



State of Tennessee State Workforce Development Board Meeting Minutes

Friday, August 22, 2025 – 10:00 AM – 11:20 AM

Board Members Present

- Jacky Akbari*
- Natalie Alvarez
- Martha Axford
- Assistant Commissioner Jay Baker
- Joe Baker
- Jason Bates
- Tim Berry
- Lynda Botsch
- Designee: Policy Advisor Suzanne Carr for Commissioner Clarence Carter
- Billy Dycus
- Ben Ferguson (Southwest)
- Max Goldberg
- Marshall Graves (Southeast)
- David Jordan
- Mayor Tim Kelly
- Policy Director Michael Hendrix for Governor Bill Lee
- Sandra Long
- Designee: Director Jennie McCabe for Commissioner Stuart McWhorter
- Mayor Mike Pogreba (Northern Middle)
- Stuart Price
- Designee: Assistant Commissioner Deborah Knoll for Commissioner Lizzette Reynolds
- Jason Schmitt
- Lee Sloan
- David Stansell
- Commissioner Deniece Thomas
- Jeff Vance
- Ron Wade (Greater Memphis)
- Assistant Commissioner Kevin Wright

Board Members Present by Proxy

- Will Trumm - Jamie Choate, Proxy

Members Absent

- Brandy Lassiter for State Senator Paul Bailey
- State Representative Clark Boyd
- J. Paul Jackson

Location in parenthesis represents the state board member's membership on a local workforce board.

*Arrived after roll call

Welcome and Opening Thoughts

Chairman Berry welcomed everyone to the meeting and offered the following comments:

- **National Governor's Association:** Chairman Berry attended this conference in Billings, MT last week and noted how proud he was to represent this board because other states look to Tennessee as an example. He thanked the board for their commitment, and acknowledged the cooperation they have among all the departments and staffs of the various partner agencies.

- **Strategy Session:** The board met for a strategy session yesterday, particularly around the recent Executive Order that the Governor signed. The committees had some good discussions about goals and where they want to be strategically to support some of the changes that are coming. They also had a preview of the benefits cliff presentation that would be presented at this meeting.

Roll Call

Iler Bradley conducted the roll call and established the presence of a quorum.

Consent Agenda (vote required)

Chairman Berry requested a motion to approve the minutes for the May 16, 2025 meeting. It was moved by Ben Ferguson and seconded by Sandra Long to approve the minutes as presented. After asking for further discussion and hearing none, Chairman Berry called for a vote. The motion unanimously passed.

Workforce System Updates

Deniece Thomas, Commissioner – Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD)

Commissioner Thomas gave the following system updates:

National Governor's Association

Commissioner Thomas also mentioned this meeting last week, noting the incredible vision of our Governor and an incredible sense of partnership, forward-thinking, and innovation by this board. Executive Order 109 made its way across the country, and a huge area of focus for a lot of other states was giving their state workforce boards expanded duties beyond the WIOA portfolio. Commissioner Thomas will be serving a second term as NGA Workforce Liaison Chair which gives them a voice to help shape the new strategy across the country.

The Golden Age Report

Several reports have lent some insight into the vision for Tennessee's workforce and this is one of them. The Golden Age Report has five pillars: industry driven strategies, worker mobility, integrated systems, accountability, and lastly, flexibility and innovation. All of these have been topics this board has been engaged in for the last few years. This report is shaping up the federal policy to match what we have already been thinking about, which will give us the opportunity to make some recommendations to the Governor to push things down through policy and practice.

Funding

TDLWD fully expects there will be a minimum 10% reduction in federal workforce funding. Commissioner Thomas thinks the work around alignment will allow them to be able to access funding that was not available to them. She's concerned about the flexibility because flexibility stretches the dollars and that's where they're really going to put their energy. Other unknowns include what's going to happen with WIOA and the availability of block grants. Commissioner Thomas will share any updates.

