

PRODUCED ON BEHALF OF
WORK SOURCE MAINE

BY THE DATA INNOVATION
PROJECT (DIP)

MAINE'S INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM:

*Implementation Lessons
and Early Outcomes*



March 2026



**Work
Source**
MAINE

**Maine's Industry Partnership Program:
Implementation Lessons and Early Outcomes**
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Work Source MAINE

This report was developed on behalf of Work Source Maine by the Data Innovation Project (DIP), which is part of the Catherine Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy at the University of Southern Maine.

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<https://datainnovationproject.org/>

Authors

Amy Geren, MCPD, Policy Associate | amy.geren@maine.edu

Sarah Krichels Goan, MPP, Senior Research Associate

Aaron Rose, Research Analyst

Matthew Starr, Graduate Research Assistant

Alexa Plotkin, Report Design

DIP Research Disclosure Statement

The Data Innovation Project recognizes that the study of the social realm can never be truly neutral. As applied researchers our social positions inevitably influence our experience and interpretation of reality as well as our approach to understanding reality. For this reason, we believe it is our responsibility to be transparent about who we are as meaning makers and producers of knowledge. We are a team of educated, employed, White professionals. We strive to mitigate our biases through continuing education, reflection and self-work, and our study approach and design. If you believe we have overlooked a critical perspective or interpretation in our work, we invite you to let us know so that we may address it.

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Executive Summary

Maine’s State Workforce Development Board (SWDB) launched the Industry Partnerships Program (IPP) in 2022 to support the workforce development needs of industries in Maine that had been disrupted by COVID-19. Industry Partnerships were charged with creating strategies to attract and retain employees, deliver skills-specific training in these industries, and strengthen career ladders with a focus on entry-level workers to improve skills and wages across jobs. The \$3.7 million program funded six industry partnership pilot initiatives to support Maine employers and employees in creating sustainable and equitable talent pipelines. The funded projects of the IPP pilot initiative represent backbone industries in Maine that endured a significant economic impact by COVID-19. These industries include agriculture, forestry, and fisheries; healthcare and social assistance; leisure and hospitality; and retail.

This is the second of three reports to evaluate the efforts and impacts of the IPP program, and follows a preliminary report released in early 2025. The report provides an in-depth look at the successes, challenges, and key themes emerging from the IPP.

Major Findings

The activities of the six funded IPPs resulted in tangible impacts on Maine's workforce, including priority populations and those with barriers to employment. Over 8,000 workers were directly affected through exposure to the workforce through over 300 recruitment activities. These workers were educated and upskilled through skills-specific trainings, on-the-job support services, and customized ESL trainings. Through these efforts the IPP sites engaged 185 employers, collaborated with 160 strategic partners, and developed 40 career pathways and 60 individual career maps. **These activities resulted in almost 4,000 individuals receiving training, including incumbent workers advancing in their careers, and over 1,200 workers entering the workforce.**

Participants in a variety of IPP-supported trainings and experiences reported deepening relevant skills, feeling more confident, and better understanding of industry career pathways. Employers and partners also described improved hiring, employee advancement, wage growth, and retention, which helped fill high-demand and high-turnover positions.

Across sectors, IPPs emphasized experiential learning, industry exposure, and targeted outreach to expand workforce participation and address outdated perceptions about these occupations. In doing so, the partnerships helped identify and reduce barriers to workforce entry while building infrastructure and cross-sector relationships that support long-term workforce development. Despite structural and capacity constraints (many IPP lead organizations were small nonprofits or a single department within a larger institution), the partnerships successfully coordinated employers, educators, and community organizations to strengthen Maine's workforce pipeline.

Through these processes, the partnerships identified and addressed workforce participation barriers and developed durable, flexible infrastructure to help grow the workforce. They were also a consistent voice representing sectors eager to engage differently with the workforce in Maine. Despite structural and capacity constraints the IPP sites leaned into relationships and cross-sector collaborations to achieve success.



Five key takeaways emerged from the IPP pilot evaluation:

- ▶ **IPP partnerships are effective workforce intermediaries.** The primary value of IPPs lies less in individual program activities and more in their coordination and brokerage role, a finding which closely aligns with evaluations of similar partnerships.
- ▶ **Durable infrastructure is a lasting outcome of the pilot.** Career pathways, training curricula, marketing tools, and cross-sector networks extend beyond individual placements and strengthen long-term workforce system capacity. However, to remain responsive to emerging industry needs, these intermediary functions require ongoing financial support.
- ▶ **Flexibility and relationship-driven implementation are central to success.** IPP sites were most successful when they adapted programming to partner capacity, regional conditions, and participant needs. Flexibility, combined with trusted relationships and sustained engagement enabled sites to respond effectively to evolving workforce demands.
- ▶ **Structural barriers remain the primary constraint on workforce participation.** While supports such as stipends, ESL integration, and career navigation expanded access for priority populations, larger issues (e.g., housing, transportation, childcare, and wages) remain beyond the scope of workforce programs alone.
- ▶ **Policy barriers limit IPP effectiveness for highly regulated industries.** Partners identified specific regulatory, licensing, and policy barriers (e.g., credential transfer, scope-of-practice limits, reimbursement issues, and seasonal labor patterns) that affected workforce strategies across sectors.

Recommendations

The findings from this evaluation suggest the need not only to fund workforce programs, but also to support intermediary infrastructure, cross-sector coordination, and alignment with broader policy systems. At the same time, workforce strategies operate within structural conditions that significantly influence participation and retention and cannot be addressed through program design alone.

- 1. Sustain and stabilize funding for intermediary-led workforce partnerships.**
Continued, reliable funding is essential to maintain the coordination, trust, and infrastructure developed through the pilot, and to support the deliberate expansion of the IPP model.
- 2. Leverage and maintain the infrastructure created through the pilot.**
Career pathway tools, training curricula, marketing platforms, and cross-sector networks should be actively maintained and updated to preserve momentum and avoid duplication.
- 3. Continue to support coordinated field-building and shared workforce narratives.**
A consistent, sector-wide narrative about career opportunities, grounded in real pathways and visible employer engagement, can strengthen sector visibility and support recruitment, retention, and long-term workforce growth.
- 4. Institutionalize support for priority populations and geographies.**
ESL integration, credential navigation, stipends, and wraparound supports should be treated as core program components.
- 5. Align workforce development with broader structural investments.**
Continued reliance on temporary financial support embedded within workforce initiatives limits long-term impact. Addressing these challenges may require treating key financial support as permanent workforce infrastructure.
- 6. Strengthen healthcare workforce incentives and reimbursement structures.**
For future healthcare-related IPPs specifically, workforce investments should be aligned with healthcare reimbursement and incentive structures.

Maine Development Foundation

Turning Forestry Competition into Collaboration

Maine Development Foundation (MDF) addressed workforce shortages in forestry-specific sectors including logging equipment operation, commercial driver's licenses, millwrighting, and forest product innovation. With their partners, the program developed structured career and education pathways for the seven most highly needed careers across the forest product sector, and training programs that connect students and job seekers with experienced professionals to guide them into long-term careers. A major emphasis has been marketing forestry careers to high school students and job seekers, dispelling misconceptions about the field, and ensuring a well-trained workforce for future industry needs.

MDF used the IPP to bring Maine's forest landowners, harvesters, and mills together on neutral ground. Through regular convenings, these longtime competitors built trust and began collaborating on shared workforce challenges. The result was a coordinated approach to training and promoting forestry careers across the sector, and a stronger foundation for multi-partner collaboration that allowed the group to pursue larger, more ambitious grant opportunities together.

MDF: By-the-Numbers

Over the course of the pilot, MDF has reported the following accomplishments:

Stakeholder Engagement & Collaboration

- ◆ 4 employers and 7 strategic partners currently engaged from industry, education, and non-profits

Training & Workforce Development

- ◆ 7 new career pathways developed
- ◆ 845 individuals trained
- ◆ 137 employees received a new credential or certification
- ◆ 29 staff received DEI and supervisory/management training

Employment & Retention Strategies

- ◆ 105 workers have been directly affected by IP strategies

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“It's not just an academic thought process where the university says, 'This is how the sector is.' No, it's driven by the industry, with university expertise, with NPOs, with all these different, you know, communities. When we engage people, it's a much more consistent message about what things are, where things are, and what are those opportunities, rather than 50 uncoordinated voices talking to people...It's a more consistent sounding message consistently delivered through all these different channels.

– MDF Business Partner

“The pathways that they've been able to put together, our students have been able to pilot, and learn from, and the more resources that get put together from, for Maine, the more we're able to get them into rural schools in front of rural students.

– MDF Educational Partner

Children's Oral Health Network

Leveraging Networks to Build Capacity

Through the oral health industry partnership, The Children's Oral Health Network (COHN) and its partners successfully developed and launched the Oral Health Navigation learning series. This was a self-paced, low-barrier training that enabled staff working in roles that support children and families in gaining access to the oral health information and services they need. It was also an introduction to dental careers for people who might be interested in additional education and career exploration. The initiative also developed a course and self-guided toolkit for Registered Dental Hygienists seeking to become Independent Practice Dental Hygienists, enabling them to expand the availability of services reaching rural and underserved communities. This partnership marks a significant step in expanding access to oral health services and addressing workforce shortages in Maine.

COHN is building a network of community health providers, using their centrality in that network to help those community health partners build, place, and scale their effort to build oral healthcare capacity. By participating in cross-sector convenings and statewide workforce conversations, COHN uses its network to highlight the role oral health providers can play in addressing Maine's broader health workforce shortages.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

COHN: By-the-Numbers

Over the course of the pilot, COHN has reported the following accomplishments:

Stakeholder Engagement & Collaboration

- ◆ 16 employers and 10 strategic partners currently engaged

Training & Workforce Development

- ◆ 4 new career pathway and 1 career exploration website developed
- ◆ 398 individuals trained
- ◆ 13 recruitment activities reached 667 people from WIOA priority communities
- ◆ 87 employees received a new credential or certification
- ◆ 91 staff received inclusive supervisory/management training

Employment & Retention

- ◆ 35 employees or trainees received support services
- ◆ 3 individuals hired

“I would love to find a way to keep this industry partnership growing, going, because the group, you know, I think we've accomplished a lot thus far. We, you know, something exists, and something, the curriculum exists. It didn't before. People are certified in something that didn't exist before. There's now a professional role that didn't exist before. That's pretty cool.

