



State of Tennessee

State Workforce Development Board Meeting

MEETING MINUTES

Friday November 13, 2020 - 9:40 AM – 12:10 PM CDT via Webex

Board Members Present

Board Members Present by Proxy

Members Absent

Martha Axford (East)	Rick Isaacson	Senior Director Steve Playl for Chief of Programs Jean Luna	State Senator Paul Bailey State Representative Clark Boyd Jonathan Cantrell
Assistant Commissioner Jay Baker	J. Paul Jackson		
Proxy Brandy Foust for State Senator Paul Bailey	Assistant Commissioner Mandy Johnson		
Designee: Deputy Commissioner Cherrell Campbell-Street for Commissioner Danielle Barnes	Designee: Policy Director Tony Niknejad for Governor Bill Lee		
Jason Bates	Commissioner Jeff McCord		
Tim Berry	Vonda McDaniel		
Proxy Sarah Noel for State Representative Clark Boyd	Mayor E.L. Morton		
Rhonnie Brewer	Greg Persinger		
Mayor Kevin Brooks	Stuart Price		
Jonathan Cantrell	Barry Ray		
Michelle Falcon	Designee: Director Ann Thompson for Commissioner Bob Rolfe		
Ben Ferguson (Southwest)	Designee: Chief of Programs Jean Luna for Commissioner Penny Schwinn		
Bill Godwin	Kyle Spurgeon		
Marshall Graves (Southeast)	Jeff Vance		
Ann Hatcher	Kevin Vaughn		
Christine Hopkins (Southern Middle)	Ruste Via		
	Ron Wade (Greater Memphis)		

Location in parenthesis represents the state board members' membership to the local workforce board.

Welcome

Chairman Berry called the Webex meeting to order at 9:40 a.m. CST. He thanked Patrice Kendrick for the technological work she did to help us get in our breakout sessions and he reviewed the protocols and Webex features that would be utilized during this meeting. Chairman Berry welcomed three new board members who were appointed by the Governor's Office since our last meeting: Jonathan Cantrell, Rick Isaacson, and Ruste Via. After thanking them for their willingness to serve, he also recognized Stuart Price for his promotion to Executive Vice President of Operations at Lee Company.

Roll Call

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

Approval of Minutes (vote required)

Chairman Berry requested a motion to approve the August 28, 2020 minutes. It was moved by Tony Niknejad and seconded by Ben Ferguson. Chairman Berry asked for verbal discussion and questions via chat. Seeing none, he asked for opposition or abstention from the vote. Seeing none, the minutes were approved as presented.

Workforce Advisory Overview – Dr. Jeff McCord, Commissioner – TN Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Commissioner McCord noted that the major theme for us now is transitioning to work. Our RESEA programs are doing things they've never done before. For example, recently unemployed individuals are connected to Tennessee Reconnect in a very big way. THEC is currently working with 500,000 potentially eligible people in TN who might have access to free skills development to find better, more meaningful jobs. Regarding capability development, the apprenticeship partnership with other agencies on the Workforce Development Steering Team is starting to set new records even during a pandemic which is exciting. As a state we're still working through a very large volume of unemployment insurance claims. There is a renewed sense of urgency to get folks back to work because claim benefits will exhaust at the end of the year when all the federal programs go away. Commissioner McCord noted that whatever this board can do to spread that word would be greatly appreciated.

Unemployment Insurance Update – Rusty Felts, Assistant Commissioner – TN Department of Labor and Workforce Development – UI

Mr. Felts thanked the board for the opportunity to speak again. Since mid-March, the unemployment division has processed somewhere between 900,000 to 1,000,000 new claims. UI has also paid out in the vicinity of \$6 billion in benefits in this state among all our different programs. These are mind-boggling numbers which almost seem impossible, but claims have been processed with a lot of support and extra resources that have had to return to their daily duties including Dr. Lovett and his staff. Mr. Felts quoted Commissioner McCord that the key word in this state is *work*: our workforce must get back out there and at some point in the very near future Tennessee will be looked at as a leader in this country. Mr. Felts noted from being on national calls that a lot of states haven't even started this discussion and aren't going to start it until sometime in 2021.