Structural Change

TDLWD took an internal look at how they were structured to support job seekers, employers, Tennessee Works, and all the great initiatives that the Governor is continuing to lead. They have undergone a bit of a change inside their department, and she shared a small snippet of their org chart. A new business engagement division has been created because they believe the main artery for workforce development, innovation, and economic development will run through their engagement with business and industry. These changes are designed to put them in a posture to be more responsive and agile. They will be canvassing the state to work with employers to showcase this

new forward focus. The goal is to have a very broad-based business engagement strategy and to have expertise in industry sectors such as hospitality and healthcare.

Partner Recognition

Commissioner Thomas recognized the incredible leadership and innovation from other agencies including the Commissioners from Economic and Community Development, Education, Human Services, Dr. Gentile with the Higher Education Commission, and Chancellor Tydings with the Board of Regents. She thanked those in the room from these agencies. Workforce and economic development do not rest with one department: it is the state's portfolio.

Audit

TDLWD had their audit, and for the first time that Commissioner Thomas can think of in her 18 years with the department, they had a clean audit: zero findings and no observations. She thanked the members of the General Assembly for keeping them honest. She also publicly acknowledged her team and their great work, and Chairman Berry did the same.

Strategic Goal: Expanded Partnerships and System Alignment

Connecting the Workforce Ecosystem

Briana Thomas, Chief Strategy Officer – Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD)

Chief Strategy Officer Thomas gave more details on the high level updates Commissioner Thomas shared.

WIOA

Major changes are being strongly considered for WIOA, but TDLWD will continue with business as usual as they are planning for the future. The WIOA State Plan Modification is anticipated to be due Spring 2026. The board has always heard this Plan and been available to give feedback. This same kind of process will be followed for the modification. A secondary step will be the modification of regional and local plans. These are the presentations the board typically hears from the local workforce development board directors and/or other staff. This will be coming in the spring too. Ms. Thomas doesn't know what the federal guidelines will be around this process.

Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC)

THEC has been working on the revision of their master plan, and Ms. Thomas recognized members of this team who were in the audience. She and her team have been engaged with THEC in their work process, ensuring that their master plan has been reflective of the work that this board is doing especially regarding where workforce development is headed on behalf of the state. They've done a great amount of work engaging workforce, education, employer, and higher education partners.

Department of Education (DOE)

DOE has been working in partnership with SCORE around innovative practices. The Future Ready TN Portal will have its full rollout. They've always been a continuous strong partner with TDLWD, and their expansion of traditional K through 12 education including workforce components has been appreciated.

Non-degree credential program (TDLWD)

There has been an increase in state funds related to traditional and non-traditional workforce programs. One of these programs is their non-degree credential program which provides a quick response to workforce needs and training for existing and future employees. More information is forthcoming.

TN Works

This is a collaborative effort to respond to business and industry needs. Multiple state agencies are coming together to provide support in a traditional incentivized way as well as a non-incentivized way. This board is a great champion and stakeholder engaged in this process. The Governor's office will say more about this effort this Fall.

Strategic Goal: Increase Labor Force Participation

Advancing Careers Benefits Cliffs: Potential Barriers to Economic Mobility
Brittany Birken, Director/Principal Advisor | Community and Economic Development
Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta

Director/Principal Advisor Brittany Birken presented helpful and enlightening information about benefits cliffs. She explained that benefits cliffs occur when low-income working families are accessing public assistance programs like childcare, housing, food assistance to help make ends meet. If they receive a small or modest wage increase, very often that can trigger the loss of eligibility for public assistance programs. This trigger can actually leave them financially worse off because the value of that public assistance program is greater than the value of the income increase.

For example, the program Ms. Birken presented works from a definition of net financial resources, i.e., income plus any public assistance received minus basic household expenses minus taxes. In a chart Ms. Birkin shared of a particular family scenario, their income increasing over time showed an increase to net financial resources until \$49,000. At that point, because of the loss of eligibility for public assistance programs at this income level, a family would be no better off making \$49,000 than they were when they were making \$14,000 accessing public assistance.