– COHN Partner

“There's a huge need for increasing access to care in Maine for a long time now, and although dental hygienists have been really uniquely positioned to be able to provide that impact, they haven't had the tools or resources to be able to do it, so this opportunity was the first time that resources have been invested in being able to provide this needed skill set to the dental hygienists. And that has been astronomical.

– COHN Partner

Maine Tourism Association

Strengthening Pipelines, Meeting Needs

Maine Tourism Association (MTA) embraced a media-driven strategy to promote the industry as a whole and attract workers to Maine's tourism and hospitality sector. Through social media campaigns, YouTube content, and the MaineLife TV series, it showcased diverse career opportunities in the industry, with the goal of shifting public perception of tourism jobs from seasonal work to potential careers. MTA also hosted large-scale workforce summits, bringing together business leaders, educators, and policymakers to address hiring and retention challenges in the industry. In addition, MTA visited school classrooms, brought youth 16-24 on career exploration field trips and trainings, and connected youth with internships in the tourism industry.

Many of Maine's businesses are small and lack the capacity to manage internship programs or develop structured training to meet the needs of their current workforce. MTA stepped in to bridge this gap, vetting and connecting interns with employers and delivering much-needed training opportunities across the sector.

MTA: By-the-Numbers

Over the course of the pilot, MTA has reported the following accomplishments:

Stakeholder Engagement & Collaboration

- ◆ 43 employers and 5 strategic partners engaged

Training & Workforce Development

- ◆ 309 individuals trained
- ◆ 103 recruitment activities reached 5,091 people from priority communities
- ◆ 141 employees received a new credential or certification
- ◆ 74 staff received inclusive supervisory/management training

Employment & Retention Strategies

- ◆ 55 new individuals hired from WIPA priority communities
- ◆ 5,416 workers directly affected

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“...[A] lot of them just don't have the capacity or the interest to develop a program for interns. And so what we've... started doing instead is, we let interns know about opportunities, and then we just talk to them about what they're interested in. And then we'll reach out to a business and say, 'Hey, I have an intern who's interested in X, Y, and Z. Would you be interested in having them for the summer?' And the answer is always yes.”

– MTA Site Lead

“We had been looking for opportunities to help develop leadership skills for our supervisor level employees, and we hadn't been able to find anything like that.”

– MTA Business Partner

Maine Business Education Partnership

Meeting Needs, Shifting Perspectives

Maine Business Education Partnership's (MBEP) retail career pathways partnership engaged retail workforce development through large-scale training and credentialing. Over 200 individuals enrolled in RISE Up, a nationally recognized retail training certification offered by MBEP through the IPP that equipped workers with essential skills for career advancement. The initiative also engaged middle and high school students through career events, field trips, internships, and job shadows, promoting retail as a viable, long-term career option with diverse pathways.

MBEP has responded to employer-identified skills gaps in the retail sector by developing targeted training, internships, and career pathways in partnership with schools and workforce agencies. As with MTA, MBEP has been deliberate in their efforts to introduce retail careers as more than "just working behind a cash register." By connecting with educational opportunities outside of the formal education system, they are making these introductions to adult workers who could make the shift to retail careers, including drawing retired workers back into the workforce.

MBEP: By-the-Numbers

Over the course of the pilot, MBEP has reported the following accomplishments:

Stakeholder Engagement & Collaboration

- ◆ 34 employers and 56 strategic partners engaged

Training & Workforce Development

- ◆ 20 new career pathways developed
- ◆ 684 individuals trained
- ◆ 164 recruitment activities reached 226 people from WIOA priority communities
- ◆ 345 employees received a new credential or certification
- ◆ 292 incumbent workers received skills-specific training
- ◆ 128 staff received inclusive supervisory/management training

Employment and Retention Strategies

- ◆ 138 new individuals hired
- ◆ 37 workers from WIPA priority communities hired
- ◆ 552 workers directly affected
- ◆ 166 employees or trainees received support services
- ◆ 90 ESL trainings provided

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“There are students from our alternative ed[ucation] program that are very hard to place that have been given traction because of these connections that have been fostered. That’s the big picture of this that carries itself out in a specific way.

– MBEP Educational Partner

“I’ll start a presentation and ask them what their perception of retail is, and I tell them not to hurt my feelings, and a lot of times it’s not positive. But by the end of the presentation I ask that question again, and they’re like, ‘It’s not what we thought. We didn’t realize you could do that.’ So those are the wins.

– MBEP Site Lead

Northeastern University, The Roux Institute

Addressing Frontline Healthcare Shortages

The Roux Institute launched a pilot program connecting pre-clinical, post-baccalaureate students with frontline healthcare jobs in Maine to address immediate workforce shortages and build long-term talent pipelines. The first cohort placed individuals across five employers, and then interest surged—including a growing number of new applicants from outside Maine—demonstrating the initiative's broad appeal and sustainability. The program currently has a wait list of applicants interested in the opportunity.

The initiative works with a range of healthcare partners across Maine, from large statewide medical groups to small community health clinics. By placing candidates in entry-level roles before they enter advanced medical programs, the initiative addresses both immediate workforce shortages and long-term talent pipelines. They have also convened healthcare providers in the state to identify critical job openings and connect participants to professional development and workforce opportunities in Maine's healthcare sector.

Roux: By-the-Numbers

Over the course of the pilot, Roux has reported the following accomplishments:

Stakeholder Engagement & Collaboration

- ◆ 8 employers engaged in industry partnerships
- ◆ 2 strategic partners engage in industry partnership

Training & Workforce Development

- ◆ 2 new career pathways have been developed
- ◆ 61 individuals were trained due to IP activities
- ◆ 2 recruitment activities
- ◆ 13 employees received a new credential or certification

Employment & Retention Strategies

- ◆ 61 new individuals hired
- ◆ 61 workers have been directly affected by IP strategies
- ◆ 31 workers from priority communities hired
- ◆ 61 employees or trainees received support services

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“ I feel like it helps us get really good candidates that we know are really dedicated to this work, because that's why they're doing this, right? [I]t kind of helps us vet folks... we're getting them through a trusted source, and we still go through our HR and interview work, but [it makes us] feel a little bit more secure, and willing to put in that extra training work on our end.

- Roux Medical Partner

“ Being able to provide that on-site training, we've been able to send our dental assistants to other dental practices to train as assistants, and that's something that we never really thought about doing before. This has given us a new way to look at hiring.

- Roux Community Partner

Maine Labor Resource Center

Connecting Maine's Immigrant Workforce to In-Demand Jobs

Maine Labor Resource Center (MLRC) was a critical force in successfully filling gaps in Maine's health and social service sectors by recruiting, training, and placing immigrant, refugee, and asylum seekers in Maine's healthcare and social service sectors. The partnership provided numerous ESL trainings and created clear career pathways tailored to New Mainers, supporting their transition into stable, in-demand jobs. This comprehensive approach strengthened both the industry and the economic integration of Maine's growing immigrant population.

MLRC leverages its cultural capital to recruit, train, and place immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers into Maine's healthcare and social service workforce. Through partnerships with employers and community organizations, MLRC helps address critical labor shortages while advancing equitable workforce development.

MLRC: By-the-Numbers

Over the course of the pilot, MLRC has reported the following accomplishments:

Stakeholder Engagement & Collaboration

- ◆ 57 employers and 49 strategic partners engaged

Training & Workforce Development

- ◆ 60 new career pathways developed
- ◆ 1,189 individuals trained
- ◆ 42 recruitment activities reached 2,147 people from WIOA priority communities
- ◆ 367 employees received a new credential or certification
- ◆ 66 staff received inclusive supervisory/management training

Employment & Retention Strategies

- ◆ 1,040 new individuals hired
- ◆ 875 workers hired from WIOA priority communities
- ◆ 1,911 workers directly affected
- ◆ 163 employees or trainees received support services
- ◆ 1,097 ESL trainings

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“[MLRC is] an organization that supports newcomers to get certification needed for them to get a job. Giving training to them, giving orientation to them, and some education on how to navigate the system.

– MLRC Community Partner

“We are like a bridge to bring them into the society.

– MLRC Educational Partner

“We help people figure out how they can translate their credentials into the American system.

– MLRC Site Lead

Background and Introduction

The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) legislation was designed to strengthen and improve the public workforce system by helping Americans, including youth and those with significant barriers to employment,¹ to enter high-quality jobs and careers, and employers to hire and retain skilled workers (Urban Institute, 2022). Maine's State Workforce Development Board (SWDB) within the Maine Department of Labor (MDOL) supports the governor in fulfilling the duties and responsibilities required by WIOA. Members of the SWDB are appointed by the governor and represent many facets of workforce development, from the Maine State Legislature to the business, labor, public education, higher education, economic development, youth activities, employment, and training sectors (26 MRSA § 2006 (2026)). The SWDB has developed a comprehensive workforce and talent strategy with the intent of continuing the success of businesses and bolstering the labor force. This strategy aims to enable potential workers to enter good paying jobs through the provision of necessary work supports and skills that allow them to thrive (Maine State Workforce Development Board, 2024).

To meet the needs of industries in Maine disrupted by COVID-19, the SWDB launched the **Industry Partnerships Program (IPP)** in 2022 (see sidebar). The \$3.7 million program, part of Governor Mills' workforce strategy and a key priority to Maine's long-term economic growth, has funded six industry partnership pilot initiatives to date. Through the IPP, the SWDB supports sector-based approaches to identify the most important workforce needs of each industry.

Defining Industry Partnerships

The National Fund for Workforce Solutions defines an industry partnership as “a dynamic collaboration of a regional group of employers, stakeholders, and workers that convene regularly with the assistance of a workforce intermediary.” Effective industry partnerships support employers and employees in creating sustainable and equitable talent pipelines. These types of employer-educator partnerships enhance workers' skills with technological advancements (National Fund, 2017).