With people being off as long as they have, there is concern about whether there will be unemployment benefits when employees go through separations next year. The UI division has seen some decline in claims numbers but the division faces many challenges in the coming months because of the last unprecedented eight to nine months. Several backlogs in the division have been caused by the sheer volume of claims and the confusion from the different programs issued by the federal government. Benefits will run out soon based on the federal guidelines and the next move at a congressional level is unknown, so our state must be prepared.

One of the biggest challenges in the UI division lately is the interpretation of the PUA program. This has presented significant challenges in facing fraud which is at a national level. The state doesn't want to overpay state or federal benefits so that's probably their biggest challenge right now with the backlogs. While the return to work is the right answer – it's what we need to do for the benefit of our workforce and employers – it has also brought significant challenges because there's confusion about self-employment, COVID exceptions, and associated appeals.

Mr. Felts acknowledged Deputy Commissioner Thomas' support and Dr. Lovett's partnership with UI. All of us must partner together to reemploy our workforce.

[Later in the meeting,] Ben Ferguson also asked via chat if Mr. Felts anticipated a surcharge in unemployment rates for employers similar to what was implemented after we had the recession in 2008 due to the significant increase in claims. Commissioner McCord responded that a surcharge does not appear likely because one of the things TN quickly began to do is use the coronavirus relief funds to support the UI trust fund. As we begin to enter December we are at the lowest UI employer tax rate so we should be ok.

Chairman Berry thanked Mr. Felts for his candor regarding upcoming concerns and acknowledged that while the numbers are going in the right direction we still have quite a hill to climb.

Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) Presentation - Flora Tydings, Chancellor; Russ Deaton, Executive Vice Chancellor for Policy & Strategy; Wendy Thompson, Vice Chancellor for Organizational Effectiveness

Chancellor Tydings discussed TBR's strategic planning efforts. Their mission is student success and workforce

development, and they wanted feedback from the board on what they are doing well and what they can possibly improve.

Mr. Deaton led the discussion and thanked Dr. Lovett for helping work through the details of this meeting. TBR is in the process of a strategic plan review of their 10-year plan created in 2015 to coincide with the Drive to 55. Looking ahead to 2025 they're doing a mid-cycle review. Now that the pandemic and the recession are part of our daily reality, they have asked some new questions and are trying to get some new feedback on what TBR can do to best serve workforce industry needs for our students and families across Tennessee.

TBR is an open access system: they accept everyone regardless of circumstance, background, preparation, geography, and demographics. They do their best to train and educate their students regardless of those circumstances, and they are intensely focused on completion, equity, and connections to the workforce. Mr. Deaton referenced meetings held by their steering team, of which Dr. Lovett is a member, and he referenced some broad ideas in a document provided to the board on their strategic direction. He asked for the board's perspective on one or two things that TBR ought to be stressing and doing more of that they are not doing now.

Marshall Graves: When you talk about ways you can respond, I think there are some really interesting probably emerging best practices around education going on in the local areas. Maybe there are some places where you could partner with the regions and try to prove out some best practices that could be explored statewide.

Nakeisha Ricks: From a partnering perspective we've seen some innovative partnerships in some of the areas of the state with TBR by sharing a space and becoming an extension of the American Job Center: meeting the participants where they are in environment that they're most comfortable with through the Office of Student Success. Some of the advisory councils that we've been invited to participate on with THEC and TBR are looking at how to provide support through a multi-agency approach for low-income students and those wraparound services with the understanding that tuition is not enough.

