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Remarks on Signing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

July 22, 2014

Vice President Joe Biden. Good afternoon, everyone. Great to be here. Please, thank you very much. Thank you, distinguished Members of Congress and members of labor and business and the community. Today, as the President signs the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, we're using this occasion also to present to the President a roadmap he asked—requested in the State of the Union message, how to keep and maintain the highest skilled workforce in the world. And this is a perfect build-on as to what the bipartisan consensus that the Congress recently reached.

I had the best partners in preparing this report that I could ask for: Tom Perez at Labor, Penny Pritzker at Commerce, and Arne Duncan at the Department of Education. I talked to Governors, mayors, industry leaders, presidents of community colleges and colleges, unions, and a lot of Members of Congress, many of whom are here. And I have to acknowledge at the out front—at the outset, my wife Jill has been an incredible advocate for community colleges and the role they play in training the workforce.

But most importantly, I spoke with an awful lot of Americans who are—as all of you have, particularly Members of Congress—who were hit exceedingly hard by the great recession, but are doing everything that they possibly can to find a job, willing to learn new skills in order to have a decent, middle class job. One thing I hope that's been put to rest—and I know we all share this view—Americans want to work. They want to work. They're willing to do anything that they need to do to get a good and decent job.

And they show us that our single greatest resource is not—and it's not hyperbole—remains the American people. They're the most highly skilled workers in the world and the most capable people in the world. And they're in the best position to learn the new skills of the 21st century that the workforce requires. There's that phrase, "All has changed, changed utterly." Well, all has changed. It's a different world in which people are competing in order to get the kind of jobs they need, whether it's in advanced manufacturing or clean energy or information technology or health care, all areas that are booming, all areas where America is back.

So the core question that we set out to answer—and I'm sure my colleagues did as well—was how do you connect? How do you connect these workers who desperately want a job, who will do all they need to do to qualify, how do you connect them with jobs? How do Americans know what skills employers need? It sounds like a silly question, but how do they know? And how do they get these skills once they know what skills are needed for the job? And where? Where do they go to get those jobs?

This report is designed to help answer those extremely practical questions. It includes 50 actions that the Federal Government and our outside partners are taking now to help fill this skill gap—skills gap. There is this new strategy that we think will lead directly to more middle class jobs. These actions are going to help promote partnerships between educational institutions and workforce institutions. They're going to increase apprenticeships, and—which will allow folks to learn and earn while they learn. And it will empower job seekers and employers with better data on what jobs are available and what skills are needed to fill those jobs.

[*Vice President Biden continued his remarks, concluding as follows.*]

But to seize this moment, we need to keep the world's most skilled workforce here in America. And I think today in this bipartisan group, we're ready. The American people are ready. And I know the man I'm about to introduce is ready. He wakes up every morning trying to figure out, how do we give ordinary Americans an opportunity? Again, this is just about opportunity, man. Simple opportunity, how do we give them—because they—an opportunity because they are so exceptional.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think everyone in this room shares that goal: providing for opportunity. And the man I'm about to introduce, that's all he talks about, it seems to me, when he talks to me.

Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States, Barack Obama.

The President. Thank you. Thank you so much. Everybody, please be seated. Thank you. Well, welcome to the White House, everybody. And I want to thank Joe for the generous introduction, but more importantly, for everything he does, day in, day out, on behalf of American workers. And I want to thank the Members of Congress who are here from both parties who led the effort to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act.

When President Clinton signed the original Workforce Investment Act back in 1998, he said it was "a big step forward in making sure that every adult can keep on learning for a lifetime." And he was right. The law became a pillar of American job training programs. It's helped millions of Americans earn the skills they need to find a new job or get a better paying job.

But even back then, even in 1998, our economy was changing. The notion that a high school education could get you a good job and that you'd keep that job until retirement wasn't a reality for the majority of people. Advances in technologies made some jobs obsolete. Global competition sent other jobs overseas. And then, as we were coming into office, the great recession pulled the rug out from under millions of hard-working families.