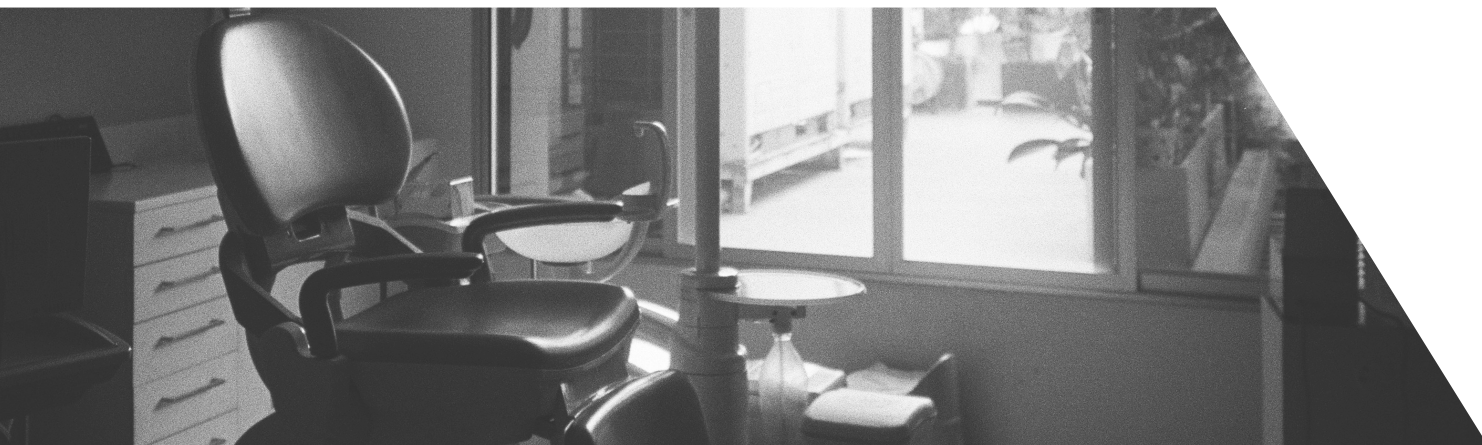
¹ Individuals with barriers to employment eligible for WIOA programming include: displaced homemakers; migrant and seasonal farmworkers; English language learners and those facing substantial cultural barriers; justice involved foster care youth or youth transitioning out of care; homeless individuals; Native American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Native Hawaiians; individuals with disabilities; individuals with low literacy levels; older individuals (55+); individuals within two years of exhausting lifetime eligibility for TANF; long-term unemployed individuals; low-income individuals; and single parents.

These partnerships unite businesses, industry associations, education and training providers, and community-based organizations to recruit, retain, and advance workers in meaningful careers. By creating structured career pathways, the program has and will continue to develop strong pipelines and skilled workers to meet industry needs. As hubs of excellence that grow and attract local talent, IPPs align with Maine's vision as outlined in the [WIOA plan for 2024-2027](#).

To select industry partnerships for the IPP, MDOL released a request in January 2022 for applications from workforce intermediaries in industries that endured a significant economic impact by COVID-19.² MDOL required each intermediary organization to co-apply with at least four employers representative of their industry, including at least two small employers and at least one organization capable of training targeted employee groups.

Applicants were asked to describe how they anticipated using funds during the two-year grant period to develop career pathway maps for their industry partners; increase the number of under-represented workers in high-wage jobs among partnership employers; organize businesses, employers, workers, labor organizations, and industry associations into a collaborative structure that supports the sharing of workforce development information, ideas, and challenges common to their industry cluster; and leverage existing non-ARPA workforce financial supports towards achieving project goals.

MDOL also required applicants to explain how they would ensure all activities would accomplish at least one of the three fundamental goals of Maine's Comprehensive Workforce and Talent strategy³ (Quint, 2022).



² These industries included: clean energy; agriculture, forestry, and fisheries; healthcare and social assistance; information; infrastructure (construction, building trades, broadband, logistics); leisure and hospitality; manufacturing; education; and retail.

³ The strategies include: create a more inclusive and welcoming workplace to attract and retain potential employees from a diverse pool of persons seeking jobs; develop and deliver specific trainings that would address shortage of skills that are critical to the competitiveness and innovation of the industry cluster; and develop and strengthen career ladders within and across companies, enabling entry-level workers to improve skills and advance to higher-wage jobs.



After a competitive review, MDOL selected six industry partners. The following describes these industry partners and their work:

Maine Development Foundation (MDF), Forestry Products Sector builds a resilient and diverse forest products sector workforce by creating workforce and education pathways, mitigating obstacles and misperceptions, expanding education and training programs, and creating recruitment and retention strategies for future workforce development.

Children's Oral Health Network (COHN), Oral Healthcare Sector is an innovative approach to supporting the growth of the oral health workforce in Maine. The initiative brings together non-profit, community-based, and employer partners, with an aim of increasing access to oral health careers and services for populations historically underserved by the oral health system.

Maine Tourism Association (MTA), Hospitality and Tourism Sector connects Maine youth, educators, and job seekers to career exploration opportunities in tourism and hospitality. By coordinating internships, convening career fairs and summits, and organizing immersive career related trips, the IPP provides exposure to and exploration of the sector. In addition, the initiative develops trainings for current and future employees focused on soft and transferable skills that lead to career advancement across tourism and hospitality.

Maine Business Education Partnership (MBEP), Retail Sector offers recruitment and training that explores best practices to enhance the professional development of new hires and upgrade the skills of incumbent retail workers. It also introduces retail career pathways to students and the New Mainer population.

The Roux Institute of Northeastern University (ROUX), Healthcare Sector addresses both the short-term and long-term needs of Maine's healthcare sector by developing a pilot program to connect pre-clinical, post-baccalaureate students with front-end healthcare opportunities in Maine, and convening healthcare providers in the state to identify critical job openings.

Maine Labor Resource Center (MLRC), Healthcare and Social Services Sector brings together health and welfare-related community-based nonprofit organizations and small businesses to elevate jobs within these sectors, build career pathways, recruit and support immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in these roles, and provide ESL classes.

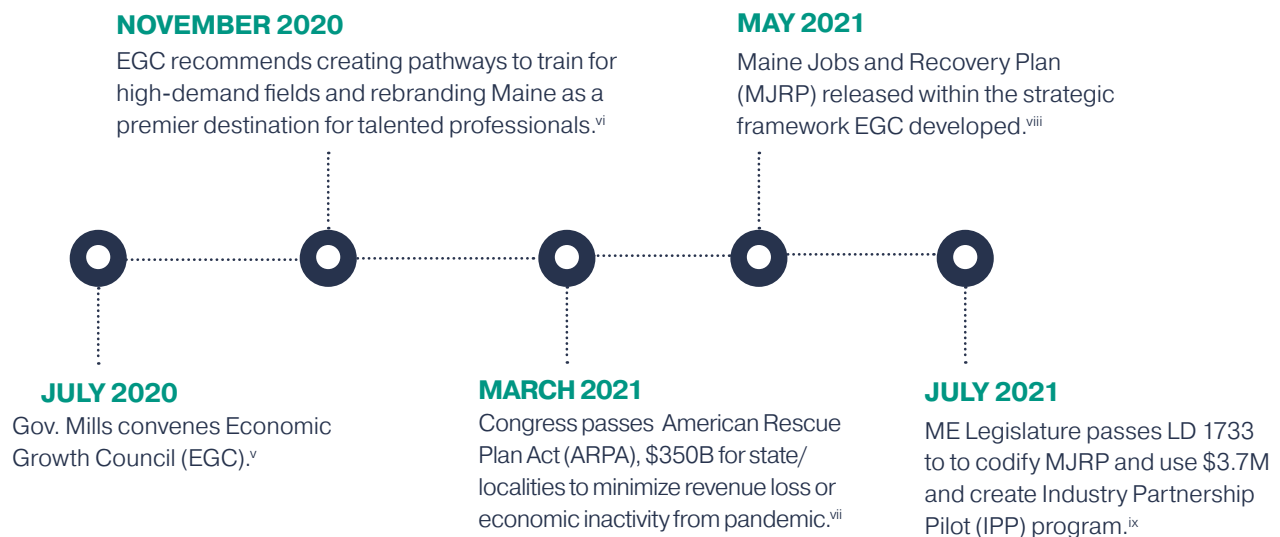
BACKGROUND ON FUNDING

Maine's Industry Partnership Program (IPP) emerged from post-pandemic economic recovery efforts to strengthen workforce development in high-demand industries in Maine. Using federal recovery funding authorized through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan, the state invested in industry-led partnerships designed to align employer needs with workforce training opportunities.

MDOL initially focused ARPA funds on industries hit hardest by COVID-19 to identify the skills needed in prospective employees.ⁱ MDOL went on to award educational

organizations, industry associations, and leaders with grants between \$300,000 and \$700,000 to develop ways for prospective employees to train in relevant skill areas and find employers in need.ⁱⁱ Established through LD 1733 in 2021, Maine's Industry Partnership Program (IPP) invests in employer-driven collaborations that connect businesses, educators, and workforce organizations to address labor shortages and build industry-specific talent pipelines. Those IPP partnerships have been overseen by the State Workforce Development Board and are alignedⁱⁱⁱ with Maine's Comprehensive Workforce and Talent strategy.^{iv}

Timeline of IPP Funding Landscape



ⁱ <https://smpdc.org/vertical/Sites/%7B14E8B741-214C-42E2-BE74-5AA9EE0A3EFD%7D/uploads/testimony-of-k-figueroa-re-ld-1733-an-act-to-provide-all.pdf>

ⁱⁱ https://www.maine.gov/labor/news_events/article.shtml?id=7788595

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.maine.gov/swb/ipp/index.shtml>

^{iv} https://www.maine.gov/swb/docs/2023/SWB_MaineWorkforceSystemstrategyreport_2019.pdf

^v <https://www.maine.gov/future/initiatives/economy/economic-recovery-committee>

^{vi} https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inline-files/Maine%20ERC%20Report_FINAL_11242020.pdf

^{vii} <https://www.ncsl.org/state-federal/american-rescue-plan-act-of-2021>

^{viii} <https://www.maine.gov/jobsplan/about-the-plan>

^{ix} <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=SP0577&item=16&snum=130>

Purpose of the Report

This is the second of three reports to evaluate the efforts and impacts of the IPP program, and follows a preliminary report released in early 2025. The previous report, the [Preliminary Impact Snapshot](#), described the scope and substance of the first 24 months of MDOL's IPP spending. This report provides an in-depth look at the successes, challenges, and key themes emerging from the IPP to evaluate the effectiveness of the model in addressing workforce demand.

