

Summary of Key Themes: MDOL & SWB Listening Sessions

Overview

During late September and early October, the Maine Department of Labor (MDOL) and State Workforce Board (SWB) conducted a total of seven listening sessions with more than 200 participants. These sessions were co-hosted by local area workforce boards and attended by members of the SWB Immigrant subcommittee, service providers, employers, community partners, union representatives, training & education providers, State agency partners, and others.

The goal of these sessions was to provide an overarching view of workforce-related priorities within the Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan and capture questions, ideas and suggestions from workforce partners to inform program design, planning and implementation efforts.

The following provides a high-level summary of these listening sessions. While not exhaustive, it captures themes that cut across multiple sessions. Session recordings and slides can be found here: <https://www.maine.gov/labor/mjrp/index.shtml>.

Feedback from Breakout Sessions

DOL and SWB presented an overarching workforce framework aligned with Maine Jobs and Recovery and Maine's 10-year economic plan priorities—seeking to advance the following three goals:

- Goal 1: Increase **size of Maine's talent pool** by 75,000 workers
- Goal 2: Increase **attainment of credentials of value** (from 44% to 60%) by 2025
- Goal 3: Increase **average annual wages** by 10% by 2030

Participants were asked to share input and ideas about how Maine's workforce system—with its full scope of partners—can work collaboratively, innovatively, equitably and sustainably to ensure it meets these goals and invests in transformative change. The following themes emerged across listening sessions:

1) Align existing players on shared goals & information: Many partners voiced a common sentiment that this funding provides an opportunity to break down existing siloes and ensure the entire workforce system is aligned on shared goals, with clear channels to share information on Department decision making and direction of the workforce system. Systemic challenges related to childcare, transportation, broadband access, and housing were consistently mentioned across all listening sessions as priorities that will require broad collaboration and coordination to address.

Specific suggestions included:

- Work together to solve the childcare availability challenge with regional innovative models (e.g., supporting home childcare, working with K-12 partners and employers to expand childcare supports)
- Explore options to braid funding across different partners to address systemic issues—specifically around childcare and transportation
- Pilot a kitchen table approach to problem solving where all agencies, service providers, nonprofits come together to identify resources and supports to meet identified challenges for specific individuals

- Catalog existing programs to identify gaps and areas of overlap to strengthen ability to match resources with individual needs

2) Create an easier to navigate & accessible workforce system for priority communities including BIPOC and immigrant communities, women, individuals with disabilities, justice-involved individuals, low-income Mainers and other communities with significant barriers to employment. Participants voiced the need to utilize outreach strategies that target underserved populations and try to bridge any gaps that may exist. They expressed the belief that the workforce system should establish a “no wrong door” strategy across agencies, partners and providers and invest in strategies to meet individuals where they are and connect them to necessary services. Specific suggestions included:

- Work closely with community-based organizations to deploy innovative outreach practices to reach priority communities where they are (e.g., public spaces like grocery stores/public transit, religious gathering places, community events)
- Leverage and invest in existing adult ed infrastructure to increase access to contextualized English language learning, foundational math and literacy, and digital literacy supports
- Review credentialing pathways for out-of-state and foreign-trained workers and provide supports to increase ease of navigation, credential access, and access to family-sustaining jobs
- Start translating career pathways materials into other languages to increase accessibility & understanding of the variety of career opportunities

3) Develop clear feedback loops with worker communities to inform program design & decision making: Several participants underlined the importance of listening to those that are most impacted by workforce investment decisions to truly understand what the barriers are and gain perspective on how to address the barriers. Specific suggestions include:

- Engage community-based organizations in the review of programs serving priority communities
- Provide financial resources to those that may face certain barriers to employment
- Continue discussions with affected communities during and after the launch of programs, including after action reviews to identify success and challenges
- Create connections and strategies to re-engage or engage previously unsuccessful candidates in programming

4) Engage employers to invest in worker training, cultural competency, flexibility, and increased wages: Several participants spoke about the need to more deeply engage employers in continued discussions about the importance of investing in worker training, wages and benefits as a recruitment and retention strategy. Many also expressed how providing employer supports and resources related to cultural competency & equity can create a more inclusive workplace. Specific suggestions included:

- Work with employers to redefine job descriptions and increase flexibility to support changing employee preferences and address employee needs for individuals from priority communities (e.g., individuals in recovery, justice-involved workers)
- Provide onsite training for existing workers as a way to upscale the workforce and invest in the continued growth of workers
- Reframe investment in diversity and equity as essential to business success—and provide trainings and resources to help employers create a more inclusive and welcoming workplace

- 5) Embed sustainability in planning via collaboration, financial innovation and outreach:** Those who participated highlighted the need to think beyond short-term funding solutions in order to provide sustainability of programming. Several people mentioned the Department and other agencies must make sure there is buy-in from a variety of stakeholders to ensure any programmatic changes are sustainable in the future. Specific suggestions included:
- Utilize blended/braiding funding to ensure continuity of programs beyond initial grant funding.
 - Enlisting successful "grads" of programs to build trust and recruit additional program participants who may be disconnected from employment and education
 - Capture individual worker and employer success stories and use those to promote participation in training and educational offerings
- 6) Expand access to career pathways via increased awareness, multiple on-ramps, and wraparound supports:** Participants shared that there needs to be more done to highlight viable career pathways and increase both awareness and access of opportunities. Working with statewide partners is critical in reaching out to workers and helping provide multiple points of entry to the workforce. Participants also felt that there should be a focus on creating clear training pathways to highlight specific career fields and how individuals can get involved. Specific suggestions included:
- Support individuals at the beginning of their career pathway as a way to encourage their development
 - Create multiple avenues for workers to earn while they learn—including ensuring necessary supports for pre-apprentices and apprentices exist to attain credentials
 - Promote non-traditional career pathways as a desired outcome and clear path to increase an individual's earning potential and level of training (e.g., apprenticeship)