Now, the good news is, today, nearly 6 years after the financial crisis, our businesses have added nearly 10 million new jobs over the past 52 months. Manufacturing is adding jobs for the first time since the 1990s. The unemployment rate is at its lowest point since September of 2008, by the way, the fastest 1-year drop in nearly 30 years. There are now more job openings than at any time since 2007, prerecession. For the first time in a decade, as Joe mentioned, business leaders around the world have declared that the number-one place to do business, the number-one place to invest isn't China, it's the United States of America.

So thanks to the hard work of the American people and some decent policies, our economy has recovered faster and it has gone farther than most other advanced nations. As Joe said, we are well positioned. We've got the best cards. So we have the opportunity right now to extend the lead we already have, to encourage more companies to join the trend and bring jobs home, to make sure that the gains aren't just for folks at the very top, but that the economy works for every single American. If you're working hard, you should be able to get a job, that job should pay well, and you should be able to move forward, look after your family.

Opportunity for all. And that means that even as we're creating new jobs in this new economy, we have to make sure that every American has the skills to fill those jobs. And keep in mind, not every job that's a good job out there needs a 4-year degree, but the ones that don't need a college degree generally need some sort of specialized training.

Now, last month, I met just a wonderful young woman named Rebekah in Minnesota. A few years ago, she was waiting tables. Her husband lost his job; he was a carpenter doing construction work. He had to figure out how to scramble and get a new job that paid less. She chose to take out student loans, she enrolled in a community college, she retrained for a new career. Today, not only has her husband been able to get back into construction, but she loves her job as an accountant, started a whole new career. And the question then is, how do we give more workers that chance to adapt, to revamp, retool, so that they can move forward in this new economy?

In 2011, I called on Congress to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act, update it for the 21st century. And I want to thank every single lawmaker who is here—lawmakers from both parties—who answered that call. It took some compromising, but you know what? It turns out, compromise sometimes is okay. Folks in Congress got past their differences, and they got a bill to my desk. So this is not a win for Democrats or Republicans. It is a win for American workers. It's a win for the middle class. And it's a win for everybody who is fighting to earn their way into the middle class.

So the bill I'm about to sign will give communities more certainty to invest in job training programs for the long run. It will help us bring those programs into the 21st century by building on what we know works based on evidence, based on tracking what actually delivers on behalf of folks who enroll in these programs: more partnerships with employers, more tools to measure performance, more flexibilities for States and cities to innovate and to run their workforce programs in ways that are best suited for their particular demographic and their particular industries. And as we approach the 24th anniversary of the ADA, this bill takes new steps to support Americans with disabilities who want to live and work independently. So there's a lot of good stuff in here.

Of course, as Joe said, there is still more that we can do. And that's why we've rallied employers to give long-term unemployed a fair shot. It's why we're using $600 million in Federal grants to encourage companies to offer apprenticeships and work directly with community colleges. It's why, in my State of Union Address this year, I asked Joe to lead an across-the-board review of America's training programs to make sure that they have one mission: train Americans with the skills employers actually need, then match them to good jobs that need to be filled right now.

So today I'm directing my Cabinet—even as we're signing the bill—to implement some of Joe's recommendations. First, we're going to use the funds and programs we already have in a smarter way. Federal agencies will award grants that move away from what our Secretary of Labor, Tom Perez, who has been working very hard on this, what he calls a "train and pray" approach, and I'll bet a lot of you who have dealt with folks who are unemployed know that—know what that means. They enroll, they get trained for something, they're not even sure whether the job is out there, and if the job isn't out there, all they're doing is saddling themselves with debt, oftentimes putting themselves in a worse position. What we want to do is make sure where you train your workers first based on what employers are telling you they're hiring for. Help business design the training programs so that we're creating a pipeline into jobs that are actually out there.

Number two, training programs that use Federal money will be required to make public how many of its graduates find jobs and how much they earn. And that means workers, as they're shopping around for what's available, they'll know in advance if they can expect a good

return on their investment. Every job seeker should have all the tools they need to take their career into their own hands, and we're going to help make sure they can do that.

And finally, we're going to keep investing in new strategies and innovations that help keep pace with a rapidly changing economy. From testing new, faster ways of teaching skills like coding and cybersecurity and welding to giving at-risk youth the chance to learn on the job, we will keep making sure that Americans have the chance to build their careers throughout a lifetime of hard work.