Ann Thompson: Maybe something that would be helpful to discuss is the advances in technology. The GM expansion to electric vehicles is an example: that's going to bring a tremendous amount of advanced manufacturing to our state. That's a space where TBR could really help work with us as we're trying to recruit those companies into Tennessee: understanding what advanced technology is and how we can get some of these individuals upskilled to take those jobs who are currently in positions that have changed due to the current landscape (i.e. restaurants, tourism, etc.).

Tony Niknejad: I wanted to talk a little bit about the Career in a Year Initiative that I know TBR had put a lot of work into prior to the pandemic and just how you see that perhaps evolving or being an additional opportunity for success as we move into our workforce reconnect strategy.

Russ Deaton: TBR did a lot of outreach and advertising about the various programs and careers that can be pursued basically within a year. We are stressing the intense and short-term training that many of our programs have that allow a student to quickly get in, out, and ready in a career. I think we've seen some success there which is even more important now: to be able to get back in the classroom and find a way to finish a program in a very focused amount of time to get back into the industry workforce.

E L Morton: How we are measuring our high school graduates coming in that need to take the courses to go back and rebuild some skill sets with Tennessee Promise? We've got a two-year curriculum but it's looking like closer to 2 ½ -3 years for a lot of students. Are there any trends that you're noticing with the volume of students that must take some remedial classes before they can get in the core of the curriculum?

Chancellor Tydings: We have definitely been working diligently over the past several years to try and streamline getting people into their program of study rather than having to take developmental courses when they come to the college. With the SAILS program, students can actually begin taking their developmental courses while they're still in high school once they have taken the ACT and they fall into that category. We are also looking at doing more of a competency-based developmental program so students don't have to take all of it if they only need help in certain areas. In response to Tony's question, right now we do have 60 programs of study that you can complete in under a year at our technical colleges and community colleges. Those lead directly to the field of work/employment in areas that are in high demand. One thing that we're going to be diligently working on between now and over the next 18 months is to deliver those in a more hybrid format. We now know that we've had great success in going online with much of the theory parts of our program of study. For students who are working and going to college, the faculty member has recorded that lecture for them, so they no longer have to drop out of their programs of study if they have a job conflict.

Chairman Berry asked if TBR could discuss the things they are doing well and their struggles so the SWDB could give feedback. Chancellor Tydings responded that one of the things that they are struggling with at the moment is the ability to get students into their programs of study: getting them to campus, enrolled, and into the right programs in order to meet workforce demand. The struggle is related to marketing and awareness which makes their K-12 partnerships important. There is also still a transportation issue in the rural counties. Chancellor Tydings

noted that the Governor's announcement yesterday on the partnership with Labor and with ECD and what is being done to contact those individuals who are currently on assistance will hopefully make a big difference in the number of people that they're able to reach. As Ann Thompson mentioned, they are also trying to make sure they're training for the new, advanced technology so the curriculum is not dated in any way.

Russ Deaton noted that TBR's TCATs in particular are in tune with the needs of their local and regional economies. The communication allows them to react when there is a change in the labor market. Costs beyond tuition are getting attention: transportation, book costs, etc. TBR also has an issue with retention of the high school graduates who come as freshmen to their colleges. For many of them it takes a while to find a program of study that really connects with them and they still lose quite a few of them after their first year in spite of a lot of attention on that issue over the years.

Commissioner McCord: The information that we've given TBR about the unemployed or recently unemployed individuals is part of our giving them the information they need to make those connections so individuals will know the opportunities that are available for them to develop their skills. We are doing the same thing with Adult Education information: somebody who completes or is almost ready to complete the HiSET exam gets the same sort of treatment that a high school senior would get in terms of making those connections to TBR programs. Hopefully a pipeline will develop from these efforts.

Christine Hopkins thanked Chancellor Tydings and TBR staff for the increase in the technology curriculum in our rural areas, and Chancellor Tydings thanked Ms. Hopkins for what she is doing in her county and for the support she has given to TBR. Ron Wade and Russ Deaton also discussed training that prepares instructors to teach in an online environment.

