

COMMONWEALTH OF NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

WORKFORCE INNOVATION & OPPORTUNITY ACT  
**PROGRAM YEAR 2024**

ANNUAL STATEWIDE PERFORMANCE REPORT NARRATIVE



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# Executive Summary

In Program Year (PY) 2024, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) made substantial progress in strengthening its workforce development system and advancing the goals outlined in the Unified State Plan. Guided by strategic priorities and supported by federal flexibility—including an approved waiver permitting Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) for In-School Youth (ISY)—the CNMI expanded access to training, strengthened employer partnerships, improved performance accountability systems, and enhanced service delivery across all WIOA Title I programs.

Implementation of the ISY waiver resulted in an 80-participant increase in youth enrollment, enabling 179 youth to access industry-aligned occupational skills training through stronger coordination with secondary schools, CTE programs, and postsecondary partners. Youth participation in credential-bearing programs increased across high-demand sectors, with early indicators showing improved measurable skill gains and credential attainment, and no reduction in services for Out-of-School Youth. These outcomes demonstrate meaningful progress in building structured career pathways and supporting a homegrown talent pipeline.

Evaluation efforts centered on the 2024 Work-Based Training Sponsor Survey, which confirmed high employer satisfaction, strong staff responsiveness, and positive productivity gains from WIOA-funded work-based learning. The survey also identified improvement areas—such as processing time and documentation workflows—which informed immediate system enhancements, including automated reminders, standardized prescreening processes, and expanded soft-skills preparation.

Customer satisfaction assessment faced challenges due to low survey response rates and temporary technical issues in the HireMarianas system. In response, the CNMI is diversifying methodologies through in-person surveys, targeted outreach, and strengthened vendor coordination to ensure meaningful and representative feedback for continuous improvement.

Progress toward State Plan goals was demonstrated through strong employment retention outcomes and robust employer engagement. A repeat business customer rate of **75.6%** reflects high employer confidence in WIOA services, while strengthened sector strategies supported 96 employer partnerships and extensive work-based learning activities, including 396 Work Experience placements, 48 pre-apprenticeship enrollments, 67 ETP training participants, and 12 incumbent workers upskilled in critical infrastructure-related occupations.

Registered Apprenticeship expansion accelerated under Public Law 23-25, with four new RAPs established, 21 OJL placements supported, and 11 apprentices achieving historic program completions in high-demand occupations. Youth apprenticeship initiatives advanced through expanded outreach and career readiness integration within schools and community organizations.

The CNMI continued to rebuild its performance accountability system following the establishment of baseline performance indicators, implementing strengthened data validation processes and restoring reporting accuracy. Despite economic constraints, PY 2024 results showed participants reentering the workforce, earning competitive wages, and achieving credentials, while employer outcomes remained strong.

Governor's Reserve funds supported statewide governance, fiscal integrity, staff development, and program administration, ensuring alignment with federal requirements and contributing to improved service capacity.

Rapid Response activity grew significantly, with assistance provided to nine employers and more than 500 affected employees. Cross-program coordination ensured seamless referrals, co-enrollment, and timely access to reemployment and training services.

Through the National Dislocated Worker Grant (NDWG) QUEST award, the CNMI served 666 participants, with coordinated enrollment across WIOA programs ensuring continuity of training and support for dislocated and underemployed workers.

While the CNMI continues to navigate economic volatility and labor market disruption, the workforce system demonstrated resilience through expanded career pathways, strengthened apprenticeship infrastructure, employer-aligned work-based learning, and improved system coordination. These advancements collectively reflect meaningful progress toward the Commonwealth's long-term vision of building a skilled, competitive, and self-sufficient workforce that supports sustained economic growth.

## Waivers

In PY 2024, the CNMI implemented its approved waiver allowing the use of Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) for In-School Youth (ISY). This waiver addressed longstanding limitations that prevented youth who were still enrolled in school from accessing occupational skills training and it directly supported the Commonwealth's broader efforts to strengthen early career pathway development. As a result of the waiver and expanded school-based coordination, the CNMI experienced a significant increase in youth enrollment. Youth participation increased by 80 reaching 179 youth served in PY 2024. This growth reflects stronger engagement with education partners and increased youth interest in pursuing training that leads to industry-recognized credentials.