The extent of this issue is significant. In 2021, Alabama conducted a poll survey of low income working families and 38% of respondents indicated they had declined taking a new job or promotion because they were afraid they might lose a form of public assistance. This also has a profound impact on the business community. The Florida Chamber of Commerce surveyed HR directors, and 33% said some employees or candidates at their company were unwilling to accept jobs, increase hours, or advance because of fear of loss of government benefits. Ultimately, these typically present as shorter term barriers, but they can prevent the long-term realization of gains. Supporting career advancement for more low-income families and addressing the benefits cliffs means savings to taxpayers.

At the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, Ms. Birken is Director of their Center for Workforce and Economic Opportunity. They conduct research, create tools, and engage with community and state partners across the country to understand solutions and mitigation strategies for barriers to labor force participation for low and moderate income working families. They also share their knowledge for replication and scale.

Currently, they have a suite of tools developed from a survive to thrive continuum. These tools:

1. Are designed to show people the implication on their public assistance and net financial resources if they get a job and an increase in hours/wages
2. Are used across the country by workforce development intermediaries including American Job Centers, One Stops, and some community colleges
3. Are designed to provide supported conversation between a tool coach and a client to help clients figure out the best career pathway to match their interests with the needs of their families
4. Can be used to think about different wraparound supports with training plans and to address any barriers
5. Provide an opportunity for employer engagement
6. Can also be used for policy simulation/changes
7. Help with cross-system collaboration, i.e., the ability to identify multiple funding sources and partners that can work together to better understand and address the barriers to economic mobility from a systems perspective

8. Have helped to inform innovative pilot development.

Their benefits cliffs tool is available and has usage in every state at this point. After giving examples from Florida and South Carolina, Ms. Birkin noted that here in Tennessee in 2021, the legislature created the TANF Opportunity Grant and dedicated money from reserves to invest in seven different community partnership pilots. One of them is here in Nashville.

The Martha O'Bryan Center, in partnership with the state of Tennessee through the Department of Human Services, has a demonstration pilot called Our Chance TN that provides coaching and transitional benefit to those who are experiencing the benefits cliff. A brief overview of this pilot was given by Timberly Russell and Keith Barnes, Director and Senior Director respectively of the Beyond the Cliff Initiative. Since this program started, they've had over 1,200 participants and have seen a \$19,500 increase in income for about 64% of their participants.

In real time, Martha O'Bryan has seen that if they help families who are experiencing this benefits cliff challenge by giving them a formula model of supports and tools, they can experience increased income, financial stability, and contribute to our great state in tax dollars and in their contribution to their communities. Participants find their way into career pathways that allow them to tap into the workforce which meets the talent needs of employers.

As an initiative of Martha O'Bryan Center, Beyond the Cliff is also looking at this from a national perspective, focusing on how to bring together not just the innovation pilot here in Tennessee but practitioners from across the country. State agencies, county governments, workforce, and social service providers are all testing innovative approaches to help tackle this issue. Martha O'Bryan is identifying best practices to help inform efforts to fix this issue for Tennesseans.

After an engaging question and answer period, Marshall Graves made a motion that was seconded by Martha Axford (and later restated for the record) that state staff develop a plan for a pilot to present to the board to utilize these types of [benefits cliffs] tools in the existing TN network of delivery services, along with data reports on Tennesseans facing benefits cliffs. Chairman Berry called for additional discussion which ensued. Attorney Jonathan Haynes gave a brief opportunity for public comment, and hearing none, Chairman Berry asked for a voice vote. The board was unanimously in favor and the motion passed.

