



**Vermont State Workforce Development Board**

Agriculture Committee - Meeting Minutes

May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022

9:00 am – 10:00 pm

**Committee Members in Attendance:** Kiersten Bourgeois, Roy Beckford, Alyson Eastman, David Lynn, Joe Tisbert, Brian Carpenter, Walt Gladstone

**Guests in Attendance:** Victoria Biondolillo, Abigail Rhim

Victoria Biondolillo called the meeting to order at 9:04 am. She updated the group on the upcoming May 26<sup>th</sup> full board meeting which will focus on developing a strategic plan throughout the summer. She stressed that ideally, each committee will play a role in producing the plan. She then shared that the purpose of today's meeting is to identify short- and long-term goals for the committee. She also mentioned compiling resources into a document for committee members to review.

Kiersten Bourgeois mentioned the Agency of Agriculture and how they assembled resources, specifically for producers. She suggested that document might be a helpful place to start.

Victoria Biondolillo noted that she will review said document. She then asked that the group try to identify different parts of the supply chain in agriculture, beyond just the producer's side. She then asked what questions employers would be asking if they were at a loss for employees or other resources?

Alyson Eastman shared that often when she gets calls regarding recruitment or how to get labor, she runs through the different scenarios and resources that New York provides on their DOL website. She then provides all resources that currently exist, that way she is not making a recommendation of one agent over the other.

Victoria Biondolillo clarified if we have those agents and condensed resources somewhere in Vermont?

Alyson Eastman said that there doesn't need to be a specific agent located in Vermont to help Vermont employers. In her previous role, she would get many referrals, however, the agents would work across the nation. That being said, she knew that states like New York had resources on their DOL website, however, she doesn't believe the VDOL has a list agents can reference.

Victoria Biondolillo suggested we put together our own list, based off of New York's as a model. She then asked the group what other federal resources one might need if they are interested in an H-2A or H-2B visa.

Alyson Eastman said that it is more about knowing what the system is and when to ask or request help from an attorney or agent. Regardless, the process is extensive and expensive. If we can educate the

local employers that have seasonal, temporary needs, we can then free up those that are here for domestic work that are available full time that are being taken for the seasonal, temporary jobs.

Victoria Biondolillo highlighted the idea of educating employers. We need to demystify the process, perhaps with a document that includes a check list of steps that should be taken and when.

Alyson Eastman volunteered to put the link in the committee chat that includes federal resources with given timelines.

Victoria Biondolillo then asked the group for other resource ideas.

David Lynn noted that his business is on his second round of H2-A visas. His Human Resources (HR) department had to reach out to experts for help and he is happy to talk to the department for resources used.

Victoria Biondolillo added that smaller businesses will need these resources easily accessible as they don't have an HR department.

Kiersten Bourgeois offered that we could reach out to businesses that have used these resources previously. Any testimonial would provide assurance to small business owners who see, for example, Cabot or Dairy Farmers of America successfully utilizing programs.

Victoria Biondolillo agreed with Kiersten, expanding by saying that we must meet employers where they are. It would add value for smaller businesses to read success stories. There is a public relations element to this document.

Roy Beckford suggested putting together a compendium of sorts, including resources from other states. He referenced North Carolina putting together a similar resource, creating both a document and website.

Victoria Biondolillo said that she envisions a document but a website as well. This will minimize folks having to take multiple steps. She then switched the focus to identifying the pain points in the system that we should focus our energy, outside of federal recruitment. What types of jobs are we typically recruiting domestic workers versus migrant workers for? What are the differences in needs of the employer?

Roy Beckford said that with UVM Extension, they look for employees that will be able to help migrant worker employees. They try to find management level employees with language experience. He also referenced certification programs that empower local folks. He summarized that it depends on the category of the job that employers are looking to fill.

Kiersten Bourgeois mentioned the need for CDL drivers, production folks and lab workers. It is across the spectrum. She then noted how hiring is a bit more of a challenge because they are a 24/7 operation.

David Lynn noted that CDL drivers, particularly milk haulers, are in high demand. They are competing with Walmart drivers that get \$100,000.00 and have more appealing hours.

Brian Carpenter noted that CDL drivers' recruitment will become even more difficult based upon the new rules coming out. The training hours are exorbitant. These new training regulations will make it more difficult for folks to switch into a CDL career.

Victoria Biondolillo referenced the Vermont Training Program to help subsidize training costs. She also noted identifying other barriers for CDL drivers in order to alleviate some of the pressure.

Brian Carpenter agreed, sharing that anything this committee can produce to help increase the number of CDL drivers in the pool would help alleviate the pressure on the agriculture sector.

Victoria Biondolillo noted for the short term, we can work on developing a document for employers. Long term, the committee can produce a CDL training program aid that would help alleviate pressure on employers while participants are training. She also suggested developing some sort of solution that could then potentially be presented to the Administration for the upcoming cycle.

Joe noted that on the farm level, having skilled lead people that stay for 4-5 years to advise temporary workers would be helpful.

Victoria Biondolillo recommended some sort of a pipeline. She then referenced Roy and figuring out how to support programs like UVM Extension.

Roy Beckford agreed. He then mentioned registered apprenticeships listed on the State Workforce Development Board's website, including national resources that could serve as a model for pipeline development in Vermont.

