

**MassHire State Workforce Board Meeting**

Thursday, March 18, 2021

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

Virtual Meeting (via WebEx)

**Meeting Minutes**

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

*Rosalin Acosta, Zamawa Arenas, Joanne Berwald, Anne Broholm, James Cassetta, Sherry Dong, Pam Eddinger, Pamela Everhart, Jessyca Feliciano, Ann-Margaret Ferrante, Maria Ferreira-Bedard, Rainer Gawlick, Axel Grippo, Robert LePage, Eric Lesser, Juliette Mayers, Catherine Mick, Radhames Nova, Warren Pepicelli, Joanne Pokaski, Elizabeth Skidmore, Juan Vega, Janice Weekes, Maicharia Weir Lytle*

***Members Absent:***

*Jesse Brown, John Mann, Jennifer Morales, Sherri Pitcher, Marylou Sudders, Beth Williams, Ray Wrobel*

***Guests and Staff***

*Christine Abrams, Michael Baldino, Jenna Borkoski, Marilyn Boyle, Inez Canada, Maydad Cohen, Cynthia Gaines, Beth Goguen, Jennifer Hansen,Toody Healy, Jason Hunter, Jennifer James, Amy Kershaw, Kim Leonard, Kathie Mainzer, Liz May, Kristen McKenna, Patrick Mitchell, Joan Philips, Moselye Pierre-Bastien, Abadur Rahman, Laura Rivera, Sacha Stadhard, Alice Sweeney*

**Welcome, Introductions & Meeting Minutes**

Joanne Pokaski called the meeting to order then reviewed the meeting agenda. Ms. Pokaski called for a motion to approve the meeting minutes for the December 3, 2020 meeting minutes. Warren Pepicelli made the motion to approve the minutes, James Cassetta seconded the motion, and the motion was passed unanimously through voice and chat vote.

**Workforce Development Update**

Secretary Acosta provided an update on the Massachusetts Economy, the Governor Baker’s FY22 budget and the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development’s key workforce development initiatives *(see attached presentation.)*

Anne Broholm noted that her company, AHEAD, LLC has been impacted by the pool of UI claimants that are making more money on unemployment than working. Her company has jobs that are open that people don’t want to fill. She added that training is great, but some folks don’t want to be trained. How do we combat this issue? Secretary Acosta responded that the pandemic has impacted low wage workers in many industries, including leisure, hospitality, food and transportation. Of the pool of low wage workers in Massachusetts 47% have a high school degree or less who are making more on unemployment than if they were working. This will be a challenge for employers until September 6 when the American Rescue Plan runs out. Perhaps if employers provide incentives for workers to come back, that could help to address the hiring challenge. Secretary Acosta noted that some workers are taking the time on unemployment to train and upskill, too.

Rainer Gawlick asked what salary is needed to exceed current UI benefits. Secretary Acosta responded that about $20/hour in when a worker is making more than UI, noting that Massachusetts has the highest, most generous UI benefits in the nation. The average UI benefit is $500/week, plus an additional $300/week.

Joanne Berwald added that she has to hire 800 entry-level positions. They will probably not be able to catch up on this hiring until fall. She noted that her company, MESTEK, brings money and business into Massachusetts, but they may not be able to keep that business if they don’t have the workers.

Jim Cassetta added that the human service sectors employs 180,000 people through state contracts. His organization, WORK, Inc, has been conducting outreach to laid off hospitality workers to encourage them to work on these state contracts, but this pay was not higher than what they’re earning on UI. They had to raise the rate to $17/hour for a particular region that was challenged with hiring (versus $14/hour for other regions). At this rate there is more interest in these jobs from workers, but they still have a labor shortage. They would consider raising the base salaries, but WORK, Inc. Is subject to the rates in the state contract. They are struggling to find people who want to work.

Pam Everhart mentioned that Fidelity Investments has hired 10,000 employees since last March, and many are in client-facing roles, albeit over the phone; these are not sites in Massachusetts because they don’t have a big call center in the state. They are not looking for people with bachelors degrees, rather, people with customer service experience. Their starting pay rate is $22 – 23/hour, and includes benefits like a 401k with a match, profit sharing, up to $10,000 to pay down student loans, up to 80% tuition reimbursement for advanced degrees.

Secretary Acosta noted that in career counseling sessions with job seekers they are trying to convey that the enhanced UI benefits will end and the longer they wait, they miss out on job opportunities. The pool of unemployed includes 50% women and long-term unemployed but does not include people who have dropped out of the labor force because of childcare, home-based learning, etc. What’s keeping people from work is a combination of factors from money, vaccinations, and UI benefits. EOLWD is doing direct outreach to claimants to get people excited about learning something new, and starting a new career. Hiring challenges are similar to when Massachusetts had 2.8% unemployment, but there are different barriers to address.

