

**THE WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND  
OPPORTUNITY ACT: SUPPORTING  
EFFORTS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF  
YOUTH, WORKERS, AND EMPLOYERS**

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**HEARING**  
OF THE  
**COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,  
LABOR, AND PENSIONS**  
**UNITED STATES SENATE**  
**ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS**

SECOND SESSION

ON

EXAMINING THE WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT,  
FOCUSING ON SUPPORTING EFFORTS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF  
YOUTH, WORKERS, AND EMPLOYERS

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**THE WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND  
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**Wednesday, June 12, 2024**

U.S. SENATE,  
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:04 a.m., in room 562, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Bernie Sanders, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Sanders [presiding], Murray, Casey, Murphy, Kaine, Hassan, Smith, Lujan, Hickenlooper, Markey, Cassidy, Murkowski, Braun, Marshall, Romney, and Tuberville.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR SANDERS**

The CHAIR. The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions will come to order. And let me begin by thanking our witnesses who are experts on workforce development, and practitioners who are working hard to put American workers and communities across this country on a path to higher wages and more fruitful careers. And we thank you very much for what you're doing.

We are here today to talk about a very serious issue, and that is the need to reauthorize and expand the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, also known here in DC as WIOA. In 2022, WIOA provided career and training services to nearly 300,000 adults, 212,000 dislocated workers, 37,000 youth, and 2.3 million individuals through employment services and employment service programs to connect people with good jobs.

It also supported literacy training and basic education for 1.1 million adults. It supports a network of 2,400 American Job Centers so that Americans in any community across this country can walk into a center to get help looking for a job, enroll in a training program at a local community college, or get referrals to food assistance or other supportive services.

WIOA also funds national programs that serve incarcerated individuals—not something I want to be talking about today because our rate of recidivism is off the charts—workers in tribal and migrant communities and youth such as through YouthBuild, which provides valuable training to 5,000 opportunity youth through building affordable housing.

It has been 10 years since Congress passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. In those 10 years, this country has experienced, as we all know, some monumental changes. COVID-19 pandemic altered the landscape of what jobs are available and forced many workers to rapidly shift careers, sometimes for lower wages.

Advancements in technology have displaced workers with one estimate showing the current shifts toward automation could put up to 39 million Americans out of work by 2030. Employers continue to ask more from workers, and in many cases, contribute less to their well-being. Of the 30 fastest growing occupations in this country, 24 require more than a high school diploma.

Let me just say this as some down to earth realities that I've experienced. I went to a high school in South Central Vermont a few months ago, and I walked into the school and there was a level of excitement that I had not anticipated. Unlike many other schools, kids were really happy to be in school.

Why was that? Well, there was a program in the school that allowed seniors to go out and get jobs in the community half-day while they were in school. The other half-day they were making 20 bucks an hour doing important work. Employers wanted their labor and they came back to school. They were motivated, much more motivated than they had previously been. They felt better about their academics, and did better academically, earning a living for their working-class families.

Second thing that I would like to bring up and hope to discuss later is, through an earmark, I got some money for Vermont Prisons. It shocked me to know—I don't know Senator Cassidy, if others know this. I kind of had assumed this was a no brainer, but it wasn't—there are prisons all over America, including in Vermont where you're in jail, you don't even have any educational opportunity. You're sitting there watching TV, doing whatever you're doing, getting angrier, more frustrated.

The rate of recidivism that we have in this country is extraordinarily high. So, we're spending, I don't know what it is in Vermont, \$60,000, \$70,000 a year to lock people up. And then a good portion of them come back because we haven't given them the job training, we haven't given them the education.

We brought some money into the state. We are working with the community colleges who are now doing educational programs where the prisoners are very motivated, is my understanding. It's working quite well. And by the way, we also got the same program for the prison guards and their families to get credits for community colleges as well.

The bottom line is, you have millions of kids in school today, they're good with their hands. They want to go out, they want to make a living and they don't have the training to do that. And I think we've got to figure out how to do that. We are spending huge amounts of money locking people up in this country, and they leave prison without the skills they need to succeed in the civilian world.

Those are some of the issues that concern me. Look forward to discussing them with you, and thanks for being here.

Senator CASSIDY.

#### OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR CASSIDY

Senator CASSIDY. Thank you, Chairman Sanders. There's about 8 million job openings in the United States and the unemployment rate is low, but so is the workforce participation. That's a bad sign. To put it in context, about 37 percent of working-age adults nationwide are unemployed and not looking for work. Again, that's not good. Idle hands are a devil's workshop is the old proverb, but people do better if they're gainfully employed.

Many Americans are not receiving job training because of a workforce development program which is just not working well. Current Federal workforce funding prioritizes bloating government bureaucracy less than in investing in worker skill. That is why reauthorizing and improving the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Grant, WIOA—always reminds me of one of those songs from Lion King.

Anyway, WIOA is so important. WIOA funds programs assisting Americans in obtaining crucial job skills as well as to connect job seekers with employment activities. But Congress has failed to reauthorize WIOA since it expired in 2020. I thank the Chair for collaborating in this. This is an important step, this hearing, in improving WIOA and reauthorizing. It is long overdue. I hope that what we learn today will culminate in a bipartisan Committee markup before the August recess.

I also want to highlight Republican colleagues for their work to improve WIOA, including Senators Tuberville, Mullin, Marshall, and Braun, all on this Committee; Budd, Romney, Collins, all on this Committee, who have developed legislation worthy of this Committee's consideration. I appreciate their work and look forward to hearing more about their bills today.

When Congress fails to reauthorize programs, we miss out on the ability to improve them to help meet the needs of a modern workforce and of employers. We have the opportunity now to increase options for training and skills development so workers can properly enter, reenter, and remain in an ever-changing workforce.

To achieve this goal, we must, one, direct more funding to training and allow states to innovate to best serve workers and employers. Two, improve the eligible training provider list, making it easier for workers to connect to a more quality workforce and training providers.

Three, allow states the flexibility to implement innovative workforce development models that meet workers where they are and get them better connected with employers. This flexible model, by the way, has been very successful in Senator Romney's home State of Utah, and it's something that my State of Louisiana is seeking to implement.

Lastly, we need to increase transparency and accountability of WIOA programs for improving employment outcomes, including earnings, to ensure that they're best serving workers. These are just a few of the policies the Committee should consider.

Again, I appreciate the Chair for calling this hearing. I look forward to this discussion on how to improve WIOA to benefit working Americans, to benefit us all. With that, I yield.

The CHAIR. Thank you, Senator Cassidy. I would mention to Members that in this new room, apparently the timer is broken and they're trying to fix it right now. So, I will gently bang at 5 after your 5 minutes. It's a Senator's dream, the timer's broken, then go on for hours.

[Laughter.]

Senator CASSIDY. I suggest we put on our iPhone and start counting down.

[Laughter.]

The CHAIR. We thank our witnesses for being here to discuss this very important issue. Our first witness is Ms. Taylor White, the director of the Program to Advance Youth Apprenticeship and Post-secondary Pathways for Youth in New America.

In this role, she directs a network that supports over 70 apprenticeship programs across the country through grants and technical assistance to expand access to apprenticeships as a high quality post-secondary option for youth.

Ms. White, thanks a lot for being here.

**STATEMENT OF TAYLOR WHITE, M.ED., DIRECTOR, PARTNERSHIP TO ADVANCE YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP, WASHINGTON, DC**

Ms. WHITE. Good morning, Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am, as you shared, Taylor White, the director of Post-Secondary Pathways for Youth at New America and the Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship, or PAYA.

Since 2018, PAYA has led a national network of dynamic public-private partnerships working to build, earn, and learn pathways that connect young people with training and work experiences they need to land jobs and work toward careers. Now 70 members strong, the network has provided powerful examples of how WIOA makes a difference in the lives of young people. It's an honor to be here today to share recommendations and how we can enhance and expand these efforts.

It's a difficult time to be a young American. Persistent inequities in our systems of education and work limit access and opportunity based on gender, income, disability, citizenship status, and most darkly, race. Economic mobility long considered a hallmark of American society has been declining for decades.

With or without a college degree, a young adult today is less likely to earn as much as their parents. Basic necessities like healthcare, housing, and education that were affordable to previous generations are far more expensive today, making the transition to adulthood much harder for young people to navigate.

Currently, over 12 percent of Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 are disconnected from both education and the labor market. That's roughly 4.5 million young people. Rates of disconnection are highest among Native American, Black, and Latino youth. Young

men are more likely to be disconnected than young women. And these, so-called Opportunity Youth are twice as likely as their connected peers to have grown up in poverty, and three times as likely to have a disability.

A robust body of research demonstrates that youth disconnection is associated with lower levels of educational attainment and increased rates of substance abuse, physical and mental illness, and criminal activity.

The individual and social costs of youth disconnection are enormous. Our public workforce system plays a critical role in identifying these young people and helping them access education, training, work experiences, and the supports they need to stay connected or reengage.

Each year, WIOA-funded programs such as Job Corps, YouthBuild, and the myriad local programs supported by Title I Youth dollars provide training and services to roughly 200,000 youth a majority of whom are neither working nor in school. But the number of youth served through WIOA is a shockingly small fraction of those who need support to access jobs, and the education, and training they need to succeed in them.

By failing to serve this population of youth in much greater numbers, we squander an opportunity to harness the potential of more than 4 million Americans who are at the very beginning of their working lives. This is unacceptable.

The most important recommendation I can offer today to this Committee is a simple one. We must substantially increase the Federal investment in youth programming through WIOA to a level that is commensurate with the scale of the barriers young people are facing.

Beyond that, however, there are other changes that I believe would improve the workforce system's ability to deliver positive outcomes for young people. For example, I believe Congress should take steps to reduce barriers to cooperation between the public workforce system and other youth-serving systems to reduce disconnection from school and ensure that when students do drop out, information can be shared to identify and reengage them quickly in the workforce system.

Anything we can do to reduce the time that young people remain disconnected will help. Simplifying co-enrollment and continuing self-attestation are two other ways we can do this through WIOA. Cross system cooperation would also be greatly aided by improved data system and enhanced data sharing flexibilities. More granular data on program dimensions, training provider performance, and longer-term program outcomes would also help state and local leaders make informed decisions about how to use their resources for the best possible results.

To make this possible, Congress should invest in state and local data infrastructure and promote cross-system data alignment. Research has shown that early career experiences such as internships, apprenticeships, and jobs that pay good wages can have positive effects on future earnings outcomes.

Under WIOA, the workforce system has placed more young people in these experiences with positive results. To expand these opportunities, Congress should establish a dedicated work experience fund that provides additional resources to programs that meet a set of quality criteria.

For example, eligible programs should include a training component, lead to credentials, and provide a clear next step, either to further training or directly to a job, and whether or not they qualify for the fund. Congress should require youth work experience provided through WIOA to be paid if it lasts longer than 2 weeks.

Finally, Congress should preserve and expand the supportive services available through WIOA. To address the needs of today's youth, including mental health issues, WIOA supportive services can provide a measure of stability and dignity to young people so they can focus on improving their futures rather than worrying about how to buy a uniform for work, if they can afford treatment for a painful tooth, or paying the rent.

For too many young adults in America today, the future is bright, but the path to get there is long, expensive, and hard to navigate. The public workforce system helps some of America's most vulnerable young workers get on their feet and onto a path toward economic security, but we can do better for them and for all young people. And we need to, not just for their sake, but for the sake of our communities and our future economy as well. An ambitious approach to WIOA reauthorization is a good start.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. White follows.]

## PREPARED STATEMENT OF TAYLOR WHITE

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. It is a privilege to be with you today. In my role at New America, I lead a body of work focused on policies and programmatic innovations designed to promote economic opportunity for youth and young adults. Since 2018, we have led an initiative called the Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA), which includes a national network of dynamic partnerships made up of state and local agencies, schools and community colleges, community-based organizations, non-profit intermediaries, and employers, all working to build earn-and-learn pathways to connect young people with the training they need to access good jobs, launch careers, and transition successfully into adulthood.

Now 70-members strong, the PAYA Network has provided powerful examples of how the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) can make a difference in the lives of young people. But it has revealed many of the legislation's limitations, as well. Most significantly, PAYA has proven to us the importance of investing in our economy's youngest workers, especially those who face historic barriers to entering and succeeding in our labor market. I appreciate the chance to share these learnings with you today.

It is a difficult time to be a young American. Persistent inequities in our systems of education and work limit access and opportunity based on gender, income, disability, citizenship status and, mostly starkly, race. In secondary and postsecondary education, overall enrollment has increased, but performance and completion gaps remain. As just one example, Latino and Black Americans have experienced the most significant attainment growth but still remain the least likely to earn a college degree.<sup>i</sup>

Gaps in labor force participation, wages, and wage growth follow suit. Economic mobility, long-considered a hallmark of American society, has been declining for decades, putting the U.S. well behind other advanced economies.<sup>ii</sup> With or without a college degree, a young adult today is less likely to earn as much as their parents. Basic necessities—housing, health care, education, child care—that were affordable to previous generations are far more expensive today, making the transition into adulthood harder for young people to navigate.<sup>iii</sup>

There are about 39 million young adults in America between 16 and 24 years of age. This is a pivotal time of life, both developmentally and economically. It is a period of rapid skill development and identity formation, during which young people crave new challenges and are exceptionally well-primed to learn from them. Many of the experiences people have in their late teens and early twenties have a lasting impact on their futures. The experiences they do not have access to matter, too.

This is certainly true when it comes to their professional lives. Research suggests that early career experiences can have positive effects on workers' wages, annual earnings, and labor market attachment. For example, a 2018 study from the Brookings Institution and Child Trends found that early access to mentors (for example, through internships and apprenticeships) and jobs that pay good wages led to

better employment outcomes later in life.<sup>iv</sup> Unfortunately, for too many Americans, these early-career assets remain out of reach.

In 2021, 12.1 percent of Americans ages 16 to 24 were disconnected from education and the labor market.<sup>v</sup> Prior to the pandemic, the number sat below 11 percent, after a decade of decline following the Global Financial Crisis. In the U.S., we refer to these young people as Disconnected or Opportunity Youth. Many have dropped out of high school without a diploma. Others have completed high school but are struggling to get a foothold in the labor market. Still others may have started postsecondary education but withdrew before earning a credential or degree (but often not without taking on debt). Rates of disconnection are highest amongst Native Americans (23.5 percent), Black youth (18.9 percent) and Latino youth (14.0 percent).<sup>vi</sup> Young men are more likely to be disconnected than young women. Compared to their peers who are working or enrolled in education, Opportunity Youth are twice as likely to have grown up in poverty and three times as likely to have a disability.<sup>vii</sup>

A robust body of research has demonstrated that youth disconnection is associated with lower levels of educational attainment and increased rates of substance abuse, physical and mental illness, and criminal activity.<sup>viii</sup> Disconnection can be costly not only for individuals but for communities and our economy as well. In 2012, a study by researchers at New York and Columbia Universities considered the lost earnings potential of Opportunity Youth, as well as the costs associated with providing various public services and benefits to support them into adulthood. The study estimated that “each year the average opportunity youth imposes a total fiscal burden of \$13,890 and a total social burden of \$37,440” in 2011 dollars.<sup>ix</sup> Adjusted for inflation, that is a cost of approximately \$71,915 per youth, per year, or more than \$3 billion dollars annually in today’s dollars.<sup>x</sup>

Our public workforce system plays a critical role in identifying these young people and helping them access education, training, work experience, and the supportive services they need to stay connected or re-engage after periods of disconnection. Each year, WIOA-funded programs such as Job Corps, Youth Build, and myriad local programs, supported by Title I Youth dollars, provide training and services to more than 225,000 youth, a majority of whom are neither enrolled in school nor working.

But the number of youth served through WIOA is a shockingly small fraction of those who need support to access jobs and the education and training they need to succeed in them. By failing to serve this population of youth in much greater numbers, we squander an opportunity to harness the potential of more than four million Americans who are at the very beginning of their working lives. In an economy that currently has twice as many open jobs as workers to fill them, this is unacceptable.

**Congress should substantially increase its investment in youth programming through WIOA** to a level that is commensurate with the scale of the challenges young people are facing in launching their careers and in line with the costs associated with their disconnection. That would require at least doubling current investment in youth through WIOA, and ensuring a majority of new resources are reserved for local workforce development boards who know the needs of their communities best.

Additional funding would be a start. But there are other improvements to WIOA that could promote the public workforce system’s ability to deliver positive outcomes for youth, too. Currently, the system is oriented toward strategies that provide quick, near-term wins without much regard for their potential to produce lasting, long-term benefits. That’s not to say that quick wins are not important; for young people who have struggled to succeed in traditional educational and work environments, they can build confidence and increase their likelihood of pursuing further resources and support. But for youth, whose

careers will likely span decades, a focus exclusively on quick wins is myopic. To land good jobs now and advance in their careers in the economy of the future, young adults need both credentials *and* work experience. Working with partners in their communities, local workforce boards can provide both, but WIOA does not offer adequate resources or incentives for them to do so. The reauthorization of WIOA is a prime opportunity to improve the public workforce system's approach to supporting the long-term career trajectories of youth. For example, WIOA should be reimagined to:

**Reduce barriers to cooperation with other youth-serving systems and improve the coordination of service delivery to reduce disconnection.** A 2018 study by Measure of America found that “by the time they reach their thirties, people who worked or were in school throughout their teens and early twenties earn \$38,400 more per year and are 45 percent more likely to own a home, 42 percent more likely to be employed, and 52 percent more likely to report excellent or good health than those who had been disconnected as young people.”<sup>xi</sup> We also know that a high school diploma is more valuable than a GED.<sup>xii</sup> Reducing disconnection to improve high school completion should be a priority for workforce boards under WIOA.

Since 2014, under WIOA, local workforce boards have been required to dedicate at least 75 percent of their Title I Youth dollars to serving Out-of-School Youth (OSY); the remaining 25 percent can go toward programming for In-School Youth (ISY). This was a dramatic shift from the prior legislation (the Workforce Investment Act, or WIA), which required just 30 percent of Title I Youth dollars be dedicated to OSY. On one hand, this change has been positive in that it has ensured that the youth who face the most significant barriers to employment are prioritized for services through WIOA (though, notably, many states sought waivers from the U.S. Department of Labor to retain a higher level of spending for ISY). On the other hand, practitioners have also reported that this change has reduced their focus on leveraging WIOA to prevent the disconnection of ISY, as well as the “time spent communicating with high school or community college partners.”<sup>xiii</sup> Given the cost of disconnection and the importance of credentials, including a high school diploma, these are not positive developments.

But the WIOA system need not return to WIA-era requirements to improve a focus on youth at-risk of disconnection. A more expansive definition of youth who can be served with different pots of resources could help, but should be accompanied by a requirement and incentives that ensure the most vulnerable youth continue to remain a focus. Clarifying and simplifying co-enrollment policies could also help. Likewise, allowing more extensive, proactive exchange of student-level data between state and local education agencies, institutions of higher education, and public workforce boards would ensure practitioners in both systems have the information they need to act quickly to keep at-risk students connected to school or to locate and enroll students quickly when they drop out.

Greater system-level cooperation across youth-serving agencies, such as with the career and technical education (CTE) system, could also help to reduce disconnection. This could be achieved through incentives to states to encourage the development of shared federal plans (e.g. WIOA and Perkins plans), shared goals, aligned performance metrics, among other tools. To improve collaboration and information sharing across systems, Congress should require that state and local workforce boards include relevant CTE leadership among their members. Additional resources and flexibility to support braiding and blending of federal funding for youth education, employment, and training programs, such as through innovations like the Performance Partnerships for Disconnected Youth, would also be beneficial.

**Invest in state and local data infrastructure and promote cross-system data alignment.** WIOA requires training providers to collect individual data on program participants, including age, race, sex, and barriers to employment. State and local agencies collect individual-level data on WIOA participants, too. Some have longitudinal data that can link workforce, education, and employment data, but many lack the ability to track employment outcomes beyond one year past exit (or simply do not). Especially for youth, most of whom are at the very beginning of their careers, the ability to capture data two or even five years into the future would help generate valuable evidence about which programs yield the greatest long-term benefits. Likewise, more granular information about program dimensions could also help advance our understanding of what aspects of youth-serving programs matter most for particular populations or occupational pathways. This information can help the system improve and gain efficiencies in the future.

Flexibility and infrastructure to improve data alignment across systems that support WIOA-eligible Americans would also be beneficial, as noted above. However, this should go beyond cooperation with education partners. While some progress has been made in aligning definitions across federal programs, room for improvement remains. As JFF reported in a 2024 report, “programmatic alignment across Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) WIOA, and the Department of Veterans Affairs is highly encouraged, and yet data collection approaches and definitions of shared variables are not standardized, and performance metrics are not aligned.”<sup>xiv</sup>

**Expand support for youth work experiences while adopting quality criteria to increase their value to youth and employers.** One analysis of LinkedIn jobs data found that 38 percent of entry-level jobs posted on the site require at least 3 years of experience. For young people, especially those who face significant barriers to employment, this trend could be disastrous. Fortunately, WIOA currently requires that local workforce boards dedicate at least 20 percent of their Title I Youth funding to providing work experiences and activities. Eligible activities include job shadowing, on-the-job training, summer youth employment, internships, pre-apprenticeships, and registered apprenticeships. This positive feature of the current law can be strengthened and expanded. As a starting point, to ensure that these work experiences are attractive and accessible to youth, especially those who need to earn a wage to support their families, Congress should require that all youth work experiences longer than two-weeks be paid. Expanded funding would ensure WIOA dollars can provide wage subsidies.

WIOA’s 20 percent work experience requirement has resulted in an increase in the number of young people who complete work experience, but a decline in the duration of services they receive through the workforce system, according to analysis from Mathematica.<sup>xv</sup> This was due in part to the increased cost of administering the work experiences.<sup>xvi</sup> To cut costs, some programs in Mathematica’s study reduced occupational skills training programs. In practice, this may seem like a creative solution. But in reality, it could have negative long-term effects for youth, especially if a reduction in time spent in occupational training means young people earn fewer or less valuable credentials.

To acknowledge the realities of today’s labor market, WIOA should prioritize earn-and-learn opportunities that provide components that we know matter: meaningful credentials, paid work experience, mentorship opportunities, and clear paths to good jobs. Congress should establish a work experience fund that can be used to:

- Reimburse employers for up to 75 percent of wages for providing work experiences to youth who are also participating in an eligible education and training program. Subsidies should be reserved for jobs that pay at least \$15 an hour and which include opportunities to earn industry recognized credentials or credit, to ensure public dollars are used to create paths to prosperity

rather than to poverty. Hazardous occupations as defined under the Fair Labor Standards Act should be ineligible for wage subsidies for workers under 18 years. Employers that receive subsidies should be prohibited from laying off existing workers to preference youth.

- Offer incentives for local workforce boards to create progressive work experiences that “link” to a clear next step toward further training, a more advanced work experience, or a full-time job. Youth-serving pre-apprenticeship programs that confer preferential access to or advanced standing in registered apprenticeship programs are just one promising example of “linking” that is currently supported through WIOA, but could and should be expanded, especially given the conclusion of the Department of Labor’s historic and successful Youth Apprenticeship Readiness Grants initiative, which ends this year.
- Offer incentives to employers for hiring youth who face the most significant barriers to employment. Especially in a period when high schools are racing to dramatically expand work-based learning programs for students, WIOA must take steps to ensure the young people it serves are not overlooked by employers fielding multiple requests for partnership.
- Build the capacity of workforce boards and other intermediary organizations to cooperate with education partners and employers to establish local or regional career pathway systems that include different tiers of work experiences and multiple paths to credentials that lead to well-paying, in-demand employment.

**Expand supportive services to address the needs of today’s youth, including mental health.** In our work across the U.S., the most consistently cited barrier to expanding access to work-based learning opportunities is transportation. Funding for equipment, uniforms, supplies, and career advising services are also common. Research has shown that intensive case management support delivered through WIOA is among the public workforce system’s most effective interventions.<sup>xvi</sup> For youth, positive impacts have been associated with programs that combine work experience and/or supportive services with training.<sup>xvii</sup>

Supportive services that can be provided through WIOA are critical to ensuring young people can access and succeed in programs that put them on a path to economic independence and security. Congress should preserve supportive services as an allowable use of WIOA dollars.

Youth today report high rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges that affect their ability to learn and to work productively.<sup>xix</sup> Counseling to support mental health is already an allowable use of WIOA funding, and local workforce board staff are well-positioned to refer youth to other providers that can meet their needs. However, resources to support staff development, training programs for youth-serving employer partners, and better coordination with other youth-serving systems would be beneficial. Congress should provide state workforce agencies with grant funding that can be distributed to local boards (either by formula tied to youth unemployment rates or competitively) to support strategies that address the mental health challenges youth in their service regions are facing.

For too many young adults in America today, the future is bright, but the path to get there is long, expensive, and hard to navigate. The public workforce system provides training, work experience, and support to some of our nation’s most vulnerable young workers to help them chart a path toward economic security. But we can do better for them and for all young people. And we need to – not just for their sake, but for the sake of our communities and our future economy as well. An ambitious approach to WIOA reauthorization is a start. Thank you for your time and consideration.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>vi</sup> Lewis, 21.
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- <sup>viii</sup> Lewis, 7. Evidence is also available in international research, including, Gariépy, Guillaume, Sarah M. Danna, Leanne Hawke, Joanna Henderson, and Sylvia N. Iyer, "The mental health of young people who are not in education, employment, or training: a systematic review and meta-analysis," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 57, no. 6 (June 2022): 1107-1121, doi: 10.1007/s00127-021-02212-8.
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- <sup>x</sup> To obtain this figure, the author used the Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to estimate the 2024 value of the dollar estimates provided by Belfield, Levin, and Rosen, and assumed a total of 4.4 million Opportunity Youth, recognizing that the 2021 number may have come down slightly as our economy has continued to grow and enrollment in postsecondary education has begun to creep back upwards. Thus, \$3 billion may be a conservative estimate.
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- <sup>xii</sup> Roberto Agodini and Mark Dynarski. *Understanding the Trend Toward Alternative Certification for High School Graduates* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica, 1998).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Kate Dunham, Caitlin Grey, Mary Hancock, Pamela Holcomb, Brittany English, and Grace Roemer, *Operationalizing Changes to the Title I Youth Program under WIOA* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica, 2020), xiii, [https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/WIOA\\_Study\\_Youth\\_FINAL508.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/WIOA_Study_Youth_FINAL508.pdf).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Brooke Valle, *Driving Improved Workforce Outcomes Through Data Access, Alignment, and Integration* (Boston, MA: JFF, 2024).
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[SUMMARY STATEMENT OF TAYLOR WHITE]

Ms. White's testimony makes the case for a bold approach to reauthorizing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to better serve youth. Ms. White's testimony will provide insight into how youth are served through the public workforce system, why WIOA needs to be modified to better serve them, and how Congress can change the law to make this happen.

Key points will include:

- In today's economy, young adults need access to high quality career education, training, work experiences, mentoring and support that help them gain a foothold in the labor market and put them on a pathway to good jobs and careers.
- Of the 39 million Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 years of age, 12.1 percent are neither employed, nor enrolled in education or training programs. Called "Opportunity Youth" these youth face significant barriers to employment. The cost of their disconnection is estimated to be more than \$3 billion annually.
- The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act supports programs and resources that provide opportunities for our Nation's most vulnerable youth to develop skills, earn credentials, and obtain employment. Each year, WIOA-funded youth programs support roughly 225,000 young people, the majority of whom are disconnected from education and work. But that's just 5 percent of the youth who would likely be eligible to participate.
- To dramatically increase the number of youth served through the public workforce system and increase the quality of support they receive, Congress should **substantially increase funding for youth through WIOA.**
- Congress should **reduce barriers to cooperation with other youth-serving systems and improve the coordination of service delivery** to reduce the risk of youth disconnection in the first place.
- To understand employment outcomes beyond 1 year (and thus the longer-term benefits of work experiences and training), Congress should **invest in state and local data infrastructure and promote cross-system data alignment.**
- To ensure young people are prepared for entry-level jobs, over a third of which require some prior experience, Congress should **establish a fund to expand youth work experiences, including pre-and registered apprenticeships, while adopting quality criteria to increase the value of these work experiences for youth and employers.**
- Finally, Congress should **expand supportive services to address the needs of today's youth, including mental health issues,** to ensure they have the resources they need to complete training and work experiences and to transition successfully into the labor market.

The CHAIR. Ms. White, thank you very much.

Our next witness is Dr. David Bradley, senior director of policy and advocacy at Jobs for the Future. Prior to this role, David worked at the Congressional Research Service as a specialist in labor economics, focusing on labor issues and Federal workforce development policies.

Dr. Bradley.

**STATEMENT OF DAVID BRADLEY, PH.D., SENIOR DIRECTOR,  
JOBS FOR THE FUTURE, WASHINGTON, DC**

Dr. BRADLEY. Good morning, Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, and Members of the Senate HELP Committee. My name is David Bradley, I'm a senior director for workforce policy at Jobs for the Future, which is a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that has worked for more than 40 years to drive

change in America's workforce and education systems. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and thank you for your leadership on this important issue.

My remarks today are going to focus on three areas. One, why reauthorization now and what are the major characteristics of WIOA, the current system, and finally, a few recommendations for improving the system.

Why does WIOA need to be reauthorized? Now, I'm sure my fellow panelists are going to give some additional reasons, but I would highlight, as the Ranking Member pointed out, there are more than 8 million job openings, and the number of unemployed is lower than that. Employers do face difficulty finding skilled workers.

In addition, there's persistent difficulty for individuals with barriers to employment in attaining quality jobs. There's going to be an expected increased demand for skilled workers, in part, through the investments from the Infrastructure, CHIPS and Science, and Inflation Reduction Acts. Since WIOA was enacted in 2014, there's been a movement toward a skills-based employment ecosystem, which has not been fully incorporated into WIOA.

Finally, there's new and constantly involving technologies that allow for new methods of training, delivery, and the use of technology such as AI and job matching. Without focused investments, we could miss an opportunity to increase competitiveness and economic advancement for all.

Let me talk a little bit about history and characteristics of WIOA. WIOA was enacted in 2014, and I want to go through some of the defining elements of the system that we have now. WIOA is designed to be demand-driven. That is, it's supposed to be responsive to local conditions and employers' demands through more than 500 local workforce areas.

WIOA emphasizes coordination and alignment through such mechanisms as required unified state planning so that programs are supposed to demonstrate that they're working together. WIOA provides local control. Local workforce boards, for the most part, are authorized to determine the specific mix of services and types of training.

WIOA provides central points of service through the one-stop delivery system, with more than 2,000 American Job Centers throughout the country. WIOA also provides universal access to career services, and has a priority of service for training services to individuals with low incomes and others in need of significant skills training.

WIOA emphasizes certain workforce development strategies such as sector partnerships and career pathways that have evidence-based outcomes behind them. WIOA also emphasizes consumer choice, primarily through its system of individual training accounts. WIOA has a performance accountability system with six main indicators of outcomes, and these are common across all titles of WIOA.

Finally, WIOA provides business services, including places where employers can go to match with skilled workers, and where the

workforce system can provide needed services to business, such as on-the-job and customized training plans.

Even with these elements, WIOA has not fully realized its goals. One problem is funding. In Fiscal Year 2023, programs and activities in the three major formula programs were funded at just over \$3 billion. This is about the same amount that it's been funded since 2000, which is an inflation-adjusted drop of about 50 percent.

What can be done to improve the system? One area would be to modernize the way people navigate the labor market and skills training; more robust career navigation, more strategies like competency-based education, and prior learning assessments to help people bring their experiences and translate that into better labor market outcomes.

Another suggestion is to invest in evidence-based programs that focus on the skill needs of employers. And there are several evidence-based programs. We have sector strategies, career pathways, apprenticeship, reentry programs.

