



**Central Western Maine Workforce Development Board**  
**Quarterly Workforce Board Meeting**  
**January 25, 2024**

**Board Members Present:** Cathy Witherspoon, Chair; Razell Ward, Secretary; Laurie Glidden, At-Large Member/Youth Chair; Sue LeClair; Josh Henry; Jim Trundy; Trampus Hutches; Kendra Wheeler; Adam Wilson; Charlie Woodworth; Brandi Farrington; Sam Hight

**Board Members Absent:** Chris Winstead, Treasurer & Chair of Resources; Kate Durkin; Bruce Tisdale; Diane Frigon; Grant Provost, Chair of Recruitment; Monique Roy

**Staff Present:** Erin Benson, Executive Director; Carrie Parker, Administrative Assistant

**Others Present:** Sara McLaughlin, Contracted Financial Manager; Tom Fernands, EMDC; Patti Saarinen, EMDC; Joe Pietroski, Kennebec County Commissioner; Karyssa Murchinson, EMDC; Loretta Alley, EMDC-Quest; Elizabeth Bordowitz, MERIT; Samantha Dina, MDOL; Kaylin Kerina, Maine Career Exploration

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**1. Welcome and Introductions:**

Cathy Witherspoon called the meeting to order at 8:34am.

**VOTED:** To approve the October 26, 2023, meeting minutes as written.

**Motion:** Razell Ward    **Second:** Laurie Glidden    **Vote:** All in Favor

All those present introduced themselves, starting with the two new board members Charlie and Sam. Charlie and Sam both gave a brief introduction of who they are and what their interest is regarding workforce services and how they are currently involved in various boards and committees around that.

A small break was taken in introductions so that Beth could present her presentation on MeritSaves as she was on a time crunch and had to leave the meeting for travel needs. Once her presentation was complete the introductions of all present continued, and presenters were introduced at the start of their presentations.

Erin explained that Joy Gould would not be presenting today as she was under the weather and would reschedule for a later date with the Board.

**2. MeritSaves: Act to Promote Individual Retirement Savings--- Elizabeth Bordowitz:**

Beth Bordowitz, Executive Director for MERIT, presented a slide presentation that explains the MERITSAVES program and details on how this savings plan works for individuals looking to start a retirement savings account despite their full-time or part-time status with employers.

Beth explained that many employers in Maine lack access to a retirement savings plan at their workplace. This leaves approximately 41% of employers without retirement savings plans for their employees statewide.

MERIT is a retirement savings plan that requires any employer who has been in business for 2 years or longer with a minimum of 5 employees, despite their working status of full or part-time, to register and offer retirement plans in Maine. The plans are catered for employers with as little as five employees who are 18 yrs old and who hold a social security number or have worked on a seasonal employment for 120 days. Employers that offer qualified plans that range from 401(k), 403(b) and 403(a), 408(k), government deferred compensation plans, IRAs, and traditional pension plans are exempt from having to enroll in MERIT.

Some of the primary features of MERIT that were discussed were:

- automatic enrollment for employees, although participation is voluntary and employees can opt out at any time,
- accounts are professionally managed and advised by financial services and are completely private
- plans are simple for both employers and employees

Employers can facilitate the program at no cost to them, with fast and easy enrollment and the program will work with their payroll processes and can be managed in coordination with payroll processors. Once employers have set up the program, employees will be automatically enrolled in a ROTH IRA with 5% of their wages being withdrawn from each paycheck, increasing by 1% annually to a maximum of 10% withdrawal. However, employees can opt out of the plans, change the percentage being contributed or choose their individual investment options once enrolled.

MERIT provides employees a 30-day window to either keep their standard choices, customize their account, or simply opt out completely. Once a plan for enrollment is in place, employees receive an email or letter from the program with an access code so that they can begin accessing their accounts from any mobile site. Beth shared the program introduction email sent on January 17th as an example of what employees can expect from the program. She also shared an image of the log in process of the MERITSAVES.COM portal as well and what some of the portal stages like adding employees would look like for reference.