It also offers insights into the unique roles, approaches and experiences of each site. The evaluation draws on multiple sources of information, both qualitative and quantitative, which provide an overall measure of program reach, highlight individual successes, and identify common themes across the initiatives. This interim report concludes with insights into the ongoing industry partnership needs and recommendations informed by the lessons learned from the initial pilot phase.



Evaluation Methodology

The DIP evaluation team employed a mixed-methods evaluation approach to gather both qualitative and quantitative insights into the IPP program. These sources have helped the evaluation team to assess the resulting impacts of the IPP efforts on individual employers and workers, and the impacts of strengthened collaboration across industry partners.

Approach

The DIP's data collection efforts for this interim report included the following sources:⁴

- An analysis of the quarterly reports submitted to MDOL,
- Key informant interviews with IPP site leads and key collaborators,
- A survey of business partners and stakeholders engaged with IPP sites,
- Focus groups with individuals engaged in IPP programming or training.

The emerging findings detailed in this report are based on the insights gathered through these multiple evaluation activities. Participation and response levels varied across each IPP site, often reflecting differences in the nature and scope of their site-level work. For some IPP sites, direct input from participants of training programs was the appropriate unit of analysis, while others determined that the business, education, and

community partners offered relevant and useful insight. Accordingly, the findings are intended to illustrate a range of participant experiences and perspectives and may not be fully generalizable across all IPP sites or stakeholder groups.

All survey instruments and the research protocol were reviewed and approved by the University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. DIP evaluators deployed surveys using Qualtrics, a web-based survey software, and downloaded data files for analysis in Microsoft Excel. The evaluation team also transcribed interview and focus group recordings and used NVivo 15 Pro software to code and analyze the findings into themes.



⁴ More details about each can be found in Appendix A

Primary Research Questions

The primary questions being explored by this evaluation study are as follows:

1. What have the pilot sites produced during the implementation period? For example:
 - a. How many and what sorts of programs, trainings and resources have been developed and offered?
 - b. How many Mainers have been trained? In what areas? How many Mainers have received badges, certifications, or credentials as a result of these efforts? In what areas?
 - c. How many collaborators and partners have been engaged by each site?
2. What have been the successes and challenges with implementing the pilot programs, and what lessons have been learned that can inform future efforts? For example:
 - a. How did pilot sites ensure the programming was relevant to the needs of their partners and collaborators?
 - b. What were the sites and collaborators' experiences with launching the program?
 - c. To what extent were collaborators and partners satisfied with their engagement in the partnership?
 - d. What recommendations do pilot sites, partners and collaborators have for future efforts?
3. How have the pilot sites developed industry-specific collaborations, and what are the benefits to business of these types of collaborative opportunities? How have these partnerships expanded businesses' capacity or potential growth?
4. In what ways have the pilot sites supported workforce development, for example, connecting people to jobs, improving quality of jobs offered by employers, upgrading skills, expanding diversity, increasing employee retention, offering immigrant supports (ESL, etc.)?

Limitations

As with all qualitative data collection and analysis, this evaluation has inherent limitations related to scope, sampling, and consistency. While the use of a mixed-method approach and the triangulation of data from multiple sources helps to mitigate these limitations, it is important to acknowledge their potential influence on the findings.

The DIP staff engaged with industry partners after an initial introduction from MDOL as part of a regularly scheduled convening of grant recipients, at which all IPP site leads were encouraged by MDOL to participate. Subsequent connections with employers, students, interns, and employees, however, depended on IPP site lead-facilitated introductions to the evaluators, shared contact lists, and the availability and willingness of participants to engage with the evaluators. As a result, it is possible evaluation participants were not a representative sample of all individuals engaged in IPP activities. Interview, focus group, and survey respondents may have been disproportionately drawn from those who had stronger relationships with the administrators of the IPP site or who had more positive experiences; negative experiences, therefore, may not have been captured. While focus group participants were incentivized with gift certificates to increase participation rates, no incentives were offered for key informant interviews and survey participation, which may have further influenced engagement patterns. In the case of one IPP site, an external evaluation had been recently conducted in addition to the DIP evaluation. As a result, this IPP site lead was sensitive about asking too

much of their employer partners and program participating students. Consequently, less qualitative data was collected from one IPP site for this report.

Another limitation includes potential language barriers. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in English, although English was not the first language for some key informant interview and focus group participants, and DIP researchers were not speakers of these other languages. This creates an increased risk of miscommunication despite the use of clarifying follow-up questions during semi-structured interviews. Likewise, this potential for miscommunication was present in the business survey, which was also administered exclusively in English. It is likely that some survey participants were not native English language speakers; in these cases, questions may have been misinterpreted or responses constrained.

Finally, from a technical perspective, the IPP evaluation was not established before or during program development as the evaluators were contracted after the pilot program had launched. Therefore, the quarterly reporting tool developed by MDOL was not designed in alignment with the evaluation questions, leading to variability on how each site interpreted them. While the DIP reviewed and assessed the data for their relevance to the evaluation protocol, the responses did not always provide the level of detail or consistency needed to fully address evaluation priorities.

Findings

The following sections present the evaluative findings that emerged from an analysis of self-reported quarterly metrics, a business partner/stakeholder survey, and multiple interviews and focus groups. The results provide insight into what the IPP pilot programs created, successes and challenges each site experienced, the benefits these partnerships brought to the broader community, and relationship to workforce development.

The findings are organized into the following areas, some of which cut across all six sites and some of which are more relevant to a specific sector or smaller group of fields:

- Program Development and Implementation
- Facilitators of Success
- Barriers of Success
- IPP Participant Recommendations
- Participant Outcomes and Experiences
- Employer and Industry Impacts

Program Development and Implementation

Over two years between 2023 and 2025, IPP sites have engaged in a wide variety of workforce development activities that spanned outreach, training, and employment. They have collaborated with industry and community partners, recruited and marketed to participants, engaged in general media and communications efforts, developed and offered new training and curricula, and created new workforce pathways. They have placed interns, supported career navigation, provided job shadowing and mentorship opportunities, and convened a workforce summit. Figure 1 presents a high-level snapshot of the outputs generated by IPP activities completed through the third quarter of 2025. Notably, IPP investments supported the hiring of 1,297 individuals, the attainment of 1,090 credentials or certifications, and the development of 40 formal career pathways.



IPP High-Level Snapshot

- ▶ **8,385** workers directly affected through outreach, training, hiring, credential attainment, wage increases, or promotions
- ▶ **1,297** new individuals hired (1,001 from WIOA priority populations)
- ▶ **3,498** individuals trained across diverse skill development programs
- ▶ **937** incumbent workers received skills-specific training
- ▶ **388** workers received leadership-based professional development
- ▶ **1,090** credentials/certifications earned
- ▶ **425** worker support services received
- ▶ **1,189** ESL trainings provided
- ▶ **40** formal career pathways and **60+** individualized career maps developed, aligning education to employment routes
- ▶ **166** employers engaged across six industry sectors
- ▶ **25** strategic partners engaged
- ▶ **324** recruitment activities held, reaching over 8,000 people

Figure 1

Building Partnerships and Cross-Sector Collaboration

At the inception of the grant awards, the IPP sites came into the work with varying levels of experience with workforce development. Three sites - MDF, MTA, MBEP - were mature trade organizations with existing networks, resources, and established workforce development strategies. These groups already possessed elements of coordination capacity, experience identifying career pathways, and an understanding of market needs which subsequently influenced how they designed their programs and outreach strategies. Conversely, the remaining three sites - ROUX, COHN, and MLRC - had more limited experience with workforce development strategies. These sites also focused on the health care services sector, where workforce efforts are shaped by distinct market forces and incentives related to access and public health, requiring different approaches to recruitment, training, and partnership development.

All six IPP sites described the initial hurdles related to initiating new collaborative efforts and relationships. Each site had to gather buy-in with their partners and explain the value proposition of the partnership, a process described by one site lead as “herding the cats.” A repeated theme, especially for smaller partner organizations, was how limited their overall capacity was to take on new projects regardless of interest or merit. A site lead summarized the sentiment noting, “I think the biggest challenge for the business is, ‘Will I

have time to look at these things? Do I have time to go to a meeting? Do I have time to get this information out to my employees and have them take time to take out training?’”

Other hurdles were primarily logistical. Clear communication and direction pertaining to project development was highlighted as a critical need. There were also delays in the rollout of a web-based self-service career mapping tool developed by the State Workforce Development Board that would support employee recruitment and information-sharing regarding industries in Maine. This final product was launched in December 2025.

While the partnerships and programs initiated by each IPP took different forms based on sector needs and target populations, each site successfully convened a diverse combination of stakeholders. Sites engaged with a total of 125 strategic partners who represented employers, non-profits, trade organizations, educational institutions and partners, community organizations, and state agencies. The IPP leads intentionally took this cross-sector partnership approach to gather input from collaborators throughout the program development and implementation and build connections across the industry. The COHN site lead described diversifying the oral health workforce as “building partnerships with all kinds of different employers where there’s an opportunity to work with families supporting their oral health needs. And so that’s why

⁵ <https://www.worksourcemaine.com/>

it's such a... wide range." Their collaboration ensured the early success of their training system as new partners saw "how the applicability of the training in different settings just... didn't really fit with the needs." COHN subsequently overhauled the training.

The new series of incumbent worker managerial trainings developed by MTA followed a similar design process to COHN, where partners directly provided feedback and identified further needs. Other IPP sites shared how strengthened collaboration enabled them to pursue external funding opportunities that they would not have been able to access on their own. In some cases, sites submitted collective proposals on behalf of multiple partners, leveraging the IPP sites' intermediary role and shared relationships. MBEP explained how the business-to-business connections "lead to workforce conversations, or even job sharing" that fills workforce needs by building new partnerships. These examples demonstrate how cross-sector collaboration enabled partners to identify shared challenges and develop collective solutions that would not have been possible working independently.

