



STATE OF MAINE
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC
AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



JANET T. MILLS
GOVERNOR

HEATHER JOHNSON
COMMISSIONER

January 23, 2025

Committee on Housing and Economic Development
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: Maine Rural Workforce Recruitment and Retention Grant Program Report for 2024
pursuant to Title 5 MRSA §13056-I.

Dear Joint Committee on Housing and Economic Development:

Title 5 MRSA §13056-I, enacted in the first session of the 130th Legislature, directed the Department of Economic & Community Development (DECD) to implement a Rural Workforce Recruitment and Retention Grant Program. The grant program was established within DECD to provide grants for local economic development initiatives in rural regions of the State, specifically Aroostook, Piscataquis, Somerset and Washington Counties, to assist businesses in locating, recruiting and retaining qualified staff to meet workforce needs. The fund requires that an entity receiving a grant secure matching funds for the initiative on a one-to-one basis.

Pursuant to 5 MRSA §13056-I, DECD is submitting the following information constituting the annual report for this program for calendar year 2024:

A. The number of applications for grant funding submitted to the department: Not Applicable

DECD issued a competitive RFA in 2023 and awarded contracts in December 2023; \$100,000 each to Eastern Maine Development Corporation, Sunrise County Economic Council, Somerset County Economic Development, and Northern Maine Development Commission. No awards were made in 2024.

B. Progress Report:

Under the terms of their two-year contracts, each awardee was required to report semi-annually to the Department on progress and expenditures. Reports included a ledger of expenses.



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As of January 15, 2025, the Department has received reports from Sunrise County Economic Council (Washington County), Eastern Maine Development Corporation (Piscataquis County), and Northern Maine Development Commission (Aroostook County). The following provides a summary of the progress reports received in 2024 from these awardees.

Sunrise County Economic Council (SCEC):

Activities from September 30, 2023 through December 31, 2024, led by the part-time Coastal Opportunities Advisor, included:

The Advisor has worked with the Small Business & Entrepreneurship Team implement the workplan, including metrics tracking. A significant part of the year has entailed community infrastructure-building within coastal Washington County towns, ensuring individuals are accurately informed on diversification avenues such as working with the Town of Beals on their aquaculture ordinance process. The Advisor has connected coastal small businesses with business advising and funding opportunities, such as working with SCEC's Small Business & Entrepreneurship team to assist an early-stage Jonesport medical services business obtain Covid-relief grant funding.

The Advisor helped coordinate five resource fairs and as a result also connected with 12 resource partners and many small businesses. In helping facilitate and deliver SCEC's Partners in Entrepreneurial startup incubator course, the Advisor has connected with more than 40 individuals in the beginning stages of entrepreneurship and interested in gaining support and training. The Advisor helped facilitate the Washington County Technical Assistance Providers Network (TAPN) which brings 38 TA providers, who support Washington County businesses, together on a quarterly basis to learn together and share challenges and avenues for collaboration.

The Advisor assisted in a working waterfront inventory initiative that cataloged 20 sites along Washington County's coast. As part of this initiative, the Advisor has helped deliver community presentations, focused on working waterfront economy and diversification opportunities, which have collectively reached 13 individuals. These community interactions are a vital component of the Advisor's work as the region faces aquaculture ordinances being presented to several communities by outside parties.



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In the second half of the year, the Advisor cataloged 198 employers in Jonesport and Beals and categorized them by primary and secondary industries. Of the nearly 200 businesses, 144 are working waterfront-dependent and 141 are classified as local small businesses.

Additionally, the Advisor collaborated with a Maine seaweed aquaculture support entity to bring education and resources to more than 5 fishermen who have since joined a cohort to explore seaweed aquaculture as a diversification strategy. The Advisor also assisted a Jonesport seafood dealer who is pursuing an oyster farm purchase. Within this reporting period, the Advisor also attended industry, community, and networking conferences, summits, forums, etc. including NACE, Maine Fishermen's Forum, Maine Opioid Response Summit, and two TA provider network meetings.

Eastern Maine Development Corporation (EMDC):

EMDC, as Hub project administrator, is leading a Hub-and-Spoke arrangement, partnering with the following "spoke" organizations on this project:

- Piscataquis County Economic Development Corporation
- Piscataquis Chamber of Commerce
- Moosehead Lake Region Economic Development Corporation
- Helping Hands with Heart working in collaboration with the Maine Highlands Working Communities Challenge Group

The Piscataquis County Economic Development Corporation working in conjunction with the Piscataquis Chamber of Commerce reported the following accomplishments:

- Met with nearly half (145) of the members to enroll them in the Hub and provide them with portal training so that they can utilize the chamber's job posting software.
- They committed a minimum of 12 hours per week to their workforce endeavors.
- They have received 23 applications from displaced workers to be a part of the Hub. They have interviewed 18 of them so far and have placed 7 in local jobs. The team is working with others to reconcile barriers to employment and to develop an individual plan for each, prior to scheduling their interviews with the receiving business. Many of the applicants just want advice, and to talk through their resumes



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and job experience. For example, after meeting, five applicants were made aware of careers/jobs in the area they had no idea existed, which spurred excitement for new opportunities, and ultimately resulted in employment, apart from our direct influence over the hiring business.

