



# MERRIMACK VALLEY WORKFORCE BOARD

## Quarterly Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, April 25, 2023

7:30 am

**MassHire Merrimack Valley Workforce Board**  
**One Union Street, Suite 202**  
**Lawrence, MA 01840**

### **MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Joseph Bevilacqua, Ann Marie Borgesi, Mark Forman, Elizabeth Goguen, Andrew Herlihy, John Lavoie, Joselyn Marte, Carol Riemer, Fred Shaheen, Ellen Weinhold, Calvin Williams, Juan Yepez

### **MEMBERS ABSENT:**

Christian Brennan, John Bruno, Ron Contrado, Kemelin Domenech, Robin Hynds, Maureen Lynch, Rosa Muñoz, Robert Westcott, Calvin Williams

### **STAFF PRESENT:**

Frank Bonet, Lynda Buote, Robin Del Negro, Joe Eid, Varsha Gandhi, Yvette Garcia, Cristy Gomez, Yeang Leng, Valerie Luque, Tracy Myszkowski, Corina Ossers, Mike Paglia

### **GUESTS PRESENT:**

Allison Dolan-Wilson, Mariah Germosen, Maria Gonzalez Moeller, Maryanne Hamm, James Henderson, Eric Nelson, Mary Rodriguez

#### **I. Call to Order**

A quorum being present, Chairman Juan Yepez called the meeting to order at 7:44 a.m.

#### **II. Welcome and Introductions**

Chairman Yepez welcomed and thanked everyone for attending today's meeting.

#### **III. Approval of the January 24, 2023, quarterly meeting minutes (vote required)**

Chairman Yepez called for a motion on the minutes of the January 23, 2023, quarterly meeting.

**Motion by Joe Bevilacqua, seconded by Fred Shaheen to approve the minutes of the January 24, 2023, meeting as submitted. Motion passed unanimously.**

#### **IV. Guest Speaker: Maria Gonzalez Moeller, CEO, The Community Group**

Maria Gonzalez Moeller said The Community Group (TCG) originally founded as Community Day Care Center of Lawrence began as a small preschool program and has been serving the children and families

of Lawrence since 1975. It has grown to meet new needs in the community, becoming a true anchor institution in Lawrence. Some of the ways TCG contributes to Lawrence are:

- Operates multiple childcare programs for infants through kindergarten.
- Provides after school and vacation childcare programs located in the Lawrence public schools.
- Support a network of home-based Family Child Care providers.
- Manage Community Day Charter Public School serving 1200 children from preschool through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Operate Child Care Circuit which manages the state childcare vouchers for children and families all over the northeast region of Massachusetts.
- Operate training and workforce development programs for aspiring and existing childcare professionals.

Frank asked Maria about Governor Healy's recent visit to The Community Group and Maria said that the Commissioner first visited and recommended that Governor Healy visit, and the Governor announced her support for and the importance of investing in early childcare education during her visit.

Frank asked Maria what the biggest challenge is the organization faces and Maria said that staffing is a challenge for TCG and our partners. We have a popular mentor/mentee or apprenticeship program, and we are recruiting people new to the field, many have recently arrived in the city. One of the biggest challenges is that to be certified as an early childhood educator, you must have 9 months of experience working at a center or in a program supervised by a certified teacher. There is more demand for childcare than there is supply.

Frank asked Maria what areas TCG serves, and Maria said TCG is the childcare resource for region three which includes 53 cities and towns in the area. We manage the funding of \$90m per year to distribute subsidies for families who cannot afford childcare or qualify for subsidies to pay for childcare. One of the biggest efforts is advocacy and to talk about the field experience. There is a huge waitlist and many barriers. We worked with Lawrence on a program to distribute funds from the city to families who need childcare and need to work now. Between \$6m-\$7m have been invested in childcare subsidies for residents of Lawrence.

Frank asked what the cost per child is and Maria said it depends on a family's income. We developed this program for families who make too much money to qualify but don't make enough pay for the cost of private childcare. We are pioneers in terms of investing and recognizing the importance of early childhood education not only for child development but also for economic reasons.