Victoria Biondolillo asked if there are any lead farm apprenticeship programs currently. If not, we could expand the definition of apprenticeships so employers could take on more on-site learning opportunities. She then asked the group for other elements within the pipeline that are missing.

Brian Carpenter noted the lack of technicians. While he noted working with Hannaford Career Center to develop technicians, he asked the group how we can focus our energy on attracting more students to those programs.

Victoria Biondolillo shared that we should work to boost Career Technical Education, including utilizing CTE funds allocated from this session. She then mentioned work based learning and connecting students with local employers.

Alyson Eastman agreed with this idea. If students knew that they could receive credit and work towards a job, she believes it would be very impactful. She stressed the need to capture kids sooner and work-based learning with credit opportunities would be a great opportunity to do so. She then noted the barrier kids face who can't drive out of state on a CDL if under the age of 21. This age limit is a barrier. If we could identify this as a federal or state law, we could potentially alleviate some pressure if they could go out of state.

Victoria Biondolillo suggested working with New England states to research that age limit law and potentially remove some barriers.

Roy Beckford stressed that training young people is a very important issue, especially regarding certifications. He then added that at a recent retirement party, the need for butchers and young farm managers was a prevalent issue.

Victoria Biondolillo agreed that we do have a massive decrease in young laborers. She shared that in the early to mid 2000s, employment among younger employees was at 60% and now it is down to 40%.

Roy Beckford added that people are clearly aging out of the workforce, noting the lack of a pipeline for the certified crop appraiser. He then shared that UVM has the Cooperative for Real Education in Agricultural Management (CREAM), however, he sees that participants tend to move to New York and Massachusetts after graduation. He also noted UVM's Field Naturalist Program where young people learn to identify pests and diseases in crops. He stressed that there are all sorts of trainings and experiential learning occurring across the state. We could list these trainings as opportunities for employers to then take advantage of. We just need to connect the workers and the potential employers.

Victoria Biondolillo asked how we can get Vermont employers connected with students earlier so when they graduate, a Vermont job is at the top of their mind. When is the correct time to start accessing them?

Alyson Eastman shared that we must start to connect with them by the beginning of their junior year of high school. With her own kids, she has seen work-based learning help with self-worth and confidence. Those characteristics translate into top employees. She shared that in her personal experience, it was difficult to get the schools to help her with work-based learning experiences. This needs to change. She also stressed that job-fairs are a thing of the past.

Victoria Biondolillo added that there are kids graduating high school who we should tap in to but also the college kids, perhaps in UVM CREAM, that we need to take advantage of. How do we form some sort of formal connection early in a UVM program to help them get placed with Vermont employers?

Roy Beckford shared that UVM has an open house and a day at Miller Farm over the summer when employers are allowed to come in and interact with UVM students. He said that he can work to make this connection better in future, and perhaps bring in his UVM Student Affairs contact.

Victoria Biondolillo agreed that if we can alert Vermont employers, and give them a leg up, they can better take advantage of the potential workers.

Walt Gladstone suggested formalizing a list of businesses that UVM CREAM students could complete an internship with. Both parties could then walk away mutually benefitting.

Victoria Biondolillo added that the SWDB staff is currently working on a business directory that lists potential work-based learning employers.

Roy Beckford stated that he works with UVM Student Affairs, and it would not be difficult to get the ideas of this committee routed to this UVM contact.

Brian Carpenter pivoted to the idea of high-level jobs and the timeline to fill jobs that are above entry level. He referenced a retirement party where a high-level worker retired and it would likely take a year and a half to get that position filled. That is a gap in our sector then that will be lacking for a while. It is critical to fill these positions before folks retire.

Alyson Eastman returned to the idea of employers needing to connect with young employees as new workers are coming out of COVID with low self-worth and confidence. She noted kids that have graduated 1-2 years ago and have not worked. We must figure out how to tap into these kids.

Victoria Biondolillo agreed with Alyson. She referenced the Career Pathways committee and trying to speak with kids who are not engaged in the workplace in order to better understand their point of view

to aid in recruitment strategies. She also shared that we need to help employers be aggressive in their approach to getting folks into the workforce who may have not necessarily ever been prior. She then agreed with Brian and the idea that it is not just entry level jobs that we need to fill.

Alyson Eastman added that kids spend most of their time on social media. We need to figure out how to target younger workers via the social media platforms they use normally.

Victoria Biondolillo noted the SWDB's efforts in using TikTok to engage with viewers to come to Vermont. She then shared that in the future, we could potentially use TikTok ads to target new workers. She also noted a potential programmatic recruitment software contract to drive traffic to Vermont JobLink.

Roy Beckford agreed with the usage of TikTok. Approaching these kids from traditional ways is no longer effective.

Victoria Biondolillo shared that the SWDB staff will investigate resources prior to the next meeting. Ideally, a working document or website will be created for employers. Additionally, some sort of outreach strategy needs to be developed in order to get the resources in front of the correct people. This research will all be done so the committee can then start making informed decisions about top priorities and tracking strategies.

Meeting adjourned at 9:59 am.

-----

Respectfully submitted by Abigail Rhim.

Abigail Rhim, Executive Assistant, Vermont State Workforce Development Board