Beth went over a few commonly asked questions. Part-time and temporary employees count toward the 5+ that necessitates the enrollment of an employer. Seasonal employees who work for 120 days within the year can also be registered. Any employee who opts out can opt back in at any time, as there are not certain enrollment times within the year. A few key dates that she also went over were the initial email or letter to Maine employers regarding MERIT that were sent out on January 17<sup>th</sup>, the employers with 15+ employees needing to enroll by April 30, 2024, and employers with 5+ employees will need to enroll by June 30, 2024, per the requirements.

Beth ended her presentation with her contact information for anyone who would like to reach out to her directly, as well as the MERITSAVES website and MAINESAVES links for detailed information from the sites themselves. Her slideshow presentation will be included in the materials being sent after the meeting.

[Elizabeth.Bordowitz@MaineSaves.org](mailto:Elizabeth.Bordowitz@MaineSaves.org)

207.888.4706

MERITSAVES.com

MERITSAVES.org

### **3. Service Provider Report---EMDC:**

Patti Saarinen gave the report on behalf of EMDC. The workforce department's biggest challenge has been low enrollments, especially true for both adults and youth. However, dislocated workers numbers have remained on track. To address this issue EMDC has held in-person meetings with local FedCAP offices, which has initiated some referrals. EMDC also presented to the Bureau of Employment Services and the Rapid Response Teams in the CWM region, as both agencies have seen many new staff. These meetings ensured that inexperienced staff members understood the WIOA programs and the referral process. EMDC has had communications with all the community-based organizations that were contracted through the RFAs, and they are beginning to see referrals coming in from those organizations.

Patti said numbers are down, so spending is also down, but they continue to watch budgeting. At the same time, with extra money to spend they are doing a much better job braiding funding with partnership programs like FedCAP, CSSP (Competitive Skills Scholarship Program), and others. Working together with these other organizations will continue to be beneficial in the future, so EMDC will continue to partner on projects moving forward.

10 participants have been enrolled in apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs within the last quarter. Working with various agencies allows for continued growth within these programs. Various projects have 24 people enrolled currently. Four projects have been completed including the first round of a healthcare cohort with 21 students. EMDC has six upcoming projects as well that will see enrollment shortly.

The success rate for training completion is 67% s. For individuals who did not complete their training, EMDC is working on other avenues that may be better suited to them. Quest had thirteen new enrollments last quarter and a lot of those participants are also engaged in EMDC's other employee-driven projects. EMDC also had nine work experience sites last quarter.

Tom Fernands, EMDC's data analyst, shared information about EMDC's texting campaign that began last week. In early fall, EMDC started doing follow-up contacts and purchased software called DialMyCalls that provides bulk texting outreach. Text messages were sent to follow-up customers to increase customer response. WIOA requires participant follow-up contact for one year after completion. They are using the tool for recruitment purposes, too, with a pilot project in Oxford County. EMDC uses contact numbers from the Maine Job Link for those listed as self-service job seekers. During this pilot, 414 text messages were sent, followed up with 892 messages this week in Kennebec County. If anyone replies STOP to the text, they will not be contacted again, and the program will automatically update the contact lists. The biggest hurdle

so far is the limit of 153 characters on the text messages being sent. That is creating a learning curve to effectively relay information within those limitations.

Laurie asked about the content of the the text messages. Tom stated that the message asks if the person needs help with job searches and employment goals to contact EMDC. Erin found the text for adults and youth and read them to the board.

Tom also mentioned that Maine is moving forward with the virtual American Job Center. There is a contract in place, and MDOL has started holding focus groups working to expand the reach of the career center system. More information around this program will come as they continue to work with it.

#### **4. Finance Update:PY2023 budget---Sara McLaughlin:**

Sara presented the financial reports that will be sent to everyone as part of the materials distributed along with the minutes for spending and budgeting through December 31, 2023.

Sara began with an overview of both programmatic and administrative spending by contract. The Opioid contract has ended as of December 31, 2023, and we were able to spend out all that funding. The WIOA contracts include the PY22 formula funding, which needs to be spent by June 2024, and PY23 formula funding which needs to be spent by June 2025. The PY22 funding must be spent before any of the PY23 funding can be spent out. Erin and Sara continue to watch this spending. 86% of the PY22 administrative funds have been spent, which is a good place..