So the bill I'm signing today and the actions I'm taking today will connect more ready-to-work Americans with ready-to-be-filled jobs. Of course, there is so much more that we can still do. And I'm looking forward to engaging all the Members of Congress and all the businesses and non-for-profits who worked on this issue. I'm really interested in engaging them, see what else we can get going.

I'll give you a couple of examples. Our high school graduation rate is the highest on record. More young people are earning their college degrees than ever before. But we still have work to do to make college more affordable and lift the burden of student loan debt. I acted to give nearly 5 million Americans the opportunity to cap their student loan payments at 10 percent of their income, particularly important for those who were choosing careers that aren't as lucrative. But Congress could help millions more, and I'd like to work with you on that.

Minimum wage. This week marks 5 years since the last increase in the minimum wage. More and more States and business owners are raising their workers' wages. I did the same thing for Federal contractors. I'd like to work with Congress to see if we can do the same for about 28 million Americans, give Americans a raise right now.

Fair pay. Let's make sure the next generation of women are getting a fair deal. Let's make sure the next generation of good manufacturing jobs are made in America. Let's make it easier, not harder, for companies to bring those jobs back home. Tomorrow Senators will get to vote on the "Bring Jobs Home Act." Instead of rewarding companies for shipping jobs overseas or rewarding companies that are moving profits offshore, let's create jobs right here in America, and let's encourage those companies.

So let's build on what both parties have already done on many of these issues. Let's see if we can come together, and while we're at it, let's fix an immigration system that is currently broken in a way that strengthens our borders and that we know will be good for business, we know will increase our GDP, we know will drive down our deficit.

So I want to thank all the Democrats and Republicans here today for getting this bill done. This is a big piece of work. You can see, it's a big bill. [*Laughter*] But I'm also inviting you back. Let's do this more often. It's so much fun. [*Laughter*] Let's pass more bills to help create more good jobs, strengthen the middle class. Look at everybody. Everybody is smiling, everybody feels good. [*Laughter*] We could be doing this all the time. [*Laughter*]

Our work can make a real difference in the lives of real Americans. That's why we're here. We'll have more job satisfaction. [*Laughter*] The American people, our customers, they'll feel better about the product we produce.

And back in 1998, when President Clinton signed the original Workforce Investment Act into law, he was introduced by a man named Jim Antosy from Reading, Pennsylvania. And Jim spoke about how he had been laid off in 1995 at age 49, two kids, no college degree. With the

help of job training programs, he earned his bachelor's degree in computer science, found a new job in his field.

Today, Jim and his wife Barb still live in Reading. Over the past 16 years, he's been steadily employed as a programmer, working his way up from contractor to full-time employee. In just a few months, Jim now is planning to retire after a lifetime of hard work. A job training program made a difference in his life. And one thing he's thinking about doing in his retirement is teaching computer science at the local community college so he can help a new generation of Americans earn skills that lead directly to a job, just like he had the opportunity to do.

Well, I ran for President because I believe even in a changing economy, even in a changing world, stories like Jim aren't just possible, they should be the norm. Joe believes the same thing. Many of you believe the same thing. I believe America is—I don't just believe—I know America is full of men and women who work very hard and live up to their responsibilities, and all they want in return is to see that hard work pay off, that responsibility rewarded.

They're not greedy. They're not looking for the Moon. They just want to be able to know that if they work hard, they can find a job, they can look after their families, they can retire with dignity, they're not going to go bankrupt when they get sick, maybe take a vacation once in a while, nothing fancy. That's what they're looking for, because they know that ultimately, what's important is family and community and relationships. And that's possible. That's what America is supposed to be about. That's what I'm fighting for every single day as President.

This bill will help move us along that path. We need to do it more. Let's get together, work together, restore opportunity for every single American. So with that, I'd like to invite up some of the outstanding folks who are sitting in the audience who helped make this happen. And I'm going to sign this bill with all those pens. All right?

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 12:31 p.m. in the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to St. Anthony, MN, resident Rebekah Erler and her husband Ben Erler. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the complete remarks of Vice President Biden. H.R. 803, approved July 22, was assigned Public Law No. 113–128.

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