- The Piscataquis Workforce bus tour for the Fall of 2024 was canceled because the schools and businesses were not able to agree on a date that worked for everyone. The next tour will happen in the Spring '25 for students. PCEDC and the Chamber will work with either Guilford or Milo Students in the next tour. In the Summer of '25, an adult bus tour is planned to take displaced workers to the county's largest employers to learn about opportunities and career paths that exist locally.
- PCEDC reports it had a successful summer with Jr. Chamber high school students program. Five summer internships began because of PCEDC and Chamber programming and the connection with the county's school guidance offices. Two of the internships are expected to result in permanent employment upon graduation.

Working with the Moosehead Lake Region Economic Development Corporation, Susan Cirini, the new EMDC Senior Director of Business and Workforce Services, met with several key partners and businesses to facilitate workforce recruitment and retention in the region. A November 7th meeting with local businesses and Greenville H.S. guidance counselor. As follow-up, Susan will schedule a virtual meeting with parents of local school children to pursue ways to engage local businesses with students. Additionally, the Greenville team will implement a Career Exploration program where students are invited in small groups to visit selected businesses throughout the region. The Greenville team also will work with superintendents at Tri-County Technical Center (TCTC), the Piscataquis Community Secondary School in Guilford, and the Nokomis Regional High School in Newport to encourage their participation in our 2025 Job Fair.

EMDC is also assisting with implementation of the Maine Highlands Working Community Challenge. This project includes creating an application for the Youth Entrepreneurship Incubator that will be submitted to the TCTC Entrepreneurship Pilot Class Instructor for her input. A first draft of the application has been completed and the plan is to pick one or two business ideas to staff and fund over the spring.



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Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC):

NMDC has been active on several workforce recruitment / attraction and development fronts since mid-summer. The organization worked with Boots2Roots to place three Aroostook County job seekers in forest products and hospitality positions at local businesses, including Best Western, Twin Rivers Paper, and Whole Trees Structures.

NMDC helped establish the Education to Industry Committee with the Presque Isle Children's Museum, educational institutions across Aroostook County, local businesses, and Aroostook Partnership. The committee participated in UMaine-Fort Kent's Bengal Power Hour, an event designed to give students the opportunity to network with employers, learn about their organizations, and explore available career fields. The committee also plans to assist Maine DOT with its Construction/Transportation Expo and Job Fair in Presque Isle, April 2025.

NMDC staff attended nine career fairs between 9/12/24 and 11/2/24 in towns throughout The County. Staff met with the Cary Medical Center/Pines health to strategize on workforce recruitment and retention. NMDC worked with the Maine Apprenticeship program with focus on food service training. Staff participated in several workshops organized by UMaine-Fort Kent and Educate Maine focused on workforce attraction. Of special note, NMDC staff is assisting a disabled individual in finding meaningful part-time work closer to his home. One of the key barriers is that he is unable to read. Staff is working with the case manager to enroll him in a literacy program.

NMDC has been active the Aroostook Ambassador program during the last six months, working with the cities of Presque Isle, Caribou, Van Buren, Fort Kent and Madawaska on a comprehensive resources list for both new and current residents of Aroostook County. Resources include local restaurants, recreational activities, civic and social organizations, as well as professional services such as plumbing, carpentry, lawn care, snow removal, daycare, and more.

NMDC is also managing the upgrades to the Opportunities Aroostook website, including improvements to the jobs listing functionality and overall user experience. The site includes testimonials from both employers and local residents. To see the new website, visit <https://opportunitiesaroostook.com/>



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Somerset County Economic Development:

Please note that as of the time of this report, Somerset County Economic Development had not begun their program, nor have they been able to expend any of their \$100,000 in grant funds. Somerset County is greatly resource constrained, with only one staff member, and is seeking a more collaborative way to ensure that the grant funds are expended. This will likely involve collaboration with a regional workforce board and/or other entities. DECD is working closely with Somerset County to ensure that the work progresses and the funds are spent before they lapse. Somerset County must expense their work to access their grant funds by June 30, 2025, and the work must be completed by December 31, 2025. Somerset County is aware of this timeline, and has developed a plan for achieving it.

Please contact Ben Sturtevant, DECD's Large Business Development Manager, if you have any questions regarding this report.

Sincerely,

Heather Johnson
Commissioner

cc: Ben Sturtevant, Large Business Development Manager, DECD