The discretionary contracts that are open include Quest, Career and ARPA. Sara said that now that the Opioid contract has been spent out, and there was a large push to enroll participants in that grant program, she expects spending in the rest of the contracts will increase. Career and Quest both are set to expire September 2024, and ARPA will expire in December 2024.

Sara moved from this into detailed explanations of the administrative budget, looking at the financials for the fiscal year so far for the local board only and not the service provider. Sara said we are at the half-way point in the year as the fiscal year goes from July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024. She reviewed her tracking of what has been spent, what will need to be reserved for future fiscal years and what is available to us to fund the current year.

The budget created during the meeting last spring and approved by the board in June was \$448,790, which is a little more than the normal budget because both Quest and ARPA had significant subcontract expenses in them. She mentioned that the \$189,000 within the budget is the extra funding that is not normally in the budget and provided the extra funding for spending that she previously mentioned. At the end of December our spending was \$121,260, which is 27% of the budget and we should be at about 50%. The one thing to note is that the bulk of the contractual expense is for Quest and ARPA which does not end until September and December 2024. Therefore, if the funding is not all spent by June 30<sup>th</sup>, we don't lose the money, we can carry it into July.

Sara reviewed the individual line items and stated that all looks fine with salary and fringe benefits. We are ahead of the budget for travel and supplies because we front the expenses, and they occurred in the beginning of the year. Spending is not anticipated to continue at that rate. Some things listed that haven't happened yet include outreach marketing and advertising, as well as the fiscal audit.

#### **5. USDOL Monitoring:**

Cathy gave an overview of the USDOL monitoring at the end of December and included staff and board members and participant interview and service provider review.

Erin said monitoring is always an opportunity for improvement, and she felt it went very well with only a few concerns noted. The USDOL team had concerns with the language in the CBO contracts, which seemed to imply that the board was paying for referrals. However, the contracts were reviewed by MDOL. Kim Moore, Ginny, and Erin have discussed this concern. If USDOL considers this a disallowable cost, MDOL will cover the expense.

The other concern was a regular competitive bid process for the Youth contract, as there is no expiration listed in the contract. The WIOA law does not say that we must send this out to bid again as we did an RFP in 2020. The law does not say we need to include an end date.

The last concern brought up was around financials and the checks and balances of the organization. Sara explained how financials work given the size of our organization and the lack of funding versus larger organizations. The funding we receive plays a role in how many staff are on the payroll versus the need for contracting services like Sara.

The next steps will be for the USDOL team to schedule a final review with MDOL. Then the team has 30 days to send a formal report, after it is reviewed internally. Any concerns will be addressed in that official report. Once the report is sent to MDOL, MDOL has 90 days to respond and make necessary corrections.

Brandi wanted to know if the concern is about not being single-point dependent and not having redundancy built in or if there was more to the concerns. Sara said she is unsure and awaiting an explanation in the report may be the only clarifier. Sara and Erin feel the monitoring team is used to larger organizations with more staffing, and do not feel anything formal will come of it.

Laurie stated that being a part of the monitoring and the other processes that Erin includes board members on is always helpful in gaining understanding about workforce services and how the boards play a part in what is happening and how they can contribute to upcoming events.

#### **6. Youth Committee:**

Laurie gave a brief update on the Youth Committee and their recent meeting on January 11th. The meeting was an initial meet and greet and gave a chance for everyone to review the vision for the committee moving forward.

Fit First technologies were present at the committee meeting and gave an overview presentation of how they focus on best practices for reaching youth within workforce services in

their areas. Part of the presentation detailed how they use an assessment tool for placement of youth in areas best suited for their individual success.

The committee produced a tentative youth marketing campaign, assessment, and the potential for a virtual reality platform for job seekers. Laurie reached out to Matthew Wyman, the statewide youth action board specialist. This board is comprised of youth who are dedicated to reaching out to other youth within workforce service systems and other assistance programs to set up a meeting with them to discuss best ways to engage youth and to get assistance and partnerships with them for future endeavors.

Erin mentioned that a key to the committee's success will be continuous outreach and networking. As an example, she mentioned Emma Schwartz from the Cutler Institute and their program working with youth in the foster care system. Any youth who has spent as little as one day in foster care is eligible for WIOA, and yet we have received few, if any, referrals. Erin is working on having Emma join us during a youth committee meeting to begin making that partnership happen.