Outreach and Recruitment

Across all six IPP sites, workforce outreach and recruitment strategies focused on experiential learning, exposure to industries, and targeted outreach. Most sites also included a long-term marketing strategy to highlight career opportunities and change perceptions about certain industries and sectors. By the fall of 2025, the IPP sites had engaged in 324 recruitment activities, reaching over 8,000 people.

The most common recruitment strategy was direct outreach from the IPP leads within their networks to engage partners. With a large focus on reaching new entrants to the workforce, many IPP sites worked with high schools and middle schools, guidance counselors, and adult education centers to coordinate various opportunities. These opportunities included field trips and site visits, career and jobs fairs, and classroom presentations. The IPP sites also connected directly with businesses, community organizations, and educational partners to develop and facilitate programs and classes, marketing and training materials.

Many of the IPP sites also actively worked to shift the narrative surrounding certain jobs and sectors. These include persistent misperceptions, such as the belief that forestry is a dying industry, retail or tourism are not real careers, medical assisting is only a steppingstone, and direct service professionals are not considered as part of the professional workforce. Every site indicated they were actively working to change these negative perceptions of their fields. Many programs' direct service components were designed to address this barrier, such as field trips and site visits, experiential learning activities, direct outreach to students and guidance counselors, and media campaigns. For example, MDF was able to hold focus groups around the state to explore perceptions about the forest sector. The IPP site lead described how this information informed their subsequent outreach, stating "...it helped us identify some misperceptions that maybe we could break down with some of those [career

and education] pathways.” The MTA site lead described a common occurrence during career presentations to students, saying, “I’ll start a presentation and ask them what their perception of retail is, and I tell them not to hurt my feelings, and a lot of times it’s not positive. But by the end of the presentation, I ask that question again, and they’re like, ‘It’s not what we thought.’ ‘We didn’t realize you could do that.’ So those are the wins.”

Reaching Priority Populations

A major goal of the IPP pilot was reaching priority populations through outreach and responsive programming. This included reaching young workers who represent the future workforce, upskilling incumbent and adult workers, and engaging the growing immigrant population. By the fall of 2025, IPP sites reported that 1,001 individuals from WIOA priority populations had been hired because of their efforts.

For youth, outreach, exposure and experiential learning often went hand in hand. MTA and MBEP designed field trips and adventure experiences to engage the young worker audience, giving them exposure to what makes Maine a tourism destination. Adult learners were reached through CTE and Adult Education programs, while ROUX’s novel gap-year program targeted a specific population of pre-clinical/post-baccalaureate students. Incumbent workers were targeted with professional development, including leadership and supervisory training opportunities. Some IPP sites specifically focused on reaching New Mainers by intentionally supporting career navigation and by integrating ESL courses and culturally responsive material into training activities. The IPP pilot also served other priority populations by design, including WIOA-defined

targets of displaced workers, women, low-income workers, veterans, and previously incarcerated populations. In one example, an MTA partner worked closely with the Department of Corrections to train and provide jobs for individuals transitioning out of the carceral system.

Removing Participation Barriers

Workforce development efforts across Maine face persistent challenges related to outreach, recruitment, and participation. Common barriers to recruitment and retention include housing affordability and availability, limited or nonexistent public transportation, and limited social and community amenities. In response, the IPP sites undertook deliberate approaches to address both rural and urban barriers, which shaped how sites designed outreach strategies, engaged participants, and partnered with employers, particularly in more remote regions.

While specific program activities took multiple forms across IPP sites, they all worked constantly to identify and mitigate barriers that directly affect participants’ ability to access training, materials and employment opportunities. These efforts included addressing financial, administrative, language, technical, and geographic barriers through a range of program supports. Over 400 workers received some kind of direct financial support from the program. The most common supports were stipends for achieving a certain credential, transportation, and childcare assistance. New Mainer communities were a priority population for several IPP sites and language access was a foundational barrier

to workforce participation. IPP sites with direct connections to these communities, including MLRC and MBEP, integrated ESL instruction into training and programming and to support navigation of credentialing systems.

In some cases, targeted financial support has had an especially significant impact. For example, students in the Roux gap-year program identified the \$500 housing stipend they received as a decisive factor in accepting entry-level pay for the year-long commitment. The Roux Institute heard from their gap-year students that “the housing stipend is what made the difference between me being able to accept a low wage role that I wanted to do and that I need to do to get the patient care hours to get the experience I need to take the next step. But it was not possible without that extra...financial support.” However, while these supports effectively reduced participation barriers in the short term, stakeholders also noted the inherent limitations of using IPP funds to supplement low wages and offset high costs.

Creating Infrastructure

Every site spoke of creating something durable and foundational with IPP pilot funds. Durable items included: training curriculum across industry sectors; coordinated career websites and career paths; consistent marketing materials to address industry perception issues; regulatory changes (e.g., new authorizations, approved scope, and utilization of insurance billing codes); and personal and business networks. Notably, most individual partners lack the incentive and capacity to create and market these products on their own. This was described by the partners as one of the major IPP benefits that needs sustained administrative funding to maintain.

COHN offers an illustrative example of how the IPP sites created sector-wide infrastructure. Prior to the Maine Dental Careers website created by COHN, information about dental career pathways in Maine was largely inaccessible unless individuals already had personal connections or insider knowledge. One partner stated how the website “has been really important for recruiting new people into the field and helping people kind of navigate once they’re already in. That was a resource that just didn’t exist.” Another partner described the development of durable professional networks as “a sort of a learning community that is developed, and hygienists have never had this type of support, and they are just flourishing.”

MDF told a similar story with the FOR/Maine website, which shares new resources and career pathway information. The IPP program allowed MDF to work with a consultant and create career and education pathways for the seven highest need careers within the forest product sector. One partner observed that these resources developed through the IPP pilot are now being used in rural schools. About this, a school counselor explained that “[i]f you look at the FOR/Maine website, I share that with all counselors... there’s some very good career exploration and guides in there that were developed through our program, and which didn’t exist.” The pilot also allowed MDF to develop the Business of Maine Forest products class which 86 students have completed so far; an online module is being developed to increase access.

Facilitators of Success

Success came from strategic relationship building, leveraging existing networks, honest communication, giving feedback while understanding constraints, and making participation easy for partners. Programs succeeded by working around structural barriers through flexibility, adaptation, and persistent personal engagement. Programs worked to optimize what they can control and strategically address uncontrollable barriers.

Relationships

Across all the IPP sites, stakeholders and staff consistently cited personal relationships as critical to program success. This is true for previously existing relationships and for new partnerships developed during the program. Both MTA and MBEP and their partners described how core programming activities, such as placing interns and arranging field trips and work site visits, were made possible because of these relationships. One educational partner described how important personal relationships were to make student field trips more effective, explaining, “Okay, so who do I meet? I meet the HR person that is hiring students. I call them up. They know who I am. We’ve placed students because of that relationship at Market Basket and we’ve place students at L.L. Bean.” Other partners described the IPP site leads as invested and committed to follow-through and communication. One partner noted that the IPP site lead “never went away, you know, and in a good way because we both have the same thing in common. I need the community partner; I need the business partner. She needs the student.” Additional partners from multiple sites reflected that these relationships helped connect

participants to caring employers and create opportunities for students who are traditionally difficult to place, particularly those in alternative education settings.

For IPP sites working with the immigrant community, these personal relationships were foundational to building trust. MLRC worked closely with collaborators to create a comprehensive navigation system linking ESL training, educational partners to develop and translate credentials, and employers. As a result of these trusted relationships, employers were more willing to hire and advance workers who were still developing their English skills and beginning the credentialing process. One MLRC partner explained, “They don’t have a company that will hire them on a training level and do those certificates. Some people will come to us, then we’ll talk to employers, and then we fund their trainings. So they get connected.”

Similarly, the forest products sector leveraged the work already done by FOR/Maine to align different stakeholders and engage with a different understanding and level of industry cooperation. One experienced forest products industry partner explained how, prior to the work of the IPP pilot and FOR/ME, the industry was siloed and competitive. They went on to describe how the pilot helped to reduce that friction, saying, “You actually...build relationships and break down those barriers to open up, you know, here’s our challenges on these pieces on a more...neutral ground. And that’s really the big value that we got.”

In addition to partnerships between IPP sites and their collaborators, the evaluation also surfaced an unexpected form of relationship: collaboration across the IPP sites themselves. In some cases, there was natural overlap between the sites and sectors, notably retail and tourism. The IPP structure enabled cross-sector collaborations, allowing sites to leverage shared efforts and extend their impact. An educational partner emphasized the significance of cross-sector connections with the following “I think it’s important... for the Department of Labor to understand...there was great synergy between these two organizations...[C]ross agency collaboration is something that, you know, doesn’t happen all the time, and it should be a credit to [MBEP and MTA site leads], for going down the road together with these initiatives.”

Flexibility

The ability to pivot was considered by many of the IPP site leads to be the most important driver of IPP success. Adapting to partner capacity and being responsive to business needs led to the most successful outcomes, and each IPP site demonstrated some examples of this adaptive ability. For example, a primary component of MTA’s initial programming was to develop a comprehensive internship program that businesses could adopt: MTA would help with the recruitment. They quickly realized that while there was interest amongst the partners for interns, most businesses lacked the internal capacity to manage the process. Although intern placements still happened, the IPP site lead took a much more direct role in the administrative components of the internship, such as vetting students, serving as the common point of contact, and assuring

that placements were a good fit for both the students and the businesses. MTA also shifted their focus to other types of outreach activities, such as student visits and job shadows.

Other examples of flexibility and responsiveness came from direct feedback from partners and program participants. MBEP and MTA work with industries with varying seasonal activity and demands. Basic logistics like coordinating site visits, trainings, and internships had to be responsive to these schedules. MBEP was constantly refining the outreach and training based on audience. The work with schools preparing career presentations and arranging site visits had a different audience than outreach focused on upskilling with incumbent employees. The MBEP site lead explained why flexibility in approach is so critical to their work, offering, “When I’m working with the business partners, we’re talking about soft skills, what they need in an employee, what roles they’re looking for, and what kind of trainings they need. If you pivot and I work with a school district, then I’m organizing field trips, going into classrooms doing career presentations, and trying to set up some [Extended Learning Opportunity] things.”