Chancellor Tydings, Mr. Deaton, and Ms. Thompson want to continue the conversation and keep the SWDB updated as they unfold their strategic planning process over the next six months. The board concurred. Additionally, SWDB board members who have further feedback were encouraged to contact Mr. Deaton, and Mr. Deaton can reach out directly to this board via Dr. Lovett or directly to board members, particularly those who represent local boards.

[Local Plan Approvals - Greater Memphis, Southwest, Northern Middle, and Southern Middle LWDBs – Dr. Kenyatta Lovett, Assistant Commissioner and James Roberson, Assistant Administrator - TN Department of Labor & Workforce Development - Workforce Services](#)

Dr. Lovett briefly mentioned the August 28 board meeting when four local board plans were approved with conditions. WFS worked with those four local workforce boards and their plans are now being recommended to the SWDB for full approval. WFS Assistant Administrator James Roberson gave high-level overviews of the plan improvements to supplement the documentation the SWDB received for the following LWDBs: Greater Memphis, Southwest, Northern Middle, and Southern Middle. These boards along with other local boards and regional councils will submit a quarterly update report to the SWDB in March reflecting progress and/or challenges they have faced in meeting the goals and objectives presented in their plans. After each high-level overview, votes were taken to approve the plans.

It was moved by Jason Bates and seconded by Michelle Falcon that the Greater Memphis Local Plan be fully approved with no remaining conditions. Ron Wade was asked to abstain from the vote based on his association with this region as well as other new board members with pending paperwork. Chairman Berry called for opposition, further discussion, and additional abstentions. Seeing and hearing none, the Greater Memphis Local Plan was approved.

It was moved by Marshall Graves and seconded by Jay Baker that the Southwest Local Plan be fully approved as presented with no remaining conditions. Ben Ferguson was asked to abstain based on his association with this region as well as other new board members with pending paperwork. Chairman Berry called for opposition, further discussion, and additional abstentions. Seeing and hearing none, the Southwest Local Plan was approved.

It was moved by Ben Ferguson and seconded by Kevin Brooks that the Northern Middle Local Plan be fully approved as presented with no remaining conditions. New board members with pending paperwork were asked to abstain from the vote. Chairman Berry called for additional abstentions, opposition, and further discussion. Seeing and hearing none, the Northern Middle Local Plan was approved as presented.

It was moved by Kevin Brooks and seconded by Marshall Graves that the Southern Middle Local Plan be fully approved with no remaining conditions. Christine Hopkins was asked to abstain from the vote based on her association with this region as well as other new board members with pending paperwork. Chairman Berry called for additional abstentions, opposition, and further discussion. Seeing and hearing none, the Southern Middle Local Plan was approved.

Chairman Berry thanked Mr. Roberson and his team for reviewing the revised plans. For the new board members, Chairman Berry noted that this is one of the important functions of our board's oversight: to make sure

local plans are compliant to ensure local areas are good stewards of the resources that are provided to them. He expressed appreciation to Dr. Lovett and everyone on his team for ensuring the standards and expectations are met which makes the board's job easier. Chairman Berry also thanked the local boards for getting those plans in compliance so quickly in order to move forward.

Committee Updates and Policy Approvals

Operations Committee

Operations Committee Chair Stuart Price presented the update. The committee received an update on the Migrant Seasonal Farm Worker Federal Monitoring Report and the WIOA Youth Federal Monitoring Report. Carla Garrett gave a high-level overview of findings and observations for each report. She mapped out the state's response to the reports and updated the board on actions taken and the current status of the findings. On the Migrant Seasonal Farm Worker Federal Monitoring Report there were six findings with three areas of concern and one promising practice. On the WIOA Youth Federal Monitoring Report update there were 15 findings with 13 being resolved and we have two remaining: one is resolved with the Monitoring Policy discussed below, and the other one is around parent/youth involvement. The Monitoring policy and the Data Validation policy mentioned below are directly related to this.