The committee agreed during the meeting that it would be beneficial to hold monthly meetings at this time and then work toward quarterly meetings once the committee is fully functioning in their vision. A survey has gone out regarding scheduling the next meeting, and Laurie is still awaiting responses currently.

#### **7. Employer Summit---Samantha Dina:**

Samantha Dina from MDOL and Kay Kerina from the Department of Economic Development were present to discuss the upcoming Maine Employer Summit.

This will be the second annual summit and the goal is to bring together employers and workforce partners to learn about what programs are out there, which are effective, and what areas need to be improved. Businesses need to learn what benefits are out there, and how they can take advantage of them by collaborating with workforce programs directly. This summit is also an opportunity to connect people from various communities with both employers and programs that they would not think of working with, or even know that exist to utilize those resources. This gives an opportunity for young adults, older workers, new Mainers, people with disabilities, people coming out of the corrections system and those in recovery a chance to learn about programs and business opportunities.

This year the summit is focusing on youth and will have some innovative pieces embedded into as many sessions as possible. There will be approximately 100 young people invited to participate and interact with potential employers. The goal is to help youth build relationships and an understanding of how to use the resources that are out there and present themselves to businesses.

Samantha and Kay opened conversation to everyone for pitching any ideas for session topics at the summit. Kendra stated that insight into benefits is beneficial and often not something that

youth focus on when looking into employment opportunities. A few topics that are being considered were presented to the group for thought and feedback. These topics included supporting mental health in the workplace, recovery friendly workplaces, attracting and hiring young adults, what does a “high quality” job mean, and a discussion on how workforce programs and employers can work together on limiting barriers like childcare, transportation etc. Patti stated that EMDC does a lot of work around both recovery and employment and cultural sensitivity with new Mainers and these would be beneficial topics to consider. Erin asked if there was any thought on doing sessions around retention as this is a topic is a growing concern among employers with whom she has spoken. Brandi agreed that she sees this as a growing problem as well. Patti said that EMDC often tells employers they need to “sell themselves” as much as the potential employee to garner interest. Trampus stated that after having a large turnover recently they changed their onboarding process to a mostly hybrid online program that yielded enormous success in getting people to complete the onboarding process, but also in improving the turnover they were seeing. Samantha stated that these types of ideas are what they are looking for to ensure that the event brings all the necessary information needed to be hugely beneficial for employers and job seekers. Razell mentioned that Lewiston/Auburn Adult Education continues to work on defining the components of good workforce behavior, such as being on time, appropriate dress, etc. especially around new workers, and those from other countries where the workday and customs may be vastly different.

The event this year is geared toward youth and will be in Bangor at the Cross Center on May 14, 2024. Samantha provided her contact information and the event link for anyone interested in attending, as registration is not open now.

[Samantha.Dina@maine.gov](mailto:Samantha.Dina@maine.gov)

[maineemployersummit.com](http://maineemployersummit.com)

#### **8. Maine Career Exploration---Kay Kerina:**

Kay said she wanted help with how best to plan small regional convening conversations to help prepare for the summit. She gave an overview of Maine Career Exploration and their contract work with JMG, MDOE and the Children’s Cabinet with Governor Office of Innovation Policy. These contracts provide multiple entry points for young people to have paid work experience and meaningful work.

Her goal is to take the feedback she has received from employers who say that they do not know how to connect with these resources and start having small regional conversations with both employers and resource partners. This allows for connections to be in place prior to the summit, making it easier for employers to recognize partnering programs in their area and connect for resources. She would like to have three regional conversations in the coastal area, central western area, and northern Maine around what would be helpful for connecting employers and bringing the ELO coordinators to you. This could be through young people talking about their experiences, looking at your network and seeing what would be helpful and if anyone would be willing to participate in this type of conversation on occasion.

Erin asked what needs to happen to get businesses to come to the table? If there are enough interested youth, could business provide tours, facilitate discussions, etc. Josh mentioned that Timber HP already participates in high school programs and other discussions and would find adding additional items would be difficult. Sam stated that they have worked on projects like this with community partners in the past and would be willing to participate in them again if something was presented to them. He feels that ensuring there is little to no overlap would be more beneficial than having businesses compete for repetitive conversations.

