



Career Technology and Workforce Development Workgroup Meeting Minutes

April 30, 2026, 10:00 am - 11:00 am

Attendance: Anne Bocchini Pack, Dr. Stephen Steurer, Karen Esterque, Diana Bailey, Adam Cummings, Jessica Johnson, Rameika Robinson, John Feaster III, Dr. Andrea Cantora

I. Welcome

The meeting was called to order at 10:03am. Anne Bocchini Pack announced that she would be presenting at the Reentry Redefined Conference hosted at Enoch Pratt Library. The presentation will focus on upward mobility for formerly incarcerated people in re-entry spaces, specifically addressing why impacted people should be in leadership roles.

II. Minutes

The meeting minutes from February were approved.

III. Review of Bills Passed

Ainsley Moench provided a quick overview of Senate Bill 305, the incarcerated individual training and re-entry grant fund. This bill extends a \$1 million annual appropriation until 2029 for training incarcerated individuals in automotive repair, which typically goes to Vehicles for Change.

Ainsley Moench reported that House Bill 557, concerning occupational licensing and certification, establishes a predetermination review process. This process allows an individual to request a determination from state agencies as to whether their criminal history would disqualify them from obtaining an occupational license, saving time and money on training. The Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services is the only exception to this predetermination process, and each affected agency must report on the implementation.

Diana Bailey inquired about the process for the Vehicles for Change grant, asking if it is an annual application open to other nonprofits or if it is an automatic renewal. Jessica Johnson

explained that Vehicles for Change is embedded within the programming provided by DPSCS. They shared that the automotive teacher from MCI-J is moving to Patuxent and MCI-W and will work in a hybrid program with Vehicles for Change, which uses the VR curriculum to certify incarcerated individuals as lube techs. Vehicles for Change is the most successful program in terms of post-release employment and earnings.

Anne Bocchini Pack raised concerns about the occupational licensing predetermination review process, stressing the need for community outreach due to a lack of trust. She inquired who is building the process, when it will be ready, and requested a one-pager on how to use the process, ensuring its reliability and enforcement mechanism. John Feaster III suggested that the inquiry about the predetermination process implementation be directed to the Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing.

Dr. Stephen Steurer expressed concern that not enough bills passed, mentioning the Peer Recovery Specialist bill stalled due to funding issues, despite the small funding ask. Anne Bocchini Pack noted that the apprenticeship bill passed the House but stalled in the Senate, suggesting the need for a Senate sponsor to get the bill across the finish line next year.

Adam Cummings mentioned the passage of Senate Bill 61, which establishes a volunteer services program allowing formerly incarcerated individuals to more easily assist within correctional facilities. Ainsley Moench confirmed that this bill establishes a volunteer protocol, making it easier for returning citizens to re-enter facilities and continue doing important work.

IV. Discussion on Employer Barriers to Employing Returning Citizens, led by Karen Esterque

Karen Esterque shared that she was formerly incarcerated and landed an HR role upon release. She leveraged her position to develop fair chance hiring practices, recognizing the unique perspective they hold as both an employer and a formerly incarcerated person. Her approach focuses on a three-pronged strategy: working with the justice-impacted individual, partnering with re-entry organizations, and engaging other employers.

One of the biggest employment barriers is the hustle mentality acquired in prison, where one has to hustle for everything, including basic necessities. This mentality—which was developed as a survival mechanism—can lead to unreliability and eventual termination, which could be avoided through better communication.

When engaging with other employers, Karen Esterque emphasized creating a safe space for candid conversations about the challenges of hiring justice-impacted individuals, cautioning against excessive cheerleading. She stressed that employers should view the hire as accommodating the individual's nervous system, equating it to accommodating other needs like

religious requirements or disabilities. She suggested that employers should set up guardrails and incentivize justice-impacted individuals to mitigate stressors. The best incentive is always money (cash in hand, gas cards, SmartTrip cards).

Re-entry partners are vital but have gaps, especially when organizations lack leaders with lived experience. Involving those with lived experience increases retention rate due to the ability to code-switch and translate the language of the workforce and prison.

One barrier to workplace success is an understanding of professional norms, , such as inappropriate email addresses or poor communication in professional emails. Additionally, there is a gap in the form of a simple pass-off of applicants from re-entry partners to employers, which lacks accountability. Karen Esterque established a partnership model with four re-entry organizations that includes weekly or bi-weekly meetings and progress reports on the individuals sent to them, ensuring accountability and support.

Anne Bocchini Pack raised a concern that large employers and universities often put formerly incarcerated people into low-wage, non-living-wage roles with inadequate benefits and misinformation. Karen Esterque responded that it is incumbent upon re-entry partners and committees like theirs to hold these employers accountable, advocate for salary transparency, and educate candidates on their rights and what constitutes a living wage.

V. Recommendations

Dr. Stephen Steurer requested that everyone review the five recommendations from the Career Technology work group for the next meeting, as this is the heart of the group's work and may require new or merged ideas. Diana Bailey agreed, specifically highlighting the need to look at the economic viability of career pathways like apprenticeships, citing line cook positions as an example of a low-reward career.

Diana Bailey noted that the Department of Labor has a report pending at the end of June, which Ainsley Moench confirmed. The group expressed appreciation for the cooperation and positive attitude of Labor and DPSCS in supporting the commission's work.

VI. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 11:05am.