Nakisha Ricks gave a great review of workforce program updates. TDLWD has partnered with three umbrella organizations and entities to provide re-employment services across the state.

The committee was also updated on the adult learning enrollment impact of COVID on TBR campuses despite Tennessee Reconnect. Approximately a thousand students who were impacted by COVID were targeted by providing tuition assistance and wrap around supports. Total participants served: 1,230 by December 31.

An award was also received from the Office of Criminal Justice Program to procure a consultant to assist with employer engagement across the state for justice involved individuals to develop a sustainability plan addressing private/public engagements and commitments.

The SNAP program has been awarded a data grant to begin implementing and developing some of the processes and objectives from the 2019 State Workforce Development Board Strategy Session such as data transparency, data synthesis, and system alignment. SNAP exceeded the state's new enrollment KPI projections by 156% for the third calendar year quarter July through September.

The committee had some good discussion around considering the reality of COVID particularly as we look at programs, the timing of program implementations, and providing the proper resourcing.

The Operations Committee reviewed three policies and forwarded them to the board for approval with no exceptions:

- 1) Monitoring – This policy: a) establishes the requirement for quarterly monitoring submissions by the local workforce development boards to include an update on regional and local plans, b) details the use of quarterly monitoring submissions and monitoring efforts to include corrective action and technical assistance, and c) establishes annual program monitoring along with already established annual financial monitoring. This new policy is in response to federal guidelines and is an added layer of accountability that will result in quarterly reporting to the board around compliance areas detailed in the policy.
- 2) Data Validation – This policy: a) establishes the local and state requirements for quarterly and annual data validation, b) establishes random sampling methodology, and c) identifies how records will be documented and maintained. To meet the requirements of this policy the LWDBs must conduct data validation on a quarterly and annual basis, participate in annual training, and respond timely to any corrective action needs.
- 3) Grievance and Complaint - This policy differentiates complaints as they relate to four separate categories: i.) complaints alleging discrimination or denial of equal opportunity, ii.) complaints alleging unjust denial of WIOA services, iii.) complaints alleging hostile work environment against employers that are not related to WIOA-funded programs or training, and iv.) complaints made by staff within the LWDA against other LWDA staff or subrecipient entities. The policy also defines the process to receive, process, and follow up on complaints within the Migrant Seasonal Farm Worker and American Job Center complaint logs.

Chairman Berry asked for a motion to approve these policies as presented. It was moved by Greg Persinger and seconded by Michelle Falcone. Chairman Berry asked for any discussion, opposition, and abstentions [other than new members with pending paperwork.] Hearing none, the policies were approved.

Innovation Committee

Innovation Committee Chair Kevin Vaughn presented the update. The committee received an update from Ms.

[Sylvia] McDonald on the virtual American Job Centers. They were open and could be accessed 24 hours a day / 7 days a week / 365 days a year. The virtual AJC shows what participants may be interested in, how they can browse through the wizard to see other services, and if they don't find something that they were interested in, they can schedule an appointment to get one-on-one assistance.

Michelle Holt also shared the Southeast LWDB's best practices.

Pre-Apprenticeship Policy - Due to an unstable internet connection, Tyra Copas explained the Pre-Apprenticeship policy. It really mirrors the legislation around what qualifies as a pre-apprenticeship. It came before the board because several training providers advertise their program as a pre-apprenticeship, however, their programs do not have a direct line to an employment status. The state receives questions from individuals asking if they can be registered for an apprenticeship. An apprenticeship is a job: the state can't ask an employer to hire an individual but the state can help direct the individual to a quality pre-apprenticeship program that has a direct tie with an employer. This TN policy makes a pre-apprenticeship program creditable, meaning that the state would verify that the program meets the legislative requirements of a pre-apprenticeship and promote the tie to employment.

