



# MERRIMACK VALLEY WORKFORCE BOARD

## Quarterly Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, January 23, 2024  
9:00 am

One Union Street, Suite 202  
Lawrence MA 01840

### **MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Joe Bevilacqua, Lisa Crutchfield, Mark Forman, Lane Glenn, Beth Goguen, Andrew Herlihy, Bill Lang, Vilma Martinez-Dominguez, Carol Riemer, Nardy Vega, Ellen Weinhold, Calvin Williams, Juan Yepez

### **MEMBERS ABSENT:**

John Bruno, Ron Contrado, Wilson DeLos Santos, Kemelin Domenech, John Lavoie, Maureen Lynch

### **STAFF PRESENT:**

Frank Bonet, Lynda Buote, Robin Del Negro, Varsha Gandhi, Yvette Garcia, Cristy Gomez, Yeang Leng, Valerie Luque, Tracy Myszkowski, Corina Ossers, Matt Robert, Abby Seripais

### **GUESTS PRESENT:**

James Henderson, Eric Nelson

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

A quorum being present, Chairman Juan Yepez called the meeting to order at 7:46 a.m.

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

Chairman Yepez said welcome and thank you for attending today's meeting.

#### **III. Approval of the October 24, 2023, Annual Meeting minutes (vote required)**

Chairman Yepez called for a motion on the minutes of the October 24, 2023, Annual Meeting.

**Motion made by Joe Bevilacqua, seconded by Ellen Weinhold to approve the minutes of the October 24, 2023, Annual Meeting as submitted. Motion passed unanimously.**

#### **IV. Report of Chair**

Chairman Yepez said welcome and thank you for attending. I hope you all had a great holiday season and a happy new year.

We have a new member on the board. Ms. Nardy Vega, of the Lawrence Public Schools Adult Learning Services is a board member replacing the previous representative of the Adult Learning Center. We look

forward to having Nardy be a great participant on this board. Welcome aboard. Mayor DePeña continues meeting with Frank, to discuss board member composition.

The Undersecretary to the Executive Office of Labor & Workforce Development, Jennifer James, has announced that she will be resigning after 22 years of working at the Executive Office of Labor & Workforce Development. She is to take a VP position at North Shore Community College. No replacement for the Undersecretary has yet been announced.

Frank and I had a meeting with the Essex County Community Foundation. ECCF inspires philanthropy that strengthens the communities of Essex County by managing charitable assets, strengthening, and supporting nonprofits, and engaging in strategic community leadership initiatives. Stratton Lloyd who is the Executive Vice President & COO, discussed several initiatives and they have offered their services to have high-level organizations collaborate with the board for future endeavors, including funding opportunities. The renewable energy industry and the immigrant/migrant area seem to be of interest to ECCF, but they also took an interest in some of our topics. We look forward to that successful collaboration.

Unless there are any questions, this concludes my report.

## **VII. Reports of Committee Chairs**

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

Vilma Martinez-Dominguez said Happy New Year! I will start by providing information related to the report Labor Exchange Program & WIOA Performance Summary for the MassHire Merrimack Valley Career Center. These numbers are as of December 31, 2023.

Total Job Seekers Served 4,812 which is 70% of the FY24 Annual Plan.

WIOA Adult Total Participants were 33 which is 30% of the FY24 Annual Plan. Along with the carry-in and new participants, 52 individuals have participated in training, or 48% of the plan.

WIOA Dislocated Workers are at 58% of the FY24 Annual Plan. Dislocated workers have the highest number of participants when it comes to WIOA funds, and that includes 74% carry-in, 51% new participants, and an hourly wage placement of \$42.07. Placement at \$42.07 doubles the wage placement of \$20 indicated for the FY24 Annual Plan.

WIOA Youth continues to be at a lower level than the FY24 annual plan. Although carry-in participation is at 115%, new participants are currently at 5%. A thorough discussion with the Career Center Director, during our last two monthly meetings, indicates that he has a plan of action to increase the number of Youth WIOA.

And last, the Workforce Board wishes to go out for Youth Procurement once again. Recommendations were made, and a board vote will be required.

**Services Solicited by this Procurement** - We will seek providers who will singularly or collaboratively provide comprehensive services for any WIOA-eligible Out-of-School youth between the ages of 16-24. Priority will be given to youth who reside within the following cities and towns: Andover, Amesbury, Boxford, Georgetown, Groveland, Haverhill, Lawrence,

Merrimac, Methuen, Newbury, Newburyport, North Andover, Rowley, Salisbury, and West Newbury. This area is collectively known as the Merrimack Valley Workforce Development Area. However, individuals from outside this area will not be turned down for consideration as it is the policy of this board to serve all.

**Program Design** - As WIOA emphasizes Career Pathways, the MMVWB is also prioritizing the development of regionally focused Career Pathways for all job seekers regardless of age/education level. We will consider Career Pathways in any industry/occupation, with meaningful evidence of the labor market demand and successful job placement, however, it shall not be mandatory. The MMVWB priority industries are advanced manufacturing, professional/technical, and healthcare and social services.