Improving WIOA participant outcomes could also be a result of reforming the performance system to encourage longer-term engagement rather than shorter in and out and onto a job. There's also room for improvement in the quality control mechanisms for training providers. This is the eligible training provider list. And finally, encouraging a focus on job quality so that people that go through the system end up in a good job.

JFF urges leaders in Congress to act and create a workforce system that works for all where there are no dead ends to economic opportunity. Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Bradley follows.]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAVID BRADLEY

Good morning Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, and Members of the Senate HELP Committee. My name is David Bradley. I am a Senior Director for Workforce Policy at Jobs for the Future (JFF), a national, nonpartisan nonprofit organization that has worked for over 40 years to drive change in U.S. workforce and education systems to ensure that every person can advance economically. At JFF, we've embraced an ambitious goal as our North Star: In 10 years, 75 million people facing systemic barriers to advancement will work in quality jobs. I want to thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee on the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

**Why Does WIOA Need to Be Reauthorized Now?**

The backbone of America's economy is its workforce. Workforce development has become a lifelong mandate for every worker. Upskilling, reskilling, transition assistance, and career navigation services are essential to help every individual create and sustain a career that will enable them to support themselves and their loved ones.

Employers must also be able to readily access the talent they need to compete. The nation's workforce development ecosystem—programs authorized under WIOA and its related partner programs—must work collaboratively to meet these needs.

The United States needs a workforce ecosystem that is adequately funded, modern, agile, equitable, resilient, and innovative enough to keep up with the skill needs of individuals and employers.

We know that calls for reform are not new. Before joining JFF, I worked as a specialist in labor economics at the Congressional Research Service, where I worked closely with the Senate HELP and House Education and Workforce Committees on the design of WIOA during reauthorization in 2014. Today, economic changes result-

ing from the pandemic and continuing technological advances require new action to update WIOA to meet the needs of the current and future workforce.

It is now time for Congress to update and improve its primary workforce development programs.

The labor market is constantly changing. The primary Federal workforce development system should be updated more frequently to address that reality.

There are currently 8.1 million job openings but only about 6.6 unemployed workers.<sup>1</sup> While this gap has narrowed in the past couple of years, there are still not enough skilled workers to meet employer demand. In addition, worker shortage rates vary widely by state, which means it is important to have state and local responses to different labor market realities across the country. Many U.S. employers continue to experience difficulty hiring workers with the skills they need to fill open jobs.

In May 2024, employment increased by 272,000 jobs. Yet 6.6 million people in the United States remain unemployed. Of those, 1.4 million unemployed individuals are experiencing long-term unemployment, meaning they have been out of work for 27 weeks or more.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the official unemployment count, an estimated 5.7 million people are not included in official unemployment totals because they have stopped looking for work, even though they want a job; another 4.4 million people are not counted because they're working part-time but would prefer a full-time job;<sup>3</sup> and millions of workers are stalled in low-paying jobs with limited opportunities for advancement. Many of these workers are Black, Latino, or members of other populations facing systemic barriers to economic advancement.

Labor shortages are likely to persist because the skills required for quality jobs will also continue to change as a result of ongoing technological advances and because recent policies—including those in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act—are creating millions of new jobs that need to be filled. The creation of new jobs combined with a tight labor market should expand the number of career opportunities available to members of populations that have long been excluded from such opportunities.

The movement toward “skills-based” employment practices means that WIOA must be updated to assist this important trend in the employment ecosystem. Rather than using only degrees and credentials as signals of qualification in the labor market, skills-based approaches capture learning and mastery regardless of where the knowledge was attained. The WIOA system can and should play a vital role in capturing skill attainment, regardless of the format, to help individuals attain quality jobs.

The pandemic necessitated a range of efforts to deliver employment and training services in new and untested ways. While the labor market has largely recovered from the devastating effects of the pandemic, it is time for Congress to consider which of the developments in system coordination and delivery should be codified in WIOA. For example, changes in WIOA's requirement to have a physical One-Stop center in every local workforce area might lead to better service delivery through some mix of virtual and satellite services. Congress must also consider the impact of technological advancements that will impact the workforce. As artificial intelligence adoption becomes more widespread, the task makeup of jobs will shift, often requiring workers to possess new or different skills. The use of artificial intelligence also has the potential to improve the efficiency of job matching and employment practices generally.

**Without focused investments and updates in workforce development, the country could miss another opportunity to promote economic advancement for all. In today's economy, most quality jobs require at least some education and training beyond high school. However, opportunities to acquire the skills and credentials that lead to quality jobs and economic advancement haven't been equally accessible to all workers. It's time to close the longstanding gaps that have limited opportunities for people based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.**

<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), *Job Openings and Labor Turnover—April 2024 and The Employment Situation—May 2024*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

### History and Characteristics of WIOA Title I Programs—What Are the Goals of WIOA?

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA; P.L. 113–28), which succeeded the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (P.L. 105–220), is the primary Federal legislation that supports workforce development. WIOA was enacted in 2014 to increase coordination and alignment among Federal workforce development and related programs and to build on system innovations already underway.

Title I of WIOA authorizes several state and national programs to provide employment and training services and continues the One-Stop system as a means of delivering and coordinating workforce development activities.

At the outset, it is worth highlighting elements of WIOA that, collectively, are intended to comprise a “workforce development system.” WIOA’s goal was to update the workforce development system and refine some of the innovations of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998. Characteristics of the workforce system under WIOA include:

- WIOA is designed to be a *demand-driven* workforce development system. This system is supposed to provide employment and training services responsive to local area employers’ demands. The demand-driven nature of WIOA is manifested in elements such as Workforce Development Boards (WDBs), a majority of whose members must be representatives of business, and in the requirement for local plans to identify existing and emerging in-demand industry sectors and occupations. There are approximately 550 local WDBs.
- WIOA emphasizes *coordination and alignment* of workforce development services through provisions such as a required Unified State Plan for core programs and a common set of performance indicators across most programs authorized by WIOA. In addition, WIOA requires regional planning across local areas.
- WIOA provides *local control* to officials administering programs under it. Under the state formula grant portion of WIOA, which accounts for nearly 60 percent of total WIOA Title I funding, most funds are allocated to local WDBs (after initial allotment from the Employment and Training Administration to the States) that are authorized to determine the mix of service provision, eligible providers, and types of training programs, among other decisions.
- The WIOA system provides *central points of service* through its One-Stop centers (identified as American Job Centers). The concept of a One-Stop center is to provide a single location for individuals seeking employment and training services, thus making the process of locating and accessing employment services more efficient and seamless. WIOA requires certain programs to be “partners” in the One-Stop center, either by physical collocation or other accessible arrangements. Notably, WIOA requires the collocation of Employment Service offices with One-Stop centers. There are approximately 2,300 American Job Centers.
- WIOA provides *universal access* to its career services to any individual regardless of age or employment status, but it also provides priority of service for career and training services to individuals with low incomes and people in need of significant skills training.
- WIOA emphasizes *sector partnerships and career pathways* workforce development strategies by requiring local WDBs to lead efforts to develop career pathways strategies and to implement industry/sector partnerships with employers.
- WIOA provides *consumer choice* to participants. Participants determined to be eligible for training services are provided with Individual Training Accounts (ITAs), with which they may choose a type of training and the provider from which to receive training.
- WIOA implements a *performance accountability system* based on primary indicators with state-adjusted levels of performance resulting from negotiations between each state and the Secretary of Labor and revised based on a statistical adjustment model. The performance accountability system applies across all titles of WIOA.
- WIOA programs provide *business services*, including places where employers can go to match with skilled workers and to receive services in support of their human capital needs. Whether through services provided by

business representatives or directly provided through American Job Centers, workforce systems arrange for on-the-job and customized training, work with employers to identify skill and employment needs, provide lay-off aversion services, and work to identify quality jobs.

Even with these elements, the WIOA system has not fully realized all its goals. There are still far too many individuals who are not benefiting from WIOA's promise. In fiscal year 2023, programs and activities for adults, dislocated workers, and youth under WIOA's formula grants to states and local workforce areas were funded at just \$3.2 billion—a funding level that has been stagnant in nominal terms since fiscal year 2000, and a decline of nearly 50 percent in inflation-adjusted terms.

This level of funding is not adequate to meet all the promises in the WIOA system, nor is the system currently designed to meet today's extensive career navigation, skills development, and worker transition needs as a stand-alone program.

In addition to the statutory requirements of WIOA, the WIOA system performs many functions in our broader workforce ecosystem. It serves as a connector of programs, a convener of partners and stakeholders, and a translator of labor market information.

Workforce development boards are intended to play pivotal strategic roles in the design of comprehensive workforce development systems; engage with regional employers; lead innovative initiatives, including career pathways and sector strategies; and leverage additional resources to support workforce programming.

Successful WIOA programs are carrying out these and other high-quality, evidence-based strategies to address the employment needs of their regional economies. However, the system's limited resources are spread too thin, performance across the more than 500 local workforce areas varies, and the entire workforce ecosystem needs significant modernization.

#### **Workforce Recommendations—What Needs to Change in WIOA?**

The United States needs a workforce system that is adequately funded, agile, and innovative enough to keep up with the skill needs of America's workers and in-demand employers. To make that a reality, Congress should take a holistic look at how workforce programs can be modernized, aligned and funded to meet the needs of the U.S. economy today and in the future. To accomplish this, we recommend the following essential changes to the system's funding and design.

**A Flexible, High-Quality Lifelong Learning System.** Congress should invest in training options that allow learners to progress at an accelerated pace, award credit for prior learning, offer stackable credentials that learners can accumulate as they move along career pathways, and capture skills and credentials in skills "passports" or "learning and employment records (LERs)" that are recognized by employers and across education and workforce systems. In addition to changes in the delivery of services, JFF recommends that funding for skills-based training in WIOA through ITAs (skill grants), high-quality work-based learning (including apprenticeships), digital literacy, sector-based training, and career pathways training strategies be increased; and that Pell Grants be expanded to include high-quality short-term credentialing programs.

**Robust Career Navigation and Support Services.** In addition to skills development, career navigation and support services provided under WIOA are critical for enabling participants to successfully transition to new careers and advance on career pathways. Congress should seek to maintain these critical services while encouraging system modernization through the effective use of technology and other strategies that result in a career navigation system that helps students, parents, jobseekers, and workers make well-informed decisions about the education, career, and employment pathways they choose. JFF recommends that Congress encourage the provision of real-time labor market information, skills assessments, skill matching, and access to skills training, supports, and reemployment services through a blend of virtual and in-person access points via American Job Centers and affiliated sites such as community-based organizations, libraries, community colleges, and K-12 guidance departments. This includes working with employers committed to using skills-based hiring for quality jobs.

**Quality Education and Training.** As demand for short-term learning options increases among workers who need to continually build new skills to keep pace with the demands of the labor market, Congress should encourage the development of improved ways to measure the quality of education and training programs. This includes making improvements in WIOA's Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL) and improvements in WIOA's performance measurement system to encourage career

pathways approaches to training. Regarding the ETPL, a reauthorized WIOA should clarify that States are responsible for back-end matching of system participants with wage records, should require states to update the ETPL at least twice a year, and should specify that local workforce boards have authority to deny funding to training providers that do not provide quality services to participants.

**Technology and Data.** We need a workforce system that makes full use of the latest technologies to expand and improve service delivery for participants. We learned through the pandemic that technology-enabled career navigation and training services can meet the needs of jobseekers and in-demand employers. We recommend dedicated investments for states and local workforce systems for the development and use of these new technologies, including investments in professional development for staff on their use. Congress should establish a Data and Technology Transformation Fund to: fund direct work with employers and national employer associations on multi-state training and credentialing efforts; provide incentives to engage in cross-state and multi-state initiatives such as the Workforce Data Quality Initiative and the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Grant Program; and provide funding to states and regional workforce systems to modernize state and regional workforce data and technology efforts. This includes the integration of technology such as artificial intelligence and machine learning into job matching, career navigation, and training services at American Job Centers and related providers.

**Dedicate Funding for the Scaling of Evidence-Based Models and Strategies.** JFF recommends that dedicated funding be provided for sector-focused career pathways and apprenticeship programs (including pre-apprenticeships and youth apprenticeships). JFF also supports codification of the Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO), the Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI), and the Strengthening Community Colleges Grant (SCCG) programs.

**Increase the Engagement of Employers.** Congress can encourage the involvement of employers in workforce development efforts through support for strategies like sector partnerships and through business services provided by local workforce boards to help employers identify ways to improve job quality for their workers and to adopt skills-based hiring practices for making employment decisions.

**Meet the Needs of Individuals Experiencing Barriers.** While WIOA includes a priority for serving individuals facing barriers to employment, more can be done to improve the outcomes of individuals who experience the greatest barriers to employment. As noted above, JFF recommends that Congress encourage the development and implementation of career pathways, sector strategies, reentry initiatives serving people who have been incarcerated, and other evidence-based strategies that provide individuals experiencing barriers to employment with on-ramps to skills training and credentials that lead to family supporting careers. We also recommend that WIOA's performance measures be changed to encourage career pathways approaches to training and that robust career navigation and support services, including needs-based payments, be available for individuals participating in pathways. We recommend targeted investments in professional development for staff and members of state and local boards on strategies that improve access and outcomes for individuals who face barriers to employment. We also recommend that states be required to identify a standardized self-sufficiency calculation to be used for determining self-sufficiency standards and wages for their state and their workforce regions so local boards can strive to place jobseekers and workers in jobs that either meet or have the potential to build toward self-sufficiency wages.

**Job Quality.** Policymakers can encourage a focus on quality jobs under WIOA by requiring that state and local boards consider job quality in planning, employer services, and data reporting activities. We recommend that Congress create a pilot program to test the feasibility of capturing additional data about characteristics of jobs in which people who exit WIOA are employed. We also recommend that states and local boards be required to identify regional self-sufficiency standards, as noted above, so local and regional boards can better assess their progress toward meeting the goal of self-sufficiency for participants. And we recommend that customized training, incumbent worker training, and business services activities, prioritize efforts that move workers into jobs that provide self-sufficiency wages and other characteristics of quality jobs.

**Value and Invest in Opportunity Youth.** In April of this year, the U.S. youth unemployment rate was 9.2 percent, with nearly 4.7 million young people ages 16 to 24 who are both out of school and unemployed—the population that many organi-

zations and policymakers refer to as “opportunity youth.”<sup>4</sup> More than one-third of these young people are living in poverty.

Congress can help to address this need by significantly increasing funding for youth programs under WIOA, and enhancing efforts to build bridges that link disconnected youth and young adults to postsecondary education, training, and employment. The workforce system should embrace evidence-based strategies that work for this population and expand opportunities for work-based learning, youth and pre-apprenticeship, and employment opportunities that lead to in-demand careers. JFF urges Congress to continue to prioritize out-of-school youth in WIOA youth programs. However, we recognize the need to serve young people who are still technically enrolled in school, but who are at extreme risk of disconnection, so we support changes in the definition of “out-of-school” to allow for the provision of re-engagement strategies for these young people.

**Adequate Funding.** While the above recommendations would result in improvements to the U.S. workforce development system—to ensure a future where all people can build the skills they need to find quality jobs and advance economically and where all employers can hire the talent they need to help their businesses thrive, Congress must invest in skills development for workers and in needed transformations in the Nation’s workforce development system. The U.S. spends far less on workforce development than other OECD countries. If funding for adult, dislocated worker, and youth programs kept up with inflation over the years, these programs would be funded at a minimum of \$35 billion today—more in line with funding for degree-bound students under Pell.

Siloed policy development for U.S. workforce, higher education, career and technical education, poverty alleviation, and economic development systems can no longer be accepted. These systems must all be considered—and transformed—so they can work together to form the critical workforce preparation ecosystem needed today and in the future. JFF’s complete analysis, *Recommendations for a Fully Funded and Transformed Workforce Development System*, can be found at <https://www.jff.org/idea/recommendations-for-a-fully-funded-and-transformed-workforce-development-system/>.

## Conclusion

Now is the time to transform this country’s workforce development system. To do this, Congress must invest and make bold changes in the country’s education, workforce development, and economic development systems that are necessary to ensure that the U.S. economy remains strong and that workers of all backgrounds have the skills they need to succeed.

By increasing resources for skills development, modernizing career navigation and training services, providing necessary transition assistance for learners and workers, involving employers in the design and implementation of workforce development programs, and ensuring that individuals facing barriers to employment have access to high-quality services, we will make sure that all individuals, including members of populations that have long been underserved by existing systems, can achieve their full potential and drive our economy forward.

JFF urges leaders in Congress to act and create a workforce system that works for all, where there are no dead ends to economic opportunity.

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[SUMMARY STATEMENT OF DAVID BRADLEY]

Good morning Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, and Members of the Senate HELP Committee. My name is David Bradley. I am a Senior Director for Workforce Policy at Jobs for the Future (JFF), a national, nonprofit organization that has worked for over 40 years to drive change in America’s workforce and education systems.

The backbone of America’s economy is its workforce. Workforce development has become a lifelong mandate for every worker. Upskilling, reskilling, transition assistance, and career navigation services, are essential to help every individual create and sustain a career that will enable them to support themselves and their loved ones. Employers must also be able to readily access the talent they need to compete.

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<sup>4</sup> “Youth Disconnection in America,” Measure of America, <https://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/> and Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), *The Employment Situation—May 2024*.

The nation's workforce development ecosystem—programs authorized under WIOA and its related partner programs—must work collaboratively to meet these needs.

**However, without focused investments and updates in workforce development, the country will miss the opportunity to promote U.S. competitiveness and economic advancement for all. In today's economy, most quality jobs require at least some postsecondary education and training. However, opportunities to acquire the skills and credentials that lead to quality jobs and economic advancement haven't been equally accessible to all workers. It's time to close the longstanding gaps that have limited opportunities for people based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—and to address a long-standing problem challenging U.S. employers—America's skills gap.**

WIOA was designed to be demand-driven. It emphasizes the alignment of workforce and partner programs. It is centered on the principles of local control and in meeting the needs of dual customers—workers and employers. It provides services through a One-stop delivery system; provides training through individual training grants; emphasizes customer choice in the selection of training services; and provides career navigation and support services for individuals in need. WIOA programs are held accountable through a performance measurement system that looks at job placement, wages attained, job retention, credential attainment, and educational progress as appropriate. The WIOA system also provides services to local employers including skill matching, employee recruitment, assistance with layoff aversion, and other business services. Local workforce development boards play pivotal strategic roles in the design of comprehensive workforce development systems; engage with regional employers; lead initiatives including career pathways and sector strategies; and leverage additional resources.

Even with these elements, the WIOA system has not fully realized all its goals. A major problem is that the system is underfunded. In fiscal year 2023, programs and activities for adults, dislocated workers, and youth under WIOA's formula grants to states and local workforce areas were funded at just \$3.2 billion—a level that has been stagnant since fiscal year 2000, and a decline of nearly 50 percent in inflation-adjusted terms.

JFF recommends the following changes to make the workforce system more agile and responsive to the needs of America's workers and employers: increase investments in the workforce; modernize the delivery of skills training; develop a robust career navigation system; create a lifelong learning system; protect workers during times of transition; strengthen verification measures for program quality; improve employer engagement; focus investments on placement in quality jobs; improve outcomes for people with barriers; and increase investments in and programming for "opportunity youth."

The CHAIR. Thank you. Senator Cassidy, do you want to introduce your witness?

Senator CASSIDY. Yes. I will introduce a good friend and someone I've learned a lot with, Dr. Monty Sullivan, who has served as the president of Louisiana Community and Technical College Systems since 2014. Before then, Chancellor of Delgado Community College in New Orleans, and a fierce leader for Louisiana's 12 community colleges and the 150,000 students who flow through their doors. Their mantra is, "Start here, go anywhere." A fitting theme for today's hearing.

Dr. Sullivan.

**STATEMENT OF MONTY SULLIVAN, PH.D., SYSTEM PRESIDENT,  
LOUISIANA COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM  
BATON ROUGE, LA**

Dr. SULLIVAN. Thank you, Senator. Good morning, Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, Members of the HELP Committee. I'm Monty Sullivan, president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System. I also serve as president of the Rebuilding America's Middle Class, which is a coalition of community

colleges from across the Nation. I appreciate the opportunity to address the Committee this morning.

Our Country's facing significant challenge in educating and training our workforce. Our talent development system, largely funded by WIOA and Pell Programs, is simply not keeping pace with the modern economy and the needs of our employers.

Today, we have over 80 million, 1 in 3 working-age Americans with a high school diploma or less. Imagine, a high school diploma or less. Today's jobs and the jobs of the future require more than a high school diploma. Very simply, without a significant overhaul of the Nation's workforce system, these 80 million working-age adults are doomed to be frozen out of the American middle class.

Two data points. 1 in 3 working age Americans are not participating in the labor force. As you heard previously, in Louisiana, 40 percent of our working-age adults are not engaged in the workforce. Point two, a decreasing share of the American population is part of the middle class. That's part of what we believe is the American dream.

61 percent of Americans were considered part of the middle class in 1971. In 2023, that number dropped to 51 percent. This sobering data demonstrates that millions of Americans lack the education, training they need to punch their ticket to the middle class. Now's the time for the Committee to lead the way in strengthening and reforming WIOA, and other Federal education and training programs.

The current WIOA system is simply not meeting the needs of employers seeking to find workers with industry-based specific skills. This is evidenced by the fact that there are 8.1 million jobs that are vacant today.

Building an effective workforce system requires our business partners to be at the table. I'm especially proud to be with you today alongside Mr. Matthew Dickerson, an incredible industry partner, committed to the long-term success of our people. WIOA is largely failing to meet the needs of many of our workers who have families, or single parents', or others' responsibilities, including going to school.

Even with wraparound support services, however, these students need flexible classes and programs that allow them to complete. Very few have the time to complete an associate degree. Most instead, need to get into the college, complete a short-term certification and industry-based certification, get out and go to work. That's when the role of the employer becomes really important to help bring them into the future of the economy.

While the data is stark, we're ready for change in Louisiana. Governor Jeff Landry recently established the Workforce and Social Services Reform Task Force. We're already seeing momentum build behind the notion of eliminating silos and fostering collaboration.

But for these efforts to really work, we're going to need your help. The integration of our colleges into the wheel structure has already taken place with institutions like South Louisiana Community College that house the one-stops on their campuses across eight parishes in South Central Louisiana.

In addition to that, you also have relationships with our Louisiana Workforce Commission and institutions that extend workforce services into communities that would not have those services under different circumstances. The Committee has an awesome opportunity before you to reauthorize and change the path of America.

First recommendation, WIOA must fund more training. You've heard that before. In 2022, less than 200,000 individuals received direct training as a result of WIOA. Imagine the numbers. 8 million vacancies, 200,000 people trained. The appropriations for WIOA programs must be increased, no doubt, but a much greater portion of those funds must be used for training services. Herein is an opportunity to leverage the Nation's more than 1,000 community colleges and the local workforce boards to create more accessible and effective workforce training systems.

Second, adult education serves more people than all of the other titles of WIOA combined. Adult Education; we must fund Adult Education. This is a forgotten population for many of us. But the solution is not simply more money. Adult education should be integrated with training and allows individuals to gain a sustained career. Yes, young people are important, but if we don't train their parents, what happens to the young person when they go home?

Third, we need to empower workers with information about which post-secondary education training options that are best for them. In Louisiana, we developed a star rating system that looks at demand for the occupation as well as income that helps individuals to make decisions about their future and their career. I also urge the Committee to require the use of earnings and employment data in determining providers programs that are available to the people of our area.

Last, thanks to the Committee for your keen focus on both of the Nation's talent development funds, WIOA, and the Federal Pell Program. I would be remiss if I did not urge the Committee to give consideration to the passage of workforce Pell, expand Pell to allow America the opportunity to be trained and educated to go to work and be productive as a part of this economy. Even with all of the WIOA improvements that we've discussed that I've outlined here today, WIOA alone simply will not get it done.

In closing, I'd like to ask that to imagine the countless Americans trapped on the outside of this economy seeing the successes of others. The erosion of the middle class has far-reaching implications for the people, our communities, and our democracy. The Committee has a chance to change lives this Congress by re-imagining market-responsive, customer-focused workforce training system. I cannot wait to see what we will build together.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Sullivan follows.]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MONTY SULLIVAN

Good morning. I am Monty Sullivan, President of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, a market-aligned system of 12 public 2-year colleges graduating over 30,000 students annually. I also serve as President of Rebuilding America's Middle Class, a Coalition of Community Colleges that aims to rebuild America's middle class by enhancing student success and by promoting the vital role

of community colleges. I appreciate the opportunity to address the Committee today on ways to strengthen the broader workforce system by improving the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

Our Country is facing a significant challenge in educating and training our Nation's workforce, both to meet the demands of employers, but also to meet the dual challenges facing today's workers of time and economics. Today, we have over 80 million working age adults in our Nation that have only a high school diploma, or less. This means that 80 million or one in three of our working age adults do not have the postsecondary education and training they need to acquire career sustaining employment. Today's jobs and the jobs of the near and distant future all require more than a high school diploma. Without postsecondary education and training, these 80 million working age adults are doomed to career tracks that lead to low-paying jobs that often lead to a lifetime of struggle to provide for themselves and their families.

We also just learned from a recent National Student Clearinghouse report that 32 million Americans have attended some college and have not earned a degree. Millions of Americans have sought a postsecondary education but failed to complete the certificate or degree that provides them a path to a better paying job and fulfilling career.

Moving to the employment data picture, our Nation has experienced some of its lowest unemployment rates in history. However, that metric fails to capture the real story behind the data. The Bureau of Labor Statistics calculates the Labor Force Participation Rate, or the number of people in the labor force as a percentage of the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years old and over. In other words, it is the percentage of the population that is either working or actively seeking work. In May 2024, the Labor Force Participation Rate was cited at 62.5 percent—meaning more than one in three American working age adults are not participating in the labor force. In Louisiana, the Labor Force Participation Rate lags the Nation at 58.6 percent. Meanwhile, there are thousands of available jobs that require skills and education beyond a high school diploma.

This is sobering data that demonstrates that millions of Americans are being left behind economically by lacking the post high school education and training they need to punch their ticket to the middle class. For these millions of Americans and our Nation's economic vitality, now is the time to improve how the Federal Government supports education and training. This Committee can lead the way in that effort by passing legislation that strengthens and reforms WIOA and other Federal education and training programs.

At the outset of my remarks, I mentioned challenges facing employers and workers. Employers consistently are challenged to find employees with the education and training they need for specific occupations. Even with what is historically low unemployment nationally and some progress on reducing unfilled job openings in the past year, the Bureau of Labor Statistics tells us that there are 8.1 million unfilled jobs in this country right now. Employers have openings for high-paying jobs that they cannot fill.

When I mention the challenges facing workers, I cited both economic and time challenges. The economic challenge I am referring to is the need for a worker to secure employment that provides them with the earnings needed to support themselves and their family. Unfortunately, we have had a drop in the percentage of Americans that are considered "middle-class" since 1971. According to an analysis by the Pew Research Center, 61 percent of Americans were considered part of the middle class in 1971. In 2023, just 51 percent of Americans are considered middle class. We need to rebuild our middle class in this country, and the single best way to do that is to ensure our Nation's workers have the education and training they need to obtain and maintain career sustaining employment.

The time challenge facing American workers is directly related to the fact that 80 million working age Americans have a high school diploma or less. Many of these individuals have families, are single parents, and/or must work while trying to acquire a postsecondary credential or degree. These complexities in their lives mean these individuals need wraparound services that allow them to have any chance of completing education and training programs. These essential services include child care, nutrition assistance, reliable and affordable transportation and even housing aid.

Even with these wraparound supports, however, education and training providers need to meet these students where they are in their lives. They need classes that take place online or around their work schedules. They need certificate or degree programs options that can be completed over months and not years, especially as

many working age adults need to attend a postsecondary institution part time due to work and family obligations. An education and training program structure that meets these needs can help bring the 80 million working age adults with a high school degree back into the system and back on the path to the middle class. The same applies to the 32 million adults without a postsecondary credential or degree—these supports can help them succeed at what they started. This is simply an imperative—for the economic betterment of our Nation, and most importantly, to reestablish a dominant middle class in America.

In Louisiana, we are ready for change. Right now, we are embarking on an ambitious program to improve the functioning of our workforce and social services systems, aimed directly at lessening the generational poverty that so profoundly hinders our people from achieving the American Dream. Governor Jeff Landry established the Workforce and Social Services Reform Task Force a few weeks ago through executive order. We are already seeing momentum build behind its mission of eliminating siloes and fostering collaboration, with the consolidation of WIOA and Wagner-Peyser services into two rural campuses of our community colleges. We have a long history of delivering SNAP Employment and Training programs through our community colleges, and we are expanding those collaborations to the programs administered by the Louisiana Workforce Commission. We are embarking on new partnerships between industry associations and state entities to address critical needs in healthcare and industrial construction. We are working across all levels of the education system, and with the administrators of all social safety net programs, to get our people what they need to truly prosper. And with the signing of the Louisiana Legislature's Act 330 just last week, we ensured that the Secretary of the Louisiana Workforce Commission not only has the accountability, but the clear authority, to direct the state's collective workforce strategy to drive economic growth and move our people from dependence to independence. We are ready to go, but for these efforts to really work, we are going to need your help.

The Committee has an awesome opportunity before the end of this Congress to begin to address these challenges by reauthorizing and improving the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. WIOA was last reauthorized in 2014, a decade ago. Our economy and the needs of workers and employers have not stood still over that time. From our perspective in Louisiana, several critical improvements to WIOA are needed to meet the needs of a 2024 employer and worker.

First, WIOA must fund more training services than it presently does. Only 175,831 individuals received training services under WIOA in program year 2022. This is a drop in the bucket for what is supposed to be the Federal Government's premier training program. As a point of contrast, six million Pell grants were provided to students under the Higher Education Act for the 2022–2023 academic year; these grants have led to far more training opportunities for qualified individuals, are far easier to access and provide much more significant support. The appropriations for WIOA formula programs should be increased, but a much greater share of those funds should be used for training services in conjunction with the critical wraparound services that make it possible to utilize such training services. One specific example of provisions that should be reconsidered to allow for greater flexibility for training more Americans is to use a broadened definition and approach to the dislocated worker programs. The economic and social implications of the COVID–19 pandemic should serve as a reminder that the current guidelines fall short of serving the needs of our communities, our people and our employers.

Second, WIOA requires Governors to identify eligible training providers to provide training services under WIOA. For too long, becoming an eligible training provider has not focused enough on what we know is critical—that education and training programs provide pathways to high wage jobs that economically sustain individuals and families and that meet the needs of employers and local economies. The Committee has an opportunity to require the use of earnings and other outcomes data to be more selective about which providers and programs are eligible to provide WIOA training services. The American community college is the entity best suited to solve the workforce challenges of our Nation. Yet, historically public community colleges are an under-utilized resource by the WIOA training enterprise. Fundamentally, we should encourage strong integrated partnerships between workforce boards and their local community colleges. At the same time, as we are increasing our reliance on data, the selection of eligible training providers should not be an exercise in red tape and bureaucracy.

Third, we must put Adult Education programs front and center in how we support and fund WIOA programs. The 80 million working age adults that I mentioned earlier often need adult education services to put themselves into a position to benefit from career and training services under WIOA. Adult education programs in our

Nation service more people than all other WIOA titles combined. Very simply, funding for Adult Education programs under WIOA should reflect this fact.