Chairman Berry asked for a motion to approve the Pre-Apprenticeship policy as presented. It was moved by Commissioner McCord and seconded by Vonda McDaniel. Chairman Berry asked for further discussion. Rhonnie Brewer mentioned the importance of this policy from the employer's perspective: building that pipeline and being able to credential the pre-apprenticeship process will help a lot. Chairman Berry agreed: the apprenticeship program is growing at a much faster rate than we even anticipated so having this pre-apprenticeship pipeline that can feed into it makes it even better. After calling for and hearing no opposition or abstentions [other than new members with pending paperwork], the policy was approved.

[Fiscal Update - Ivan Greenfield, Assistant Administrator - TN Department of Labor & Workforce Development - Workforce Services](#)

Ivan Greenfield began the fiscal update by looking at some of the funding balances, expenditures, and key performance metrics from both the state and federal perspective. This was followed by a report out on funding specific to pandemic relief, and his presentation ended with a wrap up and a look ahead.

Notable challenges and observations included:

- Working Remotely: The massive transition shift from working in the office to working at home for state staff and workforce partners continues to be a huge effort and that includes managing infrastructure and communication. The continuing COVID spikes are resulting in AJC closures and growing concerns around the health and well-being of staff and customers.
- Declining Funding/Low Expenditure Rates: The impact of low expenditures on future federal funding allocations is a concern.
- Economic Recovery: There is a massive reemployment wave forming so we are hoping to have the infrastructure for a preemptive approach to our outreach. This included embracing technology and synthesizing data to help identify the most vulnerable employers and job seekers alike.

Mr. Greenfield then addressed the net position for authorized funding. The funding was not really impacted by our fourth quarter reporting. Basically our funding has been down year over year. Those funding authorizations are based on county allocation methodologies that are overall related to some sort of unemployment or low income. For Tennessee prior to the pandemic, those numbers have been low so our funding has taken a hit as a result.

Regarding net costs, there's a significant increase in the fourth quarter due to about \$21 million increase: up from \$60 million in third quarter to just under \$81.8 million. Overall cost allocation percentages remain the same with one-third of those costs or \$27 million going towards the administration of our programs and two-thirds or \$54.6 million towards our contracted services. Year over year is relatively the same: costs relatively flat, overall programs slightly above two percent, and our contractor services down about two percent.

Costs by program were addressed with an emphasis on Title I cost, i.e. Adult-Youth-Dislocated Worker. Of the \$54 million that we had in reimbursements, 82% or just under \$45 million went to our contracted services. Of those costs, \$38.6 million went to Title I program costs. Participant costs have been down year over year most significantly about 23%. There's an adjustment to be made between the OSO and service provider costs where we have a new classification of costs. The Fiscal division is working with the local area to get that corrected so that 46.5% will be more likely less than 10%. When participant costs are broken down by services, most of the service types are significantly down: participant costs are down at 23% year-over-year which is expected given the

pandemic and AJC closures.

Switching to performance metrics, as a state we've met our overall federal core performance measures. We exceeded those target goals overall with the exception of Dislocated Worker Credential Attainment. Under the guidance, we are required to meet 90% of those targets and so in that one we did meet the target by exceeding that threshold.

Regarding the state measures more specifically, right now we are still developing KPIs so this measure is just limited to the number of new enrollments and these are based on calendar year. In the second quarter, enrollments were down: given that participant costs were down and AJCs were closed that correlation is clear. Looking ahead at third quarter there is some rebound in the enrollments which is encouraging. Actual enrollments for that period exceeded another 90 percent threshold.

Looking at some key utilization rates, these are fiscal in nature. Regarding minimum participant cost rates, per state policy local areas should be expending at least 40% of their programmatic costs on direct participant costs. Two of the nine areas are meeting that. Another utilization rate is the potential recapture which basically looks at obligation and exposure for rates on first-year contracts that should be in excess at 80% or more for that minimum requirement. There are four areas that are not currently at that rate through June 30, 2020, however it's important to note that back in June the SWDB did vote and approve hold harmless on both of these rates. But looking at these rates is a good indicator of fund utilizations. The other measures are more compliance related and look at expenses for thresholds specific to youth.