**Mass Internet Connect Briefing**

Michael Baldino of the Masschusetts Broadband Institute and Beth Goguen of the MassHire Department of Career Services presented an overview of the Commonwealth’s [Mass Internet Connect](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/how-mass-internet-connect-works) program. Mass Internet Connect gives unemployed individuals looking for work access to free or subsidized broadband internet and/or computing devices. Interested individuals are referred to a local MassHire Career Center where they will be referred to the appropriate provider for the needed resource; the Massachusetts Broadband Institute provides the subsidy for the internet or computing device (*see attached presentation.*)

Joanne Pokaski asked how many are getting the service of the people referred through MassHire? Beth Goguen responded that some people have internet bills in arrears and are therefore not eligible for the service; this contributes to the difference between referrals and services received. Rainer Gawlick suggested that we find a way to get around prohibiting people who were already subscribers. Michael Baldino agreed that this is a major issue, and providers are working with customers. There has been a program launched to help current internet subscribers who have trouble paying. And there will be a federal program to provide support for existing subscribers, and this will be up and running in April. In the coming weeks, there will be an evaluation on how the Mass Internet Connect program will exist in parallel with the new federal program.

Mr. Gawlick asked whether we have looked into other models for digital inclusion like Tech Goes Home. Mr. Baldino responded that Mass Internet Connect has partnerships with Verizon and ATT to provide hotspots free of charge if the traditional broadband is not available. Also, Comcast is not really disqualifying people based on prior balance.

Ms. Pokaski remarked that she is surprised to see that the number of referrals is so low. Are there any theories as to what is causing the lack of uptake?

Pam Eddinger responded that the slow uptake in Boston may be due to other efforts that are underway. For example, Massbay Community College has given away close to 800 Chrome books. Boston public schools are also giving away devices. Ms. Goguen added that other programs that share clientele with MassHire also had other chrome books give away, such as the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission and the Department of Transitional Assistance.

Mr. Baldino mentioned that so many people in the Commonwealth are doing this work. Tech Goes Home is an organization that the Mass Broadband Institute works closely with, and they are looking to take their model and amplify that. Mr. Gawlick stated that the strength of Tech Goes Home is that it assumes the customer knows nothing and provides training. Mr. Baldino stated that he recognizes that very point. To help with training, for Mass Internet connect, they created a document that was inserted to each chromebook that provides instruction on what someone would need to do to get up and running. They are also parsing Tech Goes Home resource library and sending the resource to folks who need additional information.

Ms. Pokaski recommended that Board members let people know about Mass Internet Connect, and then asked if there was a chance to extend the program after June 30th. Mr. Baldino said they were looking to extend the program until the end of the calendar year, and they are also learning more about federal resources.

**Commonwealth Corporation Update and Discussion**

Christine Abrams, President & CEO of Commonwealth Corporation (CommCorp), presented on the organization’s latest work *(see attached presentation.)* Ms. Abrams discussed CommCorp’s objective to increase awareness and utilization of funds for Minority Business Entprises (MBE’s) through strategic partnerships to reevaluate market investments, and engage in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)-focused marketing and partnerships. In the long term, they are pursuing an equity scorecard to evaluate work and progress. Ms. Abrams reviewed CommCorp’s 2021 investments and impact including the Workforce Training Fund Program, Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund, Youth Works, the Career Technical Initiative, Rapid Reemployment, and Safe and Successful Youth Initiatives and Re-entry. She also updated the Board on the Competency Based Education Program of the Digital Innovation and Lifelong Learning work.

Joanne Pokaski commented that she liked the idea of rethinking the model, rethinking marketing, and thinking of who the end users are.

**Board Committees Update: Workforce System Modernization Committee**

Rainer Gawlick provided an update on the Board’s Workforce System Modernization Committee. The Committee has been focused on assisting in the vision development phase of the project by engaging stakeholder groups to identify key needs of a modernized workforce system.

Secretary Acosta noted the importance of this modernization project and that is more than just technology. Massachusetts is one of the of the only state that view the customer journey along a continuum of unemployment to re-employment. Most states of UI systems and re-employment systems that are completely separate so many are interested in what Massachusetts is doing right now. They may not get it right the first day, but they are trying to incorporate all feedback, which is a process what will continue throughout the project.

Ms. Pokaski asked if there is a date and timeframe for completion. Mr. Gawlick responded that they would like to move quickly, and are drafting RFRs. The hope is to have a vendor by the end of the year.

Ms. Pokaski adjourned the meeting at 11:31 a.m.

***Attachments:***

* SecretaryAcosta EOLWD Update 2021.03.18
* Mass Internet Connect Presentation 2021.03.18
* Modernization Committee Update 2021.03.18
* Modernization Committee Update 2021.03.18