

**MassHire State Workforce Board Meeting**

Thursday, December 9, 2021

9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

Virtual Meeting (via WebEx)

**Meeting Minutes**

***(Draft)***

***Members Present (logged in):***

*Rosalin Acosta, Anne Broholm, James Cassetta (left early), Sherry Dong (left early), Pam Eddinger, Pamela Everhart, Jessyca Feliciano, Maria Ferreira-Bedard, Rainer Gawlick, Robert LePage, Eric Lesser (left early), Randall Lyons, Jennifer Morales (left early), Sherri Pitcher (left early), Joanne Pokaski, Juan Vega, Janice Weekes, Maicharia Weir Lytle (left early)*

***Members Absent:***

*Joanne Berwald, Jesse Brown, Axel Grippo, John Mann, Juliette Mayers, Radhames Nova, Jerald Parisella, Warren Pepicelli, Elizabeth Skidmore, Marylou Sudders, Ray Wrobel*

***Guests and Staff***

*John Afonso, Lorraine Albert, Michele Campbell, Inez Canada, David Cruise, Kate Durant, Elizabeth Denniston, Marisa de la Paz, Patricia Garcia, Jennifer Hansen, Amy Kershaw, Natasha Lawrence, Joana Mateus, Brendan McCarthy, Shannon Norton, Lauren Nwagboli, Ed O’Sullivan, Jeff Roberge, Kimberly Rowe-Cummings, Cheryl Scott, Sacha Stadhard, Alice Sweeney, Molly Trowbridge, Raija Vaisanen,*

**Welcome & Introductions**

Joanne Pokaski called the meeting to order and then reviewed the meeting agenda. Cheryl Scott updated the Board on the WIOA State Plan modification that will be due in the spring. DOL has not yet issued guidelines on submission, but the Board will be updated via email as more is known. The Board will be briefed on the modifications at the next Board meeting on March 10, 2022.

The 2022 Board meeting dates have been scheduled; Board members should have received meeting invitations for the meeting dates. Due to the Governor’s extension of [remote attendance allowance for public bodies through April 1, 2022](https://www.mass.gov/service-details/updated-guidance-on-holding-meetings-pursuant-to-the-act-extending-certain-covid-19-measures), the next Board meetings will be held virtually. Ms. Scott asked for feedback from Board members on their experience with virtual Board meetings and how the Board should approach future Board meetings (i.e virtual or in-person, or hybrid meetings.) Pam Everhart suggested that the Board consider hybrid meeting to allow flexibility for Board members to attend. She suggested that they look at attendance since going virtual, and if attendance has increased, virtual meetings should be allowed moving forward. Companies have had to be flexible in the workplace with remote work, so the Board should follow suit. Perhaps hold one meeting a year in-person, and the rest virtual. Joanne Pokaski suggested this in-person meeting could be in warmer weather. Senator Lesser added that there is value to in-person meetings, so if there is a meeting in person, provide as much notice as possible to ensure members can arrange to attend. That said, remote meetings allow for geographic diversity on the Board.

**Meeting Minutes**

Joanne Pokaski for any changes to the meeting minutes from the September 28, 2021 meeting; none were raised. Ms. Pokaski called for a motion to approve the meeting minutes. Pam Everhart, made the motion to approve the minutes, Pam Eddinger seconded the motion, and the motion was passed unanimously through voice and chat vote.

**Workforce Development Update**

Secretary Acosta reviewed economic and workforce indicators since the last Board meeting. Massachusetts’ unemployment rate is 5.3% just above the national rate of 4.9%. As a result of COVID, the Massachusetts Labor Force shrunk by 100,000 workers, 2/3 of the loss is attributed to reduced labor force participation (fewer people working, lagging participation for women, health concerns, retirements, etc.) and 1/3 of the loss is attributed to Massachusetts’ slowing population growth. This is the reason so many employers are having trouble finding workers to fill jobs. This is not a typical recession and the labor force remains short of pre-pandemic levels; people have dropped out of the labor force. But the composition of the labor force is what we need to be focused on. The labor force participation rates have particularly reduced for Black workers, women, and older workers. There are people who are actively looking for work, but are not looking to return to the same occupation. Meanwhile, there are jobs that are in demand, especially in for tech and healthcare jobs. There is a skills mismatch, which is where the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds come into play. Pam Eddinger commented that people are not working, they are not in school at community colleges – these “missing” people need to be found.

