

Testimony before the United States Senate
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

For a Hearing

“Building the Ladder of Opportunity:
What’s Working to Make the American Dream a Reality for Middle Class Families”

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Thank you Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and all Senators on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee for the opportunity to testify today at your hearing on “Building the Ladder of Opportunity: What’s Working to Make the American Dream a Reality for the Middle Class.” I am Deborah King, Executive Director of the 1199SEIU Training and Employment Funds. 1199SEIU is part of the 2.1 million member Service Employees International Union. 1199SEIU represents more than 300,000 members and retirees in New York, New Jersey, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Florida and Massachusetts. The 1199SEIU Training and Employment Funds is the largest labor-management workforce organization in the United States, covering over 250,000 healthcare workers and 600 hospital, nursing home and homecare employers in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Maryland and Washington, DC.

The oldest part of the organization is the 1199SEIU League Training & Upgrading Fund (TUF). Since it’s founding in 1969, TUF has supported over 100,000 workers to upgrade from service and clerical jobs to nursing and other technical and professional healthcare careers. These upgrades have enabled workers to move from low income jobs to good middle class jobs, frequently increasing their salaries by 50 to 100 percent when they move into their new classification. In addition, achieving a college degree has brought workers enhanced long-term job security and has increased the likelihood that their children will also become college graduates.

TUF is a Taft-Hartley Fund administered by both labor (1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East) and management (healthcare employers) and is financed through employer contributions. In accordance with collective bargaining agreements, employers contribute a percentage of gross payroll to TUF. As a 501c (3) non –profit organization, the Fund is also supported by federal, state and private grants. Because TUF has input from employers about industry needs, and SEIU about worker needs, it has been an extremely successful partnership in increasing mobility of healthcare workers, promoting retention and addressing industry shortages.

Although the TUF in New York City started in 1969, its track record has incited employers in other geographic areas to join the existing Fund or to create new organizations modeled on TUF. In the last 10 years, the Fund has grown by almost 50,000 workers and similar funds programs by other locals in California, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Washington, Oregon, and Nevada cover an additional 100,000 workers. This program works and it is growing throughout the country.

TUF programs have been successful because they provide a full range of benefits including counseling, preparatory classes and tutoring to support workers, many of whom have been out of school for years or who dropped out of high school or college because of economic hardships or other life circumstances, to succeed. Without this encouragement and support, many would remain in entry level jobs and not fulfill their human and economic potential.

TUF benefits, provided at no cost to workers, include English as a Second Language, GED and college preparation. In 2010 in New York City alone, thousands of workers participated in these programs. Over one third of those who attended college preparatory programs moved on to college.

In addition, TUF offers up to 24 credits per year in tuition benefits and a range of programs for technical and professional workers. This includes reimbursement as well as tuition vouchers. TUF has negotiated these pre-paid agreements with State and City University colleges, which enable people to attend public colleges with little to no out of pocket cost. Most of the TUF's workers receive additional support through federal Pell grants, which make it possible for the TUF to support so many people each year. Without the support of these Pell grants and TUF's tuition assistance, most of these workers would not be able to afford to attend college. I urge you to continue to support full funding of the Pell program, which is so essential to enable low income people to obtain the credentials necessary to secure a decent job.

In 2010, almost 20,000 workers participated in one of the Fund's many programs.

Approximately 5,000 workers were supported through tuition vouchers and tuition assistance to attend college. Many people study for technical jobs such as Respiratory Tech, Radiology Tech, Pharmacy Tech, Surgical Tech, for Social Work and counseling and hundreds of our members upgrade to these positions each year. Over 60 percent of SEIU members choose nursing as a career. In the last three years, the Fund has produced over 1,500 nursing graduates. The vast majority of these workers were Certified Nursing Aides (CNAs) prior to graduating from nursing school. Upon upgrading, these workers almost double their salaries. For example, the average salary of a CNA in New York City is \$35,000; Registered Nurses typically start at around \$65,000. In that same time period, the Fund proudly graduated over 500 Licensed Practical Nurses (LPN), who went from earning salaries in the low \$30s to the high \$40s.

In addition to the salary increases, these workers secured more satisfying jobs with more responsibilities and increased recognition and respect. This is what the American Dream is about and we are making it happen.

