to provide training in behavioral healthcare occupations. The program will start in late February.

We recently completed and passed a state fiscal audit. There was one "Finding" – the shortfall in WIOA spending in FY21. We will create a plan to increase our spending for FY21 and FY22. The auditors found two "Concerns". One "Concern" is the ability to spend funds in FY22 and the other is the continued struggle to reconcile Career Center spending and the grants that fund the spending. Brian met with Linda Rohrer and Tom Cronin, accountant at Northern Essex Community College, and they agreed to work to develop a sustainable plan to get back to and stay current. Brian will continue to report to the Board as we develop this plan. Brian asked if anyone has any questions.

Juan asked what caused the delay in reconciling spending? Brian said that we closed the books on FY21 back in July, but we transitioned to a new budget and new accounting staff at Northern Essex Community College who started in October. We're caught up through August and we're working on September. Brian is confident that we'll be current within a couple of months.

Evelyn Friedman asked why are we down on programming? Brian said that the traffic at the Career Center is almost non-existent. We're having trouble attracting people to training and we're not sure why. We expected people to start coming back when unemployment benefits ended or with the start of the new year, but they are not. We are hoping that in creating these WIOA cohort training programs, working with several community organizations that have a deeper reach into the community, we can start to turn that around. Evelyn asked if this is happening with other MassHire areas. Brian said yes. He added that under WIOA law, if a particular area falls below 80% in the spending of WIOA funds, the state can recapture those funds and redistribute them to other areas. Brian said that other northeast regions are in the same position that we are. He also added that if the state falls below 80%, the federal government can recapture state funds and redistribute to other states. Brian thinks we'll find that other states are in the same predicament.

Juan asked if we are below 80% and if so, how much? Brian said yes, we are at 54% for WIOA Youth and in the 60% for WIOA Adult for FY21. The problem is, if we focus on spending FY21 funds, we leave FY22 funds unspent and risk the same problem for FY22. Brian hopes the state recognizes that it's not only a statewide issue but a countrywide issue. Linda Rohrer added that while non-WIOA training initiatives are happening, and it's great to have these opportunities, we spend a lot of time recruiting for these programs and unfortunately, we're not reimbursed, and our capacity to spend money in WIOA is affected. A low number of people accessing the Career Center and many training opportunities adds to the struggle of trying to spend the WIOA money.

John Lavoie said that he met with Secretary of Labor, Rosalin Acosta, her assistant, and the President of Commonwealth Corporation about connecting with and recruiting high school seniors for career planning and participation in 300-hour programs offered after graduation at GLTS supported by workforce development funds. John has met with area high school superintendents. It's a proactive

way to target the many youths leaving high school who are not going to college and have no career pathway. John also spoke with Secretary Acosta about doing more in continued growth and learning once workers go to work for them. He thinks the workforce board needs to encourage companies to support workers once they are hired with continued education. It's critical that the training hours for CTI programs are accepted by the licensing board and count towards careers that require a license. It's time to invest in continued education once a participant is in an apprenticeship program. The workers of today want to know that there are opportunities. If they know what the growth opportunities are within a company, they'll be more likely to understand and sign up for these programs. They want advancement and good pay. He also talked to Secretary Acosta about the need for more teachers and trainers and funding teacher training programs. We must incentivize people in the career areas to help with this. Secretary Acosta told John that they will be marketing to get more people into the CTI and other programs.

Brian added that our region is one of the strongest in the state in development of apprenticeship programs for non-traditional trades and we have a current grant to develop apprenticeship programs in manufacturing and healthcare. One big breakthrough that we've developed out of the CTI program with GLTS is that Raytheon has signed up for two electrician and two plumbing apprenticeships.

John added that he met with Proctor and Gamble regarding similar programs for electricians and mechanics. They also discussed hiring CTI participants.

Joe asked if the Career Center is doing enough marketing of services available. He receives a weekly email from the Springfield Career Center. Brian said that we do a lot of outreach and marketing. Linda is surprised that the Chamber is not receiving the weekly Career Center Constant Contact emails that are sent out to 40,000 people. We use the website and social media and we're marketing in the community including churches and bodegas, but more can always be done. Joe is not critical of the marketing and offered to meet with Brian and Linda to assist. Linda thanked Joe and added that we are ahead in our goals for employers served.