**WIOA Elements** - Remove the requirement of occupational skills training.

Plans are to include FY25 WIOA Youth Funds in the Youth RFP we plan to release in March. This concludes my report. Thank you.

**WIOA Youth Group Training RFP (vote required)**

Frank Bonet said we are asking for Board approval to release an RFP for youth group training. In this RFP, we want to remove the requirement for occupational skills training element. We have seen that having an occupational skills requirement has been a barrier for some training providers.

We also want to include language in the procurement that we provide training services to individuals outside of our region with priority to individuals within our region. Other areas provide services to their regions only and per our policy, we provide services to all.

Our Blueprint has three priority industries, healthcare, information technology and advanced manufacturing. When we go out for procurement we have those industries in mind. In this RFP we want to open it up to any industry. This will allow us to spend more WIOA funds. If we don't spend the funds, we're going to have to send money back.

Ellen Weinhold said you're going to give preference to individuals in the Merrimack Valley and then go outside the area and Frank said it will be open to everyone at the same time and we'll prioritize individuals in our region.

Beth Goguen said can you explain more about removing occupational training and Frank said right now, our procurements include the three priority industries, but we want it to be open to other occupations and Corina said we have 14 elements that we provide and we want to eliminate occupational skills and provide other elements because we feel a lot of youth are not engaged and this will also allow training providers who provide services other than occupational skills a chance to submit a proposal. We also want to include funding from FY25 in this RFP.

Chairman Yopez asked for a motion to approve the WIOA Youth Group Training RFP.

**Andrew Herlihy made a motion, seconded by Cal Williams, to approve the WIOA Youth Group Training RFP. Motion passed unanimously.**

ii. Youth Committee

Cal Williams said Happy New Year! We are hopeful that 2024 will be as productive as 2023 was for our youth programs and initiatives. As we head into this new year, we would like to take a few minutes to celebrate our Youth team's achievements of the last quarter.

Students from Amesbury Innovation High School and Triton Regional High Schools visited Northern Essex and North Shore Community Colleges to learn about post-secondary education options. Students had the opportunity to tour the campuses and learn about career opportunities, admissions, and financial aid processes. Students from Lawrence High School visited the Norfolk County Sheriff's Office to learn about the law enforcement and judicial system. Students asked questions to make informed decisions about their next steps toward achieving their academic career goals.

We have WIOA Youth Funding available to provide career training opportunities that will lead to industry certification and unsubsidized employment in various career fields. We are currently recruiting 10 youth for the Lare Out of School Youth HiSet - Customer Service and Microsoft Word Certification program. There are approximately 70 slots available for Individual Training Accounts for Youth. Help us spread the word and refer any out of school youth to the Career Center.

We are looking to hire an additional Youth Services Specialist. We hope to bring on board a professional who is invested in our community and is eager to guide youth in attaining employability skills and career goals. Please help us and share the job posting with your network. The job posting is available on our website.

Since October, we have enrolled over 210 youth in our YouthWorks Cycle 2 Year-Round program. We are grateful to collaborate with our local youth servicing organizations and employers that are providing our youth with meaningful project based learning and subsidized employment.

Unless you have questions, this concludes my report.

**iii. Nominating Committee**

Frank said we have no report at this time.

**iv. Finance Report**

In the absence of Wilson DeLos Santos who is away for professional military education, Frank said I'd like to report that the Quarterly Budget Summary as follows:

As of November 30th, we have expanded almost 30% of our FY24 Integrated Budget.

In December, we contracted our Group Programs for WIOA Youth (1 program) and WIOA Adult (3), and ESOL (1).

With the lag of our WIOA Youth Training Funds, we are going out again in March to procure for the youth training and wrap around services.

Our last WIOA Youth Group Procurement we issued had \$400k in available funding, and our 1 contract that was awarded from this procurement totals \$64k.

We are collaborating with our regional partners in North Shore and Greater Lowell to work on our newly funded Regional Plan, Healthcare HUB, and Behavioral Health Initiatives.

As of this week, we have processed the following WIOA ITA's: 3 Youth/75 slots = 4%, 15 Adult/42 slots = 36% and 33 DW/75 slots = 44%

Unless there are any questions, this concludes my report.

#### **VIII. Report of Executive Director**

Frank said good morning and thank you for your support, ideas, and discussions on making the MassHire Merrimack Valley Workforce, and Career Center important in supporting employers and residents, economically and through employment.

Continued meetings with the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development and their staff, regarding the migrant issue in Massachusetts, continue, now categorized as an emergency task. \$111K will be arriving in the Merrimack Valley for Career Center services for migrants in Methuen and Andover. James Henderson can speak more on this matter, as it is an evolving situation. As you may have read in the Boston Globe this morning, Governor Healy and 15 other governors have demanded the federal government do more in terms of funding and assistance for migrant services.

The Donahue Institute of UMASS Lowell has been contracted to work on our Regional Blueprint. I had my first meeting with the team on Thursday. We are a bit behind on this task. However, I have indicated to have them meet with our Regional Partners, the Member's List, and several board members for input.