Ellen Weinhold said if they don't have childcare, parents can't go to school, get their diplomas or GED/HiSET, ESOL, vocational training, college, etc., The biggest barriers for low-income families are childcare and transportation. There needs to be more vouchers.

Maria said the new budget should provide additional funding to get there and the bid for childcare vouchers is coming out later this year and we are hoping to apply for as much as possible. We have more demand than supply in our region.

Jocelyn Marte said people are dropping out of classes because they don't have childcare.

Frank said besides more vouchers, you need more staffing and the collaboration with the Workforce Board and the Career Center can be part of that.

Maria said the program is pushing to match the payrate for teachers to the payrate a public-school beginning teacher makes if they have a degree.

Joe asked if the program sees retired teachers becoming childcare providers and Maria said there have been some but not many. Retirees who receive benefits have limits, but it's something to think about and there is some room for opportunity there.

John Lavoie said Greater Lawrence Technical School (GLTS) opened their early childhood program, and each year will graduate 25 students and Maria said thank you and we joined the GLTS advisory committee. It's a great source of staffing.

Jocelyn said the Adult Learning Center started a relationship with NECC two years ago where we provided a contextualized class in early childhood education and a few teachers were hired at TCG. Jocelyn will consider the 9 months of paid internship needed for certification and making that connection.

Maria said employers should consider childcare as a benefit for employees. TCG is experimenting with this, and Frank said that this is a great idea and now when everyone has a choice of jobs and employers have a lack of staffing, it's a good recruitment tool.

Maria said she recently discovered a way to attract staff. It's called Benepass, instead of retention bonuses, it's a credit card that the organization provides to employees and determines money to put onto the card for things that bring them joy, etc.

Juan asked if there were any more questions and there were none.

## **V. Report of Chair**

Juan said let me start off by welcoming the Merrimack Valley Career Center's new Executive Director James Henderson. We are glad to have you as the new Career Center's leader and can't wait to see how you shape the organization moving forward. Thank you for deciding to join the team. We are excited about all the different possibilities that the career center will explore under your leadership.

The MassHire Merrimack Valley Workforce Board conducted its program review of the MassHire Merrimack Valley Career Centers, operated by NECC, from December 19, 2022 – January 20, 2023. The review consisted of a detailed WIOA programs desk review. During the monitoring process, Career Center operations were observed in all areas, including Front Desk/Point of Entry, Intake, Eligibility, Basic Services, Individualized Services, Business Services, Training Services, Follow-up Services Partners, and alignment with the State plan. A Corrective Plan was designed and accepted to address the areas found to be of Concern and Finding by both the Board and the Department of Career Services during MMVWB FY23 Program Review that took place February 6-17, 2023. A copy of the monitoring reports will be sent to board members. The MMVWB Local One-Stop Career Center Certification will take place in 2024, to ensure that OSCCs meet minimum quality standards for effective integration of services, customer satisfaction, physical and programmatic accessibility, and continuous improvement.

Jeffrey Linehan's term of board service has come to an end. He is no longer on the board and therefore, as you may see from the agenda, we will take nominations or self-nominations to fill the Clerk position today. We would be remised if we did not thank him. Board service is one of the toughest volunteer roles of all, and he performed with dedication and tenacity. He distinguished himself as a judicious steward of our organization and never flinched in the face of difficult decisions. Thank you, Jeffrey.

Additionally, just as important, another board member's term has come to an end in more ways than one. A robust member is the backbone of any member-based nonprofit organization and Ms. Evelyn Friedman has been a robust member of many Merrimack Valley boards. Evelyn's term as a member of this board has also expired and I thank her for serving on the board. She was important in assisting with ideas and tasks that helped ensure this board's future success. I want to express my appreciation for her contributions. I am sure that you will agree that our collective efforts yielded a great outcome for this organization with her on the board. However, Evelyn's term is not the only thing changing, she has decided to retire and the MMVWB and its staff congratulate her on her career and send our best on her new adventure.