We have two initiatives for additional funding specific to pandemic or COVID CARES Act relief funds. The first [CRF State Allocation] is agency specific received as part of the state's receipt of the \$2 billion. The agency received \$9.5 million which is supporting three main initiatives: 1) Reemployment which is more participant specific and aimed at getting individuals back to work as quickly as possible; 2) Career and Training is more employer specific and looks at skills enhancements such as incumbent worker, apprenticeship, or OJT type training; and then 3) Virtual AJCs which expand our virtual footprint and create greater access to services and outreach.

The other is the National Dislocated Worker Disaster Relief Grant for \$14.8 million to mitigate the impact of COVID in two main categories. The first category is disaster relief employment which is looking at short-term employment to aid in humanitarian efforts where there might be delivery of services like supplies or cleanup efforts like sanitization of public office spaces. The other piece is similar to the career and training: it is employment training but it doesn't include that enhancement that is more specific to apprenticeship and OJT.

Looking ahead to the next board meeting we'll be reviewing first quarter 2021 budget versus actual and the FY22 state reserve funds budget. We will also review for approval any of the proposed formula allotment methodologies: as we receive our Program Year 21 funds, allocation methodologies around Rapid Response and Dislocated Worker will be presented before the board via the Oversight Committee for review and approval. Lastly for consideration, Mr. Greenfield noted that the fiscal update continues to focus on WIOA Title I. Feedback was solicited from this board on any thoughts or directions around expanding the review to include other workforce partners.

Chairman Berry thanked Mr. Greenfield for his good work and insights particularly on how COVID has impacted the budget and spending. Chairman Berry asked the board to provide Mr. Greenfield with any additions the board would like to see as part of his report.

[Workforce Insights, Research and Reporting Engine Division \(WIRED\) Presentation - Lisa Howard, Assistant Commissioner and Kshitiz Rastogi, Director - TN Department of Labor & Workforce Development – WIRED](#)

Assistant Commissioner Lisa Howard and Director Kshitiz Rastogi previewed the Claims Dashboard, one of several dashboards that WIRED created in response to the pandemic. The dashboard provides a visualization of how many client unemployment claims have been filed, where were they filed, and the industries in which they were filed.

Labor force data helps WIRED determine which areas or locations are improving or declining and which groups of individuals are impacted. The dashboard can look at geographic characteristics at the LWDA or county level in addition to demographic characteristics by age group, ethnicity, education, or occupation. Assistant Commissioner Howard and Director Rastogi gave a live demonstration of the dashboard. The link will be sent to board members.

Assistant Administrator Ryan Allen gave an update on the upcoming dashboards that will change the focus from unemployment claimants to re-employment. WIRED will be able to tie the unemployment insurance and the workforce services programs together to build out workforce dashboards to help inform the stakeholders on this board and the public. WIRED hopes to demo a workforce dashboard at the next board meeting.

Chairman Berry thanked the WIRED team for their presentation and the work that they've put into this important tool.

Broadband Presentation - Crystal Ivey, Broadband Director - TN Department of Economic & Community Development

Director Crystal Ivey gave the board a broadband overview. Her presentation began with a picture of a project that's happening in a rural part of Coffee County and a quote from Governor Lee on the state's commitment to ensuring broadband connectivity in every corner of our state.

The importance of broadband was known prior to the pandemic but the pandemic has truly elevated the conversation and highlighted the access inequities across the state. Since many people are now working from home and have students who are trying to learn from home, communities without broadband are just not able to participate fully in the economy. Broadband is absolutely necessary to function in today's increasingly digital economy.