Secretary Acosta provided an update on the ARPA funds. The legislature passed a $4 billion bill that is awaiting Governor signature. Massachusetts currently has $50 million in workforce development grants thanks to the generous budget the legislature passed. The Workforce Skills Cabinet has developed a framework for spending these funds, and they have been working with the 7 regional planning teams on defining their investment plans, identifying gaps, and taking advantage of new resources. In addition, to assist with both the demand and supply sides of the workforce equation, the Workforce Skills Cabinet (WSC) has developed two new types of positions to be embedded in workforce regions: (1) Market Makers will engage employers and match them with training providers and training grants, and (2) Upskilling Navigators will be in each MassHire Career Center to help with recruiting, screening, matching and enrolling participants in training programs. To support resource utilization, the WSC has also developed and enhanced a number of grants including the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund, the Career Technical Initiative, RENEW grants, and Rapid Re-employment grants.

Secretary Acosta shared highlights on National Apprenticeship Week, which was November 15 – 21, 2021. At Arranta Bio in Watertown, the Governor issued a proclamation declaring Massachusetts Apprenticeship Week. And at Plumbers and Gasfitters UA Local 12 in Dorchester, the Secretary met with a diverse group of apprentices, including women and people of color. In the South Shore, they celebrated the nation’s first Credit Analyst apprenticeship program.

Pam Everhart commented on the drop in employment for women attributed to childcare, and asked whether school openings saw an impact on women’s ability to work. Secretary Acosta responded that they did see an improvement, but school hours other childcare related issues continue to be a challenge. As Board member Liz Skidmore points out, for some industries, like construction, childcare is more of a challenge since work is generally not 9-5. Secretary Acosta pointed out that there is not going to be a government fix, all of us need to figure this out together. The Massachusetts Business Roundtable has been talking about childcare, and EOLWD is working closely with them.

Pam Eddinger commented that for community colleges there are two major barriers to upskilling. First, most of the training is non-credit, so the schools don’t have the infrastructure to help with navigators and developers. The second is that students cannot afford tuition and living expenses. When the school pays for tuition and a stipend, students come. But that’s a larger barrier than the schools can tackle. Also, persistence is a challenge. Once students enroll, the schools need to hold their hand through completion. As Chair of the National Apprenticeship Committee, the issue that has come up over and over is the connection between federal policies and funding, and how quickly it takes to get apprenticeships up and running. We have to take the administrative burden away from the employers. Rainer Gawlick agreed with these observations. For Apprenti, if they asked the employers to do the administrative work, he guarantees that zero of the 14 employers would have participated. Intermediaries are critical so employers don’t need to go through the learning curve to engage in apprenticeship. Acosta added that the Mass Bankers Association is acting as an intermediary for the Credit Analyst apprenticeship in order to take the burdens away from the banks. Mr. Gawlick mentioned that this is a role the Northeast Advanced Manufacturing Partnership for manufacturing apprenticeships. Ms. Pokaski noted that as an employer, sometimes the work employers do is undercounted. It can be a lot of work and that is generally not factored into the costs.

Randall Lyons commented that the Mass Boating Association, they fund two programs in marine tech with assistance from the state. They are concerned with filling a course with student, for which they need to offer ½ payment upfront for a full time day program. Right now they are struggling to find employers to participate in the Advisory Board. He suggests that employers get involved in the Advisory Boards in schools – they get a chance to talk to students, meet students, and influence curriculum. Bob LePage mentioned that he could provide the roles and responsibilities of employer advisors; this is important because they need to know expectations. Most voc tech schools have 4 years of instruction, and offer coops and placements. Employers don’t have to commit to coops to be on Advisory Boards. There is the question of whether there is truly a market if a new program is struggling with employer engagement. Secretary Acosta stressed the importance of employer involvement in schools to give both teachers and students exposure. Teachers are used to teaching from a curriculum, and they need to know about the job opportunities so they can better connect the classroom experience with reality. There is no better source of that information than employers.

**Dispatches from the Field**

Shannon Norton, Director of the MassHire Lowell Career Center, shared with the Board the career center’s experience during the COVID era. Prior to the pandemic, the Career Center did have some experience conducting online workshops and issuing laptops to customers, which helped to transition them to remote service delivery. The job seeker customer base only increased 20% from 2019-2021, while employer services increased by 160%. Fortunately, increased state funding allowed the Center to hire more business services staff. Job Seeker customers are not taking advantage of career center services in the same manner as before; at the last virtual job fair they held, only 30% of the job seekers that signed up attended, and they are not sure why. Going forward the career center would like to offer a mix of virtual and in-person services because certain populations with barriers to employment need in-person services. Virtual services don’t work for everybody. They have a young adult career center and the young people found more value in accessing the center in-person. Currently, the career centers are open to in-person, walk-in services, but volume is down considerably. Pre-pandemic, the center would serve about 100 people a day, now it is about 12 people. The lack of in-person interactions makes it harder to build relationships with . The mix of the job seeker population is changing, too. Pre-pandemic, female customers were about 46%, and it is currently 61%, suggesting that women who left the workforce during the pandemic are looking to come back. There is also an increase in Hispanic customers, so the career center is looking to hire more staff that are fluent in Spanish.