Last week we received notice that board member Robyn Hinds will be taking over as Interim CEO at LGH starting May 13th. She has requested that her board seat could be occupied by their Chief Human Resources Officer, Lisa Crutchfield, moving forward. The change would need the approval of the MMVWB appointing authority Mayor Brian A. De Peña. LGH stated that it is more than happy to continue serving on this board and they believe Lisa is best positioned to represent LGH. Additionally, Robyn unfortunately, will not be able to make this meeting.

So, as you may see there are changes ongoing on our board. Mayor De Peña has had a couple of meetings with Frank to discuss board member composition. There is a matrix, from the feds, that requires certain organizations to be included in the makeup of this board. At least 51% of the board must be composed of private businesses. Mayor De Peña is contacting businesses in the Merrimack Valley to see if there is interest in joining the board. However, if you have any recommendations for any businesses to join as board members, please send me those names and company names so that we may reach out to both Mayor and the nominee.

As you may know Request for Proposals for WIOA Adult/Youth Training will be sent out in May. These are the proposals that were discussed in prior meetings and shared with board members for ideas, suggestions, and recommendations. A procurement timeline has been finalized and we will require several board members to be part of the review team. That review team meeting I slated for July 25, 2023. If you would like to volunteer for that team review, please inform Frank. There will be planning and full board approvals of the proposed awarded organizations. These contract services are slated to start on September 18, 2023.

Unless there are any questions, this concludes my report.

## **V. Reports of Committee Chairs**

### **i. Planning and Career Center Committee**

Ann Marie Borgesi said at the February 2023 Planning Committee meeting, the committee voted to change the MMVWB Support Services Policy:

- Increase the General Support Services cap from \$1,000 to \$2,000 and the Child Care cap from \$500 to \$1,000.

- Increase the Child Care Daily Rate and Weekly Rate as follows:
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Child Daily rate of \$10.00 or a weekly of \$50.00 was changed to \$20.00 and \$100.00 respectively.
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Child Daily rate of \$5.00 or weekly of \$25.00 changed to \$10.00 and \$50.00 respectively.

Additionally, the following language was added to the Public Transportation (Monthly Bus Pass) section:

The Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority (MVRTA) board voted unanimously to go fare-free for all local fixed routes and EZ Trans paratransit services starting March 1, 2022, for at least 2 years.

The committee also voted to increase the Transportation Cost Daily Round-Trip Mileage Rate as follows:

- A new rate added as 0-9 miles at \$3.00 per day.
- 10 - 25 miles at \$3.00 per day was increased to \$6.00 per day.
- 25.10 - 45 at \$6.00 per day miles was increased to \$12.00 per day.
- 45.10+ miles at \$8.00 per day was increased to \$16.00 per day.

The Planning Committee also voted in February 2023, to add the following language to the GED/HiSET policy section:

- Effective September 12, 2022, The Commonwealth of Massachusetts will pay for a candidate's first GED® test in each subject plus limited retakes (two retests per subject). The HiSET® exam will also be paid for by the Commonwealth at a later date (estimated time for to start HiSET® free testing is October).

In February we also changed the Appeal Section in the Grievance Policy from MMVWB to MMVCC.

In March a transfer for FY23 WIOA Dislocated Worker Funds to FY23 WIOA Adult Funds was voted on and passed. The recommendation was approved, and we will have \$420k in WIOA Adult training and about \$333k for occupational skills training and integrated group training for those customers, leaving about \$87k available for ITAs (about 11 slots). For Dislocated Workers, the recommendation to do a group procurement for integrated group training funds for two classes with about 12 students each will cost about \$240k and leave the remaining funding available for ITAs (about 17 slots).