Some areas in TN are very well served with multiple service provider options and other areas don't have a single option. The primary reason for the disparity is cost, which is by far the largest barrier to broadband deployment. As for-profit broadband providers consider which areas they will deploy broadband infrastructure they consider all the costs related to that deployment. Specific cost barriers include:

- Population density: more households in a densely populated area can subscribe to the service and the provider can recoup their investment quickly.
- Geographic terrain: it's very expensive to deploy in mountainous or very rocky areas.
- Adoption rate: the number of people who are likely to sign up for the service is a factor, and lack of familiarity with broadband or certainly affordability can impact adoption of broadband services.

In 2017 the Tennessee General Assembly passed the Tennessee Broadband Accessibility Act to address persistent broadband gaps across the state. Ms. Ivey highlighted three components of the Act:

- Investment - a broadband infrastructure grant is awarded to broadband providers to help them offset the cost of deploying broadband in unserved areas;
- Deregulation - allows electric cooperatives to provide retail broadband to their electric members;
- Digital Inclusion - a portion of the grant funds are awarded to local libraries for digital literacy programming.

Ms. Ivey showed a graphic on ECD's website of the locations where broadband grants have been awarded. From FY18 to FY20, the state has awarded about \$45 million in funding to broadband providers to deploy infrastructure into unserved areas. These grants will serve roughly 66,000 Tennesseans. Currently in FY21, the General Assembly appropriated an additional \$15 million and those awards will be announced in the spring. This funding is very popular with broadband providers and the state receives more requests than current grant funding will support.

On a federal level, broadband funding has really increased in recent years. Since 2016, broadband providers in TN have been awarded over \$90 million. Additionally, in August 2020 Governor Lee dedicated a little over \$60 million of Tennessee's Coronavirus Relief Fund to broadband. This project was called the Tennessee Emergency Broadband Fund. The CARES Act funding necessitates that these projects be completed by the end of the year, and when they are completed they will serve an additional 60,000 Tennesseans. Projects are underway in Robertson, Marion, Henry, Bledsoe, and Giles counties.

COVID's impact on unconnected communities was highlighted. In addition to tn.gov/broadband as their regular website, a COVID19 broadband resources page has been added which includes hot spot locations to connect to free wi-fi, and free and low-cost internet plans. According to the FCC, there are still at least 500,000 Tennesseans that lack broadband access and ECD will continue pushing for additional deployment into unserved areas.

Chairman Berry: I really appreciate this information and it's good to see this level of investment being put toward it. I haven't been at one of these board meetings yet where someone doesn't bring up the need to improve connectivity, particularly for rural areas and residents. It might also be helpful in the future to say we've got that 500,000 resident number and we're putting this many dollars toward it. If we just show a correlation to say as this many dollars are invested, that 500,000 number is reduced by this many per dollar. You have one slide that says TN put \$60 million toward 66,000 residents so it's about a thousand dollars per resident. So for every thousand dollars, how many people can we take off that list of unconnected residents. I think you made a great point that they may have access but it's totally unaffordable because it's \$50, \$60, \$70, \$100 a month. It's right outside their door but it's beyond their financial means to tap into it because there's only one choice. Maybe creating a little bit of opportunity for choice will get those prices down.

Ms. Ivey: Absolutely, you know in TN we have one of the lowest adoption rates in the country. Of the Tennesseans that do have access - not the 500,000 but the folks that actually do have a line running by their house - we're at about 55% of Tennesseans with access who have actually subscribed to a service. So you're absolutely right: the access is a piece - getting the infrastructure in place - but the other piece is making sure they can actually sign up for [i.e. pay for] the service.

Chairman Berry thanked Ms. Ivy and her team for this very good report and noted he is glad we're heading in the right direction to get our residents connected.

Closing Remarks and Adjourn

Chairman Berry thanked everybody for the time, engagement, and improvements this team continues to make. Commissioner McCord thanked Chairman Berry for the board's leadership, guidance, and support for this work. He noted that interaction with this board is very important and greatly appreciated.

After closing announcements, the meeting adjourned at 12:10 p.m. CST.

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.



Tim Berry, Chairman
State Workforce Development Board

3-26-21
Date

3/26/21