Fourth, we need to empower workers with information about which postsecondary education and training options work best for them. In Louisiana, we use a star system that lets individuals know whether a training program leads to an in-demand and high-paying job. Five stars means that the program is both high demand and high wage as compared to other jobs in the economy. Louisiana is home to a vast number of manufacturing facilities along the Mississippi River. A key job in nearly all of these facilities is the Process Operator—an individual responsible for keeping production going. That occupation is highest demand and highest wage. Two stars might mean that it is in-demand but does not provide high wages. An example of a high demand occupation with marginal earnings is Early Childhood Education Teacher and both positions are jobs that an individual can be prepared for at a public community college. Establishing a simple way for individuals to gain actionable information and understand whether a program leads to multiple high-paying job opportunities empowers them to meet their economic and employment needs. This concept of the star rating system would be useful for the Committee to incorporate into changes in determining eligible training providers. It is important, however, that tools like this and their assessment of what is in demand and high paying be locally controlled and designed to reflect local and regional economies in states and communities.

Fifth, individuals seeking services through the WIOA system should expect that this system will provide options that work for them. There should not be a “wrong door to enter” within the WIOA system; rather, the options provided should lead individuals to the careers, training and/or wraparound services needed for success. I would urge the Committee to ensure that the eligibility for career, training and/or wraparound services under WIOA are harmonized across one-stop partner programs with an eye toward bringing in other Federal means tested programs in the future.

The Committee truly has a chance to change lives this Congress by improving WIOA. In closing, I ask each of you to pause for a moment and imagine the young child born this year in some of the poorest parts of America—in the Mississippi River Delta or in Appalachia or those on tribal lands. How will we, as a Nation, ensure those children can grow up with the opportunity to live the American Dream each of us has been part of throughout our lives. Without an effective education and training enterprise, the future for those children is even more bleak as adults than the struggles they will feel as children. The erosion of the American Middle Class has far-reaching implications for our people, our communities and our Nation. Time is of the essence. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I am happy to respond to any questions that you might have.

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[SUMMARY STATEMENT OF MONTY SULLIVAN]

Our Country is facing a significant challenge in educating and training our Nation’s workforce to meet the demands of employers, but also to meet the dual challenges facing today’s workers of time and economics. Over 80 million working age adults in our Nation have only a high school diploma, or less. Today’s jobs and the jobs of the near and distant future all require more than a high school diploma.

This lack of postsecondary education is coupled with low labor participation rates. The current Labor Force Participation Rate tells us that more than one in three American working age adults are not participating in the labor force. In Louisiana, this is 58.6 percent. There are currently 8.1 million unfilled jobs in this country, but many require more than a high school diploma.

The percentage of Americans that are considered “middle-class” has dropped since 1971. 61 percent of Americans were considered part of the middle class in 1971 and in 2023 it was just 51 percent. Millions of Americans lack the post high school education and training they need to punch their ticket to the middle class. Education and training leading to career sustaining employment is the solution to rebuild our middle class.

American workers are facing a time challenge in that they have families, are single parents, and/or must work while trying to acquire a postsecondary credential or degree. These complexities require wraparound services and education, and training providers need to meet these students where they are with certificate and degree programs options that can be completed over months rather than years.

In Louisiana, we are embarking on an ambitious program to improve the functioning of our workforce and social services systems, aimed directly at lessening

generational poverty. Governor Jeff Landry established the Workforce and Social Services Reform Task Force, and we are embarking on new health care and industrial construction partnerships between industry associations and state entities. We are working across all levels of the education system, and all social safety net programs, to get people what they need to truly prosper. We are ready to go, but for these efforts to really work, we are going to need your help.

The Committee can begin to address these challenges by reauthorizing and improving WIOA.

First, WIOA must fund more training services. Only 175,831 individuals received training services under WIOA in 2022 compared to 6 million Pell grants provided to students under the Higher Education Act for the 2022–2023 year. The appropriations for WIOA formula programs should be increased, with a greater share used for training services in conjunction with wraparound services.

Second, the Committee has an opportunity to require the use of earnings and other outcomes data in order to be more selective about which providers and programs are eligible to provide WIOA training services. This should be done while minimizing red tape, an all-too-common problem with the current system.

Third, adult education programs in our Nation service more people than all other WIOA titles combined. Funding for Adult Education programs under WIOA should reflect this fact.

Fourth, we need to empower workers with information about which postsecondary education and training options work best for them. In Louisiana, we use a star system that lets individuals know whether a program leads to an in-demand and high-paying job. Individuals need a simple way to gain actionable information about whether a program leads to multiple high-paying job opportunities and any such system should be locally controlled and designed to reflect local and regional economies.

Fifth, individuals seeking services through the WIOA system should expect that this system will provide options that work for them. There should not be a “wrong door to enter” within the WIOA system; rather, the options provided should lead individuals to the careers, training and/or wraparound services needed for success.

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The CHAIR. Thank you, Dr. Sullivan.

Our next witness is Dr. Lisa Bly-Jones, the CEO of the Chicago Jobs Council, where she leads the organization’s capacity building, member engagement and policy advocacy work. She has previously led workforce development projects for public and private entities by developing occupational and sectoral training programs that convene partners from across the workforce system.

Dr. Jones, thanks for being with us.

**STATEMENT OF LISA BLY-JONES, PH.D., CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, CHICAGO JOBS COUNCIL (CJC), CHICAGO, IL**

Dr. BLY-JONES. Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the importance of upgrading our public workforce system.

My name is Dr. Lisa Bly-Jones, and I am CEO of the Chicago Jobs Council, a workforce development intermediary in Chicago, Illinois, that develops tools, resources, and offers training to build capacity for workforce organizations, and set priorities for policy advocacy and member engagement.

I am honored to be here today to contribute to the conversation. Our work at CJC prioritizes policies that build transformative relationships between people and systems, focusing on equitable access, providing quality jobs, and removing funding obstacles that inhibit progress. WIOA reauthorization offers a critical opportunity to

scale what is working in Illinois and supplement the work we are doing to ensure that workers can access the skills they need for the jobs which businesses are hiring for.

First, Congress should fund WIOA commiserate with need when factoring inflation. Congress has steadily cut investments in workforce programs over the past 20 years. While I recognize this Committee does not appropriate funding, it plays a key role in advocating for the funding levels that should be set. In recent polling commissioned by National Skills Coalition, 82 percent of voters indicated support for increasing government funding for skills training.

Given the public support for increasing funding and growing demand, WIOA should include authorized funding levels that match current and future needs. This Committee can also support expanding Pell Grant eligibility to students enrolled in short-term, high-quality training programs. Many students enrolled in these programs would qualify for Federal higher education grant aid based on income, if not for program eligibility limitations.

Second, Congress should support industry or sector partnerships that help businesses engage in the public workforce system and career pathways that ensure worker and student success. WIOA requires a stronger connection to employers. Each local community has a local economy, and employers in those communities are best able to identify industry trends, and skills, and training needs.

It's critical to involve employers on the front end and establish industry or sector partnerships that bring together local businesses and other stakeholders to develop workforce strategies and provide training and services that supports area demand. This is especially valuable for small and medium-sized businesses.

Industry partnerships can also support access to career pathways that connect progressive levels of education, training, supportive services, and credentials throughout an individual's career.

Although WIOA require states and local workforce boards to support partnerships, it does not contain targeted funding. WIOA reauthorization should establish grants to develop and maintain industry and sector partnerships and separately support career pathways development.

Additionally, Congress should support participant needs to ensure they can enter, succeed in, and become employed after quality training programs. The House-passed ASWA requires that 50 percent of funding be allocated to training, presenting two challenges for Illinois. First, it prioritizes cost over participants. If there is a minimum measure to ensure more workers are getting training, then the proposal should include the flexibility. States need to define what that measurement is.

Second, it neglects support services and career navigation for workers with the greatest economic need. The distinction between entering training and completing is usually unexpected costs associated with childcare, transportation, or challenge with career navigation.

Career coaching and navigation services are increasingly important for advancing equity and addressing barriers. 2021 CJC report

identified that 6 months or a year is not enough time for people who have experienced trauma such as mental illness, homelessness, or incarceration to seamlessly transition back into the workforce.

Congress should focus on ensuring that there are sufficient resources to support training expenditures, including all related cost, support services, and staff assistance. CJC also partners with re-entry organizations working on behalf of justice-involved individuals to ensure that they do not face permanent punishments because of criminal records. WIOA must similarly connect justice-impacted individuals to work because we know there's dignity in work.

Finally, Congress should capture data on participant outcomes and success in the future. WIOA should disaggregate training performance outcomes by race, ethnicity, gender, and other demographic or socioeconomic factors, and expand performance indicators to include quality credential attainment, longer employment and wage outcomes, occupation-specific job placement, and measures on job quality.

I am grateful for the opportunity to provide testimony today, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Jones follows.]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LISA BLY-JONES

### **Introduction**

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the importance of upgrading our public workforce system. My name is Dr. Lisa Bly-Jones, and I am CEO of the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC), a workforce development intermediary in Chicago, Illinois. I lead an organization that develops tools, resources and offers training to build capacity for workforce organizations and set priorities for an annual policy advocacy and member engagement. Prior to this role, I was the executive director of The Workforce Connection, a local workforce board in Rockford, Illinois, where I was responsible for leadership and implementation of strategic workforce development initiatives in partnership with the mayor and other elected officials. Over the more than 20 years I have worked in workforce development and held a variety of roles across the spectrum of organizations and community colleges that help workers access skills necessary to enter good jobs.

I am also a beneficiary of our workforce development system myself. When I graduated high school, my family wasn't able to afford college. I got my first job through the Mayor's office of workforce development. I interviewed and landed a quality job that offered tuition reimbursement as a benefit. I took general educational courses at Loop College and completed my course work and graduated from Moraine Valley Community College. I will always remember the care and concern from faculty who understood the complexities of students who work full-time while pursuing their education. Their commitment to student success set me on a career path that fit my strengths and established a good foundation for me to pursue all of my educational and professional goals. These include a terminal degree and being the CEO of an organization that allows me to advocate for others who I understand, because I've had some similar experiences along the way to arriving here. I'm humbled and honored to be here and contribute to today's conversation to help this Committee better understand what workers, businesses, communities and our Country's needs.

My organization, Chicago Jobs Council keeps jobseekers at the center of all we do. CJC is keenly focused on honoring the full humanity of workers who are seeking economic security and we facilitate transformative relationships to address the larger economic system. To do this, we bring together workforce leaders from public agencies, businesses, community and technical colleges, workforce boards and community based organizations.

We convene a state-wide coalition every year, the Illinois Skills for Good Jobs Coalition that advocates for legislation that embodies 4 Workforce Policy Pillars:

- (1) Dedicate state funding for workforce training using a racial and gender equity lens,
- (2) Promote policies that eliminate structural employment barriers disproportionately faced by people of color, foreign-born workers, and women in Illinois,
- (3) Ensure that no Illinoisan—regardless of race, gender, age, or nationality—lives in poverty by promoting good jobs and a strong safety net and
- (4) Increase research, data sharing, and transparency across state agencies that touch education and workforce training to identify and address equity gaps in our public investments.

### Illinois Workforce Overview

Illinois has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country overall and the unemployment rate for Black men and women is nearly double that of the state's overall unemployment rate standing at around 9.5 percent.<sup>1</sup> And yet, Illinois has 385,000 job openings in March and one of the highest job openings rates in the country.<sup>2</sup> These measures usually run in opposing directions. The fact that both the unemployment rate and the job openings rate run high relative to the rest of the Nation suggests a sizable skills mismatch between the skills that workers currently have and those that employers require for the jobs that they are working to fill.

On top of that, generation defining investments in clean energy, semiconductors and building and infrastructure has put an even more intense demand on workers and businesses. These investments are expected to create 3 million jobs each year and nearly 70 percent of these jobs will be available to workers without a bachelor's degree. However, additional training beyond a high school diploma will be essential for workers to access these opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

In the State of Illinois, as a member of the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition, CJC was a key partner in helping to pass the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) which aims to invest in Illinois to mitigate the impacts of climate change, move to clean power sources, reduce energy costs, and support communities and workers. The law importantly provides over \$80 million annually for workforce development and contractor programs in disadvantaged communities.

Investments in infrastructure and energy present an immense opportunity for workers in Illinois and nationwide. Paired with the employment picture there is a growing need to support workforce training and supportive services through our workforce system in order to effectively seize these opportunities. States and localities are working to address growing training demands but a much larger Federal commitment is required.

### What CJC/IL Have Done to Address These Challenges

Chicago Jobs Council collaborates with partners across the state to ensure that, as our economy adapts to a changing climate and both state and Federal investments are implemented, groups who have traditionally been economically disadvantaged are now able to benefit from these efforts and gain access to the newly created jobs.

In 2020, we released a report entitled Building Pathways to Clean Energy Jobs in Illinois, which highlights the importance of investing in the future clean energy workforce as part of public investments in clean energy infrastructure. The report is informed by interviews with clean energy employers, workforce development practitioners, policy experts, and uses publicly available labor market and job posting information to illustrate how the state can effectively invest in workforce development so that people marginalized by racism, sexism, and environmental injustice

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/web/laus/laumstrk.htm>; <https://www.bls.gov/lau/ptable14full23.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/jltst.t01.htm>; <https://www.bls.gov/charts/state-job-openings-and-labor-turnover/state-job-openings-rates.htm#>.

<sup>3</sup> National Skills Coalition, *Unprecedented Opportunity: Meeting the Workforce Demands of New Clean Energy, Manufacturing, and Infrastructure Investments-National Skills Coalition*.

can directly access [clean energy] jobs, advance within green industries, and benefit from public investments in clean energy.<sup>4</sup>

Clean energy continues to be an area of focus for CJC due to the immense opportunity it poses. At the same time, we are working closely with partners to improve the workforce system, increase funding into the system, expand pathways for job seekers and eliminate barriers to accessing good jobs.

### What Still Needs to be Done on WIOA

While Illinois has worked to address the needs of our workers and businesses as best we can, we rely on Federal policy and investments. WIOA reauthorization offers a critical opportunity to scale what is working in Illinois to other states and to supplement the work we are doing to ensure that Illinois workers—and workers across the country—can access the skills they need and for which businesses need to hire.

The workforce system should prioritize every worker’s future financial stability, career pathway, and economic security. It must honor the humanity of all people, be inclusive and address the larger economic system. Our work prioritizes policies that build transformative relationships between people and systems, focusing on equitable access, providing quality jobs, and removing funding obstacles that inhibit progress.

*Congress should fund WIOA commensurate with need.*

Structuring funding at the Federal and state level that is consistent, adaptable and relevant to the changing needs of the economy safeguards everyone’s professional progress, no matter what situational changes they encounter during their careers. Yet, one of the most consistent calls we hear from partners is the need for more funding for the programs under WIOA to better meet demand.

Indeed, underlying many of the opportunities to improve WIOA so that it better serves all stakeholders is the need for Congress to consistently invest more in programs that support skills and supportive services so that more people can access training programs that lead to family sustaining wages, and more businesses can hire skilled workers for in-demand jobs. When factoring inflation, Congress has steadily cut investments in workforce programs, Career and Technical Education, and adult education programs over the past 20 years.<sup>5</sup>

While I recognize this Committee does not appropriate funding, as the authorizing committee, the Health Education Labor, and Pensions Committee plays a key role in advocating for the funding levels that should be set each year. Levels proposed in the House passed A Stronger Workforce for America Act continue this troubling trend of under-investment.

This Committee can also support investments in training by expanding Pell Grant eligibility to students enrolled in short-term high-quality training programs that help businesses fill open jobs and help workers access career pathways. Many students enrolled in these programs would qualify for Federal higher education grant aid based on income if not for program eligibility limitations. The Jobs Act has the capacity to allow for rapid upskilling of workers by lowering the time threshold for Pell Grant eligibility to programs that are at least 150 clock hours and 8 weeks in length. The JOBS Act would also institute a number of accountability standards that tie programmatic eligibility for these shorter-term programs to quality metrics.

Investing in skills training is popular with the public. In recent polling, 82 percent of voters indicated support increasing government funding for skills training in America.<sup>6</sup> Given the public’s strong support for increasing government funding and the growing need lifted up by our partners, this Committee should demonstrate a stronger commitment to WIOA programs as you work to craft legislation to ensure that authorized funding levels match current and future demand.

*Congress should support industry or sector partnerships that help businesses engage in the public workforce system.*

With WIOA there is a lot of emphasis on individuals, but we are responsible to local employers and there needs to be an increase in funding to better support busi-

<sup>4</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63a0838721aff66b22dd2598/t/63a0986c2f41ed099d83a59c/1671469164785/Building-Pathways-to-Clean-Energy-Jobs-in-Illinois-March-2021.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/NSC-LegislativeAgenda-118Congress.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/NSC-PublicPerspectives-TopFindings-Brief.pdf>.

ness-related activities, like sector strategies and sector partnerships. Each local community has a local economy and employers in those communities are best able to identify what skills and training are needed and what trends are emerging in a given industry. We never want to train people for jobs that no longer exist or have declined while we're working on developing training programs. It's critical to involve employers on the front end to ensure that does not happen. Industry or sector partnerships bring together local businesses, unions and worker organizations, community colleges, training providers, and community organizations to develop industry-specific workforce strategies and provide training that supports local and regional demand.

These sector partnerships also allow us to become educated about the industry, the numerous occupations that may exist within a sector and better positions the community to create progressive pathways that lead to sustainable careers. Established sector partnerships provide real-time conversations and innovation to pivot where needed based on emerging needs and keeping pace with technological advances. Localized collaboration supports employers in their recruitment and retention efforts to build a diverse workforce within their industry. Such partnerships are especially valuable for small and medium-sized businesses, which often lack the resources to develop independent programs. Instead, they can collaborate with other local employers to leverage collective strengths. These partnerships also provide an entry point for employers to engage with the workforce system in a role that goes beyond placing workers into jobs.

Although the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act requires states and local workforce boards to support sector partnerships as a method of workforce improvement at both the state and local levels, this policy does not contain targeted funding critical to realizing the impact these partnerships can have on businesses, workers and communities. Legislative provisions that provide dedicated grant funding to establish industry and sector partnerships and support ongoing convening as well as activities including training and supportive services for works should be included in a WIOA reauthorization. Legislative texts such as the Promoting Apprenticeships through Regional Training Networks for Employers Required Skills (PARTNERS) Act and Building U.S. Infrastructure by Leveraging Support for Skills (BUILDS) Act could serve as models for a reauthorization package. Both bills establish grant programs that support partnership convening and maintenance activities and support training and workers access to training, education, and supportive services.

*Congress should support robust career pathways that ensure student and worker success.*

One of the key benefits of industry partnerships discussed above is providing workers with access to career pathways. Thoughtful design around career pathways can help ensure that all workers, no matter where they start, have the opportunity to advance to good jobs. Career pathways connect progressive levels of education, training, supportive services and credentials throughout an individual's career. Career pathways should include high quality industry recognized credentials that are stackable—they articulate toward a higher level of certificate or degree—and portable so that they are recognized beyond a single employer if individuals change jobs.

Career pathways strategies developed in tandem with industry and sector partnerships can provide a systemic approach to expanding training opportunities that can increase economic mobility for large numbers of workers in a sector.

The Gateways to Careers Act includes language that helps develop the systemic connection between education providers and industry sector partnerships through grant funding that can be used to develop or expand programs that support career pathways, support services, and the acquisition of equipment. Similar language could be included in a WIOA reauthorization to provide dedicated support to career pathways.

*Congress should support needs of participants to ensure they can enter, succeed in and become employed after quality training programs.*

CJC works to improve the policies in workforce development that increase job access, provide wraparound workforce and employment benefit services, improve skill-building programs, and foster quality job creation that benefits those who need it the most.

Demand for training continues to increase and will be impacted further by increasing the need for workers in the clean energy and infrastructure sectors. Despite growing demand, funding for training programs is not increasing. Private and

philanthropic which is often the most flexible funding for workforce programs is inconsistent which makes reliable, robust funding for WIOA critical.<sup>7</sup>

One way the House passed ASWA addressed this challenge is to require 50 percent of funding to be spent on training. This proposal creates two challenges in a state like Illinois.

First, it prioritizes costs over participants. If there is a minimum measure to ensure more workers are getting quality training that leads to good jobs, then the proposal should include the flexibility states need to define what that measurement is. Second, the proposal excludes things like support services or career navigation from the calculation. For workers with the greatest economic need, the difference between entering training and actually being able to complete it is usually unexpected costs associated with childcare, transportation or challenge with career navigation. Restricting funds used on those strategies will not lead to more people getting to training, it will lead to more people being unable to complete training.

Instead, the Congress should focus on ensuring that training expenditures include all training related costs in the calculation, including wrap-around supportive services and staff assistance costs to meet the needs of jobseekers and businesses.

Technology is increasingly prevalent at all career levels and across industries. Indeed, recent research shows that 92 percent of jobs require digital skills and that number is expected to increase. At the same time, only two-thirds of workers have the foundational digital skills necessary to enter and thrive in today's jobs.<sup>8</sup> Workers and businesses require digital skills support especially related to upskilling opportunities for workers who are on the job and reskilling opportunities for those who have lost jobs. A reauthorization of WIOA should include language similar to the Digital Skills for Today's Workforce Act which would establish a formula grant program for states to develop digital skills training programs as well as provide funding to support digital equity among individuals who face barriers to employment and who have been historically underrepresented.

While training is crucial for workers to secure good jobs, it's often equally or more important to address and remove the barriers that hinder individuals from completing their training or retaining employment.

In 2021, the Chicago Jobs Council released Supportive Services: Lessons Learned from the Field which outlines the importance of expanding and enhancing supportive services within workforce development programs to address systemic barriers to employment, particularly for groups that have been marginalized. This includes childcare, housing, and transportation, which are essential for securing and maintaining employment as well as mental health services which have become increasingly important following the pandemic.

In that report, contributors identified that "six months or a year is not enough time for people who have experienced trauma, such as mental illness, homelessness, or incarceration, to seamlessly transition back into the workforce" and that "losing supportive services during the gap of time between when a client becomes employed and gets their first paycheck can make it hard for participants to meet their own needs."<sup>9</sup> Congress can ensure that there are sufficient resources to allow supportive services to extend past probationary employment periods in order to help give participants more time to adjust and settle into jobs. Language in the BUILDS Act could serve as a model for these efforts as the legislative text includes provisions to provide support to workers in the pre-employment stage and for as much as a year into a job.

Reliable transportation is a frequent barrier for individuals that is important to highlight. While this includes financial support for bus passes, it can also include support for those who have had their licenses suspended due to parking ticket debt, based on excessive fines and fees. Chicago Jobs Council was a critical voice in a campaign in Illinois ensure that individuals are able to drive to work regardless of their ability to pay tickets and traffic fines.

<sup>7</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63a0838721aff66b22dd2598/t/63a0987639ba57582d347355/1671469174913/Supportive-Services-Summary-Report-Sept-2021-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/news/press-releases/new-report-92-of-jobs-require-digital-skills-one-third-of-workers-have-low-or-no-digital-skills-due-to-historic-underinvestment-structural-inequities/>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63a0838721aff66b22dd2598/t/63a0987639ba57582d347355/1671469174913/Supportive-Services-Summary-Report-Sept-2021-FINAL.pdf>.

America needs a dynamic and inclusive workforce system equipped to address long-standing structural inequities in our labor market. Chicago Jobs Council works with partners to appeal to the workforce communities mostly accessing services, which are largely Black and Brown workers. We want to ensure that service providers are aware of the barriers these communities face and are creating a path forward for individuals with these barriers in mind.

Career coaching and navigation services are increasingly important services for equity-advancing career navigation. Congress should increase support for frontline workforce development professionals to provide career navigation and services including asset-based approaches, assessments to determine strengths and needs, awareness of the impact of trauma and structural barriers on behavior and performance, culturally sensitive programming and targeted services for workers of color to support better outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

CJC also partners with re-entry organizations working on behalf of justice involved individuals to ensure that they do not face permanent punishments because of criminal records. An example of this is our role in influencing the policy in CEJA that addressed returning residents and our work to connect Equity Eligible Contractors who employ these returning residents. We brought together organizations to connect and understand how best utilize and leverage funding opportunities they were eligible to receive and we will continue to work with these organizations throughout implementation of CEJA. Congress should codify the Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO) program to ensure that justice involved workers have access to industry connected skills training programs. If we're truly interested in reducing recidivism, we must connect justice impacted individuals to work, because we know there's dignity in work.

*Congress should capture data on participants outcomes and success into the future.*

Access to workforce data enhances our ability to advocate for workforce equity. By receiving comprehensive data on the state's workforce, we can better identify areas of improvement, advocate for policies that benefit all residents and measure our progress.

Under WIOA, local areas are required, currently, to measure short-term employment and earnings outcomes for workers at six and 12 months after exit. These short-term outcomes do not sufficiently capture how people progress from entry-level jobs, experience wage and skill advancement with an employer, and continue their education to progress along a quality career pathway.

To measure if workforce programs are leading to long-term economic gains for workers and businesses, WIOA performance indicators should be expanded to include measures on quality credential attainment, employment and wage outcomes for at least 2-years after program completion, occupation specific job placement and measures on job quality, such as hourly wages and hours worked.

WIOA should also disaggregate all training performance outcomes by race, ethnicity, gender, and other important demographic or socioeconomic factors like English language proficiency, income, and geography, in order effectively evaluate progress toward equitable outcomes and the efficacy of the public workforce system for all workers, including workers of color who are the majority of those accessing these services.

This Committee has a tremendous opportunity to innovate and enhance the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to meet the demands and specialized needs of all stakeholders. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide testimony today, and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.

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[SUMMARY STATEMENT OF LISA BLY-JONES]

My name is Dr. Lisa Bly-Jones, and I am CEO of the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC), a workforce development intermediary in Chicago, Illinois. I lead an organization that develops tools, resources and offers training to build capacity for workforce organizations and set priorities for an annual policy advocacy and member engagement. Prior to this role, I was the executive director of The Workforce Connection, a local workforce board in Rockford, Illinois.

Illinois has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country overall and the unemployment rate for Black men and women is nearly double that of the state's

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<sup>10</sup> <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FinalWIOARecs.pdf>.

overall unemployment rate standing at around 9.5 percent.<sup>1</sup> And yet, Illinois has 385,000 job openings in March and one of the highest job openings rates in the country.<sup>2</sup> These measures usually run in opposing directions.

While Illinois has worked to address the needs of our workers and businesses as best we can, we rely on Federal policy and investments. WIOA reauthorization offers a critical opportunity to scale what is working in Illinois to other states and to supplement the work we are doing to ensure that Illinois workers—and workers across the country—can access the skills they need and for which businesses need to hire.

1. *Congress should fund WIOA commensurate with need.* Indeed, underlying many of the opportunities to improve WIOA so that it better serves all stakeholders is the need for Congress to consistently invest more in programs that support skills and supportive services so that more people can access training programs that lead to family sustaining wages, and more businesses can hire skilled workers for in-demand jobs. When factoring inflation, Congress has steadily cut investments in workforce programs, Career and Technical Education, and adult education programs over the past 20 years.

2. *Congress should support industry or sector partnerships that help businesses engage in the public workforce system.* Established sector partnerships provide real-time conversations and innovation to pivot where needed based on emerging needs and keeping pace with technological advances. Localized collaboration supports employers in their recruitment and retention efforts to build a diverse workforce within their industry. Such partnerships are especially valuable for small and medium-sized businesses, which often lack the resources to develop independent programs. Instead, they can collaborate with other local employers to leverage collective strengths. These partnerships also provide an entry point for employers to engage with the workforce system in a role that goes beyond placing workers into jobs.

3. *Congress should support robust career pathways that ensure student and worker success.* A 2023 CJC report finds, “six months or a year is not enough time for people who have experienced trauma, such as mental illness, homelessness, or incarceration, to seamlessly transition back into the workforce” and that “losing supportive services during the gap of time between when a client becomes employed and gets their first paycheck can make it hard for participants to meet their own needs.”<sup>3</sup> Congress can ensure that there are sufficient resources to allow supportive services to extend past probationary employment periods in order to help give participants more time to adjust and settle into jobs.

4. *Congress should capture data on participants outcomes and success into the future.* Access to workforce data enhances our ability to advocate for workforce equity. By receiving comprehensive data on the state’s workforce, we can better identify areas of improvement, advocate for policies that benefit all residents and measure our progress.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much. Senator Cassidy, do you want to introduce your next panelist?

Senator CASSIDY. Yes. I’m really privileged to represent to introduce Mr. Matthew Dickerson, who represents all aspects of what we’re discussing. He’s the business development and strategy officer for Mid South Extrusion, a growing employer in northeast Louisiana, so the employee side.

He’s with associations, for example, specifically the Monroe Louisiana Chamber of Commerce in the Northeast and the Northeast Louisiana Manufacturing Alliance and Consortium. And last, he’s

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/web/laus/laumstrk.htm>; <https://www.bls.gov/lau/ptable14full23.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/jltst.t01.htm>; <https://www.bls.gov/charts/state-job-openings-and-labor-turnover/state-job-openings-rates.htm#>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63a0838721aff66b22dd2598/t/63a0987639ba57582d347355/1671469174913/Supportive-Services-Summary-Report-Sept-2021-FINAL.pdf>.

been a teacher bringing classroom experience from career teaching, and developing career, and technical education in the Monroe City schools.

Mr. Dickerson, thanks for being here.

**STATEMENT OF MATTHEW DICKERSON, BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND STRATEGY OFFICER, MID SOUTH EXTRUSION, MONROE, LA**

Mr. DICKERSON. Chair Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, Members of the Committee, and my fellow panelists, I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today about the pressing need to build a strong and adaptable workforce in our Nation. I'm Matthew Dickerson, business development and strategy officer for Mid South Extrusion in Monroe, Louisiana.

I've been deeply involved in workforce development and have over a decade of experience in various roles such as educator, career and technical education supervisor, small business owner, and now executive of a rapidly expanding and innovative plastics manufacturing company in Monroe.

I'm also honored to serve on the Louisiana Workforce and Social Services Reform Task Force appointed by the Governor. We aim to create a plan enabling individuals to transition from poverty to prosperity by coordinating our workforce and social service systems more effectively.

Like many industries, one of our challenges is recruiting and employing individuals with the necessary and essential skills in reading, writing, math, and then the specialized skills to run our production facility. Our goal is to deliver high quality products to our customers, which requires a skilled workforce.

Our projected growth and the expansion of our production capabilities hinge on our ability to not only develop our current workforce, but also recruit individuals who can produce that high quality product. I'm pleased to report significant progress in this effort in northeast Louisiana, despite being one of the most impoverished regions in our Country through two sector partnerships in healthcare and manufacturing.

As chair of the Northeast Louisiana Manufacturers Alliance and Consortium, I'm proud to say that business and industry leaders are taking real action to break the cycle of generational poverty through the development of education and workforce programs that align with our region's available careers.

I believe it's time for industry to take the lead in discussions on workforce development. We must stop being passive consumers of the workforce system and complaining about the quality of the product. This is our opportunity to lead the discussion and produce ideal candidates for our available positions.

We have dedicated extensive time to collaborating with our K-12 partners, the community and technical college system, our local universities, our local workforce boards, and various community organizations to address the constantly evolving needs of industry.

Collaboration with industry leaders is crucial to developing a partnership-driven process for enhancing workforce development

and addressing public and private sector needs. There's been a shift where businesses increasingly shoulder the burden of training, a role traditionally filled by community partners who now struggle with adapting to industry changes due to policy and resource limitations.

I believe the sector partnership model is a practical accountability framework with industry partners at its core expressing their challenges and the needs of the community partners collaborating on how to leverage dollars to address those needs successfully. However, significant challenge has been the disorganization of resources leading to inefficiencies in funding allocation and service provision, and failing to effectively meet employers' needs.

By increasing investment in training and optimizing the utilization of existing supportive services, we can enhance the ability of individuals to move from poverty to prosperity more efficiently. Local and state control over funding for workforce development programs is crucial to enhancing strategic effectiveness and ensuring successful outcomes.

