

Social Equity Program (SEP) Advisory Meeting

Meeting Minutes

Date: March 4, 2026

Time: Approximately 1 hour

Meeting Type: Virtual Advisory Committee Meeting

Attendees

- **Dr. Brien Walton** – Meeting Chair
- **Dillon Murray** – Maine Department of Labor
- **Darmita Wilson**
- **Biguita Hernandez-Smith**
- **Calvin**
- **Maureen Terry** – Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD)
- **Susan Omega**
- **Eric Weidman** – Maine DECD

Absent:

- Angela (unable to attend)
 - Rachel (unable to attend)
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1. Opening and Introductions

Dr. Brien Walton opened the meeting and welcomed participants. Attendees briefly greeted each other as participants joined the virtual session. Dr. Walton confirmed who was present and noted that Angela would not be able to attend.

2. Program Application Review and Accessibility

A significant portion of the meeting focused on reviewing the **SEP application form** and discussing ways to improve applicant accessibility and comfort.

Key Discussion Points

Balancing Information Needs with Sensitivity

Participants discussed the importance of collecting relevant eligibility information while ensuring that applicants—many of whom may have experienced poverty or other hardships—are not required to overshare sensitive personal experiences.

Susan Omega emphasized that:

- Applicants from vulnerable backgrounds may feel **exposed or retraumatized** when asked to recount personal hardships.
- The application process should allow individuals to **share experiences without feeling pressured to disclose deeply personal details**.
- Maintaining **dignity and professionalism** for applicants should be a guiding principle.

Dr. Walton acknowledged this concern and agreed that the **wording and structure of application questions** should reflect sensitivity.

Recommendation: Structured + Optional Narrative Responses

Committee members discussed a solution that balances data collection and applicant comfort:

- Use **structured questions (yes/no)** for eligibility indicators.
- Provide **optional narrative text boxes** for applicants who wish to share additional context.

Example discussed:

- A yes/no question asking whether the applicant has experience related to certain challenges (such as incarceration).
- If the applicant answers “yes,” a **voluntary explanation field** appears.

Benefits of this approach include:

- Reducing intrusive questioning
- Allowing applicants to control the depth of their disclosure
- Simplifying data analysis while still allowing narrative context
- Respecting applicant privacy

Maureen Terry also suggested adjusting wording in the **eligibility statement** to clarify that applicants may respond **either narratively or through structured responses**, depending on their preference.

3. Technical Issues with Application Access

During the meeting, Darmita Wilson reported difficulty accessing the application form.

Issue Observed

- The application page displayed a loading loop and would not fully open.
- The issue occurred on **multiple devices**, suggesting a possible link or platform error.

Observations

- The URL appeared longer than expected.
- Another participant indicated their link ended with “/formresponse”, which Darmita’s link did not show.

Action

Dr. Walton agreed to:

- Investigate the link issue
 - Follow up directly with Darmita to ensure access is restored.
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4. Program Timeline and Evaluation Period

Dr. Walton reviewed the expected timeline for the SEP funding cycle.

Key Dates

- **March 15, 2026** – Applications open
- **May 1–May 30, 2026** – Evaluation period for submitted applications

The advisory committee will review applications during the evaluation period and discuss:

- Program effectiveness
- Applicant trends
- Possible adjustments for future program iterations

Next Meeting

Tentatively scheduled for **mid-May**, during the evaluation window.

Purpose of the next meeting:

- Review early applicant responses
- Identify program improvements
- Discuss program evolution

5. Program Launch and Outreach Strategy

Participants discussed strategies for **announcing and promoting the SEP launch**.

Launch Announcement

It was suggested that a formal launch announcement be made when applications open.

Ideas included:

- Press release
- Digital flyer for distribution
- Direct outreach to community partners

Dr. Walton confirmed that the program could **launch as scheduled on March 15**.

Video Promotion Idea

Susan Omega suggested creating a **short video announcement** (approximately 1–2 minutes).

Rationale:

- Helps potential applicants trust that the program is legitimate
- Provides visual guidance on how to apply
- Makes the program feel more accessible and human

Maureen Terry indicated she is producing similar videos for other programs and offered to share an example.

Dr. Walton agreed that a short video could be helpful.

Social Media Promotion

Eric Weidman recommended creating **LinkedIn marketing language** so committee members and DECD can help amplify the announcement.

Suggested approach:

- Share press release language
- Convert it into a short LinkedIn post

- Encourage committee members and partner organizations to share

Dr. Walton confirmed this communication material is being prepared.

6. Cross-Agency Collaboration

Dillon Murray offered to involve additional staff from the **Maine Department of Labor** who have extensive experience with grant programs.

Dr. Walton welcomed additional participation and emphasized that the program benefits from diverse perspectives during its early development.

7. Closing

Dr. Walton thanked participants for their time and contributions. The meeting concluded at approximately the one-hour mark.

Dr. Walton noted that he would **follow up via email with additional guidance and materials** as the program launch approaches.