Committee Updates

Oversight Committee – Vice Chair Martha Axford

Ms. Axford noted that their meeting was very efficient. Presentations were given on the following topics:

State Plan

Amy Maberry brought the committee up to date on the State Plan which is from 2024-2027. Hopefully, it will be modified in Spring 2026 if it stays in place. Major achievements include: 1.1% growth in labor force participation since May of 2024 and an 11.8% increase in active apprenticeships since last fiscal year. The minimum participation costs rate average was up 25% for local boards. There have been successful initiatives with the youth employment program, expanded partnerships, and updated service strategy.

Bylaws Revision

Key notes for their bylaws revision include the expansion and clarification of the board's duties and responsibilities to align with the Governor's vision in Executive Order 109. Revisions also grant the board more flexibility to better prepare to support the Tennessee Works initiative. Outdated language was revised. Also, the board can add committees to work on specific projects and those committees can have participation by non-board members.

Fiscal Update

Tennessee is meeting all the federal performance measures and surpassing several state performance measures intent on increasing participation in WIOA Title I and Wagner-Peyser programs. They're seeing an increase in Wagner-Peyser because of co-enrollment and more focus on Wagner-Peyser as participants go to the AJCs. State investment in workforce development programs has increased by 219% from 2023 to the current year through fiscal year 2026. As a result of these state investments, annual authorized funding has seen a slight increase: state investments from prior years with operational expenditures remain steady, mitigating current consequences of declining federal funds which could be declining again in the future.

Chairman Berry called for a motion to accept the changes to the bylaws as recommended by the Oversight Committee and presented this morning. It was moved by Tim Kelly and seconded by Marshall Graves. After calling for discussion and hearing none, a call was made for conflicts of interest and there were none. Attorney Jonathan Haynes noted for the record that there was no public comment. A roll call vote was taken and there were 29 in favor, none in opposition, and no abstentions. The motion passed.

Chairman Berry thanked Ms. Axford for the report and noted that it was disappointing to hear that Oversight Chair Michelle Falcon submitted her resignation due to personal reasons. Ms. Falcon served this board for many, many years very faithfully and she regretted her need to resign. Chairman Berry noted that the board wished Ms. Falcon the best, and thanked Ms. Axford for filling in for this committee.

Commissioner Thomas noted, as a matter of record, that there was a task that came out of the Oversight Committee. With the expansion of Executive Order 109 which gives the board greater policy consideration and decision-making over the workforce portfolio, a report of all the workforce funding across all the agencies will be presented to the board by the next committee meeting in November so the board will have this information in their portfolio.

Operations Committee – Chair Stuart Price

Mr. Price noted that, as usual, the Operations committee had a full agenda this morning which included:

Reflections on the Strategy Session

All felt it was time well spent, and the committee is considering what they want to accomplish in the upcoming year.

Lipscomb & Labor Early Childhood Apprenticeship Project

This project was presented by Brandon Phinx and Dr. Leslie Cowell, Dean, College of Education from Lipscomb University. Lipscomb has recognized a growing shortage of early childhood educators in Tennessee and has developed an innovative apprenticeship program to meet that need. It is built on a series of stackable credentials starting with the child development associate, followed by the USDOL early childhood educator certificate, and the child development specialist certificate. This is a non-semester program, and it is also fully remote learning so students can take classes while they're working. The cohorts start in August, January, and June. The first cohort started this month with 20 participants, 10 of whom are currently working, and they have seven employment partners. The goal is to have 200 apprentices enrolled per year in this tuition-free program. With this first cohort, they're about \$35,000 short and would welcome any private sector donations or any other available funding. Childcare is a critical part of successful employment for many workers.

SNAP Employment & Training (E&T)

Michelle Joyner and Lisa Johnson gave an awesome yearly review of the entire program. They have had a significant reduction in funding of approx. \$1 million. They are:

- 1) working on expanding third-party models and utilizing a reimbursement model to help bridge this gap
- 2) expanding online training options at the University of Tennessee

- 3) increasing awareness of childcare services available by participation with SNAP E&T
- 4) adding partners in West and East Tennessee

There are 12 agencies in the partner network, and there are 3,000 enrollees in the SNAP education and training services out of 700,000 SNAP recipients. They want to use more state funding.

