

MAEA

Maine
Adult Education
Association

February 20, 2024

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and Members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak regarding the Supplemental Budget that you are working so hard to finalize. Maine Adult Education Association is requesting that you add \$592,000 to the Department of Education's Adult Education budget to support the Workforce and Career Navigator Project that has been operating over the last 18 months using Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan funds. Without continued funding in the Supplemental Budget, the program will run out of money on June 30th of this year. This pilot project has received outstanding results in a very short time and we feel it is a critical aspect of Maine's efforts to ensure that adults facing multiple barriers have access to the specific training they need to secure employment.

The final funding of this project was years in the making. Many of us in adult education, in the legislature, and other stakeholders, looked for ways to support those Maine residents who face low educational skills and other barriers to employment. We landed on this model of workforce navigators because it showed impressive results in other states. This pilot project was set up in four adult education regions, or "hubs," that spanned 8 counties - Kennebec, Sagadahoc, Lincoln, Knox, Waldo, Androscoggin, Oxford, and York. The pandemic brought the deepest economic declines in the leisure and hospitality, healthcare and social assistance, and retail trade industries. As a result, job loss was and continues to be concentrated among Maine's lowest earners, with low-wage jobs down over 28%. The learners served with these funds are those who have been historically underserved, marginalized, or part of other adversely impacted groups. They are the unemployed, underemployed, have low levels of literacy, are those from low socioeconomic groups, come from communities of color, are women, and are those who need to learn English to enter employment and/or educational opportunities.

Four Career Investment and Workplace Navigators were hired to serve the counties above with the goal of making these connections:

- enlarge the potential pool of workers
- work directly with employers and sectors to customize trainings
- establish on-ramps to careers that provide a pathway out of poverty, and
- assist employers in understanding and welcoming diversity in their workplaces.

In this first 18 months of the project, we have seen these results:

- 1,101 adults have been enrolled in this program
- 535 adults have completed their plans
- 313 adults have completed career plans
- 243 referrals were made to partner agencies
- 210 informational meetings have been held with employers, community groups, and agency partners

Of those served by this program,

- 75% were unemployed or underemployed
- 45% had low socioeconomic status
- 44% were women
- 28% were black, indigenous, or people of color
- 26% were multilingual learners
- 18% were justice involved

The four people who were hired as navigators have been hard at work assisting learners in their communities, and it would be a huge loss to let them go. Through this project over the last 18 months, Career Navigators have:

- Worked with over 400 employers with a focus on manufacturing, healthcare, hospitality, and retail (Examples include: Maine General Medical Center, BIW, Cliff House, Sam's Club, Arcadia Home Care, Reed and Reed Construction, Back Cove Yachts, and Hannaford)
- Helped 107 people find employment with their direct support - barriers included housing, language and communication barriers for New Mainers, domestic violence, justice involvement, re-entry from recovery programs, childcare, and transportation.

This program changes lives. We have seen a single mother from Knox County, who worked with a Career Navigator, was able to complete her HiSET high school equivalency diploma, find stable housing, and get a paid full-time electrician apprenticeship in her desired new field.

A single mother in Sagadahoc County was also supported by a Career Navigator to complete her HiSET, secure housing, and she found a job at BIW. As of today, she has been promoted.

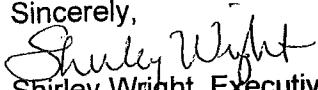
A man in a recovery program in Androscoggin County worked with a Career Navigator to build the confidence to leave a job with limited opportunities and enrolled in a community college program to become a substance abuse counselor.

A man in Kennebec County worked with a Career Navigator to gain skills and acquired employment at a local hotel. He is actively working to get an old record expunged. He told the navigator, "You're the first person who hasn't judged me."

A new Mainer in Brunswick, from Afghanistan, who had little English proficiency, worked with a Career Navigator to get employed locally by Hannaford. The navigator helped with the application, the interviewing process, the onboarding process, translation services, and scheduling needs in light of his parental responsibilities.

We could share more stories but use these to personalize the experiences learners have had across the state. Truthfully, we need Career Navigators in all counties of the state and will work to expand this program in the future, but for now we ask that you please add funding to the Supplemental Budget to maintain the current program. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,



Shirley Wright, Executive Director
Maine Adult Education Association
swright345@gmail.com
(207) 343-2157