With the waiver in place, the CNMI observed increased ISY participation in credential-bearing training aligned with high-demand sectors, including construction, healthcare, and information technology. Stronger coordination with public schools, Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, and the postsecondary institution allowed WIOA staff to embed information about training opportunities into school-based counseling, career fairs, and dual-enrollment pathways. This collaboration improved youth access to early career exploration, strengthened transitions to postsecondary education, and facilitated smoother progression into Registered Apprenticeships and other work-based learning opportunities.

Preliminary outcomes indicate positive effects on measurable skill gains and credential attainment among participating youth, with no reduction in services to Out-of-School Youth (OSY), who continue to be prioritized in accordance with WIOA requirements. The expansion of ISY training access has not negatively affected performance outcomes; rather, it has supported more intentional pipeline development by building foundational skills earlier and strengthening alignment between education and workforce development systems.

Overall, the waiver has broadened youth access to training, supported increased enrollment, improved cross-system coordination, and advanced the CNMI's strategic goal of developing a skilled, homegrown workforce capable of meeting the Commonwealth's long-term economic and labor market needs.

## Evaluations

The CNMI Workforce Investment Agency advanced its commitment to evidence-based program evaluation during the reporting year by completing the 2024 Work-Based Training Sponsor Survey and laying the groundwork for more comprehensive studies still in development. The Sponsor Survey served as the primary evaluation activity for the year and assessed WEX, OJT, Incumbent Worker Training, and emerging pre-apprenticeship and career pathway pilots. Using a mixed-methods design, the evaluation generated both quantitative performance data and qualitative insights on employer experiences, allowing the CNMI to measure early outcomes and identify systemwide improvement needs.

Completed survey results demonstrated strong employer confidence in WIOA-funded work-based training. Seventy-five percent of employers rated their experience as “very effective,” while the remainder rated it “effective.” All employers reported that WIOA-referred participants met skill expectations, and 92 percent observed positive impacts on productivity or operational capacity. Communication and program support from WIA staff remained a consistent strength, with all surveyed employers rating staff responsiveness as either “excellent” or “good.” These findings confirmed successful early implementation of several career pathway and work-based training strategies that were established in the prior year.

At the same time, the evaluation identified areas requiring further improvement, including reducing processing time from application to start date, expanding soft-skills and job-readiness preparation, and improving the timeliness of payroll and assessment submissions. Employers also recommended automated reminders for required documentation and greater consistency in participant prescreening. These themes were shared with WIOA core program leads, the State Workforce Development Board, and service providers to guide continuous improvement efforts and refine the ongoing design of pre-apprenticeship programs.

Several improvement actions have already been implemented based on the completed survey, including streamlined placement workflows, expanded soft-skills training modules, standardized prescreening procedures, automated payroll and assessment reminder systems, and increased employer check-ins and site visits. These adjustments are expected to enhance the quality and reliability of WIOA services in the next program year.

## Customer Satisfaction

The CNMI workforce system utilizes automated surveys within the HireMarianas platform to assess customer satisfaction among individuals and employers accessing one-stop and workforce services. These surveys are designed to gather feedback on service quality, accessibility, and overall customer experience. However, during the reporting period, the system experienced technical issues that prevented staff from accessing and retrieving survey results. As a result, the CNMI was unable to generate a complete analysis of customer satisfaction for this program year.

While limited anecdotal feedback was obtained through direct interactions with customers, the inability to access HireMarianas survey data restricted the CNMI's capacity to evaluate trends, measure satisfaction levels, or generalize findings to the broader customer population. The situation highlighted the need for strengthened data retrieval processes, improved vendor support, and more reliable mechanisms for tracking customer input across all service areas.

To address these challenges, the CNMI is working with the HireMarianas system vendor to restore full functionality and ensure that survey results can be routinely accessed and reported. In addition, plans are underway to diversify customer satisfaction methodologies to reduce reliance on a single system. These efforts include implementing targeted follow-up phone calls, in-person surveys at one-stop centers, and paper or tablet-based surveys distributed during workshops, orientations, employer engagement events, and Rapid Response activities.

Once accessible, customer satisfaction data—whether through HireMarianas or supplemental methods—will continue to be integrated into the CNMI's continuous improvement processes. These findings will guide staff training, strengthen service delivery, and inform program design to better meet the needs of job seekers, workers, and employers across the Commonwealth.

