Northern Middle Tennessee Workforce Board Inc.

**APPROVED**
**August 12, 2026**

**Northern Middle Tennessee Workforce Board**
**Meeting Minutes**
**February 11, 2026, In-Person & via Zoom at 11:30 a.m.**

| Members Attending | Members Absent | Staff & Guest Attending | Staff & Guest Attending Cont. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Anne Fugate | Kaitlin Salyer | Marla Rye | Josh Ward |
| Ashley Horan | Robin Baldree | Brooks Young | Joel Silmon |
| Billy Givens | Seth Thurman | Andrea Dillard | Kim Rye |
| Brandon Phinx | Tony Adams | Meagan Dobbins | Kerwin Thompson |
| Corey Johns | | Natalie McLimore | Alyssa Spaulding |
| Dan Caldwell | | Joely Berg | Laura Travis |
| David Rutledge | | Ginger Fussell | Betsy Foster |
| Freda Herndon | | Cinthya Rodriguez | Tracie Eversole |
| George “Bo” Callis | | Chelsa Lourie | Mae Wright |
| John Zobl | | Cathy Royals | Heather Skelton |
| Jordan Osborne | | James Starnes | |
| Kristi Spurgeon | | Lydia Bennett-Carnes | |
| Mark Peed | | Debbie Holcomb | |
| Mary Lear | | Britni Rowlett | |
| Nathan Garrett | | Kerry McCarver | |
| Paul Webb | | Wes Golden | |
| Sellittie Johnson | | Mike Pogreba | |
| Shoshana Samuels | | Adam Lamb | |

**Call Meeting to Order - Declaration of Quorum**

The Northern Middle Tennessee Workforce Board met in person at the Montgomery County AJC, with a virtual option, on Wednesday, February 11, 2026, at 11:30 a.m. John Zobl thanked everyone for attending. He called the meeting to order and a quorum was declared. He then called for approval of the minutes from the previous meeting. Mark Peed made a motion and Billy Givens seconded, the board approved the minutes without opposition. Mayor Golden welcomed the board to Montgomery County and noted continued business growth in Clarksville, including the upcoming groundbreaking for the city’s first Sprouts Farmers Market. Marla reported strong labor market conditions throughout Northern Middle Tennessee. All 13 counties had unemployment rates below 4%, nine were in the 2% range, and six ranked among the 10 counties with the lowest unemployment rates in Tennessee. The four westernmost counties remained above 3%, and Marla said workforce efforts would continue to focus on those areas. The region’s labor force participation rate was also strong at 68.4%, compared with 60.4% statewide and 62.4% nationally.

**Updates**

Marla reported that the state was pursuing a National Dislocated Worker Grant following Winter Storm Fern. Northern Middle requested funding for 10 temporary positions to support county mayors, highway departments, and other local agencies with recovery work. Similar funding had previously been used after the Waverly flooding. Marla also reported that the board had launched a Nashville pilot project addressing the benefits cliff, which occurs when individuals lose public assistance before

increased earnings are sufficient to offset the loss. Staff completed training through the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta and were using its calculator to evaluate each participant's household, location, benefits, and required wages for advancement. The Martha O'Bryan Center was also providing individualized counseling. Jordan Osborne asked whether assistance could be reduced gradually rather than ending abruptly. Marla said the pilot would include discussions with employers, particularly in hospitality and tourism, about transitional supports such as childcare. John Zobl asked whether the calculator provided individualized results and referenced an earlier estimate of approximately $44,000 in annual income. Marla confirmed that each calculation was based on factors such as household size, number of children, county of residence, and benefits received rather than a regional average.

**Strategic Partner Focus – TNWORKS**

Marla Rye introduced Brooks Young, Assistant Administrator for Strategy and Workforce with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development and Interim Executive Director of TNWORKS. Brooks said the initiative was launched in November to give employers a coordinated entry point to Tennessee's workforce and economic development resources. TNWORKS connects businesses with appropriate programs, grants, incentives, and services through a partnership among the Departments of Labor and Workforce Development, Human Services, Economic and Community Development, and Education, the Tennessee Board of Regents, and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. Other agencies may participate as needed. Brooks emphasized that TNWORKS is intended to coordinate and strengthen existing efforts without duplicating services or adding barriers.