Cathy said that Boyne has been touching on all these areas and has personally seen the difference that it makes in employment and retention and feels that focusing on these areas and fine tuning them will bring improvements to the employment issues faced in all communities.

Kay feels that she can take these ideas and build upon them to give time during the summit for conversation around a more focused career exploration opportunity and less of a focus on the small regional conversations. She feels that the goal can be to ensure both employers and job seekers can all leave with a better understanding of resources available to them and for the young people to gain a better understanding of where they are heading in a future career or training and the pathways needed to get there.

#### **9. Executive Director's Report:**

Due to time constraints Erin gave a brief overview and sent everyone her complete report for review. She did share an update on the \$500,000 grant through ARPA funding. \$200,000 was awarded for the funding of community-based organizations and a marketing campaign. CBOs were already selected for outreach in each of the five counties, outreach that will hopefully bring 225 referrals to yield 75 participants for EMDC services.

Erin is writing the RFP for a youth-focused marketing campaign that will use the remaining funds. Central Western Maine has the highest percentage of disconnected youth between 16-19 years old who have either dropped out of high school or are no longer in school and are not in the workforce. The campaign will include focus groups that will talk directly with young people to discuss appropriate communication strategies, and effective workforce engagement. The goal is to get perspective from the people we are trying to recruit on what we need to do to draw their interest and get them more involved with our mission.

She wrote an additional proposal for the remaining \$300,000 that would partner with the referrals from the youth marketing campaign and CBO referrals. For youth, funds would hire Fit First, a company that developed an aptitude assessment tool which was recently presented and discussed at the recent youth committee meeting. The tool is based on occupations in O-Net and the behavioral characteristics of people who are successfully employed in those occupations. The assessment identifies the best suited candidates for a particular occupation for long-term retention. The assessment takes about 15 minutes and provides people with suggestions of occupations that would be best suited for their behavioral characteristics, which may include areas they never would have considered on their own. The assessment would be followed up with a virtual reality platform that offers a series of career exploration videos. This



is a hands-on opportunity to expose youth to careers for which the assessment says they are well suited but they have never seen or heard of. Many companies are beginning to offer virtual reality platforms for training purposes; however, they are also starting to use them for career exploration. If youth showed an interest in an area, they could be set up with a work experience or referred to training opportunities such as apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, short-term or long-term training through adult eds, training providers, and institutions of higher ed.

Cathy mentioned that Fit First is like using a predictive index and feels it would be a great tool for success. Erin said one benefit is that the tool can be used on an unlimited number of participants with a year's subscription and wants to get as much use of this as possible.

Erin also mentioned her work around problematic transportation in Maine. There will be funding set aside in the proposal to work with GoMaine's commuter program and KVCAP to partner and provide transportation in the Farmington area that is currently lacking and work on reducing that barrier. She is providing more information on that as it comes and within her full report for those interested in more detailed information.

Sam asked about working with KVCAP on helping around childcare, and Erin mentioned that this is another interest avenue. She has reached out to KVCAP about discussing using their vans for workforce services and continues to work on using already established resources like this to help with barriers to employment. Sam wanted to know from Kendra if any of the bank's work with KVCAP and other community action programs to assist with providing transportation from vehicles that have been repossessed. She had not heard of this concept but was very intrigued by this type of partnering program.

Erin finished by mentioning two opportunities for anyone interested in working with Junior Achievement who is having a workforce session at Cony High School and Middle School and is looking for businesspeople to participate. The sessions are providing a curriculum to students around workforce development. There is also a high schooler who is looking for businesses that can take people on field trips to explore occupations within various businesses. If you are interested in either of these, reach out to Erin.

#### **10. Adjourn Meeting:**

**VOTED:** To adjourn the meeting at 10:27am.

**Motion:** Razell Ward      **Second:** Laurie Glidden      **Vote:** All in Favor

**Next Board Meeting Date:** Thursday April 26, 2024, 8:30am-10:30am

#### **ED Outreach since last Board Meeting**

10/26/2023 Met with Peter Osbourne from the Maine Municipal Association to discuss ways to get more youth interested in working for city/town government.