## State Strategies

### Progress Towards Strategic Goals

During Program Year 2024, the CNMI made significant progress toward achieving the strategic vision outlined in its Unified State Plan, focused on building a skilled, inclusive, and employer-aligned workforce to support economic growth and self-sufficiency. A key measure of progress in meeting employer needs is the rate at which participants maintain employment with the same employer after program exit. In PY 2024, 75.6 percent of participants (96 of 127) were employed with the same employer in both the second and fourth quarters after exit, demonstrating the effectiveness of CNMI's workforce system in preparing participants with the skills and competencies required by local businesses.

This outcome reflects alignment with the State Plan goals of fostering strategic partnerships with employers (Goal 2), expanding high-quality training and career pathway opportunities (Goals 1 and 4), and enhancing apprenticeship programs (Goal 5). By maintaining a high retention rate with employers, the workforce system ensures that participants not only gain meaningful employment but also support business stability, productivity, and sector-specific economic development.

Furthermore, these results highlight progress in delivering inclusive and equitable services (Goals 3, 6, and 7), as participants from diverse backgrounds—including youth, individuals with barriers to employment, and other priority populations—successfully transitioned into sustained employment. The CNMI workforce system's emphasis on employer engagement, work-based learning, and alignment with labor market needs underscores its commitment to continuous improvement and the realization of the State Plan's overarching vision of a resilient, self-sufficient workforce that drives economic growth across the Commonwealth.

### Progress in the Implementation of Sector Strategies and Career Pathways, Business Engagement Strategies, and Work-Based Learning

The CNMI continued to make measurable progress in implementing sector strategies and career pathways designed to meet employer needs and support economic growth. During PY 2024, the Commonwealth strengthened employer engagement by partnering with 96 employers across public, private, nonprofit, and community-based sectors. These partnerships informed program design, identified workforce skill gaps, and guided investments in training aligned with high-demand sectors such as construction, utilities, hospitality, and healthcare. Employer collaboration also supported layoff-aversion strategies, ensuring workforce initiatives addressed both current and emerging

labor market needs. These efforts contributed to a strong repeat business customer rate of 75.6%, reflecting high employer satisfaction with WIOA services and ongoing engagement.

Work-based learning remained a core strategy, with 396 individuals participating in Work Experience placements across youth and adult programs. Additionally, eight WIOA-funded On-the-Job Training (OJT) placements provided structured, employer-driven training, enabling participants to develop skills while contributing to business operations. These opportunities, along with Work Experiences, served as transitional jobs, bridging participants to unsubsidized employment and long-term career pathways.

The CNMI advanced career pathways through 48 pre-apprenticeship enrollments, strengthening participants' technical readiness and preparing them for entry into Registered Apprenticeships and employer-led training programs. An additional 67 participants accessed training through Eligible Training Providers, earning industry-recognized credentials aligned with employer demand and reinforcing clear progression along career pathways.

Incumbent Worker Training continued to be scaled as part of sector strategies and business retention efforts. Twelve employees, including staff at the Commonwealth's sole public utility corporation, participated in targeted upskilling initiatives, such as specialized crane operations training. These programs enhanced operational safety, improved infrastructure reliability, supported the adoption of modern technologies, and strengthened employee retention.

Collectively, these strategies demonstrate the CNMI's progress in aligning workforce development with employer needs, expanding career pathways, and providing both entry-level and incumbent workers with structured opportunities—through Work Experience, OJT, pre-apprenticeships, and incumbent worker training—that advance skills, employability, and long-term economic self-sufficiency.

## Registered Apprenticeship Programs

Following the enactment of Public Law 23-25, the “Commonwealth Apprenticeship Program Act of 2024,” the CNMI significantly advanced the expansion and institutionalization of Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs) as a cornerstone of its workforce strategy. The law provided statutory authority to grow apprenticeship opportunities across industries and age groups, strengthening workforce development pipelines and creating new pathways for youth and adult learners alike.