These agencies possess a deep understanding of their region's distinct challenges and opportunities, granting them the ability to customize workforce development programs that precisely cater to the unique needs of both employers and employees. This level of control offers the adaptability and agility needed to keep up with new industry trends and changes in the job market where a universal Federal approach is just not practical.

Through this targeted and localized investment approach, we can cultivate a more robust, resilient workforce that can uphold our Nation's economic growth and competitiveness with confidence and optimism.

In conclusion, as we stand at the crossroads of essential economic and social reform, our collective action or inaction will determine the future of workforce development in our Nation. Our advancements in the Northeast and Northeast Louisiana showcase the tangible benefits of industry led initiatives, and the power of collaboration with educational and community partners.

We must recognize that the prosperity of our industries and the well-being of our communities are inseparably linked. I urge Congress to consider directing significant investments to industry-led partnership, driven workforce development strategies that realistically address the skills gap, and effectively utilize resources to empower individuals toward economic prosperity.

Thank you for your attention, and for considering this important step toward building a strong and sustainable workforce.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Dickerson follows.]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MATTHEW DICKERSON

Chair Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, Members of the Committee, and my fellow panelists, I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today about the pressing need to build a strong and adaptable workforce in our Nation. I am Matthew Dickerson, Business Development and Strategy Officer at Mid South Extrusion. I have been deeply involved in workforce development and have over a decade of experience in various roles, such as educator, career and technical education supervisor, small business owner, and executive at a rapidly expanding and innovative plastics manufacturing company in Monroe, LA. I'm also honored to serve on the

Louisiana Workforce and Social Services Reform Task Force, appointed by the Governor. We aim to create a plan enabling individuals to transition from poverty to prosperity by coordinating our workforce and social services systems more effectively.

Like many industries, one of our challenges is recruiting and employing individuals with essential reading, writing, and math skills and the specialized skills required to operate our production lines. Our goal is to deliver high-quality products to our customers, which requires a skilled workforce. Our projected growth and the expansion of our production capabilities hinge on our ability to not only develop our current workforce but also recruit individuals who can produce that high-quality product.

I'm pleased to report significant progress in this effort in northeast Louisiana—despite being one of the most impoverished regions in the country—through two sector partnerships in healthcare and manufacturing. As Chair of the Northeast Louisiana Manufacturers Alliance and Consortium, I am proud to say that business and industry leaders are taking real action to break the cycle of generational poverty through the development of education and workforce programs that align with our region's available careers. These leaders work with our local workforce boards, chambers of commerce, K–12 systems, and higher education institutions to create a pipeline that leads to real careers, not just a certificate. I believe it's time for the industry to take the lead in discussions on workforce development. We must stop being passive consumers of the workforce system and complaining about the quality of the product. This is our opportunity to lead the discussion and produce the ideal candidates for our available positions. We have dedicated extensive time to collaborating with our K12 partners, the Community and Technical College System, local universities, and various community organizations to address the constantly evolving needs of our regional industry.

Collaboration with industry leaders is crucial to developing a partnership-driven process for enhancing workforce development and addressing public and private sector needs. There's been a shift where businesses increasingly shoulder the burden of training, a role traditionally filled by community partners, who now struggle with adapting to industry changes due to policy and resource limitations. I believe the sector partnership model is a practical accountability framework, with industry partners at its core expressing their challenges and needs while community partners collaborate on how to address those needs effectively. However, a significant obstacle has been the fragmentation of resources, which leads to inefficiencies in funding distribution and service support and fails to meet employers' needs effectively. By increasing investment in training and optimizing the utilization of existing supportive services, we can enhance the ability of individuals to move from poverty to prosperity more effectively.

Emphasizing the importance of local and state control over funding for workforce development programs is crucial to enhancing strategic effectiveness and ensuring successful outcomes. Local and state agencies possess a deep understanding of their regions' distinct challenges and opportunities, granting them the ability to customize workforce development programs that precisely cater to the unique needs of both employers and employees. This level of control offers the adaptability and agility needed to keep up with new industry trends and changes in the job market, where a universal Federal approach is not practical. By increasing the flexibility of the distribution of funds while collaborating with industry partners and seeking their input on spending decisions, we can guarantee that investments are explicitly directed toward programs catering to the distinct needs of local industries and workers. Through this targeted and localized investment approach, we can cultivate a more robust, resilient workforce that can uphold our Nation's economic growth and competitiveness with confidence and optimism.

In conclusion, as we stand at the crossroads of essential economic and social reform, our collective action or inaction will determine the future of workforce development in our Nation. Our advancements in northeast Louisiana showcase the tangible benefits of industry-led initiatives and the power of collaboration with educational and community partners. We must recognize that the prosperity of our industries and the well-being of our communities are inseparably linked. I urge Congress to consider directing significant investments to industry-led, partnership-driven workforce development strategies that realistically address the skill gaps and efficiently utilize resources to empower individuals toward economic prosperity. Together, let us commit to fostering an environment where every citizen can contribute meaningfully to our economy, ensuring the United States remains a beacon of innovation and prosperity. Thank you for your attention and for considering this pivotal step toward securing our Nation's future.



EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT  
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
EXECUTIVE ORDER NUMBER JML 24-44

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***ESTABLISHMENT OF THE  
LOUISIANA WORKFORCE AND SOCIAL SERVICES REFORM  
TASK FORCE***

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**WHEREAS**, Louisiana needs an educated and skilled workforce for employment in diverse occupations and industries;

**WHEREAS**, the Louisiana workforce is increasingly in need of access to high quality education and training programs aligned to the growing technological competencies required in occupations;

**WHEREAS**, Louisiana has over 110,000 unfilled jobs every month, yet a labor force participation rate under 59%;

**WHEREAS**, Louisiana's public workforce system is a maze of confusing and inefficient programs and is not meeting the challenges faced by employers and workers;

**WHEREAS**, a recent legislative audit report of federally-funded workforce and social services identified staggeringly low program outcomes and highlighted the need for a unified vision, integrated service delivery, stronger coordination and partnership, and improved oversight for positive outcomes;

**WHEREAS**, the audit report found that the state needs increased collaboration among agencies and stake holders in order to implement a unified vision and plan for how to best coordinate and administer these programs;

**WHEREAS**, the audit report found that public assistance programs and workforce development programs in Louisiana are overseen and administered by various state agencies such that an individual may have to go through multiple doors to access services;

**WHEREAS**, the audit report found that although Louisiana has a unified Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act state plan, the state still needs increased collaboration among agencies and stakeholders in order to implement a unified vision and plan for how to best coordinate and administer public assistance and workforce development programs;

**WHEREAS**, Louisiana does not have a centralized location that includes a clearing house of the available public assistance programs, how to access them, and eligibility requirements;

**WHEREAS**, Congress is currently considering reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and new opportunities to grant states the ability to pilot comprehensive innovation demonstration programs; and

**WHEREAS**, research has shown that an integrated system of workforce and social services more effectively supports Louisiana's most vulnerable citizens in escaping poverty through targeted supports and work to achieve dignity and self-sufficiency, which not only lifts individuals but also strengthens Louisiana's economy.

**NOW THEREFORE, I, JEFF LANDRY**, Governor of the State of Louisiana, by virtue of the authority vested by the Constitution and laws of the State of Louisiana, do hereby order and direct as follows:

Section 1: The Louisiana Workforce Reform Task Force shall be composed of 17 total members representing the following:

- A. The Commissioner of Administration or his designee;
- B. The Secretary of the Louisiana Workforce Commission (LWC) or her designee and one additional staff member having knowledge of workforce programming;
- C. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services or his designee and one additional staff member having knowledge of social services programming;
- D. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Economic Development or her designee;
- E. The President of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System or his designee;
- F. The State Superintendent of the Louisiana Department of Education or his designee;
- G. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Health or his designee;
- H. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs or his designee;
- I. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Corrections or his designee;
- J. The Speaker of the Louisiana House of Representatives or his designee;
- K. The President of the Louisiana State Senate or his designee;
- L. The Louisiana Legislative Auditor or his designee;
- M. One (1) member who represents the local workforce development boards authorized under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, appointed by the Secretary of the Louisiana Workforce Commission;
- N. One (1) who represents a non-profit organization providing services throughout Louisiana to individuals in poverty, appointed by the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services; and
- O. One (1) member who represents employers, appointed by the Governor.

Section 2: The duties of the Task Force shall include the following:

- A. Conduct research and collect data on state models for coordinating and fully integrating workforce, social services, education, child care, and health care programs and develop alternative approaches that Louisiana should consider to achieve improved outcomes. Such programs shall prioritize but not be limited to:

- i. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs, including oversight for an integrated regional service delivery system;
  - ii. Unemployment Insurance (UI) program;
  - iii. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program;
  - iv. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program;
  - v. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP);
  - vi. SNAP Employment and Training Program (SNAP E&T); and
  - vii. Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).
- B. Conduct research and collect data on performance outcomes of various workforce programs, including an analysis of the number of common participants enrolled in multiple programs across state agencies;
- C. Conduct an asset map that incorporates office locations, case management systems, and customer intake and eligibility procedures the above services and programs;
- D. Issue a final report containing recommendations for the integration of aforementioned services and programs, including any state department or agency reorganizations needed to achieve desired outcomes for the people of Louisiana. The report shall address the following key components:
- i. How current services and programs are organized and administered at the state agency level;
  - ii. A vision for how service delivery can be integrated for the benefit of all Louisianans who rely on such services and programs, including those currently delivered at the state, regional, and local levels;
  - iii. Opportunities for financial integration and efficient methods for allocating costs across multiple services and programs;
  - iv. Recommendations on how supportive services, such as child care, trauma recovery, health insurance, can better support employment outcomes; and
  - v. Identification of efficiencies leading to cost savings that can be used for enhanced services, such as increased resource availability for Louisianans to access education and training.
- E. The Task Force may form work groups of Task Force members to focus on specific issues or topics as needed; and
- F. The Task Force may utilize non-Task Force subject matter experts to facilitate meetings, conduct research, and/or provide technical assistance.

Section 3: The Secretary of the Louisiana Workforce Commission and the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, or their designees, shall serve as co-chairs of the Task Force and shall jointly convene the first meeting no later than May 1, 2024. The Louisiana Workforce Commission shall provide staff support to the Task Force as needed.

Section 4: The Secretary of the Louisiana Workforce Commission shall provide updates for members of the Task Force relative to efforts by the United States Congress to reauthorize and reform the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, including, but not limited to, opportunities to incorporate recommendations contained within the final report through new

demonstration and waiver authority or other changes to current federal laws. The final report shall identify opportunities for Louisiana to participate in any federally-authorized workforce demonstration project, including specific provisions requiring waiver requests.

Section 5: The Task Force's final report shall be provided to the Governor and each member of the Louisiana Legislature no later than January 31, 2025.

Section 6: Task Force members shall not receive additional compensation or a per diem from the Office of the Governor for serving on the Task Force.

A Task Force member who is an employee or an elected public official of the State of Louisiana or a political subdivision thereof may seek reimbursement of travel expenses, in accordance with PPM 49, from his or her employing and/or elected department, agency and/or office.

Section 7: All departments, commissions, boards, agencies and officers of the State, or any political subdivision thereof, are authorized and directed to cooperate in actions the State may take in response to this event.

Section 8: This order is effective upon signature of the Governor, and it shall remain in effect until the Task Force has provided the final report in Section 2 to the Governor, or until amended, modified, terminated or rescinded by the Governor, or until terminated by operation of law.



IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have set my hand officially and caused to be affixed the Great Seal of Louisiana in the City of Baton Rouge, on this 22<sup>nd</sup> day of March 2024.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Jeff Landry  
GOVERNOR OF LOUISIANA

ATTEST BY THE SECRETARY  
OF STATE

  
Nancy Landry  
SECRETARY OF STATE

## Northeast Louisiana Manufacturing Alliance & Coalition (NELA-MAC)

Launch Meeting – Oct 5, 2022

Summary & Next Steps

**On October 5<sup>th</sup>** a group of manufacturing executives from the greater surrounding areas of Monroe and West Monroe gathered in the Fireside room of the Bayou Desiard Country Club to launch a new, regional manufacturing alliance, NELA-MAC.

**NELA-MAC is intended** to be the forum by which manufacturers come together to tackle common challenges and opportunities, alongside education, workforce training and economic development partners in the region who share a stake in a thriving manufacturing industry.

**NELA-MAC will be** driven by manufacturers, professionally facilitated, staffed by Workforce Development Board (WDB) 81, and jointly supported WDB 83, the Monroe Chamber of Commerce, the West Monroe Chamber of Commerce, Delta Community College and the Manufacturing Extension Partnership. It is modeled after [similar partnerships](#) up and running in over 20 states, and after an award-winning Healthcare Alliance also in NE Louisiana.

Here are NELA-MAC's initial opportunity and priority action areas.

### Opportunities in NELA Manufacturing

The group on October 5<sup>th</sup> began with a discussion about opportunities in manufacturing in NE Louisiana. Topics were diverse, including:

- **Shared learning about industry automation** for simple tasks, allowing for the opportunity to free up talent for other, higher value tasks;
- **Growth in markets** and the opportunities to grow market share and access together;
- **Supply chain connections** within the region that may not be well mapped or utilized;
- **Stronger connections with education** providers for equipment and specific technical training; and
- **Combined impact on keeping young people and young professionals here** by combining messages and marketing about manufacturing jobs: accessible (less than 4-year degrees), well-paying and strong economic multiplier, regional cost of living and quality of life. Target young people (K-8 + high school), "returners" who left the region for five years and came home, educators and parents.

### Shared Priority Actions

Based on the Opportunities discussion, the group quickly moved into answering the question: What will be required of us as an Alliance to realize these big opportunities? The following priority action areas, along with committed sign-ups to dive deeper into success metrics and needed actions, were created.

### 1. Build the Core

- a. **Initial Focus:** Create the vision/mission/top metrics of success for NELA-MAC; build the Directory of all local manufacturing companies, and its usage rules; create an aligned agenda of priority areas, and identify the resources/programs that can add value; immediately grow the core with additional companies.
- b. **Initial Team:** Debbie Sawyer (Sawyer Plastics), Eli Finister (Neighbors Cookies, LLC), Joe Tannehill (Steel Fabricators of Monroe), Mitch Reppond (Steel Fabricators of Monroe), Ron Mason (MidSouth Extrusions), Ronnie Hines (Voith Group)
  - i. Recruit: Graphics Packaging, Hodge (Debbie Sawyer), Drax Biomass (Mitch Reppond)

### 2. Market Manufacturing

- a. **Initial Focus:**
  - i. **What:** Key message points should include quality of life, net cost of living, “Come Home to Family”, Quality jobs – be a part of “making our world”, education and training pathways exist (and they’re accessible, not always 4-year college degree)
  - ii. **Who:** Define target audiences and customized messages, including K-12, college students, parents/teachers, returners, target a 45 mile radius
  - iii. **How:** Social media, local media, a go-to place for NELA-MAC info
- b. **Initial Team:** Frederick Moeller (Bancroft Bag), John Mark Whilite (Louisiana Plastics), Mitch Reppond (Steel Fabricators of Monroe), Paul Little (ABP)
  - i. Recruit: Southern Steel Fabricators (Joe Tannehill)

### 3. Create Community Partnerships

- a. **Initial Focus:** Prioritize 1-2 big issues; create the partnership of NELA-MAC with elected officials (the Mayors) on ways to improve the community (e.g. crime reduction); create partnerships between NELA-MAC and community based organizations who are already addressing key community issues (e.g. battling substance abuse issues)
- b. **Initial Team:** Justin Marsh (Pulpmill Services Inc), Eli Finister (Neighbors Cookies, LLC), Ron Mason (MidSouth Extrusions)
  - i. Recruit: Premier Products (Marty Herlevic, James Machine Works)

### 4. Identify Specific Training

- a. **Initial Focus:** Partner with training and education institutions to identify the critical positions and their needed skills and knowledge; create a shared and single education program that targets high schoolers, focused on the “economics of job/career opportunities” in manufacturing in our region
- b. **Initial Team:** Justin Marsh (Pulpmill Services Inc), Marty Herlevic (James Machine Works)

[SUMMARY STATEMENT OF MATTHEW DICKERSON]

- I am grateful for the chance to discuss the need for a strong, adaptable workforce system in our Nation.
- My experience spans both industry and the workforce development apparatus, and I currently serve on Governor Landry's Louisiana Workforce and Social Services Reform Task Force.
- We face challenges in recruiting skilled individuals necessary for producing high-quality products in our plastics manufacturing sector.
- I am proud of the significant strides we've made in northeast Louisiana, especially through sector strategies in healthcare and manufacturing.
- As industry leaders, we must lead workforce development discussions and be proactive in shaping our workforce pipeline.
- I emphasize collaboration with local educational institutions and community organizations to meet the evolving needs of our industry.
- I advocate for increased local and state control over workforce development funds to better address specific regional needs.
- In conclusion, I urge Congress to support industry-led workforce development strategies to effectively and efficiently utilize resources and fill skill gaps, ensuring our economic prosperity.

The CHAIR. Thank you, Mr. Dickerson.

This is an area I am not all that knowledgeable about, so I'm going to ask you some dumb bunny questions. All right? What I do know is that the recidivism rate for people in prison is absurdly high. People go to jail without the skills. They need to earn a good living in the workforce, and too often, they come out without those skills, without the education.

What are you doing with regard to that so that people come out ready to be integrated into the economy so they don't go back to jail? What should we be doing? Who wants to take a shot at that one?

Dr. SULLIVAN. I'll certainly jump in. Thank you for the question. I think it's an incredibly important one. One of the keys here is recidivism. In Louisiana, at least, we see about two-thirds of the people that have been incarcerated come back in some form or fashion.

What we learned over the last six or 8 years in programs that specifically aimed at recidivism was we could reduce that recidivism rate to about one-third by ensuring that an individual that walks out of that facility has the skills when they leave to make a good living. It is a game changer for this population.

The CHAIR. All right. Let me ask you this.

Dr. SULLIVAN. Yes, sir.

The CHAIR. What you're saying is obvious. It is common sense. Nobody in the world would disagree.

Dr. SULLIVAN. Sure.

The CHAIR. I don't think the rates are much different in Vermont than they are in Louisiana.

Dr. SULLIVAN. Sure.

The CHAIR. What are we doing about it? I mean, do we have in this country—I mean, you help me, I don't know the answer to this. Are prisons providing the education and the job training that inmates need in order to live productive lives after prison? I mean,

help me out on that one. Who wants to jump in? Dr. Dickinson, did you want to—

Dr. BLY-JONES. I'll jump in. I'll say a couple of things. One, I'll say that I think across the country there are relationships with community colleges that actually deliver programming in prisons across the country. So, that's one aspect of getting the training.

The CHAIR. Are they working well, do you think?

Dr. BLY-JONES. I think there's always a need for more resources. Are they getting the skills that they deliver at that time? I would say yes. Are those the skills that employers actually need when the individual is released? Depending on where that individual is released to the community, that individual returns to the additional supportive services that are needed to keep the individual working, secure housing, the supportive services to get back and forth to their place of employment. It's the entire wraparound service. We're talking about systemic issues, so.

The CHAIR. Right. I would trust that we are all in agreement that it is insane to spend whatever it is, \$60,000, \$80,000 a year locking somebody up when for less money, we can try to educate them, give them the training they need to become productive citizens. All right? Let's work on that together.

Our second issue, in a broad sense, young person graduates high school, gets training, becomes an electrician, becomes a plumber. Probably makes a higher income than somebody with a BA in today's economy. All right? You've got millions of kids sitting in school right now who are not academic for whatever reason, not academically inclined, bored.

What are we doing, and give me good examples of what we are doing, to say to those kids you can go out and earn a living, get the training you need to do enormously important work. We desperately need plumbers, electricians, carpenters, you name it. We need them.

Give me some success stories about what we're doing to address the workforce needs of America and provide decent income for our workers. Who wants to jump in on that one? Ms. White?

Ms. WHITE. I'm happy to respond to that, Senator Sanders, thank you. So, your question started by asserting that the young person in the example has graduated from high school. And one of the things I'll note really quickly about WIOA is that the requirement that 75 percent of youth funds go to out-of-school youth. So, there's a smaller portion in WIOA funding that would go to your enrolled high school student for these programs.

Nonetheless, some of the recommendations that have been given about aligning systems, I think, matters here. Many of the youth apprenticeship programs that we support around the country are combining paid work experience, CTE coursework at community colleges, and other training providers, as well with mentorship so that young people are getting a head start on their training while they're in high school, much like the program that you mentioned at the beginning of your remarks.

These are programs that currently can receive funding through the Department of Labor if they are registered and compete for

grants. There are also a number of states that have adopted definitions and funding streams that leverage WIOA and public education funding to support the growth and expansion of these programs.

It's early days for a lot of them. We don't have a system around it. There are a few states that do have well-developed systems of exactly what you're talking about. I would point to Wisconsin as one that has had a really robust youth apprenticeship system for about 30 years. There's a lot of demand for these programs, I would say, from young people.

One thing I would love to see is more folks like Mr. Dickerson who are willing and interested in collaborating with these systems and taking a chance on young people.

The CHAIR. Good. Thank you.

Senator Cassidy.

Senator CASSIDY. I'll start with Dr. Sullivan. Dr. Sullivan, keep your answers tight because I got a bunch of questions.

Dr. SULLIVAN. Sure.

Senator CASSIDY. Okay. No wrong door. Can you elaborate—I know it started in Utah, but we can't do it unless we get additional authorities. And by the way, for the record, I'd like to enter a letter from my Governor, Jeff Landry. I'm asking unanimous consent to enter this letter expressing support for the one-door option in the reauthorizations.

[The following information can be found on page 89 in Additional Material:]

The CHAIR. Without objection.

Senator CASSIDY. Describe that for the audience and why it's important?

Dr. SULLIVAN. Sure. The one-door approach really brings together all of the resources to ensure that the employer, the individual that needs to be trained, whoever the participant might be enters one door has one opportunity, resources are pulled together. You heard Mr. Dickerson talk about the array of resources that are there, but they are not aligned in a way that really pinpoint and solve the problem.

The one-door approach attempts to take all of those services. Yes, the part that's from WIOA, but also portions from our Department of Family and Child Services or from our Department of Health to ensure an individual has a broad array of services for themselves while they're being trained. That one door approach—

Senator CASSIDY. I understand that Utah did this. They've had the best program.

Dr. SULLIVAN. Yes.

Senator CASSIDY. It was grandfathered in, but everybody else needs authorization specific to allow us to do what Utah does.

Dr. SULLIVAN. Absolutely. Utah's is a classic example. I think every state in the Nation should be looking at Utah for this reason.

Senator CASSIDY. Yes. Mitt Romney thinks so too, but, that's Romney. Mr. Dickerson, we're attempting to modernize this program. I understand that even in Northeast Louisiana, relatively

small in terms of population, there's multiple boards you have to work with.

Mr. DICKERSON. Yes.

Senator CASSIDY. Can you kind of speak—because this seems to be an area where some of the dollars go instead of the training.

Mr. DICKERSON. Yes.

Senator CASSIDY. You as an employer, can you describe the difficulties in working with these multiple boards?

Mr. DICKERSON. Yes. Well, first of all, thank you for the question. Second, there is a real challenge when it comes to utilizing the funds that are available to employers. And it's to the approach of there's a lot of different agencies, there are a lot of different organizations, and they all have a little bit of money. But when it comes to employer needs, and specifically trying to train a large amount of employees at one time, there's not enough funding with one individual organization to be able to support that.

We have two local workforce boards in our region, one for our rural representation and one in Washington Parish, and they have to work together, which they do. But it does create challenges when you start trying to move money and work with within funding streams for those—

Senator CASSIDY. Are you proposing that if they were combined, there'd be more money to provide the training?

Mr. DICKERSON. I think a coordination of funding is a strong recommendation from business and industry.

Senator CASSIDY. Is it difficult for the small business to navigate interacting with more than one board, or is it no, once you've figured out one board, you've figured out all boards?

Mr. DICKERSON. Not necessarily. They're all unique in some of their ways. Obviously, the structure's the same, but there's a lot of business leaders that I've met with that had no idea the resources that were available to them through public funding until they started coming to our sector partnership meetings and other events.

Senator CASSIDY. In a sense, just like there should be no wrong door for the prospective employee, there should be no wrong door for the employer—

Mr. DICKERSON. Yes, sir.

Senator CASSIDY [continuing]. But that's not worked out as well.

Mr. DICKERSON. That's right. But that is the work of the task force at the state level that we're looking at, is to coordinate those resources.

Senator CASSIDY. Dr. Sullivan, currently the eligible training provider list, it's difficult to navigate for workers and providers who want to provide training. And I get a sense that red tape is keeping good providers out and workers not getting the tools they need.

In a sense, how much is this going to cost? What's the financial aid, and most importantly, their expected earnings. Please discuss the current challenges of the eligible training provider list.

Dr. SULLIVAN. Yes. Thank you for the question. Eligible training provider list really should be developed based upon the question of what then can the provider bring to people and to business partners. If we start with that in mind, I think we can certainly make use of the data that we have from years looking back at that provider, the training programs, and make sure that we're maximizing value for people.

Senator CASSIDY. Got you. With that, I yield.

The CHAIR. Senator Hassan.

Senator HASSAN. Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and Ranking Member Cassidy. And thank you to the witnesses for joining us today.

Investing in workers' skills and training is an investment in our Country's economy and our global competitiveness. So, I'm pleased that this Committee is engaging in a bipartisan reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, and I look forward to continuing to collaborate with my colleagues on this important effort.

To Dr. Bradley, Senators Young, Collins, Kaine, and I co-lead the bipartisan Gateway to Careers Act, which would invest in career pathway partnerships. These partnerships bring together businesses, workforce development organizations, and higher education programs to ensure that training services are meeting the real-time needs of their employers.

Dr. Bradley, can you speak to the strength of the career pathway partnership model and why it should be a focus of WIOA reauthorization?

Dr. BRADLEY. Yes. Thank you very much, Senator. You've hit on an incredibly important component of workforce development that we feel is necessary to both maintain its role in WIOA and increase its role in WIOA.

Career pathways, as you know, clearly articulate the education and training required for each occupation. Each occupational level in a given industry delivers training in combination with academic and non-academic supportive services, and career pathways intentionally allow earners to exit and reenter the program as needed.

Now, to your point about why is it important. There's strong evidence that shows that programs that employ these tenets of career pathways result in a strong, positive impacts on credential completion rates, employment, long-term earnings, when you're talking about a system that is not exactly flush with resources. Any programs that deliver evidence-based results are a vital component in WIOA.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you so much. Dr. Sullivan. Community colleges are also critical partners in the workforce development system. For example, the Community College System of New Hampshire does important work to help Granite Staters earn high quality credentials through its Early College at Your High School Program, which has dual enrollment programming at more than a hundred high schools across our state.

We should support community colleges in WIOA reauthorization by one codifying the Strengthening Community Colleges grants program, and also by encouraging the co-location of American Job

centers on community college campuses. Dr. Sullivan, how else can we support community colleges through this reauthorization effort?

Dr. SULLIVAN. Look, I think you've named two that are incredibly important. I want to build upon the career pathways notion because I think there's an opportunity here to redefine what many of us think about community colleges.

Much of what we have developed in Louisiana has been this model and notion that students need to complete the initial industry-based certification, the initial certificate, in order to be able to go to work. The rest of their education is largely driven by an employer who is willing to provide tuition reimbursement.

Instead of an employer hiring someone at the completion of an associate degree, now they're hiring someone with skills, and allowing that individual to be trained across time. That's what creates the long-term pull of more Americans into the economy. I think that's the role of the future of the American community college.

Senator HASSAN. Well, and obviously, as technology moves at such a rapid pace, people are going to also need to know how, along with their employers, to keep learning new skills over the course of their career. Right? So, this is kind of foundational to that as well.

Dr. SULLIVAN. Without a doubt. I think some of you are aware of the workforce Pell proposal. I would encourage you to think about workforce Pell as not only being just for adults without an education, but imagine the person with a baccalaureate degree who was displaced as a result of AI. At some point, they will need to come back and be re-skilled and reeducated to be able to continue in the economy.

Senator HASSAN. Well, thank you. And to both you, Dr. Bradley, and Dr. Sullivan, I've heard from some stakeholders who say WIOA reporting requirements are overly burdensome. State and local leaders devote significant resources to writing lengthy plans, which in some cases end up acting as more of a compliance exercise than a strategic project management tool.

I've also heard that community partners are sometimes dissuaded from becoming eligible training providers because of WIOA's performance reporting requirements. So, that can unintentionally, obviously, stifle innovation and the diversification of providers.

How do we strike the right balance between performance accountability and non-burdensome reporting requirements? And are the current performance indicators the right ones? And if not, what should we do? And we have about 20 seconds left, so we'll start with Dr. Bradley and Dr. Sullivan, and then we can follow-up in writing.

Dr. BRADLEY. Yes. I'd be glad to work with your staff on this. I'll just point out one thing on the performance accountability, for example, because of your question about career pathways. One, the performance accountability measures in WIOA are based on exiting the system. Changing one of those or more indicators to keep track of the person as they go to give credit to the providers that are fol-

lowing people, not just a one and done. So, that would be one example, but glad to discuss further.

Senator HASSAN. Okay, thank you.

Dr. SULLIVAN. I think the only thing I would add is people attend our colleges, not for the credential, but for the paycheck.

Senator HASSAN. Right.

Dr. SULLIVAN. I think it's really important that we use those metrics that look at earnings and employment.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you very much. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIR. Senator Smith.

Senator SMITH. Thank you, Chair Sanders. And thanks to all of you for being here. It's a very interesting and important and timely conversation.

Chair Sanders, I was thinking about your comments about going into this school in Vermont and having that palpable sense of energy, and kind of connectedness, and engagement. And it made me think about so many examples that I've seen in Minnesota of how those kinds of youth programs are really working.

I'm thinking, for example, of the Career Academy in Moorhead, Minnesota. They literally, the school district, took an old big box store and they retrofitted it to be a career training facility, and focused on kids at the high school level and connected with community colleges, and also with employers in the region. And it had such a completely different feel, energy, excitement, lots of hands-on learning, lots of connections to local employers.

I think this is so important for us to keep in mind. And as I said, I've seen some really strong programs. And one of the things that I've noted also is that there is just this hunger for young people to understand what their options are. They don't even really know—like, you don't know what you don't know about what you might be able to do.

That's really the value behind a piece of legislation that I've been working on. It's bipartisan. It's called the Youth Workforce Readiness Act. And what it would do is actively support partnerships between community-based after-school programs, out-of-school programs.

Think like what the boys' and girls' clubs do, for example, connecting those programs with schools and with employers to provide some opportunities for young people to get some real-world experience. This could be career exploration or it could be mentoring or even opportunities for young folks to earn some credentials for their first job.

Ms. White, my question is for you, can you talk about these kinds of after-school or out-of-school programs, and what role they can play in connecting youth at the high school level, or even younger, potentially to what their opportunities are?

Ms. WHITE. Absolutely. Thank you for the question. I think what you've pointed out here is the importance of early exposure into the career pathways that many of us have mentioned. I think that out-of-school time providers, after-school time providers can play a crit-

ical role in providing these exposure experiences. Not just to high school students, but to students as early as middle school.

Part of the reason that's important is because young people make a series of decisions very early on in high school that shape the trajectory that they take through high school whether or not they complete high school. And even if they do complete high school, what options are available to them within the secondary school curriculum.

One thing I would say that I think is really important—and I've had a chance to look at the Act, and I think it's a wonderful idea. But one of the things we've talked—I think many folks here have mentioned today, we often think about the public workforce system as distinct from our education system.

Senator SMITH. Right.