10/30/2023 Met with Heather Kerner, owner/founder of The Good Crust, a company in Canaan (Somerset County). They make frozen pizza dough from organic Maine grains. She employs several

people with disabilities. I wanted to learn more about her strategy and how we might partner with her. Also met with Chris Waite, an owner of a small broadband company, and Susan Corbett, director of the National Digital Equity Center, to discuss short-term training for potential employees.

10/31/2023 Brought together Timber HP, Cianbro, Sappi, Huhtamaki, and MCCA for a discussion of E&I electrical training. EMCC instructor has a training over holiday break that Sappi will participate in and potentially Huhtamaki.

11/5-9/2023 Attended the Youth Symposium sponsored by the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals. The board also supported the attendance of Lisa Hartnett, EMDC's most experienced youth counselor in the CWM region. Also in attendance, Galan Williamson (ED for the NWDB), Susan Cerini from EMCC, Karyssa Murchison (EMDC's director of Youth Services), Brianna (EMDC youth advisor), and Hannah Greene from Educate Maine. Went to several sessions and networked with other board directors, service providers, and vendors.

11/16/2023 Attended KVCOG's CEDS committee meeting and heard from some Maine Connectivity Authority members about broadband issues. Met with two Transf staff members. Transf is a vendor I met at the Youth Symposium that has created a career exploration program using Virtual Reality. VR is part of the plan in engaging youth in the region.

11/17/2023 Met with Megan Dichter from Maine Adult Education to go over MOU and IFA information and the connection between the board and adult ed.

11/21/2023 Met again with Chris Waite to continue the conversation about a short-term training for broadband work. Also met with Todd Cummings to go over costs associated with the CWMWDB's comprehensive One Stop, which is the Lewiston Career Center. These costs are critical to structuring an updated IFA.

11/27/2023 Joined the workforce committee of Transforming Maine's Future Forest Workforce: Seamless Pathways. Attended my first quarterly meeting.

11/28/2023 Attended a training by MDOL on Effective Communication & Reasonable Modifications in the Career Centers.

11/29-12/1/2023 Attended a three-day Virtual Cross Regional Youth Round Table sponsored by ETA. There were presentations from around the country.

12/4/2023 Attended the opening session of USDOL monitoring in Augusta with the District 1 director, Greg Weltz.

12/5/2023 Attended an Apprenticeship Community of Practice meeting with the Maine Apprenticeship Program and its 14 grantees to further discuss how we can work together.

12/7/2023 Attended the presentation of EMDC's Community Partner Award to Lewiston Adult Education.

12/8/2023 Attended the Educate Maine Symposium.

12/11-15/2023 USDOL Monitoring.

12/18/2023 Met with Heather Kerner of The Good Crust and Heather Stott of Goodwill Northern New England to discuss partnering with VR to help Heather's work at The Good Crust.

12/20/2023 Attended a meeting to learn about the Business Protocol strategy that is being developed and implemented through the MDOL and how it can interface with WIOA 1B.

12/28/2023 Met with the County Commissioners to discuss their role, the monitoring outcome, and a financial update from Sara.

1/2/2024 Attended a transportation barrier brainstorming session with Merrymeeting Food Council's Farm Skills Job Training Program with VR and other members of the community.

1/3/2024 Attended a presentation by Joan Dolan, director of the Maine Apprenticeship Program, on how apprenticeship has grown in Maine and how MAP and WIOA can better work together.

1/4/2023 Gave a keynote presentation to the Maine Educational Opportunity Association.

1/10/2023 Met with Melissa Ames, the person taking over the Family Self Sufficiency Program since Laurie Glidden's retirement. Send her information about WIOA and how it could help support some of her participants.

1/11/2023 Met with Sam Hight to request that he join the board.

1/16/2024 Participated in a focus group with Portland Webworks to discuss the Virtual Job Center and their work to design and implement this web site.

1/17/2024 Met with Somerset Career & Technical Center, Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG), Career Center staff and EMDC staff to discuss the braiding of funding for youth in Somerset County.

1/18/2024 Continued the short-term broadband training with Chris Waite who is now with the Maine Connectivity Authority and wants to introduce me to their economic development person.

1/19/2024 Met with a staff member of A4TD, program for senior employment, about ways to get the word out about the program.

1/22/2024 Attended an award ceremony for The Center for Entrepreneurial Studies in Farmington, where EMDC supports several youths.