VII. Reports of Committee Chairs

i. Planning and Career Center Committee

Ann Marie Borgesi said that the committee met on November 17th, December 21st, and January 18th. The performance results reviewed at each of these meetings showed that the Career Center continues to be at or near plan for Job Seekers Served and Employers Served, but we remain significantly behind our targets for WIOA Adult, Dislocated Workers, and Youth. We need to develop a plan to address these shortfalls, particularly because our recently completed fiscal audit will contain a "Finding" that our FY 21 WIOA spending is below target in these WIOA categories. These unspent funds may be subject to "recapture" by the state.

The Workforce Board has already taken steps to address the WIOA Youth shortfall by issuing a Request for Procurement for funding to develop and implement innovative cohort-based Youth training programs. On January 18th a well-attended Bidder's conference was held and bids are expected on February 16, 2022, by 11am.

During our January 18th meeting the Committee approved the issuance of a similar RFP for WIOA Adult training programs.

As you are aware from prior meetings, the Workforce Board staff, and the Career Center will be relocating early this year. Bob Westcott, Carol Reimer, and I served on the office space RFP evaluation committee. We conducted site visits on January 6th, then met on January 12th to determine the winning bid. Two proposals were submitted, and both met most of the overall space, location, and buildout specifications. The One Union Street proposal however was evaluated as the best fit for overall suitability and cost. Mayor De Peña has given his authorization to proceed with final design and contract negotiations. He has also signed off on a one-month extension – until February 28th to the Workforce Board/Career Center lease at 255 Essex Street. The Career Center will be moving to 420 Common Street.

Juan asked if there were any questions or comments and there were none.

ii. Youth Committee

Cal Williams said that we continue to focus on developing new relationships with school systems, employers, and youth servicing organizations in order to provide area youth with college and career readiness resources, subsidized employment and internship opportunities, and training referrals. It is our goal to raise awareness among youth about the different resources available to support their academic and employment needs.

We started our Year-Round YouthWorks program. Forty-seven youth from Haverhill, Lawrence, and Methuen are enrolled and receiving comprehensive career development services by attaining employability skills, engaging in project based and internship opportunities, and working at partner employers to enhance their school learning while also earning a subsidized stipend, wage and incentive.

To increase students' awareness about Advanced Manufacturing, we collaborated with Lawrence High School staff to facilitate two days of company tours. We would like to thank TechPrint, Inc. of Lawrence and Straumann of Andover for welcoming the students and providing them with learning opportunities about the workplace and career pathways in the manufacturing field. Students were encouraged to continue with their education, take the leap into post-secondary education and/or training, and seek employment on an advanced manufacturing career pathway.

In addition, students from Haverhill High School-Gateway and Phoenix Charter Academy visited Northern Essex Community College Haverhill and Lawrence Campuses to learn about post-secondary education. We thank Northern Essex Community College staff for welcoming our students and providing them with valuable information regarding their admission process and course of studies.

In December, we released a WIOA Youth RFP for in-school and out-of-school youth. We are seeking proposals that will provide comprehensive services for WIOA eligible youth between the ages of 14-24 who reside in our region. These innovative proposals must offer year-round programs that directly address the barriers our youth are facing and help them make informed and productive education, training, and career and employment choices. The proposal submission deadline is February 16th, 2022,

by 11:00 AM.

We will continue to align and blend all of our youth programs to achieve more intensive programming and a seamless continuum of services that keep youth engaged in learning, work and career planning, and in taking the educational steps needed to get and keep good jobs.

In closing I would like to inform you that in an effort to keep up with the expectations of our funders, we have restructured our youth department. Our previous Youth Counselors and Youth Coordinator are now Youth Services Specialists. Our committed staff will continue to facilitate services to our local youth to help them improve their life prospects by providing career readiness activities and access to occupational skills training and work opportunities. The Youth Services Specialists will develop and maintain good relationships with our local employers to promote the various ways to serve our local youth which include paid and unpaid internships, full time and part-time job placement, paid short-term work placements, job shadows and/or mentoring, guest speaker, teacher externships and employer panel events. To learn more about our youth programs, please visit our website and read our quarterly MV Connect Newsletter. Cal commended the MMVWB staff on a job well done as they continue to handle the complexities of this pandemic to help our youth in the Merrimack Valley.