During PY 2024, the CNMI workforce system undertook several coordinated efforts to increase access to RAPs. Through outreach to employers, education partners, and

community organizations, the Commonwealth supported 21 Registered Apprenticeship On-the-Job Learning (OJL) placements and four WIOA-funded OJT placements, ensuring that more participants could enter high-quality earn-and-learn programs. The system continued to support 18 approved RAPs, collectively serving 34 active apprentices, reflecting both broad access and program stability.

Creation of new RAPs was a key focus. The CNMI established four new apprenticeship programs in partnership with the Commonwealth's public utility corporation, enrolling nine apprentices in critical technical occupations essential to infrastructure and economic stability. These programs addressed local workforce shortages and aligned with the Commonwealth's priority sectors.

Expansion of existing RAPs was also achieved. Several approved RAPs increased participant enrollment, added new worksites, and extended program offerings to additional industry sectors. These enhancements allowed current programs to serve more apprentices, improve training capacity, and strengthen alignment with employer needs. Additionally, structured improvements in curriculum and mentorship opportunities ensured higher completion rates and stronger participant outcomes.

Efforts to develop new youth apprenticeship opportunities are currently underway. Workforce staff are in the process of expanding outreach to secondary schools, vocational programs, and community organizations to introduce apprenticeship awareness and integrate exposure into career readiness activities. These ongoing initiatives aim to create structured pathways for youth to transition into pre-apprenticeship and Registered Apprenticeship Programs. As the programs are finalized, plans include engaging youth and underrepresented populations through hands-on learning experiences, supportive services, and mentorship.

A historic milestone was reached with the first-ever completion of RAPs by CNMI-sponsored apprentices, with 11 apprentices earning industry-recognized credentials across four high-demand occupations: Certified Pharmacy Technician, Cook, Emergency Medical Technician, and Office Manager/Admin Services. This achievement demonstrates the growing maturity of the apprenticeship system, validates the effectiveness of employer-driven training, and establishes a strong foundation for sustainable, long-term workforce development.

Collectively, these efforts under Public Law 23-25 reflect CNMI's comprehensive strategy to increase access, create new programs, expand existing programs, and develop youth apprenticeship pathways, positioning the Commonwealth to build a skilled, resilient, and demand-driven workforce aligned with local economic priorities.

## Performance Accountability

In the program year, the CNMI continued to strengthen its performance accountability system in alignment with WIOA requirements. As part of the State Plan approval process, the CNMI received approval from USDOL ETA to establish baseline levels across all primary indicators of performance for the Title I programs. These baseline designations enabled the Commonwealth to focus on rebuilding program capacity, reestablishing participant flow, and ensuring compliance with WIOA performance expectations.

With the baseline approval in place, the CNMI prioritized rebuilding its data quality processes, strengthening case management documentation, and improving the alignment of performance data with federal reporting systems. While the Commonwealth did not have negotiated numerical targets for all indicators, progress was demonstrated through incremental increases in enrollment, completion of measurable skill gains, and improved reporting accuracy. Any variances or gaps observed in performance were influenced largely by the CNMI's fragile economic conditions, which continue to affect employer demand, labor force participation, and the availability of work-based learning opportunities. These economic constraints, combined with temporary reductions in WIOA-funded activities, limited staffing capacity, and reliance on consolidated federal resources to maintain core services, contributed to fluctuations in service delivery and outcomes during the program year. As economic conditions stabilize and participant flow increases, the CNMI anticipates more consistent and predictable performance trends in future program years.

The CNMI's common exit policy remains in effect and applies collectively to WIOA Title I Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth programs. Participants are exited only after they have not received a qualifying service from any of the included programs for 90 consecutive days, and no future services are planned. This policy supports accurate reporting of outcomes and ensures that performance exit cohorts reflect individuals who have fully engaged in available services.

For PY 2024, the consolidation of funding resulted in ETA assigning baseline indicators in place of negotiated performance levels for the Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth programs. As a result, CNMI's performance for the year reflects outcomes during a transitional period in which no formal targets were set. The following narrative provides the actual results achieved in each program area and establishes a performance benchmark that will inform future cycles.