In March the Planning Committee voted to change the Fixed Reimbursement Rate. Under WIOA Section 680.700, a 50% wage cap is established for OJT reimbursements. This same section also allows Local Workforce Development Boards to increase the wage cap reimbursement rate for OJTs from 50 to 75 percent. Issuance 100 DCS 07.101.1 (July 6, 2017) reiterates this; stating that the OJT training wage reimbursement rate can increase up to 75% according to the size of the employer, the quality of the training, and other factors determined by the Governor or the workforce board. This gives WBs flexibility in developing OJT opportunities that work best with the participating employers and the local economy. In alignment with WIOA regulations, the MMVWB established, the following OJT Employer Wage Cap Reimbursement Policy:

- Employers will be granted a flexible OJT wage cap reimbursement rate according to their total number of employees at the time they enter an OJT contract. Employers with 1 to 50

employees will receive a 75% reimbursement rate while employers with 51 or more employees will receive a 50% reimbursement rate.

- The April 2023 Planning Committee was canceled and therefore no reporting is required.

Ann Marie asked if there were any questions.

Joe said this shows how complex these rules and regulations are and he gives all members and staff credit for their work.

Frank said we may have to change the transportation language again as a bill was just introduced that would provide free public transportation going forward.

Ann Marie said that the Planning/Career Center Committee is looking for new members and to let us know if you would like to join the committee.

## **ii. Youth Committee**

In Cal William's absence, Robin Del Negro said MMVWB staff continues to visit area high schools to provide Connecting Activities school to career development education services. Staff participated in Triton Regional High School's Career Exploration Sessions. They continue to teach students job search techniques, provide resume building support, and expose youth to post-secondary education opportunities.

Our Youth Services Specialists collaborated with high school staff to recruit for the High School Senior Internship in Education Project. We currently have 12 students from Triton Regional and Haverhill High Schools enrolled in this opportunity. These students are learning about careers and opportunities in the education field.

We exceeded the overall program goal of 429 YouthWorks enrollments. We enrolled 268 youth during the summer and 163 during the year-round. Special thanks to Lawrence General Hospital (LGH) for hosting 36 youth during our YouthWorks Year-Round program. Brenda LeBlanc, Volunteer Coordinator for LGH has been instrumental in ensuring that our young adults are placed at various departments with the hospital to learn about health-related careers. These students are working diligently on their assigned tasks while learning the employability skills employers are looking for.

We submitted an application to the Commonwealth Corporation for the 2023-2024 YouthWorks program and were conditionally approved for \$2.2 million to provide project-based learning and subsidized employment opportunities to 460 eligible area youth between the ages of 14-25. The summer component of the program is scheduled to start July 5<sup>th</sup> for our youth servicing organization partners and July 10<sup>th</sup> for our employer partners. We are looking to expand our employer partners list. Please let Cristy Gomez know if your organization is available to host one of our youth this Summer.

We will be hosting our 2023 YouthWorks Employers Orientation Breakfast on Wednesday, June 7<sup>th</sup>, here at the office.

The WIOA in school youth group Request for Proposal (RFP) was granted to the YMCA of Haverhill. They currently have eight in school youth enrolled and the program is going well.

This month, we will be releasing another round of RFP for the out-of-school group program. We are asking board and youth committee members to be part of the review team. Please let Cristy Gomez know if you would like to join this team.

**iii. Nominating Committee**

Juan said we don't have any updates with the nominating committee at this time.

**iv. Finance Report**

In Bob Wescott's absence, Tracy Myszkowski said Frank signed the YouthWorks contract for just over \$2m to serve 450 youth. We'll be busy as youth start the program in a couple of months.

Tracy said regarding the Requests for Proposals (RFPs) for WIOA Youth and WIOA Adult group training programs, The Massachusetts Department of Career Services (MDCS) authorized the transfer of \$70k from WIOA Dislocated Worker funds to serve WIOA Adult. We are working with the Career Center to continue to facilitate Individual Training Accounts (ITAs). We'll revisit the timeline and allocations. We'll be looking for team members on the board and the planning committee to serve on the review committees so we can ensure we have good proposals and feedback for those providers that may not be funded.

**VI. Dissolution of MMVWB, Inc. 501c3 (vote required)**

Frank said that we are requesting a vote to dissolve the MMVWB, Inc. 501c3. The previous MMVWB Executive Director was paid under this account and there are no longer staff under this account. It was funded by NAMC, and that funding is moving to Metro North Workforce Board and Tracy said that we want to close out the business as there is no activity needed.