Ms. WHITE. We think about our high schools as distinct from our colleges. That does young people a disservice. They mature and they learn at very different rates. They have interests that develop at very different times. And so, the more we can create bridges across these systems, whether that's out-of-school directly into K-12 education, K-12 education, the CTE system, into work experiences, the better we'll be able to serve young people and allow them to earn credentials, gain exposure—

Senator SMITH. I think that's correct.

Ms. WHITE [continuing]. Over the course of their lives and post-secondary experiences. Dual enrollment has been mentioned. That's critically important, right?

Senator SMITH. This is what's happening in this facility, this great program in Moorhead where you have dual enrollment. I know this is happening all over the place.

I think, Chair Sanders, what we need to figure out is how to do—is to make sure that our WIOA programs are reinforcing this kind of innovation that's happening at the local level, rather than creating sort of a bureaucratic maze for organizations, or students, or educators, or employers that want to participate to kind of their way through.

Ms. WHITE. Right. Absolutely. The one thing I would add to it too, is that so much of this momentum that you're referencing is happening in schools, led by schools, or out-of-school providers that work with public education.

The WIOA system primarily serves students who are disconnected from that system. And one challenge that I think this population will have as programs—these in-school programs explode really, and I do think they will, is that those are not necessarily the young people that employers look to first.

We need to ensure that WIOA remains strong, and continues to support programs for the students who face the greatest barriers to employment and may not have access to or maybe overlooked as some of these really excellent school-based programs evolve, keeping them connected to those programs, using them as strategies for re-engagement, and ensuring that there are incentives in place for employers to work with these hard-to-serve kids, is going to be a

really important step to ensure that we can create these opportunities and really expand their benefit for all.

Senator SMITH. Thank you so much, Chair Sanders. And I'll just say this to Ranking Member Cassidy as well. This is a bill I have with Senator Collins, and Senator Graham, and Senator Wyden, and I'm going to be hoping that we can get this included in our bill.

I have another question, which I will provide in writing, focused on supportive services. And just what a big deal it is if you don't have access to transportation, or childcare, or a little bit of extra training. What a big barrier that is to being able to keep or get a job. So, I'll follow-up with that in writing. Thank you.

The CHAIR. Thank you.

Senator Marshall.

Senator MARSHALL. Well, thank you, Chairman Sanders. I want to start by offering a letter on behalf of Senator Budd. It's from the North Carolina Chamber regarding Pell Grant eligibility. So, on behalf of Senator Budd, I'd like to ask unanimous consent to enter to the record a letter of support for his bill, the Promoting Employment and Lifelong Learning Act from the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce.

[The following information can be found on page 96 in Additional Material:]

The CHAIR. Without objection.

Senator MARSHALL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And again, welcome to all of our panel and making the efforts to give us some advice here.

I'm going to start with Ms. White. When it comes to youth apprenticeships we grew up in an era where we all had summer jobs and part-time jobs. And when I go back home, employers tell me they have a hard time getting through the barriers of apprenticeships coming on board.

Instead of adding more regulations, are there some regulations we could tweak to maybe give those youth and other people more of an opportunity for apprenticeships?

Ms. WHITE. Sure. I'm happy to take that. Thank you for the question, Senator. So, I think to some extent, the complaints from employers around registration for apprenticeships they're legitimate. I'm actually trying to register my very own apprenticeship right now. We are hiring one at my place of employment, and it can be challenging.

I think many states have invested in state-level intermediaries that have provided really significant guidance to employers to expedite that process. They take on a lot of the administrative burden to sort of expedite kind of the creation of the program and the registration from start to finish.

I think there are a number of ways that registration could be simplified and expedited. One thing, I think, could go a long way toward the expansion of these programs at the local and state level are program standards that develop through things like sector partnerships.

Often, the hardest part of building these programs is employers saying; I don't know how to put the pieces together. I don't know what a work process schedule is. I don't know how to specify the skills and competencies that these folks need. I can tell you what they should do, but I don't know how to write it.

To the extent that we can create shared resources to help expedite that process for youth and for adults, I think we'll see greater uptake.

Senator MARSHALL. Okay. I'll go to Dr. Bradley next. One of my sayings, "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it." And if you don't have the data timely, it doesn't do me any good.

As we work through this WIOA authorization, we have a bill that would require the Department of Labor to implement performance indicators within 6 months of enactment and provide monthly technical assistance to local workforce boards. Can you just give me your perspective on the importance of those timely reports and implementations?

Dr. BRADLEY. Thank you, Senator. That's an excellent question. And that's been one of the issues in the system; it's data lag. The reason that up-to-date, more real-time data is so important is because things change quickly. And you want training providers and workforce boards to be able to respond to what's happening now, not describing a situation 6 months ago.

Also, in terms of understanding training providers that have positive outcomes. If there's a year or 2 years lag of that, and they're not a good training provider, they're not getting good results. You want to know that sooner rather than later because of the good stewardship of public dollars in the WIOA system. So, it's really important both from an agility standpoint, but also to know what's working.

Senator MARSHALL. Thank you. Mr. Dickerson, my wife and I are community college graduates. So, proud of my community colleges and technical colleges and their ability to flex from moment to moment. In a rural community where there's agriculture, one community college as the Diesel Mechanic School. Maybe where the wind energy is popping up, a community college quickly offers a 2-year degree in wind energy, and where there's manufacturing, maybe it's a focus on welding and other skills like that.

How do you see the opportunity for short-term Pell Grants in those types of programs? Is that something that would be a good idea, short-term Pell Grants?

Mr. DICKERSON. Yes, sir. I absolutely believe that'd be a great opportunity for our adult population to get into the workforce faster through certified programs. Now, the other part of that is, yes, the funding's available, but do you have industry leading those discussions and developing those programs on the other side of it? And I think that's a critical aspect that can't be overlooked.

I'm proud to say Louisiana Delta Community College, which is our community college in Monroe and the northeast side of the state, work with industry often and become flexible in the short-term programs that we need. So, I know that'd be a positive step for this relationship.

Senator MARSHALL. Thank you. Appreciate that.

The CHAIR. Thank you.

Senator Kaine.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Chair Sanders, and thanks to all the witnesses.

I'll just begin with you, Dr. Bradley. I'm only now starting to find a spirit of forgiveness in my heart for you, for hiring Karishma Merchant away from my Senate staff. She's sitting there in the front row, but I am finding a sense of forgiveness after—

Dr. BRADLEY. Please forgive me.

Senator KAINE.—8 months.

[Laughter.]

Senator KAINE. I want to talk to Dr. Sullivan and really builds on Senator Marshall's questions about the importance of training services. Not everybody can access a 4-year degree or even a 2-year degree. But we also know that by 2031, more than 70 percent of jobs will require some form of post-secondary education or training beyond high school. And that's why I have long been a champion of expanding Pell Grant to include high quality short-term education and training programs.

One of the real virtues of the Pell program is how we've made it flexible over the years, full-time students, part-time students. I'm really happy that we recently, within the last 2 years, went back to an original part of Pell, which was folks who were incarcerated, who are trying to gain college and skills so that they can be successful. Once they're released, they can now qualify for Pell, and that's leading to some significant pickup and offering courses to those individuals.

But I do believe the next expansion and flexibility of Pell should be for high quality, short-term education, and training programs. Senator Braun on the Committee, he and I have introduced the JOBS Act. We have over 45 bipartisan co-sponsors, including 10 on this Committee. I want to thank Chair Sanders for agreeing that this will be marked up later this summer.

Different community colleges have kind of embraced this notion in tandem with their own state legislatures and Governors. Virginia Community College has a FastForward program to focus on state funding for these short-term, high-quality programs, and the results have been pretty strong given your experience both in Virginia and Louisiana.

Can you speak to the value of these programs, sort of picking up on what Mr. Dickerson just said?

Dr. SULLIVAN. Certainly. Thank you for the question, and thank you for your leadership around this issue. I know, personally, you have understood career and technical education for many years. Personally, you invested your own time in that space.

Workforce Pell, I think, is a huge part of the solution of educating and skilling American people. The American worker today, the biggest issue they face is time. And so, when we say to them, go get an associate degree, and they say, I don't have the time.

What we should be offering them is an opportunity that gets them the skills to get to work, but that's not the end. That's the beginning, and ensuring that workforce Pell allows those programs high quality, high value for that individual that gets them into the work.

But then we have our employer partners who we need help to pull people through that economy to make sure that as the jobs change, they're able to be educated and skilled and stay on top of that economy.

Senator KAINE. I do acknowledge what Senator Marshall said. Our community colleges are often really flexible. So, Central Virginia Community College in Lynchburg, they offer different programs than J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Richmond, because they're pretty attuned to the dynamics of the local economy and local workforce needs.

The last thing I'll just say on this is I really celebrate work that we've done in the last couple years to do an Infrastructure bill. And I really celebrate work that we've done to do a Manufacturing bill, but who's going to build it? Who's going to make it? This is a challenge that I'm hearing from all my employers, so I look forward to working more on this.

Ms. Taylor White, a question about youth unemployment. Just one more question. Young people who are disconnected from both school and work represent a critical pool of untapped talent and opportunity for economic mobility in this country.

Some call this group of people disconnected youth, but I think the term that I've heard my colleague Bobby Scott use is Opportunity Youth, which I like, and I have what would be similar to legislation he's promoted on the House, the Opening Doors for Youth Act to expand employment opportunities for these young people who do not have a current connection either to school or employment.

According to a recent report from the Center for American Progress, while the post-pandemic labor market has seen increased participation from young people ages 16 to 19, there's still millions that do face barriers to employment. How can WIOA better support young people to reconnect to both education and the economy?

Ms. WHITE. Thank you for the question, Senator. I mean, I think the easiest answer through WIOA is the expansion of access to work experiences. They have been proven to yield results in the short-and long-term for young people's outcome, labor market outcomes.

I think to the extent that WIOA can be leveraged to create more of those paid work opportunities for young people and to create incentives for employers to hire these young people who pay face significant barriers to entry to the labor market, that's one way to make sure that young people that are served by WIOA have access to these jobs. You're right, youth unemployment is at 9, almost 9.5 percent right now, which is pretty high.

Senator KAINE. Great. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Well I'm going to keep going since they're talking about—

[Laughter.]

Senator KAINE. Does anybody else just want to say something about this youth employment and kind of the opportunity to better connect young people either to school or work with WIOA.

Mr. DICKERSON. From an employer standpoint, in our conversations, we acknowledge work experience is valuable, apprenticeships are valuable. One challenge and one question I would ask our panelists and this Committee to consider is there needs to be an education for business and industry leaders on how to effectively do that. Because we have some real challenges of bringing young people into our manufacturing facility.

But we have opportunities. Like we have a business academy in Northeast Louisiana that allow students to go into the business office setting, which is a much safer environment than a manufacturing facility. And so, considering some of those resources and those conversations, I think, would be beneficial.

Senator KAINE. Great. Please, Dr. Bly-Jones.

Dr. BLY-JONES. I just want to build on that because I think we've talked a lot about adding additional funds for individuals. I want to accentuate the point that Mr. Dickerson just made in terms of resources to work with local employers. I think that's an important component.

Oftentimes, local workforce boards are tasked with working with employers and don't necessarily have the additional resources to convene for those sector partnerships to educate employers on the best way to work with youth in those work-based learning experiences. And so, I would elevate the point that was mentioned before, that we need the resources to actually help with some of those sector partnerships as well.

Senator KAINE. Thank you so much. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIR. Senator Marshall.

Senator MARSHALL. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Dr. Bly-Jones. If we were to start a program like yours in Kansas City, Wichita, bigger city, what would be the most important advice you'd give us? What would be the things to not do, perhaps?

Dr. BLY-JONES. Thank you for the question and considering creating a jobs council in Kansas City.

[Laughter.]

Senator MARSHALL. We probably have something like it, but I'm still just trying—I think that lessons learned are always good to go over.

Dr. BLY-JONES. I love the sound of it because it really is about systemic change and it is about coalition building. And so, a lot of the work we do is in partnership. One of the things I want to echo, we've heard a lot of how separate our systems are. Really, WIOA is about integrating all of these systems.

We've talked about K-12, we've talked about adult Ed, we've talked about individuals with disabilities. We talked about the stigmas that are attached to individuals that have criminal records. We've talked about the need for educators to be employed to be educated employers, to be educated about how the system works, and how they can best leverage this system for talent acquisition.

I would say to get the partners that are required in the workforce ecosystem, all of the partners that I've mentioned, and then think about your local economy and what skills are needed to actually fill those jobs. We heard that there are a lot of jobs and there are a lot of people who are unemployed. And so, making sure that we're skilling them up for the jobs that actually exist.

Senator MARSHALL. What would you say are the impediments to success? What is the most common reasons people drop out of this program you're outlining?

Dr. BLY-JONES. I think we talk about getting individuals jobs. I think we have to be mindful about quality jobs. I think we have to think about the benefits that come with employment, and what it costs to maintain employment. We talked about the supportive services that are needed, whether that is the transportation or whether that is affordable childcare.

Another crisis we have in the country now is mental health. And so, even including that when we talk about our youth, and we talk about our adults, and the trauma that individuals have endured, I think mental health is another component that needs to be included when we think about supportive services as well.

It's those wraparound services from the point of the person actually getting the job, to actually keeping the job. The retention component.

The CHAIR. Thank you. Let me ask kind of a simple question here. What has been brought up by a number of Senators is the fact that we put many, many, many billions of dollars into rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure, and yet we don't have the kind of skilled workforce that we need in order to move that as rapidly as we would like.

What I've heard in Vermont, and I would like you to comment on this, is it's one thing to talk about giving people the skills, but to give people the skills you need to have. Somebody knows the profession. I can't teach them to be a plumber unless I'm a good plumber, or an electrician, or whatever.

What I've heard in Vermont is, especially in the schools, to get somebody who has the skills out of the workforce to become a teacher becomes a whole project unto itself. Not to mention if he's making \$100,000 dollars as a plumber, and I'm going to pay him \$50,000 as a teacher, he isn't going to do it. Is that an issue that we're running into around the country? Who wants to speak to that?

Mr. DICKERSON. Yes, sir.

The CHAIR. Dr. Sullivan.

Mr. DICKERSON. I'll give an example. In Northeast Louisiana, we have manufacturing companies and other companies that are partnering with those school districts where they actually allow employees to take a couple of hours a day and go teach at a certain school district in that area. And that's what's happening at the—

The CHAIR. Paid by the employer—

Mr. DICKERSON. The employer—

The CHAIR.—As part of their job in a sense.

Mr. DICKERSON.—That's right.

The CHAIR. That's interesting.

Mr. DICKERSON. I think that's the model of partnership at the local level that we're seeing that I hope can be seen at the Federal level is the work and the success is going to happen at the local level. The more of these conversations from local—

The CHAIR. Let me get it straight. So, you're working for me, you're a skilled worker. I'm going to pay you to go to a local school. You'll get your salary.

Mr. DICKERSON. Yes, sir.

The CHAIR. What about the teaching skills? I mean, you could be a great worker and not necessarily a great teacher. How do you deal with that one?

Dr. SULLIVAN. Transition largely for us is aimed at retiring individuals, maybe plumbers, maybe process operators as they retire out, we're bringing them into the college and it takes time. We need to spend time with them to help them understand pedagogy, how to teach.

The CHAIR. Exactly. All right. So, you could be a great plumber, but not a great teacher.

Dr. SULLIVAN. Yes.

The CHAIR. All right.

Dr. Jones.

Dr. BLY-JONES. I was just going to point to the gap in pay in terms of bringing a professional in, and it is best to actually recruit from those who are actually looking to retire soon.

The CHAIR. If you have sympathetic employers, does his idea makes sense to you, having an employer pay?

Dr. BLY-JONES. I think at the local community, that level of engagement is what I think you saw when you walked into that high school. The excitement that a young person or any person has when they're contributing to their local economy. So, being able to work as a local employer and be able to contribute in K-12 or even the community college, that's what we're looking for in community investment.

The CHAIR. I have the sense that at least in some school districts what you are suggesting, which kind of makes common sense, somebody may say, well, you don't have the teaching certificates that you need or qualifications. Are we running in—is that a bureaucratic problem, or who wants to speak to that one?

Mr. DICKERSON. Go ahead. Well, I know while I was in the school district we had the certifications to train up those teachers that would transition. But what I'm specifically talking to is more of a collaboration approach of—it might not be a person moving out of their career and into a career in education. As much as it is, we're going to teach this class because we have a shortage, and that's really the relationship at the local level.

The CHAIR. Senator Romney.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. When I was serving as Governor of Massachusetts, I would hear occasionally some stories that gave me some concern. Let's say that a lumper in Massa-

chusetts—by the way, you probably don't know what a lumper is, but this is a person who unloads a fishing boat and works in a canning factory, a fishing factory.

This person lost their job because of overfishing, or regulation, or whatever—I'm not getting into that—but if they lost their job, they then were overwhelmed with the process of trying to get unemployment and maybe some housing vouchers and perhaps TANF. And then they needed job training because those lumping jobs are not going to come back.

I looked at how many Federal job training programs there were. There were 49 at the time. And I would hear that a person that had lost their job was overwhelmed with the complexity of getting help. And I mean, is that a real problem? Do people who are in one profession that maybe is going away and need help, do they have a hard time figuring out how to access various government programs that might be available to them? Dr. Bly-Jones, do you have any thoughts on that?

Dr. BLY-JONES. Usually what happens—thank you for the question—usually what happens is it's a rapid response team that goes out and they are notified at the state level when an employer is actually facing a layoff of individuals. And so, a rapid response team is sent out to that employer to talk to individuals about the resources that exist. So, it's at that time that they may learn about the different Federal services that you mentioned.

In theory, it would be seamless and that is the intention. And then they go from there into what is referred to as American Jobs Centers that are located in most local communities, again, to be able to actually access resource—

Senator ROMNEY. But the job centers are not going to have TANF, or housing vouchers, or unemployment insurance. Right?

Dr. BLY-JONES. No. They would have an individual you would talk to, and they would have all of those services there. It is considered a one-stop center.

Senator ROMNEY. Not at the job center. The one-stop center, that's what I'm getting to, which is, a Governor smarter than me, Mike Leavitt of Utah had an idea, which instead of having all these offices separate, the job training, and the TANF, and the Housing and so forth, let's have one office and let that one office help an individual that became unemployed. And that worked extremely well for the State of Utah.

That, unfortunately, is prohibited under law at the Federal level. We can't put those offices together. And only one state was grandfathered to allow that to occur. And that was the State of Utah. I have introduced a piece of legislation which is known as the One Door to Work Act, which would allow as many as five other states to be able to also do what Utah does, which is have a one-stop place where individuals can go to get help with unemployment Housing, TANF, food stamps, as well as job training.

Mr. Dickerson, you come from Louisiana. Louisiana is one of the states that said we would love to be able to do that. And I'm delighted that for instance, the Ranking Member and other Members

of this Committee support this idea. Is that something that you believe would be helpful in your state?

Mr. DICKERSON. Yes, sir. That's the work of our Louisiana Workforce and Social Service Reform Task Force that was put together by the Governor and our Secretary of Workforce and Department of Child and Family Services as well.

It's both sides of it. It's not only for the employee, but also for the employer. But to your point one challenge that we've heard in our conversations at the local level around the one-door policy is to make sure that those one-stop centers are appropriately staffed to accommodate all of those services, and that those staff members are educated so that when that individual does come in, they not only get access to the services, but the service delivery mechanism is there to meet them. And that's something we would support.

Senator ROMNEY. Yes. Excellent. I would just note one more thing, which is that Governor Leavitt, and the Utah program, assigns a caseworker. As soon as someone becomes unemployed, they get a caseworker who begins helping them with everything from the support they need for safety net services at the same time, to laying out a plan for getting them back into the workforce and training.

It's an extraordinary program working well in the State of Utah, and I'm delighted that the Ranking Member and others in this Committee support this idea of letting at least five other states get the chance to try this on a temporary basis and see if it's working well for them. I know Louisiana, Texas, other states have said, please let us do this. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIR. Yes.

Senator MARSHALL. Mr. Chairman, I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record a letter from 46 business groups and think tanks expressing support for Senate Bill S. 3825, Senator Romney's One Door to Work Act.

[The following information can be found on page 90 in Additional Material:]

The CHAIR. Without objection.

Senator Murray.

Senator MURRAY. Well, thank you very much, Chairman Sanders, for having this really critical hearing. When I was a young teenager, my dad got MS. We have seven kids in our family, and the only reason we were able to get back on our feet was a workforce training job that gave my mom some skills to get a job. It really saved our family. So, these are really important.

Now today, because Democrats passed laws that made generational investments in American manufacturing and infrastructure and clean energy, we are seeing historic job growth. And in every corner of my State of Washington, I hear from businesses who need more skilled workers to grow and compete. Workers who want to learn new skills and start new careers so they can set themselves and their families up for a success.

Investing in workforce training doesn't just help build a strong economy from some statistical level. It really changes lives and it helps people working parents like my mom. That is exactly why I'm

so passionate about doing a strong bipartisan reauthorization of our Federal workforce programs.

Mr. Chairman, 10 years ago, I worked alongside my Republican colleagues, the late Senator Isakson to pass the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act back then. Just like now, we had a divided Congress with a Democratic Senate and a Republican House. We knew it wasn't going to be easy, but we also knew it was going to be worth it, and that we could make a real progress if we listened to each other and listened to folks back home, and focused on where we could agree and what could actually make a difference for people.

Now, no one got everything they wanted at that time, but in the end, we all got a bill that we were very proud of, and a bill that was really helpful for workers and businesses and the economy. So, there's no question in my mind that we can do that again, and it is way past time to build on that progress so we can keep our economy strong and put the American worker first, which is why this conversation is so important today. So, I really appreciate us having this hearing.

Ms. White, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, just over one in 10 young people are neither enrolled in school or are working. Currently, WIOA requires 75 percent of funding for youth be set aside for out-of-school youth to get connected to the critical employment and training resources services they need. But we have a lot more work to do. Can you talk to us about the importance of reaching out-of-school youth in the WIOA funding?

Ms. WHITE. Absolutely. Thank you for the question, Senator Murray. For the out-of-school youth who have disconnected, the public workforce system is often their place of last resort. It's really their last lifeline to reconnect to training, to education into the labor market.

Under the current version of the bill, 75 percent, as you said, is required to go toward that population of Opportunity Youth. That introduction in 2014 has allowed for WIOA to serve more vulnerable youth than was previously possible under the prior bill.

I think the legislation must retain a requirement that a majority of funds be devoted to the most vulnerable young people. At the same time, I don't know that there is a perfect flat number that works in every single community. There are communities that would like to and have found ways to dedicate resources to keep students connected to school rather than reaching them after they withdraw.

There are lots of interesting ideas out there around assigning priority for service frameworks that could help local workforce boards make decisions about how and when to intervene, and how and when to serve young people that I think could be really effective and reflect the expertise of local workforce professionals.

That said, I do think it's critical that we retain a very clear requirement on the percentage of funds that must go to that population.

Senator MURRAY. Very good. Thank you. I appreciate that.

Dr. Bradley, we work to strengthen the quality guardrails in the 2024 reauthorization, and the last several years have really shown us that we've got more work to do. So, as we work on this lot 10 years later, what more can we do to strengthen the quality of the training provided, including through stronger requirements for eligible training providers in their programs?

Dr. BRADLEY. Thank you, Senator. You're right. There's always work to be done on this issue. And I think that one of the things at JFF that we've learned, we talked to a lot of state practitioners, and I think there's some really good state examples. New Jersey is doing some great work in this area, Alabama, Minnesota, to kind of build in quality measures. They're doing this at the state level, but lessons could be learned at the Federal level.

I think that regular ETPL update more regular than exists now, which is part of the House bill, I think something akin to having states do like a college scorecard, but for the workforce system. And I also think that there are other steps you can take to allowing locals, for example, to have more say about providers in their area. Right now, the eligible training provider list is set at the state level.

Another thing that the House bill does that may improve qualities, they have this contingent eligibility mechanism that would allow maybe training providers that have a promising practice. And it could be high quality, but may not have been around for a long time to sort of receive payment in a structured way, sort of as they meet performance outcomes.

Senator MURRAY. Is there a way to track those outcomes so we know that somebody got a quality training at a program?

Dr. BRADLEY. There are. And one of the things that I think can help on that is that a lot of times wage records are used to track outcomes. And one of the things specifying that there's a specific state agency that's sort of responsible for the backend work on tracking outcomes because they have access to the wage record data. That would be another improvement. Glad to discuss further.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIR. Senator Tuberville.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Whenever I hear from my folks back in Alabama workforces, top of their mind—we're struggling right now in our state. Struggling to fill jobs, struggling to match up the right people with the right job, struggling to keep businesses open, struggling to keep cost affordable. It's a huge problem. Reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act will be a huge step in the right direction. I think we all agree with that.

Now, I know my colleagues on both sides, they all have been hearing a lot about this issue. We've all discussed it, and people across the country have been speaking up offering solutions. A lot of my colleagues have spoken up and presented their ideas. And I have, one, myself, introduced a Workforce Data Act yesterday. This bill is simple. It was developed in coordination with stakeholders

across the WIOA system, and it would help ensure these Federal dollars are getting to the right folks.

My bill would improve data sharing within the WIOA's system, and allow local boards and providers access to wage data from the unemployment insurance system. This would allow them to measure performance with better and more accurate measures of success. We will be able to determine which training is working and which folks are being helped by these programs. Pretty straight forward and simple. Hopefully we can do something with this.

Mr. Dickerson you started your career as a high school coach, I think we have a little bit in common. And thank you for your service, because teaching is a service, coaching is a service. Can you tell us about what employers are looking at from the WIOA system?

Mr. DICKERSON. Yes, sir. Thank you for the question. And some of my fondest memories were as a high school coach, and there's a lot of lessons that can be applied in the business as well.

But from an industry standpoint, I think a partnership in our workforce development is what we're looking for. And I made a statement in my testimony that it's our time to really step up and help bridge that gap. But for too long and for too many years, especially since Covid, I think business and industries are spending more internal dollars on developing their own workforce because of the lack of participation from the external. And that's just sustainable for a business and our budget.

Considering a strong partnership with our community partners, our local workforce boards, our community technical college system is what we'd really be looking forward to.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Is the current system working?

Mr. DICKERSON. I think there's challenges with the current system that make it difficult to be successful. I think we have some spotlights in Northeast Louisiana that I'm proud of to say that we are working, but not to scale and not to meet the demand of employers in our areas.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Yes. Education is the opportunity for our kids in the country. And I heard even earlier about people that have lost their jobs, which is rightly so. Education, all my life, our education system has abandoned us in some degree. We need to do a lot more work with that.

I know I have two huge manufacturing plants in Mobile. We make commercial jets, we make ships and submarines, and they have gone out recruiting in McDonald's and Walmart to train people how to weld and how to do plumbing and electricity. Some of the best workers. We can't sustain our Country like that. We can't do it. It's got to be done through the educational system.

Too many of our kids go to 4-year schools that they don't need to go. I've watched that. I was part of that. And so, kids that come and get a degree in something that they could never get a job and had to go work at Walmart. So, Mr. Sullivan, why is WIOA funding having such a minimum impact on our broader workforce needs?

Dr. SULLIVAN. Thank you for the question. I think it's important to note the funding level of WIOA. I think it was referenced at about \$3 billion. Just for a sake of reference, the Federal Pell Pro-

gram is about \$30 billion. So, just let that sink in for a second about the scope and scale.

Think about the number of colleges that are available and the ability to be able to scale, as you heard Mr. Dickerson say a few minutes ago, to ensure that everyone has that opportunity. I think that's where we've got to find a way. But the reality is, there are very few people out of the 150,000 that we have educated every year in Louisiana's community and technical colleges that are funded via WIOA. That number is likely very similar to the number that you have in Alabama, somewhere around the 1,100 or 1,200 range.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Yes. We're in a tough situation. I'm all for Pell Grants. I dealt with them for years with football players and all that. The problem is, I think they're misused, but we could use Pell Grant more for workforce development, for kids that just want to specify on something. I think that junior colleges, obviously, there's a lot of things that we can do to help, but we just don't do it. We talk about it. We don't do it. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIR. Senator Markey.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We cannot solve our current significant overdose crisis without programs that support workers. This is why the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act demonstration grants funding workforce development programs in states, counties, and towns with widespread opioid use are so important.

In New Bedford, Massachusetts, for example, this funding enabled 140 formerly incarcerated individuals to get training for high-demand jobs with a living wage in the maritime trade industry.

As the public health crisis evolves with rising polysubstance use disorder and substances like xylazine finding its way into fentanyl, we have to fund these programs permanently.

Mr. Bradley, in your testimony, you state that workforce development is essential to help every individual create and sustain a career that will enable them to support themselves and their loved ones. Why is it important for WIOA to fund programs that allow people impacted by substance use disorder to find meaningful, dignified, and well-paid work?

Dr. BRADLEY. Thank you, Senator. Yes, it's important. I think you've hit on a key point here, which is that people who interact with the workforce development system are coming from all different circumstances, all different sets of needs, different sets of backgrounds, different sets of challenges and barriers.

In one of the programs that you're talking about, the DOL did a couple of pilot programs, demonstration programs, through the authority of WIOA in sort of 2018, 2019, related to the opioid crisis. And because of the flexibility that they had under the demonstration authority, they were able to move into this area.

I don't think opioids is like mentioned in the statute of WIOA, but when crises happen, DOL is able to direct some of its resources at the national level toward these. So, I guess, I would say that it's important to remember that not everybody coming into the system

has similar challenges, similar needs. There needs to be some flexibility about the type of programming to meet them where they are.

Senator MARKEY. Senator Romney was talking about the fishing industry in Massachusetts earlier, and New Bedford is the largest port in the United States' fishing ports. And so, this is the kind of program that is working to help people to be able to make a new life for themselves.

YouthBuild is a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act program that serves over 5,000 16-to 24-year-olds who are not working and are not in school. The young people enrolled in YouthBuild obtain a high school degree, learn trades by building affordable housing in their community, and gain fundamental jobs skills. These programs help kids get opportunities they were previously denied and give them the tools to build the pathway to their future.

My YouthBuild for the Future Act would support this crucial work by providing more funding. That programs can use more flexibly. This program works, which is why we need to provide enough funding for it by allowing Department of Labor funds to match AmeriCorps funds.

YouthBuild will also need flexibility in spending funds such as being able to provide meals to participants. We cannot expect young people to learn while they're hungry. So, Ms. White, why is it important to fully and flexibly fund YouthBuild?

Ms. WHITE. Thank you for the question, Senator, from my home state. So, as you mentioned, YouthBuild provides critical training opportunities for young people who face really significant barriers to employment. And they provide a really important service to the communities where they're working in, in building homes.

A big part of the flexibility that you mentioned, I think is important because as we've seen in YouthBuild, there are really positive short-term outcomes for young people. There's less evidence that over time those positive benefits are retained.

Many of the programs that are having really strong results today have been able to forge partnerships with community colleges, with AmeriCorps, with other organizations, so that young people who complete those programs have a warm handoff to a clear next step.

Flexible resources for YouthBuild programs to continue developing strong partnerships with employers in their communities connecting to apprenticeship programs and forging partnerships with community colleges in other education programs so those young people have a very clear and supported transition. When the program ends, we'll help ensure that YouthBuild continues to be successful and increases the long-term benefits for its participants as well.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you. Thank you for your work. And Dr. Bly-Jones, could you talk about why it's important to have workforce training in the clean energy sector, this growth sector for our economy?

Dr. BLY-JONES. Thank you for the question. And so, it's important, and I have to say under the leadership of my Governor, J.B. Pritzker, he signed into legislation. So, we are actually using state

funds for the Clean Energy Jobs Act. And it is really about making sure that we have renewable energy.