### PY2024 Actual Results

WIOA Adult:

- Entered Employment 2nd Quarter After Exit **14.7%**
- Entered Employment 4th Quarter After Exit **13.0%**
- Median Earnings **\$4,157**
- Credential Attainment **57.7%**
- Measurable Skill Gains **61.8%**

WIOA Dislocated Worker:

- Entered Employment 2nd Quarter After Exit **9.6%**
- Entered Employment 4th Quarter After Exit **13.9%**
- Median Earnings **\$4,031**
- Credential Attainment **66.7%**
- Measurable Skill Gains **52.8%**

WIOA Youth:

- Entered Employment 2nd Quarter After Exit **27.3%**
- Entered Employment 4th Quarter After Exit **33.9%**
- Median Earnings **\$4,056**
- Credential Attainment **33.3%**
- Measurable Skill Gains **16.7%**

Effectiveness in Serving Employers **75.6%**

Overall, the CNMI's PY 2024 performance reflects steady progress toward meeting baseline targets established by ETA for the Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth programs, despite ongoing economic and labor-market constraints. While several indicators particularly employment rates and measurable skill gains remain below long-term expectations, the results demonstrate that participants are reentering the workforce, earning competitive wages, and obtaining industry-recognized credentials even within a fragile economic environment. Strong performance in employer engagement, evidenced by a 75.6 percent repeat business customer rate, further highlights the workforce system's ability to maintain employer confidence and provide value to local industries. These baseline results provide a realistic foundation for future improvement as economic conditions stabilize, service capacity expands, and WIOA-funded training and career services return to full operational strength in the coming program years.

To ensure the highest standards of data integrity, the CNMI implemented a strengthened data validation protocol consistent with ETA's annual validation requirements. The validation approach includes periodic desk reviews of participant files, cross-checking source documentation against reported elements in the case

management system, and internal audits of eligibility, service delivery, and outcome documentation. Staff received refresher training on data validation procedures, and the workforce system enhanced quality-control checkpoints to prevent reporting discrepancies. These improvements support more accurate performance reporting and lay the foundation for establishing measurable performance targets in future years.

Overall, despite operational and fiscal challenges, the CNMI made meaningful progress in stabilizing its performance accountability system, ensuring data integrity, and preparing for future performance negotiations. The establishment of baseline levels provides a necessary rebuilding period as the Commonwealth restores full program capacity and repositions itself for long-term performance improvement.

## **Statewide Governor's Reserve Funds**

During the program year, the CNMI utilized Governor's Reserve funds, consistent with WIOA Section 128(a)(1) and 20 CFR 682.210, to support essential statewide workforce activities that strengthened program administration, improved fiscal accountability, and enhanced service delivery across all Title I programs. These funds were primarily used to support the salaries of the Director and key fiscal staff whose responsibilities include statewide program oversight, grant management, fiscal controls, monitoring, technical assistance, and compliance with federal performance and reporting requirements. Their roles are central to ensuring the effective administration of WIOA resources and the implementation of policies and systems that support high-quality service delivery across the Commonwealth.

Governor's Reserve funds were also used to support activities of the State Workforce Development Board, including coordination of board meetings, policy development, staff support, and alignment across workforce, education, and economic development partners. These activities strengthened governance, improved strategic planning, and ensured that board decisions were informed by labor market analysis and aligned with the priorities outlined in the Unified State Plan.

In addition, a portion of statewide funds supported training and statewide capacity-building efforts for participants and staff. These investments improved staff competencies in case management, data reporting, and program implementation, and expanded participant access to training opportunities aligned with industry needs.

Collectively, the use of Governor's Reserve funds had a direct and indirect impact on overall WIOA performance by improving administrative efficiency, strengthening fiscal integrity, enhancing policy and governance structures, and supporting the delivery of consistent, high-quality services across local programs. These statewide investments ensure that the CNMI workforce system maintains compliance, increases capacity, and remains responsive to employer needs and participant outcomes.

## Rapid Response

During the program year, the CNMI Department of Labor (DOL) significantly expanded its Rapid Response efforts in response to increased employer disruptions across the Commonwealth. The Rapid Response team assisted nine employers experiencing downsizing or operational challenges, with potential impacts to more than 500 employees. This represents a substantial increase from the previous program year, when only one employer event required Rapid Response assistance. The surge underscores both the growing demand for coordinated workforce intervention and the CNMI's strengthened capacity to support employers and workers during periods of transition.