Operational Dashboard

Jeremy Colbert presented enrollment numbers for four programs. Wagner Peyser and Youth Employment Program numbers were all in line. Title I and Title III co-enrollment is currently at 61% of the goal. The focus will be on reaching 90-100% of this goal. There will also be continued discussion between Jeremy's team and this committee on the operational dashboard reporting that the board would like to see.

Innovation Committee – Chair Marshall Graves

Mr. Graves noted that their committee had a very busy schedule. They heard three informative presentations.

Rural Healthcare Grant Update

Teresa Smith, TDLWD Assistant Administrator for Rural Initiatives, talked about this grant and the status of this initiative. The state funded \$7.4 million in grants to 38 grantees. This covered 58 different health sciences and healthcare career occupations. So far, they've had 267 participants in 31 different occupation areas that represent participants from 52 counties in TN. These include phlebotomy, certified nursing, pharmacy tech, EMT, biomedical equipment technicians, and other health sciences and allied health work. They didn't necessarily expect to have enrollment in these programs at this phase, but the planning that was done and the funding certainly indicates that there's an appetite for this kind of training across our state and that partners are willing to be involved.

Tennessee Department of Education

Deborah Knoll presented on Career Technical Education (CTE) focusing on Future Ready Tennessee. They're developing a rubric around measuring credentials of value to be able to tell in the broad spectrum of certifications what is actually valuable for students. They're continuing to work with many partners across the state. There are three different strategies around how to take this work into the rural areas, specifically 1) virtual work-based learning, 2) empowering the local school districts and the local county governments in rural areas, and 3) targeting outreach to employers to help them understand how this could work for them.

TN SCORE

Bryce Warden and Mary Cypress Mets presented their ongoing work on this effort. They have presented to the full board in the past. Their conversation this morning was about the new initiatives to develop educational initiatives primarily at the high school level to align students with work-based learning.

Joe Baker noted that a motion out of this committee was made earlier this year asking for some information on which jobs were most likely to be disrupted by technology and artificial intelligence, and where the biggest opportunities may exist going forward. He asked when the committee could get an update. Commissioner Thomas noted that last week, TDLWD had an opportunity to meet with an economist from Open AI and a representative from Nvidia. She put forth an invitation for them to come and speak directly to this board. If they're not able to make it in November, TDLWD will ensure they can forward at least their reports ahead of time, but it was felt that a more active engaged conversation would be better than a stock report.

Commissioner Thomas also wanted to have the Boyd Center develop an AI report specifically for the board. This would entail getting the scope approved by the board to ensure they're hitting all the key points to commission this

study. The economist/outlook view will be very important to ensure that when they commission the study, the request is specific enough to give the board substance to make policy decisions.

Closing Remarks

Tim Berry, Board Chair

Chairman Berry thanked the board for these reports and their time this morning in committee meetings. Other closing items of note:

Jennie McCabe, Director of Workforce Development at ECD, announced that Scottie Tutor will serve as Assistant Director of Workforce Development. Scottie has served as the Business Development Consultant in Northern Middle TN and Southern Middle TN. She's very experienced has worked with partners. ECD is excited to have her transition from business development to expand ECD's workforce capacity as they move forward with Tennessee Works and other exciting initiatives.

Commissioner Thomas acknowledged that this was the last meeting for Briana Thomas before she goes out on maternity leave. Commissioner Thomas recognized her amazing work both on Tennessee Works and supporting the board. Ms. Thomas will rejoin TDLWD next year, and the board gave her well wishes.

The meeting adjourned at 11:20 AM.

Note: An audio recording of this meeting is on file at the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development. All meeting minutes and dates are provided on the State Workforce Development Board website.

The signed document is available for inspection upon request.

Date: November 14, 2025

Signed by: Tim Berry, Chairman, State Workforce Development Board