Dave Cruise, President and CEO of MassHire Hampden County Workforce Board, provided an overview of the MassHire Hampden’s plans to provide workforce services to the MassHire Hampden region. The Hampden Board is excited for the new year when the expanded state and federal resources will start to hit the regions. Many of the 81,000 Job Seekers they serve in the Hampden region will need to get training, and the hope is to work with these individuals to get them the supports needed so they do not drop out of the workforce. For the past 9 months, the region has not had additional funding to offer training, so it is very exciting that there will be an array of training opportunities available. Fortunately, the funding will be for multiple years, and if the funding is carefully braided and blended, it can help to alleviate previous years’ funding fluctuations. The hope is that training can be used to develop transferable skills so workers can remain competitive and retain employment through future economic downturns in and disruptions. MassHire Hampden has seen a reduction in Job Seeker customers, but Mr. Cruise believes they will come back once training funds are available; they are currently not able to meet demand for training without additional resources.

Joanne Pokaski asked if employees are back in the office and whether services are by appointment only. Also, what is the career center doing to attract customers since the volume is down. Ms. Norton responded that all employees are back in the office and that has been helpful for fostering collaboration, mentoring, and camaraderie. During the summer, they did have services by appointment only, but that was mainly due to the high volume of UI issues. They currently allow for walk-in services. To get people back in the door, they need to hold in-person events, which was a main driver of attracting customers pre-pandemic. Ms. Pokaski speculated whether a marketing campaign would help get people back to the centers. Ms. Eddinger mentioned that Bunker Hill Community College did a marketing campaign to bring in more students, but what students were looking for were job guarantees and stipends to offset the risk of going into training. Ms. Pokaski added that they talked about this in the Greater Boston regional meetings. In order to go to training, many people have to leave their current job which is a huge risk. We can’t ask job seekers to take on that risk. Ms. Eddinger agreed that training is a huge risk and it can take two years to so see the outcomes we’re looking for. At Bunker Hill, the students taking non-credit courses increased, and the students taking credit courses decreased. And, with the vaccine mandate, it is taking people longer to enroll in class. She appreciates $15 million of ARPA funding to all community colleges, but more resources are needed to address the need. Mr. Cruise suggested that they bring in employers to help determine how the money could best be used. Ms. Eddinger agreed that a strategic approach is needed, but $15 million is not enough to address the need. Let’s look at the funding sources, and braid funding from different sources. Also, a focus on building infrastructure that connects employers to the discussion. Jim Cassetta added that he is in a unique situation working with people with disabilities. It is a challenge to support them. They have over 70 openings at WORK, Inc., and the biggest barrier is the wages. We have a wage crisis. Ms. Pokaski mentioned that they are trying to get people to not just any job, but good jobs. There is a real opportunity to have people come back to the workforce in a better situation.

**Modernization Committee Update**

Rainer Gawlick updated the Board on the Workforce System Modernization Committee and their involvement with the Employment Modernization and Transformation (EMT) Project which will procure and deploy an updated unemployment and re-employment system. He shared the overall goals of the EMT to seamlessly integrate the UI and re-employment systems. The project management team is gathering feedback from employer and job seeker customers to help shape the vision of the modernized system. Mr. Gawlick reviewed key insights from market research from job seekers and employers.

Joanne Pokaski mentioned that she uses the career center in two different ways: (1) to push out information to get folks involved with their company and its initiatives, (2) recruit job seekers who are a good fit for the company and help them navigate the organization. The new system would benefit from helping career centers get to know and build relationships with employers; what about a company profile in the system? Pam Eddinger asked about how the market research breaks down by race and ethnicity. She also suggested that perhaps there could be information about paths into levels of a career. Right now, there are challenges with early childhood education workers, and folks don’t see a future in culinary or hospitality because of low wages. But if they were aware of the paths from these jobs into careers, there may be more interest in these high-demand fields. Maria Ferreira-Bedard mentioned that younger job seekers do not want to use career centers. Ms. Pokaski suggested a system that is like Tinder for job opportunities. Secretary Acosta added that they have been trying to be more attractive to younger workers; for millennials, speed is of the essence, they want to access things on their phone.

**Open Meeting**

Joanne Pokaski adjourned the meeting at 11:29 a.m.