CNMI DOL delivered these services in close coordination with the WIOA Core Programs, ensuring an integrated and seamless response. Collaboration with Title I (Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs), Title II (Adult Education), and Title IV (Vocational Rehabilitation) allowed the workforce system to address a full range of reemployment, training, and supportive service needs. This cross-program partnership improved referral pathways, increased co-enrollment opportunities, and ensured that Rapid Response recipients received comprehensive and individualized assistance.

For employers, Rapid Response services included consultation on layoff aversion strategies and technical assistance on available workforce funding opportunities, including options for incumbent worker training or upskilling to stabilize operations. Early engagement with employers also helped the team gather timely data, plan onsite events, and coordinate wraparound services.

For affected workers, the Rapid Response team conducted onsite and virtual orientations that covered job search services, WIOA training opportunities, supportive services, and pathways into high-demand occupations. The team facilitated warm handoffs to the CNMI's federal workforce programs, where staff assisted with intake, eligibility screening, and co-enrollment across WIOA Core and partner programs. This streamlined process ensured that workers could quickly access career counseling, reemployment assistance, adult education or ESL classes, and disability-related supports when needed.

The dramatic increase in Rapid Response activity this year demonstrates the CNMI workforce system's enhanced capacity, improved cross-program coordination, and commitment to mitigating the impact of large-scale layoffs. Through timely intervention and strong partnerships across the WIOA Core Programs, CNMI DOL ensured that more than 500 affected employees received the support necessary to transition successfully into new employment or training opportunities.

## **Wagner-Peyser Activities**

The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) is not a recipient of Wagner-Peyser Act Employment Service (ES) funding under sections 7(a) or 7(b) of the Act. As such, no Wagner-Peyser funded activities were conducted during the program year.

Nevertheless, the CNMI Department of Labor, through its Employment Services Division, continues to provide comparable workforce and reemployment services to jobseekers and employers. These activities include job search assistance, job matching and referral, labor exchange functions, and support to unemployment insurance claimants (PUA/FPUC) through job placement and eligibility assessment services. The Employment Services Division also collaborates with other workforce and training programs to ensure that individuals seeking employment or reemployment have access to a full range of resources and support despite the CNMI's non-participation in the Wagner-Peyser program.

## **National Dislocated Worker Grants (NDWGs)**

The CNMI's NDWG QUEST award successfully served 666 participants, far exceeding the planned enrollment target of 250 individuals and demonstrating the Commonwealth's strong capacity to identify, engage, and support dislocated and underemployed workers. Of the total served, 438 participants received individualized career services, including career counseling, job search assistance, and supportive services, while 177 participants engaged in training aligned with priority industries such as hospitality, care economy, environmental mediation, and others. Throughout the grant period, all participants were co-enrolled in WIOA Title I programs to ensure seamless continuity of services and uninterrupted access to supportive resources, particularly for those who remained in training at the close of the grant on September 30, 2025.

NDWG funds were strategically coordinated with the CNMI's Rapid Response and Dislocated Worker programs to deliver timely interventions for affected workers. This coordination provided employer outreach, skills assessments, training referrals, and job placement support, strengthening the Commonwealth's ability to respond to economic disruptions. The integration of NDWG activities with the CNMI's disaster and emergency management framework further enhanced the workforce system's ability to rapidly mobilize services in response to labor market instability or industry-wide layoffs.

Overall, the QUEST award significantly expanded the CNMI's workforce development capacity and demonstrated the effectiveness of coordinated service delivery. By exceeding enrollment expectations and supporting both participant progression and employer needs, the grant reinforced the Commonwealth's workforce infrastructure and contributed to more resilient and responsive economic recovery efforts.

## State Best Practices and Needs

### Challenges

During the reporting period, the CNMI workforce system faced ongoing challenges due to economic uncertainties and shifting labor market demands. Industries critical to the Commonwealth, including hospitality, construction, and healthcare, experienced fluctuating employer capacity, workforce shortages, and slower than expected recovery, creating challenges for participant placement and alignment of training with available job opportunities. These conditions necessitated adjustments in program design and service delivery to ensure that workforce initiatives remained relevant and responsive to current employer needs. The CNMI'S WIOA system has prioritized flexibility in training programs, strengthened employer engagement, and expanded career pathway strategies to address these challenges, but ongoing economic instability continues to require careful monitoring and adaptation to maintain alignment with the labor market and ensure positive participant outcomes.