Young explained that TNWORKS will focus on high-growth, high-demand industries offering competitive wages, including manufacturing, healthcare, and nuclear energy. The initiative will help employers address recruitment, retention, upskilling, training pipelines, apprenticeships, and other workforce needs. TNWORKS or a partner agency will assess each request, identify the appropriate resources, coordinate a customized plan, and monitor results. Mayor Golden asked whether TDOT would participate in major economic development projects. Brooks said TNWORKS had referred requests to TDOT, although the agency had not yet participated in a full project. David Rutledge asked whether building trades unions and apprenticeship programs were involved in planning for the nuclear industry. Brooks confirmed that discussions were underway to support both construction and long-term operations. David offered to assist with introductions, and Brooks accepted.

John Zobl referenced the board's earlier discussion about awareness of the AJC system. Marla asked whether AJCs might eventually operate under the TNWORKS brand. Brooks said a coordinated marketing campaign was being developed across social media, television, industry publications, and other platforms. He added that promoting TNWORKS would also increase awareness of partner services and that AJCs would be incorporated into employer solutions when appropriate. Marla noted Michigan's use of the Michigan Works brand and suggested Tennessee could consider a similar approach. Amy Mayberry said TNWORKS would be a major part of the State Workforce Development Board's 2026 strategy and aligned with efforts to better match AJCs with labor market and employer needs. She added that the board was updating its four-year plan using current labor market data, federal policy changes, and state priorities.

**Sector Strategy**

Marla reported continued progress on healthcare sector strategies. Following the previous discussion with the Tennessee Hospital Association and Williamson Health, Northern Middle partnered with the association on a statewide Incumbent Worker Training grant. Approximately $244K was awarded through eight hospital contracts across five workforce areas to train about 224 healthcare employees while connecting participating hospitals with their local workforce boards.

Marla also updated the board on the Rural Healthcare Initiative. The current paramedic apprenticeship program with Volunteer State Community College served advanced EMTs from six counties, with approximately 21 of 24 participants expected to graduate in May and become licensed paramedics. John Zobl commended the results. Marla said those who left the program generally did so because of personal circumstances and could return in future classes. Northern Middle was preparing a second grant application after local officials again identified paramedics as a regional priority. The proposal would include Volunteer State and a new Austin Peay State University program in Montgomery County, improving access for western counties. Seven or eight county mayors had supported the application.

Chelsa Laurie of the Tennessee Hospitality and Tourism Association reported that the first Middle Tennessee Hospitality and Tourism Workforce Task Force meeting drew approximately 50 representatives from education, hotels, restaurants, attractions, and other industry partners. The group discussed workforce challenges, existing resources, and potential projects. A follow-up meeting was planned for March to review findings and identify next steps. Marla said the healthcare and hospitality efforts reflected continued progress on the board's sector strategies.

**One-Stop-Operator Report**

Sarah Buckles provided her first report as One-Stop Operator following George Phillips' retirement. She had worked under George for approximately a year and a half and had been in the role for about one month. Title I enrollments were below expectations, but staff had identified opportunities for improvement and issues with the state's Title III system that were under review. Title I staffing was nearly complete, while Title III continued to face shortages. Recruitment was underway for approximately 49 positions statewide, which was expected to improve staffing and in-person service delivery. Sarah also reported that the career services provider transition had proceeded smoothly.

**AJC Operations**

Andrea Dillard reviewed second-quarter career services performance. Title I enrollments were below goal after exceeding the Adult enrollment target in the previous quarter, partly reflecting the usual decline in center traffic during the Thanksgiving and Christmas period. Outcomes for participants already enrolled remained strong, with exits, positive exits, placements, and placement wages meeting or exceeding goals. Natalie McLimore outlined strategies to improve enrollments despite reduced staffing and lower walk-in traffic at the AJCs. Staff were focusing on partnerships with organizations already serving individuals engaged in education, training, or support programs. In Sumner County, staff partnered with Grace Place Ministry, which supports single mothers, to develop training opportunities for participating families. Natalie said Grace Place had served approximately 70 families during the previous year and was preparing to build 13 additional homes. Staff were also working with Tech Impact, I Am Next, and Dreams of Hope to identify individuals who may qualify for training and On-the-Job Training opportunities.

Natalie also reported that a New Year, New You event in Stewart County produced eight enrollments in an area that previously had none. Staff were pairing employment events with résumé and job-search assistance to help participants better present their skills and improve employment outcomes. Additional partnerships were being developed with TCATs so staff could meet prospective participants at training locations rather than requiring them to visit an AJC. Career advisors and workforce managers were also receiving weekly enrollment reports showing current performance and remaining goals, allowing staff to respond more quickly throughout the quarter. John Zobl and Corey Johns supported the increased focus on community partnerships and recognized the impact of Grace Place Ministry in Hendersonville. Corey said working through organizations already serving potential participants should help improve enrollments. Natalie added that Grace Place representatives had initially been familiar only with résumé and job-search assistance and were enthusiastic to learn about the additional training and workforce services available.