Chairman Yepez called for a motion for the dissolution of MMCWB, Inc. 501c3.

**Motion by Joe Bevilacqua, seconded by John Lavoie for the dissolution of MMVWB, Inc. 501c3.  
Motion passed unanimously.**

**VII. Vacancy – Election of Board Clerk (vote required)**

Juan said that we are accepting nominations for the election of a new Board Clerk. The Board Clerk must be from the private sector. Juan said that as there are no nominations at today's meeting, we will table this for the next meeting.

**VIII. Report of Interim Executive Director**

Frank said I have been meeting with city mayors, town managers, and town administrators. I've asked these leaders about their take on the MassHire MV Workforce Board and the MassHire MV Career Center and how we can better serve their communities, their businesses, and their people. I will have a report to the board once I complete two additional initial visits.

MMVWB staff were invited and hosted the Institute for Community Inclusion of UMass Boston. They run the Lawrence Partnership for Transition to Employment and the consortium met on March 23, 2023. The Lawrence Partnership for Transition to Employment (LPTE) is a new, 5-year collaborative youth transition project between the ICI, Lawrence Public Schools, Massachusetts state agencies, community organizations, advocacy groups, youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD), and family members. As the administration on Community Living (ACL) Project of National Significance on Community Collaborations for Employment, the LPTE focuses on enhancing collaborations across existing

local systems to help youth with ID/DD seamlessly transition from school to jobs in their communities. Youth with disabilities interact with many systems during their transition from school to work. The LPTE designs and test transition services and activities to increase the number of youth with ID/DD in Lawrence who finds and keeps long-term career-focused competitive integrated employment, graduate from post-secondary education programs, and live and participate fully in their communities. The LPTE aims to transform transition services by creating a sustainable model that results in improved employment and post-secondary education outcomes and long-term career successes for youth. The project goals are interrelated and emphasize collaboration between diverse partner organizations. We are happy to be part of this collaboration.

Signage for MassHire Workforce Board was ordered. Hopefully, the signage will make it easier to locate MMVWB in this building.

National Association of Workforce Board had its annual NAWB Forum in Washington, DC on Saturday, March 25, 2023, through March 28, 2023. I attended on behalf of a board member. Participants had the opportunity to learn directly from national leaders about policy, initiatives, and trends.

- I was able to hear from The Office of Apprenticeship at DOL as well as innovative leaders thinking about the next generation of apprenticeships. Sessions highlighted how programs connect workers to economic opportunity while meeting the skill needs of employers in high-demand industries. The apprenticeship system continues to grow, with the workforce system, including workforce development boards, a major partner in that expansion.
- One of the presenters was Laurie Bouillion Larrea - President/CEO, Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas (WFSDallas). I was able to pick her brain on her successful transportation program in which she runs at the WB. They received private funding for employee transportation costs and have partnered with Uber to charge a subsidized daily cost of \$3.00 a day. Some of these trips are 40 miles one way. They have also accepted private funding and created childcare services in some of the larger employers.
- Additionally, among other presentations, I was able to attend, I was able to join policy experts in a session to discuss the outlook and progression of federal workforce development policies in 2023 and beyond. Wider trends in the political and economic landscape were examined, including perspectives on policies that go beyond the primary federal investment in workforce development. One of the most surprises that occurred in that presentation was that due to baby boomer retirements and the low childbirth rate in the US, there are three new piecemeal workforce initiative legislative bills on the floor, the recently approved Chips and Science Act, and other moving parts of the workforce development, that according to NWA Steve Voytek - Policy Advisor, Foresight Law + Policy, that they expect the US to be in the predicament of not having enough workers for vacancies for the next 100 years.

As mentioned in the email I sent the board, MMVWB staff have created working guiding principles. Guiding principles are values that lead the organization's employees, leaders, and others in any situation they may face. These principles summarize what staff believes the behaviors they want employees and leaders to agree to follow. The principles will be posted in the office and conference room. It's one of the first steps in the staff development training process that we are participating in through next year.