### Promising Practice: Pre-Apprenticeship Development in High-Demand Industries

During PY2024, the CNMI advanced a promising practice centered on expanding high-quality pre-apprenticeship pathways that directly address the workforce needs of high-demand and hard-to-fill industries. To strengthen the talent pipeline for priority sectors including construction, healthcare, and hospitality, the CNMI invested in developing structured pre-apprenticeship programs aligned to employer expectations, industry standards, and the requirements of Registered Apprenticeship pathways.

Using quality pre-apprenticeship framework principles, the CNMI designed programs that incorporate technical instruction, work readiness training, hands-on learning, and strong connections to local employers. Industry engagement played a central role in shaping curriculum, defining competencies, and identifying clear transition points into Registered Apprenticeships or direct employment. This demand-driven approach ensured that training content remained relevant, responsive, and tied to immediate labor market needs.

Early implementation demonstrated strong potential: employers reported increased interest in hosting pre-apprenticeship participants and recognized the model as a viable strategy to address persistent workforce shortages. Participants benefited from

structured career exposure, supportive services, and a clear pathway toward employment or continued training.

This promising practice also helped strengthen coordination among WIOA Title I programs, education partners, and community organizations through shared curriculum tools, recruitment strategies, and co-enrollment processes. By positioning pre-apprenticeship programs as effective on-ramps to long-term career pathways, the CNMI improved system alignment and enhanced its capacity to meet employer demand, contributing to a more resilient and skilled workforce for the region.

### Promising Practice: WIOA Title I Consolidated Award

The CNMI has leveraged the WIOA Title I consolidated funding award as a promising practice to provide greater flexibility in serving all individuals “walk-in” participants, rather than limiting services by rigid program-specific allocations. This approach allows career services, training, and supportive assistance to be offered seamlessly to any eligible individual, enabling rapid intake, assessment, and connection to appropriate services without administrative barriers. By consolidating funding streams, the CNMI workforce system can prioritize participant needs over funding silos, efficiently allocate resources to meet demand, and respond quickly to employer and industry requirements. This flexibility has enhanced access to workforce services, improved participant engagement, and strengthened the territories ability to deliver outcomes that align with both individual career goals and labor market demands.

### Lesson Learned: Importance of Early Employer Engagement for Apprenticeship Programs

During PY2024, the CNMI observed that the success of apprenticeship programs and pre-apprenticeship pathways is closely tied to the timing and quality of employer engagement. Early involvement of employers in program design, skill standard development, and participant recruitment proved critical to aligning training with industry needs and ensuring timely placement of participants. Delays in employer onboarding, clarification of program requirements, or the registration process sometimes slowed participant enrollment and limited immediate work-based learning opportunities.

Analysis of program data and feedback from employers highlighted that proactive, structured engagement such as pre-planned consultation sessions, sector-specific advisory meetings, and joint curriculum development leads to higher employer participation, stronger sponsorship of apprentices, and improved alignment between training outcomes and labor market demand. For participants, early employer

involvement ensures that training is relevant, increases motivation, and enhances the likelihood of successful completion and job placement.

The CNMI has learned that embedding employer engagement as a continuous, early-stage practice rather than an ad hoc or reactive activity is essential for scaling apprenticeship programs, strengthening workforce pipelines in high-demand industries, and meeting the needs of both participants and employers efficiently. Moving forward, the CNMI will prioritize structured employer partnerships from program inception to improve program responsiveness and performance outcomes.

### Success Story: Inaugural Registered Apprenticeship Program Graduation

In Program Year 2024, the CNMI celebrated the successful completion of its inaugural Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) cohort, graduating eleven apprentices in four high-demand occupations: Certified Pharmacy Technician, Cook, Emergency Medical Technician, and Office Manager/Admin Services. These participants completed a combination of structured on-the-job learning and related technical instruction, achieving industry-recognized credentials that prepare them for immediate employment and long-term career advancement.

This milestone demonstrates the effectiveness of employer-driven training and the CNMI's commitment to building a skilled, demand-driven workforce. Apprenticeship sponsors reported that graduates were highly prepared, motivated, and ready to contribute meaningfully to business operations, validating the alignment between RAP training and employer needs. For participants, the program provided essential work experience, technical competencies, and career guidance, while also increasing engagement with supportive WIOA services.