**Eligible Training Provider Update & Requests**

Andrea Dillard presented the Eligible Training Provider List, which included one new provider, two new programs, three requests requiring approval for price increases greater than 25%, and one provider seeking reinstatement after previously missing credential attainment and employment benchmarks. She provided additional information on Paula Anderson Coaching and Consulting, a Memphis-based provider seeking approval for a medical coding exam preparation course. Memphis staff indicated that the program would likely not be recommended because it was test preparation rather than occupational training. Andrea recommended that Northern Middle also decline to add it to the ETPL. Marla agreed that the course would be more appropriately treated as a supportive service for participants who had already completed medical coding training but needed additional preparation to earn the credential. Andrea noted that this approach would also reduce reporting requirements for the provider.

The remaining requests included a new barbering program through TCAT Dickson, three qualifying price increases, and Lab Four of Nashville's request for reinstatement. Lab Four had been removed in October 2024 after narrowly missing credential attainment and employment benchmarks and was now eligible to reapply. Its performance would continue to be monitored if approved. John Zobl confirmed that the recommendation was to approve the requests except for Paula Anderson Coaching and Consulting. Andrea clarified that the committee had requested additional research before reaching a final decision on that provider. Billy Givens moved to approve the ETPL excluding Paula Anderson Coaching and Consulting, and Mark Peed seconded the motion. The motion passed without opposition.

Marla reported that ETPL oversight had moved to Jay Baker within the Adult Education division of the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development. She said she had discussed the need for stronger state policy allowing local boards to better align approved programs with regional sector strategies and employer demand. Under the current process, local denials may be appealed and overturned even when a program does not closely match local priorities. Marla said she would continue providing input as the state considered possible changes.

**Financial Report**

Ginger Fussell presented the second-quarter financial report for the period ending December 31. Grant utilization increased by approximately $520K during the quarter, but spending remained below the anticipated midpoint pace. Formula fund utilization was 27.1%, and cumulative expenditures totaled approximately $3.1 M, compared with an adjusted $3.7 M at the same point the previous year. Ginger noted that expenditures typically lag enrollments and should increase as enrollment initiatives produce results. Four new or anticipated grants totaled approximately $591K, increasing the proposed budget from approximately $12.4 M to $12.98 M. The awards included the healthcare Incumbent Worker Training grant, State Apprenticeship Expansion Formula funding, additional Tennessee Youth Employment Program funding, and Rural Healthcare funding. Marla added that the healthcare award included approximately $244K in program funds, the apprenticeship awards totaled approximately $210K for employer-based programs, and the additional youth funding had to be spent by June 30, 2026. She also noted that the governor had proposed $8 M for the Tennessee Youth Employment Program beginning July 1, 2026. Ginger reported that a Rural Healthcare funding opportunity of approximately $250K had been released for the next program year.

Ginger requested approval of the report and authorization to seek permission to repurpose up to $250K in formula administrative funds to program funds through June 30, 2026, if needed. She said the board did not anticipate difficulty spending expiring program funds, but administrative funds could remain because Workforce Essentials was operating career services more efficiently in-house with lower overhead. Although transferring administrative funds could make the Minimum Participant Cost Rate more difficult to meet, it would direct more funding to participant services. Mayor Golden moved to

approve the report and authorize the potential transfer, and Ashley Horan seconded the motion. Mark Peed said the Finance Committee had reviewed the information in detail and found the financial activity to be tracking appropriately. The motion passed without opposition.

Ginger reported that the Minimum Participant Cost Rate had improved slightly to 38.19%, compared with the required 40%. The improvement was driven by ancillary grants, including youth employment, apprenticeship, Rural Healthcare, and reentry, along with reduced overhead. She said performance typically improved in the third and fourth quarters and expected the organization to meet the requirement if direct formula expenditures increased.