Juan asked if there were any questions or comments and there were none.

iii. Nominating Committee

Jeff Linehan welcomed Mark Forman from Bake n' Joy and founder of Boston Coffee Cake to the Board. He informed the group that one of the goals we have for this year is to have a representative from Amazon on the Board. There will be over 2,000 employees hired at North Andover/Haverhill and it would be great to have someone on the Board representing them. He asks if anyone knows someone in a senior level position at Amazon that can make the commitment to participate on the Board, please contact Jeff. Juan said we will see how the Board can help with this.

iv. Finance Report

Tracy Myszkowski said in follow up to the audit "Finding" about expenditures for FY21, we had the same issue in FY20 but we were able to FIFO the expenses in from our FY21 expenses to FY20 which alleviated a lot of the dollars we spent in FY21 so we could fully expend FY20. We're going to be in the same situation this year. With the procurements and contracting we hope to do by the end of this fiscal year, we'll be able to expend and obligate the FY21 money with help from the Department of Career Services (DCS). We'll be in the same situation with FY22 as we continue to move money from one year to another. The Career Center struggles with staffing which contributes to the issue because the WIOA staff they are waiting to put onboard would help recruit customers for training. For the December report for FY21 for Youth programming, we are only at about 44% of expenditures with Career Center obligations of about 13%. For FY22, we are only at 2% expenditures with Career Center making up 49% of an obligation. We're not confident that obligations will pan out due to Career Center staffing levels. We know that Linda is working diligently to fill the Career Center staff openings. Hopefully with the programs we are trying to implement for youth and adult, we'll be able to contractually obligate some of our funding. Even though the State has waived the 30% requirement on training costs for FY20, FY21, FY22, we as the Board have always maintained that percentage and have not taken away the training

funds and we're carrying in the any of the training funds that we didn't spend in prior years and adding it to the new pool of money, making these unobligated funds so large.

We met with the architect to finalize the plan for the new office space so they will be able to start some of the buildout. The team will be working over the next month procuring for the move, disposing of old furniture and equipment, and purchasing some new items. We'll be working to get the this done for the March 1st move with the Career Center.

Juan asked what is the total amount of 2% of expenditure for FY22? Tracy said \$14,000.00. Some of that money may be transferred over to FY21 depending on how we can escalate our group programs. We were one of the first sites to be fiscally audited and we're finding that these issues are region wide. Tracy is working with her fiscal peers, and they are trying to get a meeting with the State to help with some of the contracting issues, to see if we can get more waivers granted and if there are other ways around this because most of our lag, aside from staffing, is the training dollars. If we can obligate some funding this year at the start and run the programs through next fiscal year, assuming we can get customers in, we should be able to fully expend these funds. We need the staff to help facilitate the workload that will be required with these programs.

Joe added that we all appreciate all the work we are doing during this pandemic.

Juan asked if there were any questions or comments for Tracy and there were none.

VIII. Approve the Planning/Career Center Committee's recommendation for WIOA Group Adult Procurement (vote required)

Juan asked for a motion to approve the recommendation for WIOA Group Adult Procurement.

Motion made by Cal Williams, seconded by Evelyn Friedman to approve the WIOA Group Adult Procurement. Motion passed unanimously.

IX. Other Business

Noah Berger proposed an action item regarding Andrew Herlihy's comment in the Zoom chat to make sure Career Centers are on MVRTA bus stops. Both Lawrence and Haverhill Career Centers are close to MVRTA downtown hubs. He asked that we post MVRTA information to our websites. Juan agreed and Brian will work with Linda and IT to post this information.

X. Adjournment (vote required)

Having no further business, Chairman Yopez called for a motion to adjourn.

Cal Williams made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Jeff Linnehan. Motion passed, and meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Lynda Buote

Recorder