It's also comprehensive. It's an example of the sector partnership that I talked about when I talked about working with contractors, talking about the communities that have been affected by pollution, and making sure those individuals are a part of the skills development for those clean energy jobs that we will have in Illinois.

In addition to that, we've also included the population that we referenced earlier; those returning citizens. So, we are being intentional about the population. We are being intentional working on both sides of the equation with the job training program, but also with the contractors, and subcontractors, and the employment piece to make sure that we are not training individuals for jobs that don't exist, but that we are doing the match on the front end and ensuring that the employers are engaged with us throughout the entire process, and that's a true sector partnership.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIR. Senator Braun.

Senator BRAUN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I come from a place in Southern Indiana, where I live in a town in a county that's got one of the lowest unemployment rates, both town and county. And our state, we're the biggest manufacturing state per capita. We've got a place called Ivy Tech, that's that bridge between what should be done in high school. Like, it used to be done to where you don't need a bridge on basic skills. Sue Ellspermann, who runs Ivy Tech gave me some disturbing news that they've got a labor participation rate of 86 percent, want to take a crack at our 63. So, they do what I remember years ago to where every high school was emphasizing career and technical education, the pathway there I think has been oversold. It's also too darn expensive to boot.

I'm interested. Have we really changed the dynamic? So, you don't need as much participation here. We definitely need that flexibility to where Pell money can be used for that. But let's go back to the source of the issue.

I was on our school board and found out the guidance counselors were stigmatizing against stuff we're talking about. And that's where it's got to start with transparency. Maybe a portal here, at least in every state, what are the high-demand, high-wage jobs so parents and kids can clearly see it and then get establishment education behind it to where they're telling kids and parents what makes more sense, especially when you look at what the cost of a college education was 40 years ago compared to what it is now.

A lot of times the end result is you get exported out of state to find a job with a bad degree or back into the basement. So, I'd like each one of you to comment on, if we do all of this, we put more programs behind it.

When I was in our state legislature seven, 8 years ago, we were spending \$1 billion on 19 different programs, and none of them are really doing that much good. And the true solution is maybe not K through 6, but it's middle school through high school when it's a bargain for education and getting everything lined up with transparency and proper guidance.

We'll start with Ms. White, and try to keep it to 30 seconds or so, so I can hear everybody's opinion.

Ms. WHITE. Thank you for the question, Senator. So, I mean, I think your point about alignment is spot on. I think that's something that has to happen between our middle schools, or high schools, and post-secondary training and education options.

One thing I would emphasize, I had a chance to travel last year with the delegation from Indiana to the institute in Switzerland, where there's a team right now. One thing I want to underscore about what's so different about that system is the employer leadership and the employer coordination. That's a really big difference. The employers are not just playing a role in hiring students for work-based learning. They are working hand in hand with educators to define that curriculum. And we need mechanisms in place to make that happen stronger and more rapidly.

Senator BRAUN. Good point, because they were detached in Indiana from that equation. They just thought the system was going to produce it automatically.

Dr. Bradley.

Dr. BRADLEY. Thank you, Senator. Yes, one, I agree with you that there needs to be some connectivity and continuity, and I think one of the ways of looking at successful dual enrollment programs.

When you're in high school being dually enrolled in an institute of higher education, and people can start—students can start to understand what they might want to go into and start building the skills and abilities to do that. But you're introduced at a younger age, and there's a clear path forward just out. The idea is it doesn't just stop in 12th grade. You can see the future.

Senator BRAUN. Dr. Sullivan.

Dr. SULLIVAN. Senator, thank you for your leadership, certainly on the JOBS Act. but I'll tell you, I think a lot of what we've heard today is about blending what we have traditionally thought of in different frames of education. Things are different today. Even dual enrollment is effectively a blending of K-12 in post-secondary.

What I would urge is a much less of a siloed approach, and an approach that allows individuals to have dollars to be able to go out and find the training that has the greatest value for them, but not to limit that to a one-shot deal.

A final point, do not drop benefits just because an individual gets a job. What we know is that there's a benefits cliff that is happening in this country that needs to be smoothed out, that allows an individual to get a job and keep those benefits.

Dr. BLY-JONES. Thank you, Senator. I have three words that I'm going to use. I'm going to use awareness, coordination, and alignment.

Aware of the actual occupations that exist in that local community, local economy. Alignment with the actual systems that we've talked about. So, talking about the employer, talking about the schools, the jobs, and all of those supportive services. And coordination, everything has to be coordinated. We've talked about this. We've talked about needing more resources, but the way to best

utilize and leverage resources is to make sure they're properly coordinated. Thank you,

Senator BRAUN. Mr. Dickerson.

Mr. DICKERSON. Yes, Senator. I want to talk about a couple of things that are, I would say, actionable that are happening in Northeast Louisiana. One, one conversation you talked about the stigma between college-bound and career-bound education. And our belief and our message is that every student is a career-bound student, whether that's immediately after high school, 4 years, or 16 years. When they complete high school, they're going to end up in our workplaces. And so, we want to celebrate working in our area.

The second thing is our sector partnership. The Northeast Louisiana Manufacturers Alliance and Consortium is developing a website. Because you talked about awareness about careers in our area, but the manufacturing, and really branding, and marketing manufacturing in Northeast Louisiana that's going to go live here in the next couple of months.

But in that, I want to share one way that we're getting into the classrooms is through virtual 360 tours where a student will have a library, teachers have a library of videos, they can tour our manufacturing facility and a dozen others without ever leaving their classroom, just to bring that awareness piece in.

Senator BRAUN. Thank you. Very good.

The CHAIR. Senator Murkowski.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just following-up on that, and I wish that I had been there for the full scope of that question. But to the comments that you had made, Mr. Dickerson, I was reading an article from *The Wall Street Journal* just yesterday, and it's entitled, Gen Z Plumbers and Construction Workers are Making #Blue Collar Cool. So, I mean, doesn't that get your attention?

We spend a lot of money trying to figure out, all right, how are we going to attract young people into the trades? And the article goes on about a young woman who is an electrician in Cornwall, New York, and she's on TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. Did you see her recently atop a bucket truck, adding utility outlets to power poles, or fixing an electric panel in a water damaged basement. And then, we've got a plumber, 23-year-old guy out of California who has a TikTok video of himself removing a water heater with a dolly.

By the time he woke the next morning, it had 470,000 views. So, all right, people, let's pay attention to our young people, how they are communicating this. And they're looking at this and they're seeing these are good jobs. These are not only jobs that can take care of a 23-year-old young person, but it's really good wages. And they point that out in this article and how these young people are kind of blowing out the stereotypes.

They talk about one young woman who wants to show that it's Okay to be feminine in a male-dominated industry of welding. So, she's in full makeup and mascara, whatever it is that takes. But I think these are good reminders to us that how we are able to

reach young people about these career opportunities and why they truly are careers.

This is not just a detour on your way to a college degree. These are jobs that everybody needs. You've got great people that want to be doctors and lawyers, but every one of them needs to have their toilet worked on in their house. They need to have their lights go on, they need their electricians. So, how we make this real, I think, is so much of what we're trying to do with workforce development.

I just came from a meeting with the Alaska Home Builders Association and we're talking about really the housing crisis within our state. And it comes down to one thing. You've got builders, but they can't get the framers, they can't get the electricians, they can't get what they need. It's all workforce, workforce, workforce.

As we are looking to focus on the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, I'm one who's looking to make sure that we're advancing our legislation for that next generation. Not thinking what it is that we think they should have, but what it is that is going to attract them that's going to be able to provide for those jobs.

I want to make sure that we're incorporating flexibility into these programs because I come from a big state with big geography, low population, super high costs. Your transportation costs just are killers. But I'll tell you one of the things that has been an impediment to our workforce training programs is they're all located in your cities, in your larger population centers.

But I've got 80 percent of the State of Alaska. Our communities are not connected by roads. So, people have got to fly in. So, it's not like they can go take a training class and then be at home dealing with their kids, or spouse, or whatever it is. So, for us, what they're looking for are childcare, transportation costs.

How we can incorporate flexibility into these programs is something that I hope that you would all share, is going to be a positive. That also is an attraction when it comes to young people looking to these training opportunities.

I've talked, haven't allowed you more than 40 seconds now to say anything, but can any of you speak to how important it is to how flexibility—

The CHAIR. I'm going to give you an extra minute. How's that?

[Laughter.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Oh, thank you. Thank you, Chairman. Flexibility.

Dr. BRADLEY. Thank you, Senator. That's a great question. I did not know. Did you say 80 percent of Alaskan towns are not connected by roads?

Senator MURKOWSKI. That is correct. It's either by water or by air.

Dr. BRADLEY. Oh, interesting.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Interesting and very costly.

Dr. BRADLEY. Yes, indeed. I would say, and just to go back to Senator Markey's questions about the flexibility, that people come

to the workforce system with very different backgrounds, very different needs.

We had a panel recently where workforce leaders from different cities came in and they were talking about the workforce system being a barrier reduction system. And so, meaning that people are going to come in with different barriers and have different needs and that there has to be some flexibility. Everyone doesn't get the same treatment essentially.

I would say that's the importance. You'd see diverse populations coming in with very different needs and backgrounds.

Dr. SULLIVAN. I would just add that it's not only a diverse population, but it's also Federal regulations that we're all expected to follow with populations that are diverse, with goals that are diverse, and with timeframes that are diverse. And so, it is absolutely necessary that we have the flexibility.

The final point is we all expect these programs and the training to be aligned with the regional economy. Federal guidelines to align with the regional economy. So, you can imagine that's threading a needle. So, looking for that flexibility is going to be key.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Do you think that the way things are structured currently that we do have that flexibility, government programs by their very nature are not inherently built to be flexible?

Dr. BLY-JONES. I'll jump in. Thanks for that question and expanding upon that. One of the areas of advocacy that the Chicago Jobs Council continues to advance is making sure there are barrier reduction funds, and that the definition of supportive services is more expansive. So, you talked about—

Senator MURKOWSKI. Would that include like childcare, transportation?

Dr. BLY-JONES. Yes. I was just going to say you talked about childcare, you talked about transportation. We talk a lot about supplies for individuals, what they need to actually get to work. You talked a lot about construction. A lot of the equipment that individuals need can be very costly.

Then, the other component I mentioned earlier is even adding in the mental health piece. So, expanding the definition of what supportive services actually are, and then making sure you have those funds allocated to actually reduce the barriers for individuals to be able to get to work.

We talked a lot about fines and fees that keep people away from work too. A lot of work that we do at CJC is eliminating some of those barriers related to fines and fees that can inhibit someone from—they can have a suspended driver's license and can't get to work. So, being able to address all of those things with a much more expansive definition is what we look to advocate for in terms of reducing barriers.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIR. Thank you, Senator. I think you've had almost every Member of the Committee here which tells you how important this issue is to people from all over the country. And I thank all of you for being here today.

This is the end of our hearing. For any Senators who wish to ask additional questions, questions for the record will be due in 10 business days, June 27th by 5 p.m.

The CHAIR. I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record four statements in support of workforce development. Without objection.

[The following information can be found on page 74 in Additional Material:]

The CHAIR. The Committee stands adjourned. Thank you.

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL



**Statement for the Record**

**The United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber,  
Manufacturing, Energy, Allied Industrial and  
Service Workers International Union (USW)**

**for the**

**Senate Committee on Health,  
Education, Labor & Pensions**

**hearing on**

**The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Supporting  
Efforts to Meet the Needs of Youth, Workers, and Employers**

**June 12, 2024**

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, and members of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions (HELP), on behalf of the United Steelworkers (USW) 850,000 members, we want to thank you for holding this important hearing on workforce training.

Our nation's principal workforce training legislation — the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) — has not been updated since 2014. In that time, the economy has evolved dramatically, and yet the tools available to workers to adapt to this shifting landscape have remained stuck in place. In this era of advanced manufacturing, new clean technology, and an ever-changing service sector, workers must have access to high-quality training programs. Unfortunately, according to a 2023 Brookings Institution report, “nearly half of all Americans over the age of 25 still have no postsecondary education or training credential”.<sup>1</sup> Without such training, the report continues “these workers, on average, earn low hourly wages and have low weekly and annual earnings”.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, USW applauds the HELP Committee for finally acting to update our current workforce training system and address its shortcomings.

In this statement, we wish to outline our union's priorities when it comes to workforce training. First, we will highlight certain issues that we would like to see enhanced in a revamped WIOA. Second, we will discuss the need for a comprehensive approach to union-sponsored training programs — one that includes both Registered Apprenticeships (RA) and other proven, high-quality models. Lastly, we will conclude with a note on the importance of complementary policies that support worker training, namely reforms to the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act and the reauthorization of Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA).

#### **We Need to Improve Our Current Workforce Training System**

To start, it is important to put our current situation into a historical and global context. Historically, one study found that “federal government spending for workforce services and training have dropped by two-thirds despite the fact that the labor force has grown by about 50 percent since that time”.<sup>3</sup> Looking across the world, that same study found that many industrialized nations spend as much as five times more of their gross domestic product (GDP) than the United States on such active labor market policies.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, it appears from recent Congressional action in the House that this trend is set to continue. Earlier this year, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce favorably voted A Stronger Workforce for America Act out of committee. Based on Congressional Budget Office (CBO) analysis of that bill, a government

<sup>1</sup> [The Brookings Institution](#), “Should the federal government spend more on workforce development?” May 23, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

researcher noted that “in most cases, annual authorization levels...for existing programs would be a fixed annual amount that is slightly above the Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 appropriation level”, despite the growing needs in our country for more investment in workforce training.<sup>5</sup> We need significantly more investment if we want to provide our workers with the best-in-the-world training that they will need to succeed in our 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.

Another shortcoming of our existing system is the limited role that labor plays in shaping workforce training programs. When it comes to on-the-job training, a simple truth emerges: workers know best how to do their jobs, and by extension, they also know what skills they could benefit from.

However, our current approach is not set up in a way that recognizes this fundamental truth. For example, under WIOA, state and local workforce development boards are overrepresented by industry and underrepresented by labor. On state boards, the minimum size is 31 members, with 17 allocated to business and 7 reserved for “workforce” — but of those 7, only 2 are set aside for labor organizations. That means that a state board could include 17 business representatives and only 2 labor organization members. The situation is similarly concerning for local boards: they have a minimum of 19 members, with 10 set aside for business and only 4 for workforce, with 2 of those being for labor organizations.

With such an imbalance between employers and labor, it is no wonder that our current workforce training system is failing to meet the needs of workers. One step in the right direction is the bipartisan Expanding Labor Representation in the Workforce System Act, introduced by Representatives Mikie Sherrill (NJ-11), Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01), and Jahana Hayes (CT-05), which would “expand labor representation on state and local workforce development boards from 20 percent to 30 percent of board positions”.<sup>6</sup> What we really need is to go even further and to ensure that labor’s representation on these boards is equal to that of employers.

In addition to labor’s underrepresentation on state and local workforce boards, another key limitation of our current system is that it does not prioritize funding labor intermediaries and joint labor-management programs. Labor-sponsored programs, for the same reason mentioned above, are the best-known forms of effective workforce training. Since workers know best what skills they will need to do their jobs well, it is critical that our training programs preference those perspectives. As such, we strongly urge you to include priority funding for labor-sponsored programs as well as labor consultation and/or concurrence language in any update to WIOA.

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<sup>5</sup> [U.S. Congressional Budget Office](#), “Cost Estimate – At a Glance – H.R. 6655, A Stronger Workforce for America Act”, January 12, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> [U.S. Representative Sherrill](#), “Reps. Sherrill, Fitzpatrick, Hayes Reintroduce Bipartisan Legislation to Expand Labor Representation on Workforce Boards”, February 8, 2023.

These represent a few of our union's major priorities as it relates to workforce training. We appreciate the efforts that the HELP Committee is taking to update and improve our workforce training system, and we urge the Committee to implement our union's priorities in any such effort.

#### **We Need a Multi-Faceted Approach to Workforce Training**

A major tenet of USW's philosophy on workforce training is that a one-size-fits-all model does not work. Our membership is one of the most diverse in the country, impacting all economic sectors: we have members in industries as wide-ranging as manufacturing, mining, professional services, construction, healthcare, transportation, and so many more. Each of these sectors — let alone the individual workplaces within them — are all different, and as such, they require different skills and techniques to be successful.

No one training model can work for all of those sectors. For example, Registered Apprenticeship programs are often referred to as the "gold standard" for workforce training in certain sectors — and rightly so. For workers in the building trades, a strong, union-sponsored RA program is the best form of training we have. This Registered Apprenticeship structure also works in certain industrial settings for particular job classifications, such as the maintenance workers in the glass sector.<sup>7</sup>

The reason this model works is because workers are trained in a specific trade that is broadly applicable across workplaces. For example, if a worker goes through an RA program and eventually becomes a journey person as an ironworker, they can then use those skills as an ironworker on a number of projects, regardless of the specifics of the workplace (e.g., repairing a bridge or building a skyscraper).

However, there are just as many, if not more, industries where a Registered Apprenticeship model does not work. Take two of our union's larger sectors: steel and paper. Both are large-scale industrial sectors where maintenance is an essential job function to keep a facility operating smoothly. However, being a maintenance worker at a steel mill requires a very set of skills than being a maintenance worker at a paper mill. As such, a standardized Registered Apprenticeship model would not work to effectively train a worker in these settings.

Instead, what is needed is a workforce training system that is as diverse as our economy. An optimal workforce training system built for the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy must leverage all of the skills, talent, and techniques that make our country the strongest economy in the world. This includes investments in effective training programs like Registered Apprenticeships, while also directing resources toward other proven training programs that work in different sectors.

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<sup>7</sup> [Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries](#), "Standards of Apprenticeship adopted by USW & O-I Portland JATC", October 1, 2020.

USW has high-quality training programs across the country that can serve as inspiration for the types of training that need more federal support. For example:

- **Incumbent Worker Training:** USW Local 135L negotiated with Sumitomo Rubber in Tonawanda, NY to stand up a Junior Electrician program, which made it easier for workers to earn a credential through an accelerated education and on-the-job training program. Although not an official Registered Apprenticeship program, this arrangement works both the employer and the workers to upskill in a way that benefits both parties.
- **Partnerships With Local Community Colleges:** USW collaborates with Cleveland Cliffs and Ivy Tech Community College in Valparaiso, IN to sponsor an "Interdisciplinary Industrial Workforce Certificate Program" course worth 40 credits. The program is a pre-employment training opportunity that offers a mix of coursework through Ivy Tech Community College and on-the-job paid internships at Cleveland Cliffs.
- **Using Department of Energy Grants to Provide Community Members With Credentials:** Funded by a Department of Energy (DOE) National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) grant, USW Local 8-550 and Local 1-689 have partnered with West Kentucky Community and Technical College to run a free, 240-hour Radiation Control Technician training program to community members in Paducah, KY. Launched in 2021, the graduates earn a DOE-recognized credential, and fully 90 percent of the first cohort are now employed as USW members at the Paducah plant.

These are just a few instances that underscore the multitude of effective, union-sponsored training programs that are not Registered Apprenticeships. As Congress considers legislation to update our workforce training system, it is imperative that they complement the benefits of Registered Apprenticeship programs by also investing in alternative proven, union-sponsored programs like the ones described here.

#### **We Need Other Policies That Support Effective Workforce Training**

Lastly, in addition to strong investments in our principal workforce training system, there is also a need to improve related policies that we have to support workers during times of transition. Chief among these from USW's perspective are reforming the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act and reauthorizing Trade Adjustment Assistance.

There are several reasons that a worker might interact with our nation's workforce training system: for some, they graduated high school and are seeking early career training in a certain industry; for others, they are looking to make a career pivot

toward a higher-wage occupation; and for still others, it occurs because they have lost their job and want to gain new skills as they search for new employment.

It is for this last group that reforming the WARN Act and reauthorizing TAA would be most impactful. Estimates suggest that in the decade since WIOA was last reauthorized (excluding 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic), there is an average of 19 million layoffs or discharges each year.<sup>8,9</sup> Clearly, with this level of involuntarily job loss, we need to ensure that workers have access to effective income support and workforce training opportunities.

The WARN Act was passed into law back in 1988 with the goal of providing workers advanced notice in the event of a plant closure or mass layoff, so that they would have time to enroll in retraining programs and/or look for a new job. Although noble in its intent, the WARN Act has several loopholes and shortcomings that limit its efficacy. For example, the law exempts certain “smaller employers” and only requires 60 days notice. Also, there are limited enforcement mechanisms when employers fail to give adequate notice. To address these limitations, USW has long endorsed the Fair Warning Act, which would expand the number of firms required to give WARN notice, and it would increase the notice timing from 60 to 90 days. USW has also been supportive of legislative solutions to provide the Department of Labor (DOL) with investigative and enforcement powers related to WARN violations. These reforms would ensure that workers are actually provided with the necessary time and resources to transition if their workplace is to close.

Reauthorizing TAA is also critical to supporting workers who need training after losing their job due to a trade-induced shock. These workers, much like those impacted by WARN closures, have lost their job through no fault of their own. Historically, these trade-displaced workers could rely on TAA to provide income replacement, as well as training opportunities. Much like Registered Apprenticeships for building trades training, TAA has often been called “the gold standard” for job retraining. Its efficacy in linking workers with strong retraining programs make it a highly impactful benefit for workers. According to a study by the Census Bureau, TAA recipients earn an average of \$50,000 more in income over a 10-year period compared to workers who did not participate in the program.<sup>10</sup> However, TAA lapsed at the end of FY2022. Since then, any worker who has lost their job since June 30, 2022 has been unable to access TAA benefits. As of June 2024, DOL estimates that 745 petitions covering 118,057 workers are on hold, awaiting TAA to be reauthorized. USW has strongly pushed for TAA to be reauthorized to ensure that those workers can access these much-needed benefits.

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<sup>8</sup> [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), “Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey”, Accessed June 10, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that some individuals may have been laid off or discharged multiple times in a year, so this statistic is not the same as 19 million Americans.

<sup>10</sup> [U.S. Census Bureau](#), “Census Working Papers – Can Displaced Labor Be Retrained? Evidence from Quasi-Random Assignment to Trade Adjustment Assistance”, February 2022.

Taken together, each of these policy initiatives, in conjunction with more investment through an updated WIOA, would enable U.S. workers to enhance their existing skillset and/or retrain into another occupation in order to take advantage of new, higher-wage economic opportunities.

**Conclusion**

In closing, workforce training is critical to help U.S. workers continue to lead the world in productivity, while also ensuring that those workers share in the benefits of that output. To achieve that goal, we need to update our primary workforce development system, namely through increased funding, more labor representation on workforce boards, and increased investment in labor-sponsored training programs. Furthermore, we need to ensure that our approach to workforce training is comprehensive and lifts up all proven forms of labor-oriented training. Lastly, it is critical to use this opportunity to address other, related policies that support workforce training, such as reforming the WARN Act and reauthorizing TAA. By doing all of this, we can ensure that the United States has the strongest and most effective workforce training system in the world. We thank you again for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record on this critical hearing.

# ALA American Library Association

June 12, 2024

The Honorable Bernard Sanders  
Chairman  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor,  
and Pensions  
U.S. Senate

The Honorable William M. Cassidy, M.D.  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor,  
and Pensions  
U.S. Senate

Dear Chairman Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy:

On behalf of the American Library Association (ALA), I am writing to provide our views for the record of the Committee's hearing on "The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Supporting Efforts to Meet the Needs of Youth, Workers, and Employers."

America's public libraries have long served local communities as trusted and accessible front doors for workers to gain new skills and find their next job. Public libraries combine an expansive reach of more than 17,000 technology-rich locations; welcoming staff trained to provide access to the most relevant resources for people of all stages of educational and employment readiness; robust learning and employment resources; and sustained and flexible collaboration with workforce partners. As a result, people use libraries every day to gain digital and information literacy skills, access new technologies, pursue career and educational programs, and start new businesses.

Even as this is true, public libraries remain an underutilized and untapped resources for job seekers to "find a viable path to employment" and for local businesses to "find job-ready candidates," according to a March 2024 Burning Glass report, *Reimagining the Public Library's Role in Local Workforce Development*. This report states that we should "[i]magine if there were a better-coordinated workforce development ecosystem, capitalizing on what each actor does particularly well. For libraries across the country, this would mean leaning into their proven ability to assess patrons' needs, support lifelong learning, cultivate trust throughout the community and forge strong partnerships with outside organizations." The report closes with an emphatic endorsement of boosting the role of libraries in the workforce development system by noting, "if America truly wants to create more access to opportunity for more people, it only makes sense to integrate the nation's most trusted, most visited institution more deeply into the effort."

As you work to update and strengthen the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the workforce system, ALA urges you to find ways to increase integration and partnerships with libraries. Libraries, in contrast to workforce centers, are closer to where people live, are easier to get to by various modes of transportation, are often open on nights and weekends, and are familiar and trusted public

institutions with no stigmas or strings attached. Greater integration of libraries would allow more dollars to be directed to workforce development services and increase access to these services, enabling individuals to gain the skills to fill in-demand jobs, support their families, and strengthen the economy.

Specifically, ALA requests that the Committee:

- Expand the role of public libraries in the one-stop delivery system for workforce development, by adding public libraries as an eligible entity to operate a one-stop center, specifying that public libraries can be among service providers who can receive a contract to provide career services, and expanding the ability of local boards to use funds to support assistance to public libraries to provide free and open access to basic and individualized career services;
- Incorporate digital and information literacy through definitions, references, and strengthened provisions in Title I and Title II to respond to employers who say that many workers lack digital literacy (the skills needed to utilize technology to find and communicate information) and information literacy (the skills needed to think critically and creatively about tasks and intrinsically understand technology to protect lives on the job and prevent cyber security breaches);
- Include public librarian representation on workforce boards and other aspects of the workforce planning process to improve coordination and resource sharing; and
- Provide support for college and career navigators at public libraries.

Some of these provisions were included in the House-passed WIOA reauthorization bill, [H.R. 6655](#), A Stronger Workforce for America Act. All of these provisions are included in the bipartisan Adult Education WORKS Act ([S. 3075](#)), introduced by Senators Jack Reed (D-RI) and Todd Young (R-IN), and some also are in the bipartisan Investing in Digital Skills Act ([S. 4391](#)), introduced by Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Tim Kaine (D-VA).

We appreciate your leadership as you work to enhance our workforce system to better meet the needs of youth, adults, and employers. As you develop the Committee's WIOA reauthorization bill, we urge you to include the text of these two bipartisan bills, S. 3075 and S. 4391, with the goal of expanding the integration of libraries in our nation's workforce networks to enable job seekers to more easily access employment services and training and ensure they gain the skills for better jobs and improved career pathways.

Thank you for your consideration. If we can provide more information, please contact Larra Clark.

June 12, 2024

The Honorable Bernard Sanders  
Chairman  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor,  
and Pensions  
U.S. Senate

The Honorable William M. Cassidy, M.D.  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor,  
and Pensions  
U.S. Senate

Dear Chairman Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy:

On behalf of COABE, the leading association for adult education, representing 79,000 adult educators and leaders around the country, I am writing to provide our testimony for the Committee record as part of today's hearing on "The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Supporting Efforts to Meet the Needs of Youth, Workers, and Employers."

With over 2,300 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title II programs around the country, COABE members work tirelessly to help underserved adults master the skills they need to build better futures for themselves, their families, their communities, and our nation. Our teachers and leaders provide numeracy, literacy, English language skills, digital and information literacy, work readiness, soft skills, high school equivalency, and numerous wraparound services to millions of adult learners nationwide.

And yet there are millions more who need our services given that [43 million adults](#) are low-skilled in literacy and [62.7 million](#) adults are low-skilled in numeracy in the United States, and the skills gap continues to widen. Without the opportunities provided through adult education programs, many adults will remain sidelined from the economy as they struggle to find jobs that provide family-sustaining wages and employers will continue to face workforce shortages.

That is why we are so pleased that the Committee is holding today's hearing and working to find ways to strengthen WIOA. COABE was grateful to have had the chance in March to showcase an adult education program in Washington, DC for your staff and staff members of Senators who serve on the Committee. We visited Briya Public Charter School, where we heard from participants about the critical role adult education is playing in their lives and saw firsthand how a well-funded and supported adult education program can provide multi-generational benefits, essential wraparound services, a complement of literacy skills, including digital and information literacy, and a pipeline to well-paying jobs. We are working to ensure that the experience of adult learners at Briya is not limited to one program. With additional support and needed updates to WIOA, adult education programs across the country have the potential to mirror Briya's success.

In the intervening years since the last reauthorization of WIOA, COABE gathered input from the field and worked closely with program directors, educators, learners, employers, and stakeholders to develop recommendations responsive to the needs of adult learners and adult educators. These recommendations have been included in [S. 3075](#), the bipartisan Adult Education WORKS Act, introduced by Senators Jack Reed (D-RI) and Todd Young (R-IN). We are grateful for their leadership as well as the support we have heard from members of the Committee, including Senator Tina Smith (D-MN) who has joined as a cosponsor, and Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Tim Kaine (D-VA) who have introduced bipartisan legislation, the Investing in Digital Skills Act ([S. 4391](#)), that incorporates aspects of S. 3075.

COABE was encouraged to see your counterparts on the House Education and Workforce Committee recognize on a bipartisan basis the need to strengthen adult education. The House-passed WIOA reauthorization bill, [H.R. 6655](#), A Stronger Workforce for America (ASWA), includes some of the Adult Education WORKS Act, such as:

- Promoting the use of integrated education and training programs (IETs);
- Providing opportunities to professionalize the adult educator field;
- Recognizing that adult learners need to gain digital literacy skills;
- Ensuring additional resources are devoted to professional development for practitioners; and
- Requiring the Department of Education to disseminate effective practices used by States to use administrative data to determine program performance and reduce the data collection and reporting burden on eligible providers.

At the same time, COABE knows that more needs to be done to help adult learners reach their full potential and ensure employers have a pool of skilled workers to take on the jobs of today and tomorrow. As such, COABE urges you to build on the House-passed bill by integrating the remainder of the Adult Education WORKS Act in the legislation you are drafting to revise WIOA. Specifically, we ask you to:

- Enhance accountability by addressing WIOA's standardized and rigid accountability structure, which in practice, does not fully capture or accurately measure the efforts and successes of adult learners and adult education programs. We recommend ensuring performance metrics are applicable to WIOA Title II and are measurable, attainable, and relevant to adult education; authorizing an innovative pilot performance accountability system to empower States and programs to test new measures and indicators that capture the full range of skills and credentials that learners attain; and ensuring interim performance indicators are responsive to learners and current program needs.
- Define information literacy and place greater emphasis throughout Title I and Title II on ensuring workers and adults gain digital literacy and information literacy skills that are critical in the workplace, in high demand by employers, and necessary to navigate everyday life. We know that the vast majority of jobs today require technical skills that allow people to create, share, and understand information in a digital

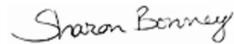
world. Digital literacy skills are those needed to use technology to find and communicate information. Information literacy skills go a step deeper, enabling workers to think critically and creatively about tasks and avoid mistakes that can cause harm to others in the workplace or fall prey to online scams that can shatter a business. Both types of skills are essential in today's world and in the workplace of tomorrow.

- Promote access to college and career navigators in the workforce system. These are skilled professionals who can advise learners on pathways to a better job or to pursue a certificate or degree program. College and career navigators are vital in helping learners explore college and work interests and identify the skills and education needed to meet work opportunities in their communities and beyond.

We ask that you include these additional provisions and the rest of the bipartisan S. 3075 in the Committee's WIOA reauthorization bill. All of these priorities are absolutely essential to the success of adult learners – so that they gain the skills to earn higher wages to participate in the economy and break cycles of generational poverty – and to ensuring employers can find workers who can bridge the skills gap mismatch that persists in many fields.