Key considerations for MJRP priorities

The Department also facilitated a discussion to gather feedback, questions and ideas about specific MJRP priorities including: apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship, healthcare workforce strategies, industry partnerships, jobseeker navigation, training and education supports, and employer engagement in creating an inclusive workplace.

| Topic | Overarching considerations and recommendations |
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| Apprenticeship & pre-apprenticeships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change perception & raise awareness: Many voiced a need to better understand what an apprenticeship entails, what are its benefits and what are the requirements. Some mentioned existing biases and misconceptions that must be addressed to increase employer & worker participation in apprenticeship. • Make process seamless for employers, as they work to set up an apprenticeship program. Employers felt like there are many barriers to bringing in apprentices including the difficult-to-navigate processes and program costs. • Learn from best practices & current players: Get input from both employer sponsors and apprentices in order to collect more information and learn best practices. • Leverage apprenticeship as means to engage newer audiences: Increase opportunities to expand pre-apprenticeship and find ways to use apprenticeship as a pathway for different communities and occupations. New audiences might include focusing on healthcare and other career fields that don't typically utilize the apprenticeship model or intentionally engaging mid-career and older workers |
| Industry partnerships | <p>Participants felt an investment in strengthening industry partnerships could encompass the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly defined skills & target industries: Participants stated that it would be helpful to understand better what skills employers are specifically looking for in workers as well as what are the current pools of talent and in-demand industries. • Collaboration and coordination among existing partners to ensure streamlined access to existing resources and funding opportunities. • Mix of large and small businesses. Participants voiced that it is important to make partnerships are inclusive of businesses of all sizes including small and medium sized companies. |
| Jobseeker Supports and Navigation | <p>Listening session attendees shared that jobseeker support programs can seek to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand access to training. Participants felt that creating broader access to training will help to develop the pool of workers. They shared that this must be done in a way that acknowledges that not everyone has the same access to transportation, by bringing training to jobseekers. • Better understanding of where jobs are and how jobseekers can be connected. Several individuals mentioned that improvements to the Maine Joblink could include geo-mapping of jobs so jobseekers can visually see where there are openings and what they are. This would allow jobseekers to see where jobs are in relation to where they are located. |

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| Employer Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in local context: Participants stated that employer participation in their local communities and local workforce boards can help to build relationships and connection to the region they are in—a tool for recruitment and retention • Address barriers to employment: Participants expressed the need for employers to engage with community members and workers to understand what barriers they are facing and how changes could be made to allow for more flexibility—having an open dialogue builds trust between the two sides. • Provide cultural competency training for both employers and workers to ensure a welcoming environment is created throughout the entire organization |
| Training and Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand investment in adult education to alleviate capacity constraints and deliver increased English language learning, digital literacy and other essential skills • Evaluate how training providers can broaden eligibility requirements for those seeking training opportunities by broadening access to the immigrant community as well as other communities facing barriers • Review what training can be provided to help decrease barriers to workers seeking positive employment growth. Core trainings offerings that are not typically considered would include access to driver’s education and financial literacy. |
| Healthcare Workforce | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disseminate clear career pathways: Participants shared that various career pathways need to be highlighted to show there is not one singular way to enter or advance in a healthcare career. This would include the utilization of apprenticeship as a way to enter the healthcare workforce and have a path to growth. • Address credential-related barriers: Many expressed a need to break down the credential barrier for the healthcare workforce, especially for individuals coming from outside of the country that may have transferable skills and experiences. Participants mentioned the use of prior learning assessments and bridge programs to help address this gap. • Promote high-quality jobs: Multiple individuals highlighted the need to increase wages in the healthcare industry, as it has been cited as a major reason people have not pursued work in the industry |

Next Steps

Both MDOL and SWB will be utilizing the information gathered to inform its ongoing planning and implementation processes for the various Maine Jobs and Recovery initiatives. Though many conversations are ongoing, some concrete initiatives that already incorporate input gathered in the listening sessions include:

- Promoting employer engagement and investment in the workforce by providing supports for healthcare employers to invest in their incumbent healthcare workers to provide on or off-site training as a retention and advancement tool
- Creating two full-time healthcare navigator positions that will be based within local CareerCenters to assist individuals interested in healthcare careers get connected to training and job opportunities. These positions will have a particular emphasis on helping out-of-state and foreign-trained workers navigate the complex credentialing landscape, in partnership with ongoing efforts.
- Updating and expanding the role of a CareerCenter counselor to be more deeply embedded in the community by working with trusted partners to better meet individuals where they are and connect them to needed services
- Relaunching the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program to provide support for both short-term credentials and degrees—as well as connection to resources or funding to address essential wraparound supports noted across all sessions (e.g., childcare, transportation)

Other initiatives that are being explored to further embed this input include:

- Exploring ways to gather continued input from workforce partners via existing infrastructure (SWB subcommittees, local workforce board meetings, etc.)
- Working closely with State agency partners to coordinate efforts, address gaps, reduce duplication, and strive toward a “no wrong door” approach for individuals and employers looking to access services

As new programs and funding opportunities become available, they will be shared broadly via Maine Jobs and Recovery communications vehicles including website, press releases, social media and more.