The work COHN did during the first year of the program exemplifies the need to pivot. COHN initially had a goal of working with the Maine CDC School Oral Health Program to develop training that would give hygienists and a new class of oral health navigators authority to provide screenings and fluoride varnish, expanding their reach in schools. A combination of regulatory challenges and changes in CDC priorities led COHN to rethink the oral health navigator role and its place in

the system. COHN shifted its focus to collaborate with community partners and health clinics to create the oral health navigator trainings and get people credentialed. As described by COHN, the oral health navigator learning series became a “stepping stone... to pull in people who haven’t necessarily experienced... the dental system and therefore may not really understand that there’s a whole career pathway in it that could be an opportunity for them.”

Barriers to Success

As previously discussed, all partners consistently mentioned early implementation hurdles. Although these hurdles were anticipated, they created common early implementation challenges across sites. The first challenge was general coordination: vetting and organizing partners; finalizing grant understanding; determining original program activities, outreach, and targets; developing career pathways; and beginning project implementation. The other major challenge during early implementation was specific to the delay of the Work Source Maine website and the development of career pathways on the site. This challenge altered the timelines and workplans for many of the sites, but once the website successfully launched, site leads and partners have begun to utilize and market the resource.

Beyond initial startup hurdles, however, the IPP pilot uncovered several barriers and challenges that can be examined across three major categories: structural; capacity and budget limitations; and industry-specific challenges. Within each of these categories it is important to frame what partnerships can control and what

they cannot. For example, while organizations have some ability to set and adjust wages, overall labor market forces and prevailing sector wages are beyond their control.

Structural Constraints

Throughout the implementation of the IPP, several structural challenges emerged as fundamental barriers to recruitment, retention, and economic development. Despite their efforts to overcome these challenges, sites and partners consistently discussed housing costs and availability, transportation infrastructure and access, childcare costs and availability, and market wages that do not cover living expenses as major impediments to their work. Affordable housing, transportation, and access to childcare were echoed in the employer/stakeholder survey when respondents were asked about critical workforce challenges. These problems were all amplified when trying to develop programs and recruit new workers to Maine, especially in rural areas. One site described the challenges in rural recruitment and retention, “namely, there’s no housing in the area. There’s not much, you know, socially to do for someone who’s right out of undergrad, wages, things along those lines. So, we’re still sort of brainstorming ways to incentivize people to take some of those more rural locations.” Similarly, another stakeholder described a local transportation assistance program that had one more year of funding, noting, “once that funding goes away, we’re going to be sending that same shuttle that goes to Windham out to Sanford to pick up our employees...we really need some help with funding on transportation for these folks.”

Stakeholders highlighted structural barriers unique to New Mainer communities related to transferring foreign credentials and a catch-22 faced by workers seeking entry into healthcare and direct support roles, where employment often requires certifications and a driver's license that are difficult to obtain without already having a job to pay for training and fees. While IPP partners worked to mitigate these barriers through navigation support and targeted assistance, it was often beyond the scope of the IPP interventions alone to access reliable transportation, change credentialing requirements and systems, and secure basic resources such as appropriate clothing and technology for job searches.

Capacity Constraints

Capacity barriers were mentioned by all IPP site leads and partners in the program. Budget, time, and staff limitations were identified as the most common capacity constraints for IPP partners. Just as structural issues amplified rural barriers, capacity constraints amplified barriers for small organizations, as engagement with IPP activities has a cost. These became critical decision points for organizations deciding to take on an intern, offer trainings, or engage with the partnership in committed ways.

Each sector also identified the impact of workforce shortages on their capacity to engage. Being understaffed and overwhelmed by, as one partner phrased it, "a staff of three doing the job of 10", was a frequent theme. Additionally, both IPP site leads and partners expressed concerns over ongoing funding and sustainability. They noted that committing to engagement and making policy and hiring

changes can be unappealing to partners without continued and sustainable funding sources and methods.

Partnership-specific Constraints

The IPP sites and their partners also pointed to industry- and population-specific challenges that impacted their work. These included policy and regulatory issues that presented minor hurdles in some cases and outright roadblocks in others. Some of these challenges mentioned include:

- Age restrictions for workers
- Limited dental hygienist scope and authority
- Difficulties with foreign credential transfer and legal status of workers
- Language barriers
- Liability concerns
- Licensing issues
- Inconsistent medical reimbursement rates and codes, particularly with MaineCare
- The seasonal nature of tourism
- Placing interns equitably across organizational size and regions

While not a result of IPP formation or directly related to the work accomplished by the collaborations, these challenges speak to the nuances between industries and the broad spectrum of regulatory and implementation issues that can arise when piloting new initiatives.

IPP Participant Recommendations

IPP site leads and other participants offered some insights into future IPP designs, many of which reinforce earlier findings that have already been shared. They emphasized that sustained, reliable funding is the backbone of success, calling for continued and expanded investment across the programs. Some urged exploring more creative IPP funding strategies, such as blended funding streams that combine state funding, other external grants, and industry sponsorship. Many also stressed the need for future iterations to address the persistent structural barriers (e.g., transportation infrastructure, affordable housing, and childcare access) that negatively impact workforce participation. Finally, site leads and participants underscored the importance of growing their partnerships to support ongoing identification of program gaps and maintaining consistent marketing of industry and career pathways to ensure programs remain accessible, effective, and sustainable.

Participant Outcomes and Experiences

Over the course of the IPP pilot, the program resulted in 1,297 new hires, 1,090 certifications, and 3,498 people trained. In focus groups, participants who engaged in IPP activities discussed how the experience increased their professional and personal skills, provided them with a broader understanding of industry sectors and career opportunities, and exposed them to aspects of the industries that changed their perceptions and built their confidence. Training participants, the IPP site leads, and the

partners who were surveyed also described new hires, promotions and advancement, wage increases, and higher retention among the participants. This allowed employers to better meet their staffing needs and fill high-demand and high-turnover positions.

Skills and Perceptions

Across multiple sites, focus group participants reported learning a combination of technical and soft skills that are highly transferrable across industries, such as improved technology skills, communication skills with customers and co-workers, managing expectations, and the ability to understand how parts of an organization function to create the whole. As one participant stated, “I appreciate that the training emphasized real world examples and practices. I think that those communications and customer service strategies could be helpful, [at] almost any job.” Another shared, “I never thought about all the work that goes into promoting Maine and kind of making it this brand, making it...this cohesive thing...So I’ve just been learning a lot about, like, the collaboration and the teamwork that goes on behind the scenes.” Similarly, when asked how the IPP has been most impactful to their business or organization, business survey respondents pointed to high-quality, accessible training, certifications and professional development opportunities that strengthened worker skills. Indeed, 58% reported improved soft skills, 55% cited increased certifications and licensing, and 42% reported improved digital and technical proficiency.

Incumbent workers also spoke of how they benefited from professional development in the form of leadership training focused on developing managerial skills for supervisory staff. Managerial training was part of an MTA hospitality partner's strategic retention plan based on the idea that better trained supervisors lead to better retention and performance outcomes. The partner described the impact of the training on their employee as a newfound sense of confidence and communication skills, sharing, "I see him moving right up the ranks with this, because he likes how he feels and he likes how the staff that he oversees [are] responding to him because he knows how to communicate with them. I'm so excited, because I know this is only the beginning of what he's going to do next. I just cannot even get over the difference in this individual, it's amazing."

As previously mentioned, almost all the IPP sites worked to dispel misperceptions about the industry sectors through intentional experiences and training. While skill development was a primary outcome, exposing community members to the industry itself also proved to be impactful in shifting participants' perceptions. For example, almost all focus group participants across the tourism and retail partnerships explained how their experience generated a deeper knowledge of the industry, a new awareness of career opportunities, and changed their perceptions about the industry. Similarly, MDF described a FOR/Maine survey where 94% of the students reported they knew little to nothing about the forest products sector. An MDF education partner described how site visits, like a tour of the Advanced Structures and Composites Center at the University of Maine, showed new industrial applications of nanocellulose and highlighted

the engineering side of the forest products sector. Indeed, 41% of the business partners/stakeholders surveyed indicated that the IPP had helped to improve perceptions of the industry. However, this sample could be somewhat skewed, given that this was a focus area of MBEP and MTA who also had higher response rates compared to the other sites

Confidence and Career Awareness

For some participants, the value of their IPP experience was increased confidence and autonomy. This was particularly true for non-native English speakers participating in MBEP's RISE Up retail trainings and ESL support, and for hygienists who gained new authorities and the capacity to open their own practices. Some training participants described feeling more respected by their employer because of their enhanced skills and credentials.

Participants were also asked how engagement with the programming might encourage them to stay in Maine. Across sectors, the focus group participants were highly varied in terms of career stage and goals. While younger workers were less likely to have clear goals, a career in mind, or an intention to stay in Maine, their experiences helped them to learn about an industry and see different job opportunities in fields that were new to them. In some cases, students discovered pathways that led to adjacent roles within the industry. As one MDF educational partner shared, "we had a group of high school students go through the Business of Maine Forest class, and several of them actually did change their career paths...[A] few students who were in that natural resource technical center program...transitioned over

or into the trucking program, or into the diesel mechanic program, because they saw that as an avenue and opportunity to work in the industry.”

Similarly, many participants from the retail and tourism sectors said that they would not rule out work in the field after their experience. Most notably, those involved with these sectors expressed a particular and strong love of Maine after experiencing a full tourism season—they understood Maine’s beauty and wanted to see the industries that showcase it succeed. Together, these findings suggest that IPP participation can influence confidence and career clarity, thereby shaping how participants view themselves, available career options, and future opportunities in Maine.

Employer and Industry Impacts

The IPP partnerships have had impacts across individual, organizational, industry, and community levels. This section examines impacts beyond the grain of the individual worker to understand what the IPP program means at higher organizational and industry levels.

Expanded pipelines

The immediate and direct impact of the IPP pilot on businesses has been a greater pool of new hires who have the skills and training required alongside upskilled incumbent workers. As sectors develop their recruitment and retention strategies, the IPP program activities supported industries by actively growing the recruitment pool. Many of the stakeholders who were interviewed shared

examples of how the IPP recruitment events, direct engagement with educational partners, and targeted outreach were exposing more diverse candidates to the industry. One MDF partner described the IPP approach as an “aggregation of expertise, resources, and effort,” explaining that collective, sector-wide coordination allowed individual employers to focus on their specific workforce needs while the broader pipeline is “covered, guided, and supported by the businesses themselves.”