Thank you for your consideration and please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

Sincerely,



Sharon Bonney  
Chief Executive Officer  
Coalition on Adult Basic Education



June 10, 2024

Lee Saunders  
President  
Elisa McBride  
Secretary-Treasurer

**Vice Presidents**

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New Britain, CT  
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New York, NY

Mike Testramski  
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The Honorable Bernie Sanders, Chair  
The Honorable Bill Cassidy, Ranking Member  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy:

On behalf of the 1.4 million members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), I am writing with respect to the June 12, 2024, hearing entitled "The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Supporting Efforts to Meet the Needs of Youth, Workers, and Employers." AFSCME represents Employment Service (ES) workers across 17 states who play critical roles in the workforce system. I request that this letter be included in the hearing record.

As you consider the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), we urge the Committee to recognize the enormous contributions of the Employment Service (ES) to the broader workforce system. As you know, the Employment Service was established by the Wagner-Peyser Act, and it is a WIOA-required partner in the American Job Center (AJC) network that provides services to both job seekers and employers in need of qualified workers. Their role spanning the unemployment insurance (UI) system, re-employment services and labor exchange services is a critical component of the workforce system that must remain within this highly skilled ES workforce.

Central to Employment Service's success, the merit-based personnel system ensures ES workers are honest brokers providing high-quality service to job seekers. Merit-based ES staff are civil service state employees who match eligible applicants with federal programs and deliver benefits and services efficiently and effectively. Merit-based ES staff conduct the people's business according to transparent standards, free from political influence and without fear of arbitrary management action or retaliation. Merit staff are professional and resilient and can help safeguard decisions to grant or deny a federal benefit from political whims. Staff hired on a merit basis develop a broad knowledge base that benefits job seekers who rely upon their strong understanding of the workforce programs available.

Efforts to weaken, privatize or outsource the Employment Service's highly skilled, middle-class sustaining union jobs that the merit-based personnel system provides, are short-sighted, misguided and would lead to a waste of government funds and poorer service outcomes for job seekers and employers. For example, the reemployment services

**American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO**

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provided by state merit staff shorten a worker's period of unemployment by speeding their return to work and produces higher earnings gains, especially for women. A study of Nevada's Reemployment Eligibility and Assessment program revealed that requiring merit-based staff to conduct all unemployment insurance (UI) program roles resulted in workers being connected to jobs more quickly and lowered total benefit payouts, a cost savings for the government<sup>1</sup>.

Outsourcing of Employment Service functions during the pandemic provided a cautionary example of the perils of privatization. In response to the pandemic unemployment crisis, Congress enacted a temporary exemption from the longstanding requirement that UI adjudicators be merit staffed. First included in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act<sup>2</sup>, this temporary exemption resulted in many states contracting with private companies that hired low-paid, poorly trained (if trained at all), non-merit staff to administer traditional and new temporary UI programs, such as Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA).

In the experiences of AFSCME members, PUA suffered from a toxic combination of already fragmented ES and UI systems, poorly designed and outdated information technology, and non-merit staff who were untrained and did not understand their roles in a public system. This led to high turnover among contracted staff and supervisors, bias in the hiring of staff and in job and training referrals and placements, and poor service and long payment delays for claimants<sup>3</sup>. Further, incomplete and deficient work by outsourced staff increased the workload for state merit staff adjudicators who were forced to clean up vendor staff errors. Even well-meaning efforts to streamline or simplify the workforce system can lead to outsourcing of ES functions. This outsourcing leads to poorer service for jobless workers who need the ES' expertise to shorten their unemployment duration and to get their next job; and employers who rely upon ES referral for qualified workers. The Employment Service and the merit staff who make up this important piece of the workforce system should be maintained and strengthened in any WIOA reauthorization efforts undertaken by Congress.

Recent actions by the Department of Labor and House of Representatives have reaffirmed the bipartisan support for merit staffing. In November 2023, the Department of Labor published the "Wagner-Peyser Act Staffing" final rule which restored merit-staffing standards in the Employment Service<sup>4</sup>. Congressional actions and judicial decisions

<sup>1</sup> Impaq International Report: Impact of the Reemployment and Eligibility Assessment (REA) Initiative in Nevada), [ETAOP\\_2012\\_08\\_REA\\_Nevada\\_Follow\\_up\\_Report.pdf \(dola.nv.gov\)](https://www.dola.nv.gov/ETAOP_2012_08_REA_Nevada_Follow_up_Report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 21 Pub. L. 116-136, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/house-bill/748>

<sup>3</sup> AFSCME Member Reports. AFSCME members from the following states reported the continued contracting (after the expiration of the CARES Act UI privatization provision Sept. 6, 2021) with private companies to the detriment of state merit staff and claimants: Illinois, Maryland, Nevada, New Mexico, and Ohio. Members in Florida, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and New York reported uncertainty about whether their states continued to contract out after the expiration. Zelnick, Jennifer R. (May 2022) "Privatization, COVID-19, and the future of the ES/UI employment security model in the United States." Working Paper, Labor and Worklife Program at Harvard Law School.

<sup>4</sup> Federal Register: Wagner-Peyser Act Staffing. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/11/24/2023-25372/wagner-peyser-act-staffing>

support a state merit staff requirement in the ES. In April, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 6655, A Stronger Workforce for America Act, with overwhelming bipartisan support. H.R. 6655 maintained merit-staffing standards in the Employment Service, a critical piece of the House's bipartisan compromise. We strongly encourage the Senate to support the House-passed provisions for Title III of WIOA (Amendments to the Wagner-Peyser Act) and maintain merit-staffing standards in the Employment Service.

I also want to highlight some provisions of H.R. 6655 that are of concern, which we hope the Senate can improve upon, including inadequate authorization funding, lack of adequate input from labor and workers in the workforce system, and block granting. First and foremost, stagnant funding after the pandemic recovery is short-sighted. The workforce system needs sustained investments and the authorization levels proposed in H.R. 6655 are not enough to move our economy forward. Second, increasing labor representation on state and local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) would not only make the boards more worker focused, but increased labor representation also brings an important perspective to the boards about the in-demand skills needed for a local area or state. Third, we were concerned by provisions in H.R. 6655 that allow block granting of WIOA formula funds in smaller states. Block granting can lead to a lack of accountability, lower levels of coordination and service provided to workers most in need. Block granting also leads to consolidation and less funding when more funding is sorely needed. There are many ways that coordination within the workforce system could be improved, but block granting funding for an entire state is a step too far that could significantly harm the employment and training opportunities for workers and services for employers.

As the Senate considers WIOA reauthorization, we strongly encourage you to maintain the existing merit-based personnel system that serves as a vital foundation of the Employment Service. We also encourage you to increase funding levels and labor participation in the workforce system and increase workers' voice overall. As the union representing Employment Service workers across the country, we welcome the opportunity to provide any further information to the committee about our members' experiences and insights.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our views on these important topics.

Sincerely,



Edwin S. Jayne  
Director of Federal Government Affairs

ESJ/LM:eli



Jeff Landry  
Governor

State of Louisiana  
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
P.O. BOX 94004  
BATON ROUGE

June 10, 2024

Senator Bill Cassidy  
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC

Dear Senator Cassidy,

The United States is currently facing a significant workforce crisis, a challenge that demands immediate attention. Congress plays a pivotal role in addressing this issue by enacting federal legislation that empowers states like Louisiana, among others, to support all of our citizens in securing employment opportunities, taking them from dependence to independence.

The reality is this: too many of our citizens are sidelined from the workforce, while employers struggle to fill vacant positions. Louisiana, for instance, currently faces an alarming number of 120,000 open jobs as of March 2024, a situation mirrored in many of our 50 states. It is imperative that Louisiana, and all states, have the capacity to reform our workforce systems to address the needs of approximately 91,000 citizens who are currently unemployed.

As Governor, I am fully committed to leading workforce reform efforts in Louisiana. In March, Louisiana took a significant step forward by establishing the Louisiana Workforce and Social Services Reform Task Force. In addition to this, our State Legislature has passed SCR11, which urges Congress to enact changes to our federally funded workforce development services. While these initiatives are crucial for Louisiana's progress, this change needs federal action.

Congress must introduce a One-Door option within the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), granting states the flexibility to integrate their safety net and workforce systems seamlessly.

As leaders entrusted with the welfare of our respective states, we possess unique insights into the challenges faced by our constituents. I urge you to champion a solution that streamlines program coordination, enabling all citizens to access employment opportunities and empowering states like Louisiana to fulfill their potential.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeff Landry".

Jeff Landry  
Governor

Dear Leader Schumer, Leader McConnell, Speaker Johnson, and Leader Jeffries:

States are facing a work crisis, and more Americans than ever are on the sidelines. There are 8.9 million open jobs in this country, and the workforce participation rate has not fully recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many states have not fully rebounded. By the end of 2023, there were 41 million Americans relying on food stamps and nearly 90 million Americans relying on Medicaid. Many citizens remain on the sidelines even as our employers cannot find workers to fill jobs. Our top priority must be to solve our workforce crisis.

There is a clear path forward. Congress must change federal law and create a One-Door State Option in federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), as included in the bipartisan H.R. 6655 and introduced by Representative Burgess Owens (UT) and Senator Mitt Romney (UT) in the One Door to Work Act (H.R. 6274 and S. 3825). This would give our states the flexibility to integrate our safety net and workforce systems and move more citizens out of poverty and into work.

Why are the safety net and workforce systems separate? WIOA currently restricts the consolidation of federally funded employment and job training services with other federally funded safety net services. The majority of WIOA funding for youth, adults, and dislocated workers bypasses the state and is sent directly to the federally designated local workforce development boards, also called "one stop centers." This creates a disconnect between our workforce system and the state offices that operate safety net programs like Medicaid, food stamps, and TANF. Because of this, there is an administrative estrangement between state-run safety net programs and the local workforce services that serve the same beneficiaries.

This prevents our states from responding to the millions of our citizens out of the workforce. A September 2023 Louisiana audit of the WIOA program revealed that WIOA is now serving fewer eligible individuals, participants are making less money upon completion, and are not working in the career they are training for. Citizens deserve better outcomes.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 prohibits the Secretary of Labor from waiving requirements related to the funding to local areas.<sup>14</sup> However, Utah is the exception. For nearly 30 years, Utah has been allowed to operate with a fully integrated federal and state system for both human and workforce services.<sup>15</sup> Why? Because under both WIOA and its predecessor law WIA, federal lawmakers included a grandfathering provision that permits states to have a single state local area designation only if they already had one prior to passage of the acts, which Utah did.<sup>16</sup> Any state currently not operating under a single state local area designation cannot become one under current federal law.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, if federal law permitted states to opt into single-state designation, our states would be able to integrate our safety net and workforce systems and produce better outcomes for our citizens. When compared to every other state, Utah was able to limit its job loss and show the quickest job recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Utah leads all other states on the percentage of jobs recovered that were lost at the onset of the pandemic in February 2020. For every one job lost, Utah has gained two. Meanwhile, fifteen states still have not recovered their lost jobs.

The reality is that every state should have the flexibility to design an integrated workforce and safety net model that enables people to succeed. Every hour a safety-net recipient spends finding their way through the system is an hour they can't spend working their way into opportunity. From an administrative point of view, streamlining reduces redundancies, conflicts, and costs, ultimately saving both federal and state taxpayers' funds.

At a personal level, a robust workforce is not only integral to a thriving state economy, but also to its social fabric. When a person is unemployed for longer than six months, it is associated with decreased well-being, even measurably affecting mortality, reducing life expectancy by as much as a year and a half. When parents who were formerly dependent on welfare find employment, we see increased physical health as well as emotional and psychological wellbeing. There are even better health and behavioral outcomes for their children.

Several state legislatures have taken every available step to coordinate eligibility systems of all programs. This includes independent efficiency audits of all the programs to find common ground for consolidation and streamlining.

- Texas created a taskforce to develop a plan to consolidate workforce development and human service programs.<sup>10</sup> Texas also passed a resolution calling on Congress to amend federal law to allow states to provide for the consolidation of federally funded workforce development services with federally funded social safety net services.<sup>10</sup>
- Louisiana passed a resolution requiring an audit of coordination between their SNAP, WIOA, TANF, and CCAP programs.<sup>11</sup>
- North Carolina passed legislation directing the Secretary of the Department of Commerce to develop a plan to create a seamless, statewide, comprehensive workforce development program.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these good and necessary first steps by state leaders, federal law must change for real improvement. If we want better outcomes and better program experiences, federal law must be changed to allow states to reform their workforce and safety net systems.

The states are uniquely positioned to best understand the needs of our state citizens, and WIOA flexibility represents a needed tool to meet those needs. While WIOA has not delivered on its aims of adequately helping America's workforce, this flexibility represents a tool to better empower states to provide better outcomes for their citizens.

We urge you to work in a bipartisan manner to pass a WIOA Reauthorization with a One Door state option that reforms crucial program coordination to allow all our citizens to find work and lives of meaning.

Signed,

Greg Sindelar, CEO  
[Texas Public Policy Foundation, TX](#)

Randy Hicks, President & CEO  
[Georgia Center for Opportunity, GA](#)

Daniel Erspamer, CEO  
[Pelican Institute for Public Policy, LA](#)

Rachel Barkley, Executive Director  
[Alliance for Opportunity](#)  
[Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, LA](#)

Adam Knapp, CEO  
[Committee of 100 for Economic Development, LA](#)

Barry Erwin, President & CEO  
[Council for A Better Louisiana, LA](#)

Carson DeLarue, Director of Governmental Relations  
[Associated Builders & Contractors of Louisiana, LA](#)

Justin Yancy, President  
[Texas Business Leadership Council, TX](#)

Stephanie Matthews, Executive Director  
[Texas Association of Business and Chambers of Commerce Foundation, TX](#)

Derek Monson, Chief Growth Officer  
[Sutherland Institute, UT](#)

Robert C. Gross, Founding Executive Director  
[Former Utah Dept of Workforce Services Robert C. Gross Associates, UT](#)

Kevin D. Roberts, PhD, President  
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Mason M. Bishop, Nonresident Fellow  
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Brent Orrell, Senior Fellow  
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Les Ford, Adjunct Fellow, Center for Opportunity and Social Mobility  
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Scott Winship, Director, Center on Opportunity and Social Mobility  
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Akash Chougule, Vice President of Government Affairs  
**Americans for Prosperity**

Tony Woodlief, Senior Executive Vice President and Senior Fellow, Center for Practical Federalism  
**State Policy Network**

Steven Taylor, Founder and Principal  
**ED2WORK**

Eli Lehrer, President  
**R Street Institute**

Brandon Arnold, Executive Vice President  
**National Taxpayers Union**

Jeff Wasden, President & CEO  
**State Business Executives**

Gonzalo Schwarz, President & CEO  
**Archbridge Institute**

Bob Eitel, President and Co-Founder  
**Defense of Freedom Institute for Policy Studies**

Will Swaim, President  
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Tamra Ryan, CEO  
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Lindsay Killen, Vice President for National Strategy  
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[Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, VA](#)

Jessi Troyan, PhD, Director of Policy and Research  
[Cardinal Institute for West Virginia Policy, WV](#)

[1] B. A. Barlow, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 1–10, 1948.

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[4] M. A. B. B. Barlow, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 1–10, 1948.

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[7] M. A. B. B. Barlow, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 1–10, 1948.

[8] M. A. B. B. Barlow, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 1–10, 1948.

[9] M. A. B. B. Barlow, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 1–10, 1948.

[10] M. A. B. B. Barlow, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 1–10, 1948.



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August 15, 2023

The Honorable Ted Budd  
304 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC

Dear Senator Budd,

On behalf of the NC Chamber, I am writing to you today in support of the Promoting Employment and Lifelong Learning (PELL) Act, which would expand Pell Grant eligibility to provide more opportunity for students to gain skills and enter the workforce in high-demand industries.

Something I hear from our 700+ member companies every day is that they are struggling to find qualified candidates. Adapting the existing Pell Grant will give more students the opportunity to obtain valuable higher education credentials that include high-quality, short-term programs. Additionally, it would provide much-needed flexibility for those who wish to pursue those programs.

The NC Chamber supports this piece of legislation which promotes workforce development in education and would benefit both the employer and job seeker. I, on behalf of North Carolina's business community, thank you for your time and consideration and hope to see this important piece of legislation advance through the legislative process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary J. Salamido". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "G" and "S".

Gary J. Salamido  
President and CEO

## QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSE BY DAVID BRADLEY TO QUESTIONS OF SENATOR LUJÁN AND SENATOR HASSAN

SENATOR LUJÁN

*Question 1.* Based on your extensive knowledge of WIOA, could efforts to increase flexibility for program administration allow WIOA programming to better serve Native communities?

Answer 1. Yes. In recognition of the need to reduce costs and time for administering workforce development programs for federally recognized tribes and tribal organizations, Congress enacted P.L. 102-477 (often referred to as “477”) in 1992. In brief, P.L. 102-477 allows federally recognized tribes to submit “477 Plans” to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) that allow for the consolidation of multiple Federal funding streams and reporting requirements, which allows for more funding to be spent on support for job placements and case management activities. The law, which has been amended twice since its enactment, has resulted in significant, but incomplete consolidation. As of 2024, there are 78 Plans approved across 38 individual Federal programs, which represent 298 federally recognized tribes. While this consolidation has resulted in cost savings through consolidated administration, the 298 tribes with 477 plans currently represent just over half of the 574 federally recognized tribes. Additional efforts to incentivize more tribes to participate in 477 plans would provide greater flexibility and reduced administrative costs, thus allowing more individuals to participate in employment and training programs.

*Question 2.* In your understanding, does the funding allocated to WIOA Section 166 adequately meet the need for employment and training services currently experienced by Native communities?

Answer 2. Funding for programs authorized under Section 166 of WIOA and its corresponding predecessor programs under previous versions of WIOA—the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) and the Workforce Innovation Act (WIA)—has declined significantly in the past several decades. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, programs authorized under Section 166 of WIOA received \$60 million. Compared to funding for similar programs under JTPA in its first year (1984), this is a small drop of \$2.2 million in nominal terms (-3.6 percent) but a steep decline of \$127.6 million in inflation-adjusted terms (-68.0 percent). If WIOA programs for Native Americans were funded at the same level (inflation-adjusted) in 1984, Section 166 would now be funded at \$188 million, rather than the current \$60 million. Given the relatively higher rates of unemployment and poverty among Native Americans, this significant decline in funding makes it more difficult to provide adequate employment and training services to Native communities.

SENATOR HASSAN

*Question 1.* I’ve heard from some stakeholders who say WIOA reporting requirements are overly burdensome. State and local leaders devote significant resources to writing lengthy plans which—in some cases—end up acting as more of a compliance exercise than a strategic, project management tool. I’ve also heard that community partners are sometimes dissuaded from becoming eligible training providers due to WIOA’s performance reporting requirements. This can unintentionally stifle innovation and the diversification of providers.

How do we strike the right balance between performance accountability and non-burdensome reporting requirements? Are the current performance indicators the right ones? If not, what should be added or taken away?

Answer 1. In enacting WIOA in 2014, Congress adopted a set of 6 common performance metrics that would apply across all titles of WIOA. This was an effort to streamline data collection and reporting and to allow for easier comparison of performance across all WIOA programs. While streamlining performance indicators was a step in the right direction, there are additional measures that Congress could take to reduce the administrative burdens associated with collecting and reporting data. For example, a designated state agency should be required to assist training providers by performing all “back end” data operations, such as matching program participants with wage records. In addition, automatic eligibility for certain providers, such as community colleges, would reduce barriers to entry for some training providers. Current WIOA performance indicators center on outcomes that occur after exiting a WIOA program. While these indicators provide important information about employment placements, credential attainment, and wage gains, this may lead to a focus on short-term results for an outcome to count. Adding an indicator

that captures career progression could encourage system providers to focus on career pathways and other strategies that are effective over a period beyond just placement in employment.

*Question 2.* Students in rural communities often struggle to find post-secondary educational opportunities that align with the needs of businesses in their communities. This results in many young people leaving their communities or not pursuing post-secondary education.

What improvements should we make to WIOA so that rural communities can develop and sustain strong workforce development systems?

Answer 2. Rural communities often face challenges unique from urban or suburban settings, such as a lack of training providers, unreliable internet service, a lack of public transportation, and limited options for career advancement. Starting in 2019, DOL is currently funding its sixth round of grants under the Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) Initiative, which is designed to provide grants to help address persistent economic challenges through aligning community-led economic and workforce development strategies and activities. Building on the lessons learned and best practices from WORC grantees, Congress could codify the WORC Initiative in WIOA (currently it is authorized under the demonstration authority in WIOA and thus not directly in statute). Codifying the WORC Initiative would allow Congress to set program parameters and priorities, authorize funding levels, and create a more stable program rather than relying on demonstration authority.

*Question 3.* Competency-based assessments can help individuals bypass unnecessary course or training requirements if they're able to demonstrate that they already have the desired knowledge for a given role or credential.

How can we improve and expand the use of competency-based assessments in the workforce system?

Answer 3. Competency-based assessments have a critical role in the larger ecosystem of skills-based employment practices, which focuses on documenting and translating skills and competencies, regardless of where they were obtained, into signals of qualification in the labor market. Congress could encourage the expansion of competency-based assessments by supporting the development and implementation of a common skills language used by employers, learners, jobseekers, and education providers. This also includes the development and deployment of digital credential wallets that are recognized and accepted across education systems, workforce systems, and employers. These wallets would serve as repositories of easily shareable and verifiable digital records of people's work and learning histories and would facilitate seamless transitions across learning and employment opportunities. Federal support for efforts to develop and scale digital credentials wallets could include funding pilots that use innovative technologies such as blockchain to ensure portability and verification, convening key stakeholders, and supporting research and development.

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RESPONSE BY DR. LISA BLY-JONES TO QUESTIONS OF SENATOR LUJÁN, SENATOR HASSAN AND SENATOR SMITH

SENATOR LUJÁN

*Question 1.* Thanks to the passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act, we've seen an investment of Federal dollars across the country that will allow us to build infrastructure that meets the needs of the 21st century. In addition to Federal dollars though, we need a skilled workforce that is ready to begin construction on these infrastructure projects.

What can we do here at the Federal level to ensure WIOA programs are nimble enough to meet the demand of sectors such as broadband or clean energy that require skilled workers?

Answer 1. Although WIOA requires states and local workforce boards to support industry partnerships, WIOA does not supply targeted funding. To ensure WIOA programs are nimble enough to meet the demand of sectors such as broadband or clean energy, **WIOA reauthorization should include dedicated funding to establish and maintain industry and sector partnerships.** With WIOA there is a lot of emphasis on individuals, but there is also a need for stronger ties to employers that provide access to career pathways for workers with progressive levels of education, training, supportive services and credentials throughout an individual's career.

Each local community has a local economy and employers in those communities are best able to identify emerging industry trends, recommend training needs based on the skills required for the occupations that exist. It's critical to involve employers on the front end and establish industry or sector partnerships that bring together local businesses, and other stakeholders, to develop workforce strategies and provide training that supports area demand. This is especially valuable for small and medium-sized businesses.

A reauthorization of WIOA should include language similar to the **Digital Skills for Today's Workforce Act** which would establish a formula grant program for states to develop digital skills training programs as well as provide funding to support digital equity among individuals who face barriers to employment and who have been historically underrepresented. **Digital Skills Building** is necessary in today's labor market to keep up with technological advancements. Technology is increasingly prevalent at all career levels and across industries. According to a NSC report, "Recent research shows that 92 percent of jobs require digital skills and that number is expected to increase. At the same time, only two-thirds of workers have the foundational digital skills necessary to enter and thrive in today's jobs." Workers and businesses require digital skills support especially related to upskilling opportunities for workers who are on the job and reskilling opportunities for those who have lost jobs.

SENATOR HASSAN

*Question 1.* I've heard from some stakeholders who say WIOA reporting requirements are overly burdensome. State and local leaders devote significant resources to writing lengthy plans which—in some cases—end up acting as more of a compliance exercise than a strategic, project management tool. I've also heard that community partners are sometimes dissuaded from becoming eligible training providers due to WIOA's performance reporting requirements. This can unintentionally stifle innovation and the diversification of providers.

How do we strike the right balance between performance accountability and non-burdensome reporting requirements? Are the current performance indicators the right ones? If not, what should be added or taken away?

Answer 1. Striking the right balance between performance accountability and nonburdensome reporting requirements are accurately described as a challenge and concern.

With funding not keeping pace with inflation and wage increases, offices responsible for reporting requirements are short-staffed and stretched thin, which creates a burden when there is insufficient staffing to support the work.

**The current performance indicators are the right ones, but they do not go far enough** to measure if workforce programs are leading to long-term economic gains for workers and businesses. The current measures reflect short-term outcomes and do not adequately capture how people progress from entry-level jobs, experience wage and skill advancement with an employer, and continue their education to progress along a quality career pathway.

WIOA performance indicators should be expanded to include measures on quality credential attainment, employment and wage outcomes for at least 2-years after program completion, occupation specific job placement and measures on job quality, such as hourly wages and hours worked.

**WIOA should also disaggregate all training performance outcomes** by race, ethnicity, gender, and other important demographic or socioeconomic factors like English language proficiency, income, and geography, in order to effectively evaluate progress toward equitable outcomes and the efficacy of the public workforce system for all workers, including workers of color who are the majority of those accessing these services.

Access to **workforce data enhances our ability to advocate for workforce equity**. By receiving comprehensive data on the state's workforce, we can better identify areas of improvement, advocate for policies that benefit all residents and measure programmatic progress.

SENATOR SMITH

*Question 1.* I frequently hear from people who are eager to go into high-quality, good-paying careers, but struggle to do so. These are people who want to work hard, contribute to their communities and support their families, but they face some tremendous barriers. It's my belief that some of the key things that help people get and keep jobs are transportation, training and childcare. Dr. Bly-Jones, some argue

that providing supportive services through WIOA is not a good use of funds or that we should have stricter rules about how much should go toward training and limit what we can spend on supportive services. What do you think of that perspective, and what challenges have you encountered when facilitating access to supportive services?

Answer 1. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, P.L. 113–128) programs appear to be reaching the at-risk populations the workforce system is intended to serve. Some customers, however, have greater barriers than others, and it is not clear that all customers get the services they need to succeed. **WIOA programs do not provide sufficient supportive services** to help customers overcome systemic barriers that disproportionately impact women, people of color, people with disabilities, and other groups.

In 2021, the Chicago Jobs Council released *Supportive Services: Lessons Learned from the Field* which outlines the importance of expanding and enhancing supportive services within workforce development programs to address systemic barriers to employment, particularly for groups that have been marginalized. This includes childcare, housing, and transportation, which are essential for securing and maintaining employment as well as mental health services which have become increasingly important following the pandemic.

In that report, contributors identified that “six months or a year is not enough time for people who have experienced trauma, such as mental illness, homelessness, or incarceration, to seamlessly transition back into the workforce” and that “losing supportive services during the gap of time between when a client becomes employed and gets their first paycheck can make it hard for participants to meet their own needs.”<sup>1</sup> Congress can ensure that there are sufficient resources to bolster supportive services and have those services extend past probationary employment periods in order to help give participants more time to adjust and settle into jobs. **Language in the BUILDS Act could serve as a model** for these efforts as the legislative text includes provisions to provide support to workers in the pre-employment stage and for as much as a year into a job.

For people facing entrenched barriers to employment, particularly women and people of color, the process of finding a good-paying job along a career pathway can be especially challenging. These systemic and structural barriers can manifest as limited affordable childcare options, lack of transportation access, inadequate or unaffordable healthcare, and housing instability resulting from public disinvestment in those services.

*Question 2.* We have made record investments in critical sectors like manufacturing and clean energy through the Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Nationwide, we’ve already seen the creation of 800,000 new manufacturing jobs and 270,000 clean energy jobs since the beginning of the Biden administration, including 1,100 clean energy jobs in Minnesota. We will need to continue to grow our workforce. Dr. Bly-Jones, how can we ensure that as we do so, all workers will have the opportunity to benefit?

Answer 2. **The ideal model for comprehensive inclusive strategies is local Sector Partnerships and Pathways.** The workforce system is a dual-customer system, serving the needs of both jobseekers and businesses. State and local workforce boards work directly with businesses and industries to understand and address their workforce needs and support economic development. In that role, both state and local boards have an opportunity to collaborate with businesses to increase the diversity of their workforce and increase the availability of quality jobs and the supports workers need to succeed in them. **WIOA reauthorization should include dedicated funding to establish and maintain industry and sector partnerships.**

Many quality jobs with family sustaining wages require a postsecondary degree or credential. The Chicago Jobs Council (CJC) has been working with coalition partners and stakeholders to build a robust clean energy workforce in Illinois by fostering collaborations across the labor, education, and industry sectors.

CJC was actively involved in the passage of the Illinois Climate Equity Jobs Act (CEJA), which could be a national model for clean energy and infrastructure jobs. CEJA prioritizes investments, job training, and business opportunities in communities disproportionately impacted by pollution and climate change. It funds training programs to prepare workers, including formerly incarcerated individuals, for clean

<sup>1</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63a0838721aff66b22dd2598/t/63a0987639ba57582d347355/1671469174913/Supportive-Services-Summary-Report-Sept-2021-FINAL.pdf>.

energy jobs. CEJA establishes programs to assist both startup contractors in the solar industry as well as contractors looking to grow and become prime contractors for renewable energy projects. CEJA aims to reach 100 percent renewable energy by 2050, phasing out fossil fuel plants by 2045. Requires 40 percent renewable energy by 2030 and 50 percent by 2040—a major increase in clean energy deployment. Additionally, the act supports workers, creates new community grants, and promotes utility accountability and ethics reform. Overall, it establishes Illinois as a national leader in equitable climate policy by centering disadvantaged communities, driving major emissions reductions, and holding utilities accountable—all without raising taxes.

Established sector partnerships provide real-time conversations and innovation to pivot where needed based on emerging needs and keeping pace with technological advances. Localized collaboration supports employers in their recruitment and retention efforts to create a pipeline and build a diverse workforce within their industry. Long-standing relationships with employers happens at the local level. **WIOA reauthorization should include dedicated funding to establish and maintain industry and sector partnerships.**

In 2020, CJC released a report entitled Building Pathways to Clean Energy Jobs in Illinois, which highlights the importance of investing in the future clean energy workforce as part of public investments in clean energy infrastructure. The report is informed by interviews with clean energy employers, workforce development practitioners, policy experts, and uses publicly available labor market and job posting information to illustrate how the state can effectively invest in workforce development so that people marginalized by racism, sexism, and environmental injustice can directly access [clean energy] jobs, advance within green industries, and benefit from public investments in clean energy.<sup>2</sup>

Through collaboration and partnership with those closest to the issues. The Chicago Jobs Council (CJC) is a relentless advocate for economic equity and inclusion, working tirelessly to empower individuals from all walks of life to achieve financial stability and self-sufficiency.

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RESPONSE BY MATTHEW DICKERSON TO QUESTIONS OF SENATOR HASSAN

SENATOR HASSAN

*Question 1.* Students in rural communities often struggle to find post-secondary educational opportunities that align with the needs of businesses in their communities. This results in many young people leaving their communities or not pursuing post-secondary education.

What improvements should we make to WIOA so that rural communities can develop and sustain strong workforce development systems?

**Answer 1. Summary:** It is no secret that rural communities are grappling with substantial challenges in establishing effective workforce development systems, primarily due to factors such as brain drain, sparse employer distribution over vast geographic areas, under-resourced populations, and limited access to crucial skills training and employment opportunities. These obstacles are intensified by diminishing Federal support, which constrains the ability of local workforce boards to afford tuition and vital supportive services necessary for fostering workforce talent in economically disadvantaged regions. This situation forces many residents to migrate to urban areas in search of improved prospects, subsequently depriving rural areas of essential services like healthcare, affordable housing, and skills development facilities.