Last week, the staff of the Workforce Board completed a nine-month, 27-hour High Impact Team Development Training. The fundamental purpose of the Team Development program was to present to managers, future leaders, and staff members the key behaviors, strategies, and actions that are required to create operational excellence. Completion certificates were provided, and a mini celebratory event took place.

This completes my report. Thank you.

#### **IX. Other Business**

James said I wanted to touch on the shelter issue. Thankfully, we have funding coming in. The challenge is language. Although Haitian Creole is the first language for the majority, several have become proficient in Spanish. In an effort to try to serve as many people as quickly as we can, we are reaching the individuals who speak Spanish. We will contract with someone who is fluent in Haitian Creole for outreach at the shelters. This person would be stationed at the Career Center. We're limited to contract with this person for 18 hours per week and we feel that should be sufficient for a solid impact. We've arranged, through Northern Essex Community College, for one set of ESOL classes with funds the college appropriated through an existing grant. The classes are based on the needs of the participants. They are intensive and will prepare participants to enter the workforce. We're finding with this group is that there is a strong push to get into the workforce immediately. Because there are conditions that go into living in a shelter and reporting income, there's a hesitancy to do that. We're trying to break through that piece. We want to see these people being self-sufficient. Thank you to Frank and the Workforce Board and Career Center teams.

Ellen said if they do go to work and are no longer eligible to stay in the shelter are the agencies working with them going to provide subsidies for these families and James said each shelter has different management. Because the shelter is operated by the National Guard, I can't go into the Andover shelters to engage with folks.

Vilma said Greater Lawrence Community Action provides a wide array of services including work with immigration and the only shelters we're not serving is Methuen. Andover only has the National Guard, so there's no case management. We have grants to work with these families and it's taking a lot of effort. We're trying to figure out how we're going to work with individuals to do everything they need and it's going to be very hard and \$15 - \$20 per hour isn't going to get them housing. This problem is complex. The State is struggling and we're going to have to take ownership and leadership of some of this work.

James said the challenge is we have a lot of entities with different mandates. It's not a question of intentions. The legal clinics are set up and doing fantastic serving tens of thousands of people. But when people come out of the clinic, they don't have the support for next steps at the local level. We're continuing to work as closely as we can with all of our partners, and we're trying to address the expectations as quickly as we can.

Mark Forman said how many people and how many shelters are we talking about, and James said Methuen's shelter is a hotel operating 100% as shelter with about 110 individuals. Andover shelters have about 100-110 individuals and families continue to move in. We are hopeful that Methuen will have the ability to issue travel vouchers so people can use Uber to get to work. We've heard Amesbury and Haverhill will potentially have shelters and Vilma said as of now, the Andover shelters will not relocate.

Frank said that security is a concern at the Methuen shelter. This is where elected officials talk about resources having to be used and they are asking the Governor's office to send funds to help.

Juan said what is going on with the children in the shelters in terms of education and James said I can only speak to what's happening in Methuen shelter and those children are bused to school. The social integration piece of it is that my sense is that it's like a camp. Meals are brought in, etc. Without affordable housing for them to go in, we're going to keep flailing. These migrants represent people who did things the legal way and Vilma said there are not only migrants living in the shelters. There are also citizens seeking emergency shelter.

Beth Goguen said the Governor's focus for MassHire is jobs. I was interested in how employers have been responding and James said the initial response is great and then for a large group, we hit the wall with language. Transportation is a secondary challenge. Employers who can help address the transportation issue can help solve it.

Eric Nelson said several employers have been great about it. The biggest problem for employers is do the individuals have work authorization; do they have the skill set and minimum requirements. I spoke with an employer regarding the language barrier about purchasing translator headsets to help with translation.

Frank said our pressure has been coming from the labor workforce office. How many people are working and that we need to get people to work. We can't use WIOA funding for training for these

individuals. We met with Senator Markey's office about flexibility in WIOA requirements. If we could use WIOA training funds, when an individual's work authorization comes through, they are ready to go to work. We are having these conversations and James said there are a lot of people working under the table. These are folks who have learned to become adaptable, but technology is a challenge. We have a long way to go, and Eric said we are being very careful about who we are speaking with as we've heard across the state, there are predatory employers out there trying to take advantage of a bad situation and these folks may not recognize that and we're doing our due diligence to make sure we're doing that for them and Beth, I don't know if you can help. We had a conversation with Beth Israel, Lahey and they have a very large list of immunizations that are required, and we'd like to see if they are eligible, and Beth said I have a contact at the Department of Public Health I can reach out to about immunizations.

Juan said thank you James and Eric. I know there are a lot of challenges that you must deal with to help the migrants. We appreciate the update.

Juan said is there any other business and there was none.

**X. Adjournment (vote required)**

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

**Motion made by Joe Bevilacqua to adjourn, seconded by Cal Williams. Motion passed, and the meeting was adjourned.**

Respectfully submitted,

*Lynda Buote*

Recorder