These sentiments were reflected in the business partner/stakeholder survey, where multiple respondents highlighted how the IPP strengthened workforce pipelines and helped drive connections with new and diverse talent pools. As one stakeholder stated, “We have been able to connect high school students with employers who would otherwise not have reached these students before graduation. Connecting students with opportunities to be mentored by professionals in the field before they graduate allows them to learn skills and have a more accurate perspective on jobs/career paths. This is a critical way to keep the pipeline for industries/businesses in Maine fresh and connected to the workforce coming out of our schools.”

In addition to increasing the numbers of applicants, partners felt that IPP activities such as training and recruitment efforts yielded higher quality and more motivated candidates. They also suggested that the combination of more skilled workers and motivated and focused interns helped to streamline the recruitment process. One business partner stated, “I feel like it helps us get really good candidates that we know are really dedicated

to this work, because that's why they're doing this, right? ... It kind of helps us vet folks as well... we're getting them through a trusted source, [which] makes us feel a little bit more secure and willing to put in that extra training work." Indeed, about half of the respondents to the business partner/stakeholder survey (n=11) reported that they had observed increases in hiring and retention since participating in the IPP activities. Of those, again about half attributed the increases to the work of the IPP. Although the number of respondents reporting these increases was small, their observations do point to potential workforce impacts stemming from the IPP investment.

Enhanced capacity

One of the most impactful and successful aspects of the IPP program has been the ability to leverage shared resources to undertake initiatives and implement programs that would otherwise be out of reach for individual businesses and organizations. As a result of IPP engagement, businesses and organizations are increasing their capacity in ways they could not achieve independently. Every business and community partner explained their constraints around capacity, bandwidth, budget, and resources to recruit, retain, and train workers. A recurring theme from these partners was how the IPP programming and activities provide the operational lift needed to engage in activities such as entry-level and incumbent worker training, professional development, vetting and coordinating interns, organizing recruitment activities, and developing marketing materials. These functions are simply not feasible for many organizations without IPP support, especially small businesses.

For businesses and sectors facing chronic vacancies and high turnover, partners reported the impacts have been stabilizing. The job placements in community health, including in oral health clinics and in the retail and tourism sectors, are examples where industry partners noted that IPP activities are impacting hiring in sectors with high vacancies and high turnover.

Other partners noted how short-term placements that come through apprenticeship and internship programs have provided budget flexibility that has helped stabilize staffing and service delivery. Many have found that short-term placements coming through the IPP pipeline (e.g., interns and seasonal workers) are worth the time and resources to train because they add immediate value to the organization. As one IPP site lead described, "...some of the businesses that we've been working with...have no capacity to hire someone to come in for the summer to help them do stuff. So that's been a very tangible benefit to some of our businesses: they've been able to actually have students come in and work." This was reflected in the business partner/stakeholder survey, with many describing how the IPP enabled small organizations to add staff capacity and invest in training that would otherwise be unaffordable, while also improving industry branding, networking, and talent attraction. As one partner stated, "This is the only way our small nonprofit is able to afford additional staffing capacity." Likewise, another said, "We are able to fill some of our high need positions and know that other similar organizations might experience the same."

Moreover, the IPP site leads and partners believe the infrastructure built through the IPP grant period will allow them to continue hiring and supporting workers in ways that improve staff retention, allow for professional development, and grow the next generation of managers, supervisors, and leaders. One COHN partner described how IPP resources have expanded their capacity to support career progression, saying “if we grab someone who then really becomes interested, we can do assistant training, we could support them in their look to go to hygiene and even dental school.” Similarly, an IPP site lead described, “In our industry especially, people tend to get promoted from within...[A]nd suddenly you’re in charge of a bunch of people, but there’s no training for how to do that, even though it’s a radically different job...So we’ve launched this program to help take people who are kind of new to that frontline role and help them become better leaders.” Another described helping businesses to understand that many New Mainer workers “...need the flexibility. Some of them have, like, families, small kids, and they are both working. The wife and the husband are working so they need the flexible schedules.” As a result of one such conversation, the business adjusted schedules to allow both parents to remain employed.

IPP site leads and partners recognize that the long-term impact of IPP activities on the engaged sectors remains to be seen. Nonetheless, many spoke about the importance of continuing to leverage lasting infrastructure such as class materials, marketing and promotional materials, websites, and career pathways, with the networks and connections made to maintain engagement and continue the

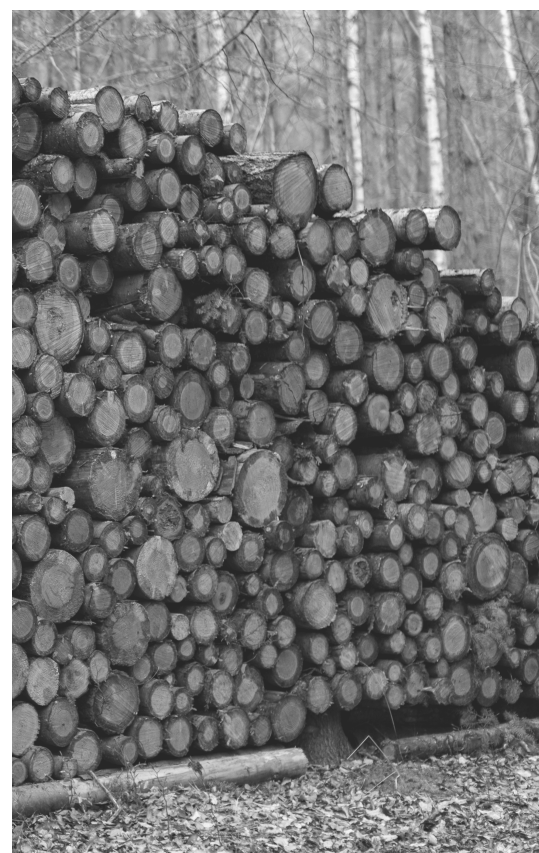
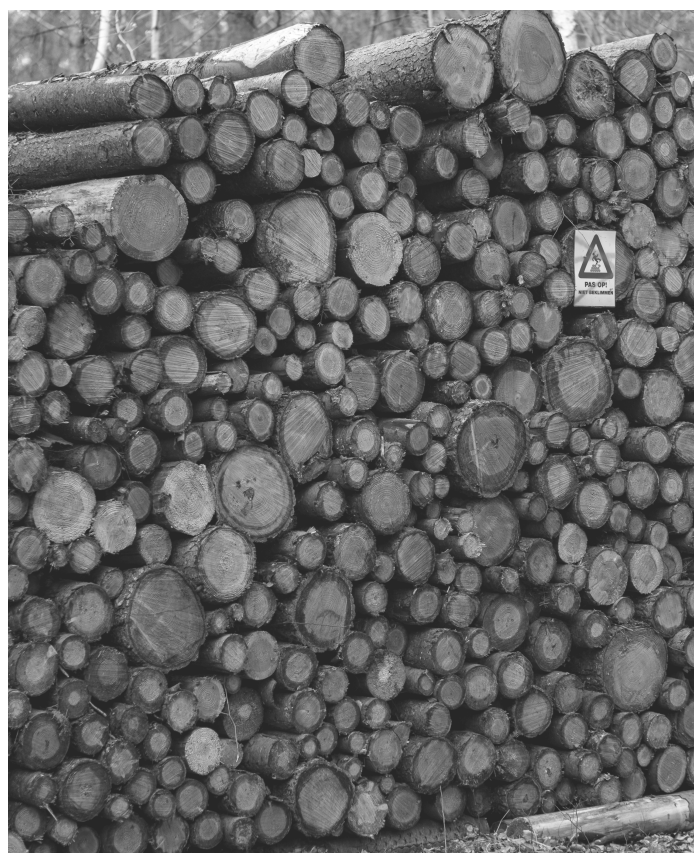
pilot’s momentum at the end of the grant period. Indeed, the IPP sites that developed websites and media campaigns are noting higher than expected engagement and they want this momentum to continue. A COHN partner noted specifically that the oral health careers and resources website developed during the grant period was “this entirely new thing” and they want to see the site utilized to continue growing the oral health workforce, improving their skills, and improving oral health access and outcomes across the state.

Cooperation and centralization

While businesses inherently compete with each other for both customers and workers, the IPP program fostered a positive type of industry-wide cooperation, collaboration, and cross-sector learning that benefits everyone. Describing a “three-legged stool” in an interview, one MDF partner said, “The three pillars of a forest sector [are] landowners, harvesters, and mills. You need those. That’s the three-legged stool. If one of the legs isn’t strong, the whole thing will collapse.” They went on to describe how the cooperation fostered by MDF “[got] everyone to actually sit at the same table, which they really hadn’t done for...ever.” The cooperation fostered by MDF contributed to the establishment of new career pathways, developed forest products sector business classes, and paved the way for a new CDL credential in collaboration with their educational partners. The IPP collaborators are also working together to change the perceptions of careers in the forest products sector. Other IPP sites echoed this experience, expressing hope that these programs, connections, and networks continue when the funding cycle ends.

Stakeholders saw the value of the IPP pilot as creating a central hub of information and communication. Many described the ongoing effort required to build and maintain centralized job-posting platforms across sectors and clearly link postings to career pathways. Organizations would need to know about Work Source Maine to post jobs and utilize workforce development services. While maintaining job listings across multiple platforms may sound simple, stakeholders pointed out this can be burdensome for organizations, and often depends on direct outreach from the IPP site coordinators and the networks built through engagement with IPP programs and resources. Additionally,

many partners and site leads appreciated that the partnerships represent a brand for the industry with a consistent, clear, coherent voice marketing the sectors and career opportunities within them. As one MDF business partner stated, “When we engage people, it’s a much more consistent message about what things are, where things are, and what are those opportunities, rather than 50 uncoordinated voices talking to people.” Lastly, sustained coordination allows the industry partners to monitor the field for program gaps and creative collaboration opportunities, allowing supporting programs and materials to develop flexibly in response to employer and industry needs.





Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Taken together, the IPP evaluation findings demonstrate that the primary value of IPPs lies less in individual program activities and more in their coordination and brokerage role, a finding which closely aligns with evaluations of similar partnerships in Colorado (Wildfig Partners, 2021), Florida (Careersource, 2017), Hawaii (Peters, 2024), Maryland (Maryland DOL, 2024), Massachusetts (Mass Commonwealth Corp, 2013, 2024), Michigan (Quinn, 2012), New Jersey (New Jersey DOL, 2025), Pennsylvania (Penn DOL, 2024), and Rhode Island (Pearson-Merkowitz et al., 2018). Across all the industry sectors, the IPP sites functioned as an intermediary, linking employers, education, community organizations, and state systems in ways individual entities could not achieve alone. The partnerships described how they aligned stakeholders, expanded recruitment pipelines, and increased access to training and career navigation.

Flexibility, trust, and relationships consistently surfaced as essential drivers of success. The most successful outcomes emerged when IPP sites adapted programming to meet partner capacity, seasonal demands, regulatory realities, and participant needs. Each IPP site emphasized the importance of flexibility, rather than rigid program expectations, as critical to their success. This flexibility allowed them to account for sector and regional differences, and the unique needs of varying populations. Flexibility among the IPPs was most effective when coupled with trust, persistence, and personal engagement. The relationships established over the course of the pilot make the IPP sites uniquely situated to respond to shifting industry and workforce needs in the future. Again, these findings reflect findings from the literature on sector strategy implementation, which show that flexibility, trust, and sustained relationships are essential (Maguire et al., 2010; Mass Commonwealth Corp, 2013; Nat. Fund for Workforce Solutions, 2017, 2018; Third Sector, 2024; US DOL, 2016; Woolsey et al., 2010).

The literature on sector-based investment has increasingly emphasized systems change and infrastructure-building as the most durable results (Colorado Workforce Development Council, 2023; Nat. Fund for Workforce Solutions, 2017; Quinn, 2012; Third Sector, 2024; Wilson, 2017; Woolsey et al., 2010). This evaluation proved no exception: stakeholders described the myriad ways in which the impact of tangible career pathways, training curricula, marketing assets, websites, and cross-sector networks created through the pilot went beyond individual placements or cohorts and represents a lasting impact of the initiative. The IPP investment in this way has contributed to long-term workforce system capacity. However, these findings also raise questions about sustainability, as the intermediary functions demonstrated by IPP sites require ongoing capacity to adjust and respond to industry needs, which cannot be maintained through short-term or project-based funding alone.

The IPP pilot has demonstrated the critical role of targeted and intentional supports such as student stipends, ESL integration, career navigation, and credentialing assistance to meaningfully expand access for priority populations (e.g., young workers, adult learners, New Mainers, etc.). Multiple stakeholders and participants agreed that the availability of these supports often determined whether participation was feasible, particularly in rural settings common in Maine. These experiences and findings align with research on equity-focused workforce strategies which indicate that wraparound supports can be foundational for participation

among immigrants, low-income workers, and adult learners. However, stakeholders across multiple IPP sites also consistently described larger structural barriers, such as housing, transportation, childcare, and wage levels as limiting recruitment and retention, particularly in rural regions and the healthcare sector. While the IPP sites described how they worked to mitigate many of these challenges, resolving larger structural barriers to workforce participation is beyond the role of this workforce development programming. Indeed, there is a growing consensus in the literature that workforce programs must be embedded within broader economic and social policy strategies that make basic needs a priority in support of broader economic and workforce development.



Recommendations

The findings from this evaluation suggest that future investments should not only fund workforce programs, but intentionally support intermediary infrastructure, cross-sector coordination, and alignment with broader policy systems that shape workforce participation. The findings also demonstrate that industries benefit when a trusted intermediary assumes the operational lift of recruitment, training coordination, and partnership management, functions that are otherwise infeasible for many

employers. They also suggest that workforce development investments are most impactful when they prioritize flexibility, coordination, navigation, and capacity-building rather than stand-alone training programs. At the same time, the findings make clear that workforce strategies operate within broader structural conditions that significantly shape participation and retention and cannot be addressed through program design alone.

It is from these implications that the following recommendations are offered for consideration in future replication and investment in the IPP model, many of which align with findings from other workforce and sector partnership evaluations.

1. SUSTAIN AND STABILIZE FUNDING FOR INTERMEDIARY-LED WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS

Continued, reliable funding is essential to maintain the coordination, trust, and infrastructure developed through the pilot, and to support the deliberate expansion of the IPP model. Short-term or episodic funding undermines relationship-based models that require time to mature, and interrupts momentum developed through a pilot. Almost all states who funded similar partnership programs⁶ did so through a mix of state, federal, business, philanthropic, and local sources. Almost all publicly available evaluations of state-level partnerships suggest using diversified funding streams that are tailored to state and local needs and the level of public support.

⁶ The research team considered a state's partnership to be similar to MDOL's pilot partnership program if it: a) required a facilitating organization to gather some mix of employers, educational institutions, and community-based organizations; b) created pathways to credentials or jobs in understaffed industries; and 3) funded a partnership in at least one of Maine's six pilot industries. A total of 24 states currently or have recently run a partnership program similar to Maine's pilot; 21 of those 24 states offered some sort of public explanation as to how they funded their industry partnership program.

2. LEVERAGE AND MAINTAIN THE INFRASTRUCTURE CREATED THROUGH THE PILOT

Career pathway tools, training curricula, marketing platforms, and cross-sector networks should be actively maintained and updated to preserve momentum and avoid duplication. These tools can also serve as a foundation or resource and knowledge bank from which new industry partnerships can build.

3. CONTINUE TO SUPPORT COORDINATED FIELD-BUILDING AND SHARED WORKFORCE NARRATIVES

A consistent, sector-wide narrative about career opportunities, grounded in real pathways and visible employer engagement can strengthen sector visibility and support recruitment, retention, and long-term workforce growth. This is an essential component for sustaining existing IPP sites and establishing new ones, with approaches tailored to unique sector contexts.

4. INSTITUTIONALIZE SUPPORT FOR PRIORITY POPULATIONS AND GEOGRAPHIES

ESL integration, credential navigation, stipends, and wraparound supports should be treated as core program components given their central role in access, attraction, and retention. Institutionalizing these supports within future program design and funding models is critical for sustaining existing IPP sites and embedding them into future ones.

5. ALIGN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT WITH BROADER STRUCTURAL INVESTMENTS

Continued reliance on temporary financial support embedded within workforce initiatives limits long-term impact, as participation barriers re-emerge when funding ends. Addressing these challenges may require treating key financial support as permanent workforce infrastructure, advancing parallel policy solutions (e.g., living wages, housing development, public transit, and childcare systems), or pursuing both approaches simultaneously.

6. STRENGTHEN HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE INCENTIVES AND REIMBURSEMENT STRUCTURES

For future healthcare-related IPPs specifically, workforce investments should be aligned with healthcare reimbursement and incentive structures, which may require partnerships across multiple state agencies and stakeholders. This could include expanding incentives for providers to accept MaineCare, examining reimbursement rates, and assessing how these policies shape workforce investments and sustainability.

Conclusion

The findings from this evaluation have demonstrated that the impact of the IPP pilot has been greater than the sum of its parts. In particular, each IPP site has established itself as a trusted intermediary that brings together diverse partners to address shared sector challenges; this in turn has begun to expand workforce capacity and opportunities across the various industries. Notably, the pilot has shown that flexible, relationship-based approaches and targeted supports are essential for reaching priority populations and addressing workforce needs. At the same time, the evaluation has highlighted that workforce initiatives do not operate in a vacuum and are sensitive to the broader challenges posed by housing, transportation, and difficult-to-navigate systems. Future IPP investments should prioritize sustaining this intermediary capacity and cross-sector coordination, and align with broader policy and funding systems that support long-term workforce resilience.



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Appendix A: Data Sources

The DIP evaluation team employed a mixed-methods evaluation approach to gather both qualitative and quantitative insights into the IPP program.

Quarterly report data and analysis

The evaluation team obtained quarterly program data from MDOL provided in Excel spreadsheets, which were then aggregated into summary counts across all six IPP sites. In addition, the evaluation team reviewed the qualitative narrative for each site to reveal cross-cutting themes, lessons learned and highlight unique examples of success.

Key informant interviews

The evaluation team conducted interviews with program staff at each pilot site to gather their insights into what has worked, what lessons have been learned throughout implementation, and the impact of collaboration and partnership on each site's ability to develop Maine's workforce and meet industry needs. These interviews were semi-structured to gather consistent information from each participant yet allow researchers to explore the unique experiences specific to each site. During these interviews, the evaluation team worked with the pilot sites to identify and then interview up to five critical partners per site to gather broad perspective on impacts of employer collaborations through additional one-on-one and small group semi-structured interviews. Between two and four interviews with key collaborators were held per IPP site.

Business partner/stakeholder survey

To gather insight into business partner and stakeholder perspectives, the evaluators administered a short survey to key collaborators identified by each IPP site lead. The survey was distributed by Qualtrics software to emails provided to the evaluators by each IPP site after obtaining collaborators' permission to share their emails. Survey questions asked for quantitative reporting on the length of time engaged with IPP activities, the approximate number of employees that participated in IPP-related training or workforce development activities, and the size of businesses in terms of number of employees. Collaborators were also asked their perspectives on what the most critical workforce challenges were for their business or organization, what specific skills they perceived as lacking among job applicants, and the extent to which participating in the IPP program benefited their organization specific to hiring and retaining employees.

Participant focus groups

The evaluation team convened virtual focus groups with participants from most sites with students and employees who participated in an education or training component. Researchers worked with IPP site leads to recruit voluntary participants, which resulted in small groups of two to four participants per group. Focus groups were held via zoom, and the questions and answers were recorded and transcribed with that platform's tools for these functions. Participants were incentivized with \$25 prepaid gift cards for their participation. Questions asked about participants' career experiences and goals, how participation in the training or work experience contributed to the advancement of their skills, and how the experience has impacted their confidence in working in the field in the future, including if it has contributed to their feeling about staying in Maine to pursue their career. Where applicable, participants were asked about program impacts to their understanding of workplace culture in the specific industry and opportunities to build English language skills at their place of work.