The Massachusetts Workforce Board Executives continue to meet with Secretary Jones monthly. The conversations continue to be informative and soon to be productive.



The board staff continues to meet with employees in the MV region to discuss partnerships and to gain insight on how best to support them. Our last visit was made by Program Administrator Mike Paglia, to GemLine whom we've matched up with NAMC for apprenticeship support.

Frank asked if there were any questions.

John asked when MMVWB works on initiatives with Lawrence High School (LHS) that we include GLTS, as many of these initiatives benefit GLTS students and Frank said we will. John said GLTS has partnerships with LHS, and we will be visiting area high schools to recruit graduating students who are not attending college for workforce development programs. John said GLTS would also like to be part of any MMVWB apprenticeship program discussion, and I would also like to be included in conversations in the work that we do with Secretary Jones and Frank said he will follow up with Secretary Jones as he would like to invite her to a meeting in our area in the next few months.

Joe said I attended a meeting where the issue of housing was discussed, and transportation is one of the key components they are talking about in terms of affordable housing access. I like the fact that we are looking at transportation as one of the components of workforce training. One of the things I think we still need is a pool of flexible money for when things happen, and we need to make that movement. I hope that some of these programs will be a little more flexible. It would also be good if there was a way to help licensed workers who come from other countries, by providing refresher courses so they can go to work and Frank said there was discussion at the forum in Washington about how to help get immigrants into the workforce. There are challenges with funding restrictions and Joe said we need to have funding available to transition people into work and Frank said that he could call or draft a letter to legislative leaders.

James Henderson said part of the challenge we are facing not just in this region, but across the state and country is that we are being very prescriptive to what the solution is. Many people come to the U.S. with immeasurable skills, background and experience and the challenge is not always an issue of are they able to work right away, it's that they're getting bad information. I'm thinking that a triage system will facilitate this, like what we do at the Career Center. We try to identify the person's transferable and parallel skills. The bigger question becomes does the state or federal government see the value of harnessing the skills that person has and having them on a parallel track vs a singular track.

Joe said the problem is that the regulations are so restrictive, and the reality is that we need to have flexibility and James agrees and said that a lot of the decisions are driven by data. Another solution is if we can get private money and put together an organization to do a lot of the groundwork.

Juan said as an employer, he'd like to be able to search for candidates on a state website. Is that something that could be available?

Beth Goguen said MassHire JobQuest is going through a huge re-vamp on the business side to respond to employers needs. There will be ways to match with candidates including pre-screening and connection to candidates. The new JobQuest build is rolling out mid-May. I invite you to connect with the Career Center's Business Service Representatives for assistance.

James said the goal is to have more of an impactful communication with employers bridging the gap and putting our Business Services Representatives forward in the five key areas.

Beth said there are many unemployed people who are required to come to the career center for services and it's a huge pool of people to connect with.

Mark Forman said Bake 'n Joy has many jobs available, and the Merrimack Valley has many food companies. Where do we get the resources to find people who work in freezers or manufacturing? Amazon will be hiring and impacting resources. Does anyone know when Amazon is opening? Frank said he will find out when Amazon will be hiring, and Mark said that he is concerned with Amazon hiring as we will all be looking for workers from the same pool.

Joe said that when he attended an opening ceremony at the Amazon facility in Haverhill, they were looking for part-time workers.

**IX. Other Business**

Andrew Herlihy said the Merrimack Valley CEDS (Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy) document is updated by the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission. The work on this document involves people from all over the Merrimack Valley and there is a workforce development focus. The process is wrapping up and I recommend that the Workforce Board and Career Center get involved in this process.

Andrew said the LEADS program is promoting manufacturing. A disturbing statistic is that only six freshmen at Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School selected the advanced manufacturing cohort. We don't promote manufacturing well enough. There is a movement coming out of Haverhill to do more promotion of manufacturing.

**X. Adjournment (vote required)**

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

**Motion by Joe Bevilacqua to adjourn, seconded by Jocelyn Marte. Motion passed, and the meeting was adjourned.**

Respectfully submitted,

*Lynda Buote*

Recorder