The shortfall in funding complicates the implementation of customized skills training programs that could benefit both local employers and their prospective employees. Although the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) provides personalized guidance and case management important for participant success, the scarcity of supportive services in rural locales presents considerable challenges. Additionally, the establishment of industry and community partnerships and access to American Job Centers (AJCs) are hindered by the limited organizational presence and logistical constraints such as inadequate public transportation, high costs, or insufficient internet access for virtual services.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63a0838721aff66b22dd2598/t/63a0986c2f41ed099d83a59c/1671469164785/Building-Pathways-to-Clean-Energy-Jobs-in-Illinois-March-2021.pdf>.

A pressing need exists to augment WIOA funding tailored to rural local workforce development areas to rectify these issues and bolster support for rural districts. This increase in financial support would alleviate some of the economic pressures these areas face, enabling the realization of robust workforce development systems that empower marginalized individuals and contribute to rural communities' economic growth and sustainability. Revising transportation funding under WIOA and addressing employment within family run businesses are critical steps. Moreover, adapting the WIOA to enhance post-secondary education alignment with local business needs, expand workforce training for better economic mobility, modify performance metrics for more adaptable training provision, and incorporate Economic Development as a mandated resource-sharing partner can significantly aid these efforts.

**Narrative:** Rural communities continue to experience challenges in their efforts to provide remote services and programs to both individual and employer customers. The "brain-drain" which widens prime-age employment gaps, and creates an unfair competition with large corporations in big cities for top talent continues to exist. Additionally, rural workforce systems operate differently from their urban and suburban counterparts, facing unique challenges such as having fewer employers spread across a larger geographic area and historically under-resourced populations when compared to their urban counterparts.

In many instances, students in rural, poor areas lacking adequate access to necessary skills training; particularly skills training that may result in a full-time, unsubsidized employment opportunity in a demand occupation in a targeted industry. Likewise, employers encounter difficulties in sourcing affordable skills training that meets their workforce integration needs. From the viewpoint of a rural, local workforce board covering 6,500 square miles, and with a single community college operating three rural campuses, hosting economically viable training classes typically necessitates a minimum class size of 10 or more. Given the specialized training needs of businesses, consortia of employers are impractical.

A constant reduction in Federal funding has left local workforce boards unable to cover the demand for tuition costs and essential supportive services that are critical for significantly improving the workforce talent in rural, economically disadvantaged areas. As a result, both youth and adults are forced to relocate to larger urban centers in pursuit of education, skills training, and job prospects. This forced migration leaves those who remain, feeling trapped and abandoned; often forced into accepting low-wage jobs that fail to provide self-sufficient wages and perpetuates generational poverty in rural areas. Additionally, this migration of people seeking better opportunities elsewhere often results in limited access to healthcare, diminished affordable housing options, and restricted opportunities for skills development in rural American communities.

Many times, local employers in rural communities can benefit from customized skills training which is a viable employer-based training service available under WIOA, to train prospective trainees prior to employment placement. However, the magnitude of training needs (i.e., classroom, employer-based) far exceeds the availability of funding. In addition, small businesses lack the employer match necessary to implement the Customized Training Agreement.

A critical component of WIOA is the personalized guidance provided by the case management staff which is tailored to the specific needs and goals of each individual participant. This individualized approach fosters a deeper connection between the case manager and the participant, enhancing participant engagement and motivation to achieve successful program outcomes. Regular check-ins and progress assessments by case managers ensure that participants stay on track toward the achievement of their education and employment goals as jointly created and agreed upon by the individual and his/her case manager and made a part of the individual's program plan (IEP). This accountability fosters a sense of responsibility and ownership over their professional development, ultimately strengthening their human capital through consistent growth and improvement. While urban and suburban areas have many supportive service options available, rural areas do not, making it more expensive and cumbersome to provide support.

Developing and maintaining industry and community partnerships are very important to the workforce system. However, finding partners in rural areas is challenging because many organizations do not exist in these communities, and those that do face similar challenges and frustrations as the AJCs.

Accessing rural AJCs becomes equally challenging for individuals when public transportation is unavailable and they cannot afford private transport. Even when transportation is accessible, it often proves unreliable for reaching training or job opportunities located miles away from their residences. Additionally, while virtual

services are an alternative, individuals face significant hurdles in areas where internet access is minimal, costs are prohibitive, or non-existent in rural communities.

Without resources to maintain the level of services needed to support these marginalized individuals, rural areas will continue to suffer.

**Strategy: What improvements should we make to WIOA so that rural communities can develop and sustain strong workforce development systems?**

**Improving the WIOA to better support rural communities involves several key strategies:**

**1. Increase WIOA Funding to Rural Local Workforce Development Areas:** Despite stagnant or reduced funding under WIOA, rural local areas are grappling with rising operational costs, stringent regulations, and set-asides earmarked for special programs; many of which ultimately send its program participant to the American Job Centers for additional services. Consequently, rural local areas struggle to meet the hiring demands of employers seeking candidates for high-demand, high-wage occupations who can be trained through employer-based programs. Additional workforce development funding would support expanded efforts by employers to provide immediate employer-based training and classroom training that can help ensure sustainable wage earnings for individuals seeking job training and placement assistance. Furthermore, resources for offering tuition and supportive services to job seekers with certain barriers have been so inadequate that local boards in rural areas can no longer keep up with demand.

- Because of rising operational costs, it would be beneficial if the WIOA funding would include an additional allotment to directly support the infrastructure costs associated with operating career centers. It is critical, now, more than ever to maintain AJCs in rural communities. Because of the barriers that exist for the population that we serve, we do not want transportation to ever be a concern, or barrier. While there are some available options to reach individuals virtually, it is critical that we continue to provide intensive case management and career development services, in-person to individuals who have been determined to be the “hardest to serve” populations in need of public assistance, as these services can prove to be the lifeline needed for many people to experience success.

**2. Formula Funding Adjustments:** Modify the formula for distributing funds to account for the unique challenges and lower population densities of rural areas. This could involve allocating a minimum percentage of funds specifically designated for rural workforce development efforts. At the very least, the threshold utilized to determine unemployment and excessive underemployment should vary annually to correspond with the national unemployment rate, workforce participation rate, or the current dislocated worker formulary for all funds which equitably allocates funds to all parishes/counties.

- Over the past three funding cycles most states experienced substantial decreases to their WIOA formula funding in each of the Title I programs funded under WIOA while the Federal allocations have remained constant. The allocation must depend on the hold-harmless factors to avoid even deeper cuts to states. A review of the allocation formula to ensure that certain data variables do not have devastating effects leading to these outcomes. Possible consideration can be to use the **Workforce Participation Rates** over the Unemployment Rates, giving a more accurate depiction of eligible adults who are not engaged in the workforce. The formula should provide greater sources of funds to rural area with large populations of individuals who are not part of the state’s current workforce, and therefore not included in the Workforce Participation Rate of the state.

**3. Flexibility in Fund Usage:** Provide greater flexibility in how funds can be used in rural areas. This includes allowing funds to support innovative approaches, such as mobile training units, distance learning technologies, or partnerships with local industries, which may be more effective in rural settings. Expand the amount allowable for local incumbent worker training which is currently set at 20 percent of adult and dislocated worker allocations.

- Combine Adult and Dislocated Worker funds into a single funding category to allow greater flexibility.

- Currently, the transfer of funds can be cumbersome and does not provide local areas with the level of flexibility and nimbleness needed to respond quickly to local demand shifts.
- Dislocated Workers, under a combined funding concept, can become a “priority population” like others under current law.

4. **Capacity Building:** Allocate resources for technical assistance and capacity building tailored to rural workforce development boards to mitigate unique challenges around skills training access and funding. This can help them effectively utilize funds, implement programs, and navigate regulatory requirements.

- Raise the allowable 20 percent percentage from Adult/Dislocated Worker program funding a local area can expend on incumbent worker training. These opportunities would help meet the demand of local employers’ unique skill upgrade needs; thereby opening new job opportunities for entry level positions. Employers would then be able to provide upward movement for established employees increasing retention rates and experience modifiers.
- Rural areas often have difficulties finding partners (foundations, chambers of commerce or other economic development agencies) when many of the organizations do not exist in rural communities; and when they do, these organizations share the same challenges and frustrations AJCs experience.

5. **Targeted Support for Priority Industries:** Focus funding on priority industries for rural areas, such as agriculture, renewable energy, healthcare, and tourism. This ensures that workforce development efforts are aligned with local economic opportunities and demand.

6. **Flexible Training Delivery Models:** Promote flexibility in training delivery models to accommodate the dispersed populations and geographic challenges of rural areas. This may include online learning options, mobile training units, or partnerships with local community colleges and businesses.

- Rural communities often have unique economic and demographic characteristics that may not fit well with a standardized One-Stop Operator requirement. Removing this requirement allows communities to tailor their workforce development strategies to better meet local needs and leverage local resources.
- Removing the One-Stop Operator requirement can reduce financial burdens and redirect resources to more effectively support workforce development initiatives that directly benefit employers and job seekers.
- Overall, removing the One-Stop Operator requirement for rural communities aims to promote flexibility, reduce barriers to effective service delivery, and empower local stakeholders to design and implement workforce development strategies that are responsive to their unique challenges and opportunities.

7. **Integration of Wagner Peysner Services:** Implementing the “one door” strategy for integrating service delivery of both WIOA Title 1 and Title III at AJCs allowing local staff to provide employment services promises to enhance operational effectiveness, improve service delivery, optimize resources, and ultimately benefit both the limited staff at remote facilities and enhance outcomes for job seekers and employers alike.

- **Cost-Effectiveness:** Utilizing local staff can be more cost-effective than deploying personnel from distant locations. It minimizes travel expenses and allows resources to be allocated more efficiently toward direct service delivery.
- **Accessibility and Convenience:** By having services delivered locally, job seekers can access assistance more conveniently. This reduces barriers such as transportation costs and time constraints, making it easier for individuals to seek and maintain employment.

By implementing these improvements, WIOA can better support rural communities in developing and sustaining strong workforce systems that are responsive to local needs and conducive to long-term economic growth.

RESPONSE BY MONTY SULLIVAN TO QUESTIONS OF SENATOR HASSAN, SENATOR SMITH, AND SENATOR BUDD

SENATOR HASSAN

*Question 1.* I've heard from some stakeholders who say WIOA reporting requirements are overly burdensome. State and local leaders devote significant resources to writing lengthy plans which—in some cases—end up acting as more of a compliance exercise than a strategic, project management tool. I've also heard that community partners are sometimes dissuaded from becoming eligible training providers due to WIOA's performance reporting requirements. This can unintentionally stifle innovation and the diversification of providers. How do we strike the right balance between performance accountability and nonburdensome reporting requirements? Are the current performance indicators the right ones? If not, what should be added or taken away?

Answer 1. Accountability for Federal job training funds under WIOA is critical to ensuring that individuals are receiving the training that is most effective to obtain and maintain employment. The major indicators of performance that are essential to assess most job training programs are employment status post-training and earnings. Within the totality of the WIOA system, however, an indicator that assesses measurable skills gains is also important, especially when considering how adult education fits into the WIOA system.

*Question 2.* Students in rural communities often struggle to find post-secondary educational opportunities that align with the needs of businesses in their communities. This results in many young people leaving their communities or not pursuing post-secondary education. What improvements should we make to WIOA so that rural communities can develop and sustain strong workforce development systems?

Answer 2. Fostering stronger connections between educational institutions, such as community colleges, and businesses is critical. In Louisiana, the individual campus leaders within the Louisiana Community and Technical College System work closely with businesses in their local communities to understand the skills and knowledge businesses are seeking in potential employees. This guides campus leaders and our system to streamline educational opportunities and industry-specific skills and knowledge. WIOA should further encourage collaboration between businesses and community colleges.

SENATOR SMITH

*Question 1.* It's important to me that we prepare job seekers for high-quality, good-paying careers. However, these usually require a firm grasp of the English language, digital literacy and numeracy. In Minnesota and around the country, adult basic education programs are instructing people from a variety of backgrounds in these critical skills. What can Congress do to improve the delivery of these services, reduce the challenges that providers may face and better respond to the needs of adult learners?

Answer 1. As I said in my testimony, adult education programs are essential to ensuring that our Nation's workforce can take advantage of job training opportunities as well as succeed in obtaining and retaining employment. Ensuring that we fund the Federal Adult Education State Grant program is critical to reaching all of the people who need adult education services to improve and strengthen their employability. Adult education providers in Louisiana are adept at delivering these services and are limited primarily by a lack of funding.

SENATOR BUDD

*Question 1.* Dr. Sullivan, I'd like to highlight Workforce Pell and how passing Workforce Pell this Congress will meet the needs of workers and employers. As you may know, I introduced the Promoting Employment for Lifelong Learning (PELL) Act this Congress, which would allow low-income students to use their Pell Grants at short-term, high-quality programs that prepare them for in-demand jobs. Unfortunately, students or workers looking to skill or re-skill do not have this option today because Federal policy has unfairly supported only degree programs instead of all postsecondary pathways. The PELL Act would allot short-term programs at all institutions to be eligible while requiring these programs to meet a number of quality requirements, so both students and taxpayers can be assured that Pell Grant funds are supporting only high-quality programs. As Board President of Rebuilding America's Middle Class, you have expressed support for the PELL Act. Can you explain why you think this bill is important? Can you describe ways you've seen

short-term program providers partner with employers to develop relevant high-quality skills that open up good opportunities for job seekers?

Answer 1. Extending Pell Grant eligibility to short-term courses is essential if we are to meet American workers where they are. Many students who attend our colleges are single parents who are also working full-time. They simply do not have the time to spend multiple years pursuing an associate degree part-time; a short-term program resulting in a credential that leads directly to a good paying job with benefits is one of the only sustainable paths for them to pursue. When that person achieves their first credential, it puts them on a path to earn additional credentials and possibly degrees, widening their economic possibilities. Expanding Pell to cover these short-term credentials may be the most important tool that Congress can give Americans seeking a better economic future.

*Question 2.* Dr. Sullivan, employers are often deterred by stiff requirements when considering whether to invest in training current or prospective employees. Employers face the choice of paying for this training or saving the money to allocate to other business-related costs. How could partial reimbursements to small and medium-sized businesses for job training accelerate worker opportunities and help close the skills gap? Specifically, how might this encourage employers to invest more in training and upskilling their workforce?

Answer 2. Employers working closely with community colleges produce programs that are directly applicable to available jobs in a local community. Employers must be part of the discussion to identify education and training opportunities to fund with WIOA, state or local job training resources. Often, the work that small and medium-sized businesses do on the front end with community colleges ensures that the businesses get a return on their investment in time.

*Question 3.* Dr. Sullivan, in your view, how critical are short-term credential programs to meeting the immediate needs of local employers and addressing skills gaps in the workforce? Can you provide examples of partnerships between your colleges and local businesses that could be strengthened by the availability of short-term Pell Grants?

Answer 3. Short term credential programs are extremely critical to meeting both the needs of employers and the individuals they employ. For example, in the healthcare space, Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC) has partnered with local hospitals and healthcare providers to offer short-term nursing and medical assistant programs. These programs are designed to quickly produce qualified healthcare professionals to meet the growing demand in the region. Short-term Pell Grants could expand these programs, enabling more students to enroll and complete their training, thus alleviating the critical shortage of healthcare workers. Additionally, South Louisiana Community College (SLCC) collaborates with Ochsner Health to provide fast-track certifications for emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedics. Increased funding through short-term Pell Grants would allow for more extensive training resources and potentially higher enrollment rates, directly impacting the availability of emergency services personnel. Further, Central Louisiana Technical Community College (CLTCC) has a strong partnership with local trucking companies to offer CDL training programs. These programs are essential for producing qualified truck drivers needed to support the logistics and transportation sectors. Short-term Pell Grants would make these programs more accessible, helping to mitigate the driver shortage that many companies face. Last, Louisiana Delta Community College (LDCC) partners with telecommunications companies to provide short-term training programs in broadband installation and maintenance. These programs are crucial as the demand for broadband services continues to grow. Short-term Pell Grants could help increase the number of trained technicians, supporting the expansion of broadband infrastructure in rural and underserved areas.

*Question 4.* What are the current barriers preventing students from enrolling in and completing short-term credential programs, and how could short-term Pell Grants help overcome these barriers? Are there specific financial, logistical, or informational obstacles that these grants could address?

Answer 4. Expanding the eligibility of Pell Grants to cover short-term credentials would cure the problem of allocating funding to pay for the program that provides the credential. Any single parent with a low to moderate income may struggle to come up with the funds to cover even a \$500 short-term program. Pell Grant eligibility for such programs removes that financial barrier.

*Question 5.* Dr. Sullivan, how can workforce development boards ensure that their services are closely aligned with the evolving needs of local employers? What mechanisms or partnerships would be most effective in achieving this alignment?

Answer 5. Fostering strong connections between workforce boards and local employers is critical to ensuring that training programs financed with WIOA dollars actually relate to local available jobs. There is no substitute for ongoing and specific dialog between local boards and businesses about employer needs and the ways a local board can help respond. WIOA should encourage this sort of collaboration.

*Question 6.* Dr. Sullivan, I believe that it's important for WIOA to have effective performance indicators that ensure trainees receive quality education and are well-prepared for employment. What metrics or indicators do you think are most crucial to evaluate the success of training programs?

Answer 6. Among other indicators, employment post-training and earnings are key metrics that should be used to assess the success of a training program. Both are directly tied to the real-world challenges facing an individual who is seeking employment—whether employment can be maintained and if earnings are sufficient for the needs of the person and/or their family.

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RESPONSE BY TAYLOR WHITE TO QUESTIONS OF SENATOR HASSAN, AND SENATOR SMITH

SENATOR HASSAN

*Question 1.* Registered apprenticeships help address workforce shortages and help students earn while they learn. Like many states, New Hampshire is facing a shortage of highly qualified educators in secondary math and science, as well as special education. The New Hampshire National Education Association, Southern New Hampshire Services, New Hampshire colleges, and others are doing important work to make teaching a viable career pathway through a New Hampshire Registered Educator Apprenticeship Program. **How is WIOA being utilized to support registered apprenticeships in critical shortage areas, and what more can be done?**

Answer 1. Funding available to state and local workforce boards through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) can support Registered Apprenticeship programs for new, incumbent, or dislocated workers, both youth and adult, in a number of ways, whether or not those programs are in critical shortage areas. For example, WIOA Title I funding can be used to support:

- **Pre-Apprenticeship Programs:** WIOA funding is frequently used to support pre-apprenticeship programs that provide basic skills development, work experiences, and other supports designed to help participants qualify for entry into a Registered Apprenticeship program.
- **Instructional Costs:** Individual Training Accounts funded through WIOA can be used to cover the costs associated with the classroom-based instruction (i.e. “related instruction”) that apprentices are required to complete, including tuition, fees, books, and other costs, so long as the training provider delivering the instruction is on the Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL). Under WIOA, all sponsors of Registered Apprenticeship are eligible for the ETPL.
- **On-the-Job Training Costs:** Under WIOA, on-the-job training (OJT) contracts may be established with employers to support the OJT component of Registered Apprenticeship programs. Governors and local boards may choose to provide reimbursement to employers of costs up to 75 percent of apprentice wage rates under WIOA.
- **Case Management and Supportive Services:** Prior to entry into a pre-or Registered Apprenticeship, WIOA-eligible workers can receive screening assessments, basic skills and language training, and career planning support through WIOA. In some cases, WIOA dollars may be available to fund supportive services like transportation or child care to assist participants preparing for or enrolled in apprenticeship programs. However, because Registered Apprentices are employed and earn increasing wages over time, many will no longer qualify for services through WIOA once the program is underway.

Despite the many ways that WIOA funding can be used to support participation in Registered Apprenticeship, there are fewer connections than one might expect between the two systems, especially at the local program level. Research has shown that many local workforce personnel lack a deep understanding of the apprenticeship system, making it difficult for them to promote apprenticeship opportunities to

employers or potential participants.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in our own experience working with place-based practitioners, we find that many local apprenticeship sponsors and program leaders lack connections to their local workforce boards and are unfamiliar with the process by which a pre-apprentice or Registered Apprentice might qualify for support through WIOA.

Even for those who are very familiar with Registered Apprenticeship, however, there can be barriers to integrating more fully with that system. For example, some providers find the eligibility determination processes too cumbersome and opt not to pursue resources that might benefit their participants. Additionally, Registered Apprenticeship programs tend to have higher entry requirements (e.g. high school diploma or equivalency) than other types of training provided through the WIOA system. Many WIOA-eligible individuals simply do not meet these criteria at system entry. Registered Apprenticeships are typically longer than the short-term training programs funded through WIOA, too. Providing funding for multi-year programs can impose administrative complications on local workforce boards and can be more challenging to capture in performance reporting. Even more fundamentally, longer programs tend to be more expensive than shorter programs. For budget-constrained workforce boards, more expensive programs typically means serving fewer people overall—an unappealing prospect in our current system, which incentivizes local actors to prioritize quantity over quality.

For these reasons—and because many apprentices do not remain WIOA-eligible once they are employed and earning good wages through a Registered Apprenticeship program—it is more common to see WIOA dollars supporting pre-apprentices rather than Registered Apprentices. Pre-apprenticeships can equip workers with the skills and knowledge they need to compete for Registered Apprenticeship opportunities, especially in many critical shortage occupations that require a high-level of numeracy, literacy, or other foundational skills for entry. Pre-apprenticeships have been used effectively in many sectors to create pathways for disadvantaged workers—including workers of color, workers with disabilities, women, and youth—to access careers in fields where they are currently underrepresented. However, the quality of pre-apprenticeship programs can also vary considerably and many do not provide a true pathway to employment.

As the public education system has experienced an acute labor shortage, pre-apprenticeship and Registered Apprenticeship programs for teaching assistants, paraeducators, classroom teachers and even principals have developed. Over the past 3 years, the number of these programs has grown rapidly. Based on emerging research, WIOA does not appear to be a widely utilized source of funding for educator registered apprenticeship programs.<sup>2</sup> Research conducted by the U.S. DOL-funded Educator Registered Apprenticeship Intermediary reveals that programs use a mix of one-time Federal funding (e.g., ARPA, SAE grants and ABA grants), state funding (e.g. recurring appropriations), and local funding (e.g. district allocations for staffing).<sup>3</sup>

The programs that have leveraged WIOA (such as New Hampshire’s program and the enrichEd Pathways model in Texas) are using Title I funding to:

- Provide progressive wages
- Fund tuition costs (up to \$6,000 per year for 3 years)
- Provide wraparound supports
- Cover certification costs

In these programs and many others (including those outside of the education field), WIOA funding is braided with other funding sources to meet apprentices’ needs. This is especially true when it comes to providing wraparound supports. Many programs leave it up to individual apprentices to connect with their local job centers to find out if they are eligible for support under WIOA. This likely leads to underutilization of available resources.

<sup>1</sup> Copson, E. et al., 2022. *Challenges and Opportunities for Expanding Registered Apprenticeship with Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I*, Urban Institute, United States of America. <https://wdr.doleta.gov/research/FullText-Documents/ETAOP2022-39-AAI-Brief-WIOA-Final-508-9-2022.pdf>; Bergman, Terri and Deborah Kobes. 2017. *The State of Apprenticeship among Workforce Boards*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future. <https://jfforg-prod-new.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/NAWB-Apprenticeship-092717.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Erica Mallett Moore, Dana Grayson, John Diaz, and Melissa Raspberry, *Educator Registered Apprenticeships: Funding Profiles for Five Programs* (Research Triangle, NC: Educator Registered Apprenticeship Intermediary, in press).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

To better support apprenticeship in critical shortage areas through WIOA, Congress should:

- Increase investment in WIOA Title I overall so that state and local workforce boards receive funding that is commensurate with the employment and training needs they are facing. Additional resources can reduce budgetary pressure that lead workforce leaders to prioritize short-term, often low-quality training programs that frequently fail to deliver lasting benefits for workers or employers. Given cuts proposed in the House of Representatives' most recent appropriations proposals, WIOA legislation should authorize a funding level at least twice the current spend and emphasize high-quality training as a focus of new resources. Doing so would improve but not eliminate the effects of years of underinvestment in the public workforce system: Even if the U.S. doubled its spending on workforce training programs, we would still rank far behind international peers in the percentage of GDP dedicated to similar programs.<sup>4</sup>
- Modify performance indicators to emphasize quality employment *outcomes* as a primary goal of the public workforce system. For example, WIOA should require measures of post-program earnings at least 1 year after program completion, and require wages be compared to median earnings in metropolitan statistical area (MSA) or the regional living wage. Indicators should also be added to collect information on whether or not program completers remain employed in occupations and industries related to their field of training. Such changes can drive local boards to prioritize higher quality training options, including pre-and Registered Apprenticeship.
- Encourage the use of WIOA Governor's Reserve funding for activities that provide staff training and develop stronger linkages between local workforce boards and apprenticeship agencies/sponsors in industries experiencing critical shortages of workers in occupations that pay at least a living-wage. Sector-specific strategies to forge such partnerships have been effective in addressing critical shortage areas in some industries and regions, especially when supportive services (such as those offered through WIOA) are included alongside targeted training.<sup>5</sup>
- Expand access to high-quality work experiences available to WIOA-eligible youth through a work experience fund or grant program designed to support the development of new programs aligned to a set of rigorous quality standards, including pre-and Registered Apprenticeship model. The fund could be used to:
  - **Reimburse employers** for up to 75 percent of wages for providing work experiences to youth who are also participating in an eligible education and training program. Subsidies should be reserved for jobs that pay at least \$15 an hour and which include opportunities to earn industry recognized credentials or credit, to ensure public dollars are used to create paths to prosperity rather than to poverty.
  - **Offer incentives for local workforce boards to create progressive work experiences that "link" to a clear next step** toward further training, a more advanced work experience, or a full-time job. Youth-serving pre-apprenticeship programs that confer preferential access to or advanced standing in registered apprenticeship programs are just one promising example.
  - **Offer incentives to employers** for hiring youth who face the most significant barriers to employment. Especially in a period when high schools are racing to dramatically expand work-based learning programs for students, WIOA must take steps to ensure the young people it serves are not overlooked by employers fielding multiple requests for partnership.
  - **Build the capacity of workforce boards to collaborate** with education and apprenticeship partners as well as employers to establish local or regional career pathway systems that include different tiers of work

<sup>4</sup> For information on peer nation's investments in workforce training, navigation supports, hiring incentives, and other active labor market policies, see the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development tables available at: <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/public-spending-on-labour-markets.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Alyssa Ratledge, Cynthia Miller, and Kelsey Schaberg, "Meeting the Needs of Job Seekers and Employers," MDRC, September 2020, <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/meeting-needs-job-seekers-and-employers>.

experiences and multiple paths to credentials that lead to well-paying jobs and promising careers.<sup>6</sup>

- Support research and evaluation activities to identify effective practices and programs and tailor future legislation and investment to replicate best practices, while phasing out apprenticeship and other training programs that do not reliably improve employment outcomes.

SENATOR SMITH

*Question 1.* Thank you so much for speaking during the hearing to the importance of exposing kids, especially underserved youth, to a variety of career options before they leave the school system. **Could you expand on how you think Congress can more effectively facilitate connections between young people and career exploration or employment opportunities?**

Answer 1. Currently, Federal funding to support connections between young people and career exploration and employment opportunities comes primarily from two sources: the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Education. Congress funds these activities through three pieces of legislation:

- **The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**, which includes dedicated funding for skills development, training programs, work experiences, and other employment-related supports for youth (as well as adults);
- **The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V)**, which provides funding for our Career and Technical Education (CTE) system; and,
- **The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**, which provides funding for a wide range of academic and enrichment activities provided to students in our elementary, middle, and high schools.

WIOA funding supports both in-and out-of-school youth (ISY and OSY, respectively), though current legislation requires a greater share of resources be used to support OSY. Perkins and ESSA both focus on ISY. Whereas Perkins has an explicit focus on CTE, ESSA does not. However, resources provided through ESSA can be used to support career connected learning opportunities and often are. For example, a 2017 report led by Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group found that nearly three-quarters of states' ESSA plans indicated they would use ESSA funding to support learning and activities related to career development.<sup>7</sup>

Within each of these pieces of legislation, myriad funding streams and programs support (or can be used to support) career exploration and employment. In addition, there are dozens of additional funding sources and streams scattered across other pieces of legislation, all designed to help young adults explore or prepare for careers. While these supports are valuable and necessary, they are siloed and often poorly connected. This reality contributes to a fragmented landscape of programs at the state and local level, and prevents the development of a truly systemic approach to preparing young people for careers.<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately, Congress can address some of these challenges by taking steps to promote greater alignment between these major pieces of legislation and the systems they support by, for example:

- Revisiting and aligning definitions, accountability requirements, and eligibility requirements and determination processes each time legislation is reauthorized.<sup>9</sup>
- Incentivizing—not just permitting—greater cooperation and coordination across state education and workforce actors in mandatory planning processes, including those required for WIOA and Perkins.

<sup>6</sup> For more details on this proposed concept, see U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. “The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Supporting Efforts to Meet the Needs of Youth, Workers, and Employers.” Testimony by Taylor White, Director, Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship. June 12, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on how ESSA can support career education, read Advance CTE's.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the issues of budget siloes and fragmentation, “How can Federal funding support systems alignment for career pathways? A blog series exploring lessons from three examples of flexibility” available at <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/how-can-federal-funding-support-systems-alignment-for-career-pathways/>.

<sup>9</sup> Congress should also ensure definitions and data priorities in WIOA, Perkins, and ESSA are aligned, to the greatest extent practicable to TANF, SNAP and other relevant social and human service programs.

- Creating grant programs and other incentive structures that emphasize cooperation across programs that connect or span youth-serving systems, for example, by linking high school CTE programs and pre-apprenticeships to re-engage OSY, or by supporting the expansion of dual enrollment CTE pathways for ISY;
- Supporting states to develop stronger career advising infrastructure with middle and high schools;
- Supporting an ecosystem of intermediaries and out-of-school time providers to provide career exposure and education opportunities that supplement and reinforce those provided through the public education and workforce systems, with a focus on students who face barriers in education and employment;
- Investing in state and local data infrastructure to better connect K–12 education data, higher education data, data from the public workforce system, and employment data to understand how early career exposure activities, work-based learning, and various secondary and postsecondary education and training paths affect employment outcomes.
- Supporting research and evaluation to develop an evidence base for the many career exposure, work-based learning, career training, and other related programs supported in the ecosystem to identify best practices and target future investment.

It is worth pointing out that the resources the U.S. Federal Government dedicates to career exposure, career and technical education, and workforce training is very low relative to other nations' investments in similar infrastructure and programs, even despite the high number of Federal funding sources, streams, and programs.<sup>10</sup> If policymakers are committed to creating opportunities for our Nation's future workers to gain career exposure, workplace experiences, and valuable education and training opportunities at scale, we must substantially increase our investment in the systems and programs that provide them.

Finally, a persistent challenge in developing a coherent ecosystem of career exposure, experience and training opportunities for youth and adults is our fragmented approach to engaging employers, who are themselves a fragmented stakeholder group. Employers sit on local and state boards and are engaged in various advisory capacities by public economic development agencies, workforce boards, the CTE system and other training and education institutions. While there are some bright spots that demonstrate employers can play a more active, sustained role in talent development, many of these engagements are superficial. The U.S. lacks a robust, cross-system strategy for engaging employers in the development, evolution, and delivery of career-oriented training—not only for youth, but for adult and incumbent workers, too. International examples can offer useful lessons, but our approach to solving this problem will need to be American made. Congress should encourage innovative strategies to organize and engage American employers as co-developers of tomorrow's workforce, rather than consumers or distant supporters of it.

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[Whereupon, at 12:01 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]




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<sup>10</sup> OECD. See footnote 3 above.