The One-Stop Operator contract remained within budget, and no significant issues were identified in monitoring Workforce Essentials as the Career Services Provider. Monitoring of the One-Stop Operator focused on the transition from George Phillips to Sarah Buckles. Formula grant case file reviews also identified no issues, and storm-delayed on-site monitoring had been rescheduled. The state's Program Accountability Review resulted in no findings and one observation involving a paid 30-minute meal break that should have been unpaid. The state recommended retraining staff and worksites on the requirement. Ginger explained that the issue arose during the rapid expenditure of nearly $500K received late in the prior grant period. Because the grant remained open, the Board recovered the funds from EDSI and corrected the records. The adjustment was approximately $50. Mark noted that the review covered millions of dollars and commended staff for the limited nature of the issue. Ginger also reported that Stone, Rudolph & Henry completed the external financial audit. All three reports received unmodified opinions, no findings were issued, and Northern Middle remained a low-risk auditee. The required governance letter was included in the board packet. Ginger recognized Cinthya Rodriguez, Debbie Holcomb, Britni Rowlett, and Cathy Royals for their contributions and acknowledged Marla's financial and budgeting experience. John Zobl and other board members commended the team for the financial results, monitoring performance, and clean audit.

**AJC Location Report**

Marla presented a proposed restructuring of the AJC network. The board began evaluating centers in April 2025 to determine which locations were operating most efficiently and should remain open. The review reflected the state's movement toward fewer physical locations, greater coordination through TNWORKS and partner agencies, and similar changes made by other workforce areas. The analysis considered operating costs, visits, cost per visit, percentage of county population served, program enrollments, and an overall composite ranking. Rutherford, Montgomery, Davidson, Dickson, and Sumner counties consistently had the highest service volume, and the overall rankings remained largely unchanged during the nine-month review.

Marla said Northern Middle had maintained a physical presence in each county as long as possible, but changing technology, funding reductions, and statewide direction made the current structure difficult to sustain. The board had experienced an approximately $1 M funding reduction, while the AJC network cost approximately $820K annually. She recommended retaining five physical locations in Montgomery, Sumner, Rutherford, Davidson, and Dickson counties and closing the remaining eight centers based upon the evaluation data. Dickson would remain open to address the geographic gap in the southwestern portion of the region. The restructuring was expected to save approximately $332K. Marla emphasized that services would continue through virtual appointments, outreach, job fairs, and scheduled visits at partner locations such as libraries, courthouses, schools, TCATs, community colleges, and other public facilities. No staff layoffs were anticipated, and the savings could support additional staff and outreach. Houston and Stewart county officials had offered possible meeting space, and discussions were underway with NSCC in Humphreys County regarding shared space.

Jordan Osborne asked whether the board could pay for part-time space in affected counties. Marla said traditional rent could cause a location to require AJC certification, but limited user fees or contributions toward expenses such as internet service might be possible at access points. John Zobl noted that technology, funding, and service delivery had changed since the board's earlier commitment to maintaining a center in every county. Corey Johns said the workforce system had also shifted toward helping employers identify and develop workers for available jobs. Ashley Horan supported co-location with partner organizations and cited the Nashville AJC at NSCC as an example of how shared space could improve visibility, efficiency, and access.

Mark Peed said mobile staff would need laptops and reliable internet access to serve customers effectively at temporary locations. Corey cautioned that many participants could face technology or internet barriers and recommended reviewing lessons from previous mobile and virtual service pilots. He also stressed the need for clear, consistent schedules in counties without permanent centers. Mark and Jordan agreed that strong communication and dependable service schedules would be essential. Freda Herndon suggested exploring grant flexibility to provide laptops or tablets to participants without adequate technology access. Marla said some tablets were already being purchased when allowable and agreed that the issue warranted further review. Freda also noted that AJC closures could affect Adult Education classroom access and recommended exploring evening space through TCATs, community colleges, K-12 schools, and other partners. Corey suggested reviewing existing broadband, library, and rural technology investments, and Ashley noted that some counties had received grants for library improvements and equipment. Brandon Phinx recommended discussing whether a tablet program previously used for reentry services could be adapted to support the revised model.

Marla reported that the Executive Committee had approved the plan. The eight offices would close effective June 30, with the revised structure beginning July 1. She again confirmed that no employees would lose their positions and said the savings might allow Workforce Essentials to add staff. Mark Peed moved to approve the restructuring plan, and Mary Lear seconded the motion. Corey Johns excused himself from the vote. The motion passed without opposition. Marla acknowledged that closing physical locations was difficult but said the decision was data-driven and could improve services through stronger partnerships and more flexible delivery.

Marla report that the next Board meeting is scheduled for May 13, 2026. She stated that is the same time as the Tennessee WorkSource Summit and that the board may adjust its schedule to allow for Board members to attend.

**Public Comment Period & Adjournment**

No public comments were submitted. Following a motion from Dan Caldwell and a second from Mark Peed, the meeting was adjourned.