The inaugural graduation represents a significant step forward in expanding Registered Apprenticeship opportunities in the CNMI. It highlights the positive impact of WIOA-funded initiatives in fostering workforce readiness, addressing local labor shortages, and creating sustainable career pathways for youth and adults. The success of this first cohort establishes a foundation for future program growth and serves as a model for integrating apprenticeship training into the broader workforce development system.

### Success Story: Entered Employment 4th Quarter After Exit

#### **Adult - Leo Master Jr**

My journey with the WIOA program has been a life-changing experience, one that has shaped my career trajectory in profound ways. The application process was a pivotal moment for me as a single father, as it marked my decision to pursue a path of professional development and growth. With determination and enthusiasm, I submitted

my application, eager to seize the opportunities that lay ahead. When I received confirmation of my acceptance into the program, I felt a surge of excitement and gratitude, knowing that this was the beginning of an incredible journey.

On October 30, I underwent an interview and evaluation designed to assess my skills, aptitude, and readiness for the program. It was a rewarding experience, as I had the opportunity to showcase my strengths and demonstrate my commitment to success. Despite the nerves, I approached the assessments with confidence, drawing on my passion for learning and determination to excel.

Following the assessment phase, I eagerly awaited the start of the work-based training component of the program. On November 6, I began my training at NMTech, where I was welcomed into a supportive and dynamic learning environment. From day one, I immersed myself in the training, eager to absorb knowledge, acquire new skills, and make meaningful contributions to the team.

The work-based training at NMTech was an invaluable experience, providing me with hands-on learning opportunities and exposure to real-world challenges. Under the guidance of experienced mentors and colleagues, I gained practical skills and industry-specific knowledge that would prove instrumental in my future career endeavors. Whether it was mastering technical concepts, honing my problem-solving abilities, or refining my communication skills, each day presented new opportunities for growth and development. As the months passed, I witnessed remarkable progress in my abilities and confidence levels. The supportive atmosphere at NMTech fostered a sense of camaraderie and collaboration among staff, who rallied together to overcome obstacles and celebrate achievements.

On May 6, as I completed my work-based training and prepared to transition into the next phase of my career, I reflected on the incredible journey I had undertaken. From the initial application process to the invaluable training at NMTech, the WIOA program had equipped me with the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to succeed in the workforce. I felt a profound sense of gratitude for the opportunities afforded to me and a renewed sense of purpose as I embarked on the next chapter of my professional journey.

I am excited about the possibilities that lie ahead and grateful for the foundation laid by the WIOA program. With the skills and experiences gained through this transformative journey, I am confident in my ability to achieve my goals and make a meaningful impact in my chosen field.

## Success Story: Credential Attainment and 4th Quarter Employment after Exit

### **Youth - Joven Atalig**

I had a good time working with WIA overall. It essentially served as my first paycheck. I had a terrific experience working at American Pizza and learned a lot about hospitality and serving [while attending Cooperative Education Class]. The opportunity to work for WIA and Co-Op let me observe diverse vocations and broadened my viewpoint, even though entering the military was my initial choice. My coworkers and clients were enjoyable to work with, and the training was enjoyable as well. After graduating [from Kagman High School on May 24, 2023], I got a job at Crowne Plaza Resort as a Food and Beverage Attendant. The work experience I gained as a Server [Attendant] has made it easier for me to understand how other Servers feel. You'll eventually become adjusted to the state of constant exhaustion. I also gained knowledge about how to serve, smile, and clean tables.

## **Pay for Performance**

The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) has not yet implemented a Pay-for-Performance contracting policy under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). During the program year, no statewide or local Pay for Performance contracts were executed.

Looking ahead, the CNMI Department of Labor is exploring the development of a Pay for Performance policy framework to strengthen accountability and promote measurable outcomes across workforce programs. The Department aims to identify feasible performance indicators such as credential attainment, employment retention, and earnings gains and assess data capacity to support outcome-based contracting. In future program years, the CNMI intends to pilot Pay for Performance strategies on a limited scale to test effectiveness and scalability, drawing on best practices and technical assistance from the U.S. Department of Labor and other jurisdictions that have successfully implemented such models.