Another success of TUF is the high levels of retention and completion rates. One specific example is the Health Care Career Core Curriculum program (HC-4), a supported college entry program. In this program, Fund participants attend pre-requisite college courses as a cohort, with additional tutoring, counseling and interventions to ensure success. HC-4 retention rates are over 90 percent, as compared with national success rates of 30 to 50 percent for adults returning to school. TUF is now expanding this model to other geographic regions.

Another positive outcome has been TUF's track record in establishing innovative worker friendly programs. Through labor and management working together, TUF has been able to partner with colleges to create part-time, evening, and flexible programs. These programs have allowed healthcare workers to move up the education and career ladder. This is an example of how labor and management speaking with one voice can make systemic change which benefits everyone.

When I think of our successful outcomes, I cannot help but think about some of TUF's participants who have shared their stories at our annual graduate recognition ceremonies.

When Christine Porter spoke at our ceremony just a few weeks ago, the entire audience was in tears. Born on a dairy farm in Upstate New York, Christine left home at 16 and had her first child at 18 years old. Several years later, her life was in turmoil as a result of a terrible divorce that left her and her three young children seeking refuge in a domestic violence shelter. Moving her family to Queens, New York, Christine worked three jobs seven days a week, to keep food on the table. After acquiring a job as a Medical Assistant and becoming an 1199SEIU member at Long Island Jewish Medical Center, Christine learned about Training Fund benefits.

Like the thousands of Health Careers Core Curriculum (HC-4) graduates who came before her, Christine found the transition to college to be much smoother while taking classes with other 1199 members and having access to additional types of support. While working full-time, Christine completed the program and moved on to receive tuition vouchers for her nursing degree at Queensborough Community College. She graduated this year with honors and served as the President of the Student Nurses Association. Christine is now working for her same employer as a Neonatal Intensive Care Registered Nurse. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor's of Science in Nursing and plans on graduating in 2012. Her dream of having a decent life for and her children, which began in that shelter, is now a reality because of her perseverance and support from our program.

Another speaker who comes to mind is Dr. Michelle Joyce. Michelle worked at Jordan Hospital in Plymouth, Massachusetts for nearly ten years after obtaining her masters in physical therapy. Many healthcare professions are increasingly requiring higher credentials. The Training Fund was negotiated into her Union contract for the first time in 2007, and Michelle saw her door to higher education and increased job security open.

Michelle pursued her Doctorate in Physical Therapy at Boston University, something that was too costly to consider before the Training Fund was established. She continued to work, be a wife and mother to two small children and obtain her PhD! She credits both the Union and Jordan Hospital's administrators for their insight and timely trust to partner together to bring the Fund to Massachusetts.

Some of our graduates had a longer road to travel to reach their goals. Some did not have a high school diploma or were working in a very low paid, entry level job. One such graduate, who I now see every day, is Denise Cherenfant.

Denise began her journey as a home health aide and then became a Certified Nurse Aide and 1199 member at Daughters of Jacob Nursing Home in the Bronx, New York. Denise was a single mother at the time and determined to increase her standard of living so that she could offer her son a better future. She tried to pass college entrance exams on her own several times but was unsuccessful. When she learned about the Training and Upgrading Fund, Denise enrolled in free college preparation courses which gave her the ability to pass the college entrance exam and succeed in college level work. Denise received her Associate's degree as a Physical Therapy Assistant from New York University, a very demanding program.

A few years later, Denise decided to return to school to become a Bachelor's-prepared Registered Nurse. Through support from the Fund, she attended Lehman College, with no out of pocket cost and also received a stipend so that she could take time off to attend classes and study. Without this financial support, Denise could not have reached her career goal- she became the

first member of her family to graduate college and earned her Bachelor's of Science in Nursing in 2009. After working as a Registered Nurse at her former employer, Denise is now working at the Training Fund and is planning to pursue a Masters Degree in Nursing Education.

At the beginning of her journey, Denise earned minimum wage, with no benefits. She now earns a middle class salary with excellent health, pension and other benefits and she is able to pay for her son's college tuition. He just started this fall.

Unfortunately, in our country today, attaining middle class status does not necessarily mean that you will maintain it. A particularly scary time is when an employer moves out of the area or closes. Another project under the Training and Employment Funds umbrella is the 1199SEIU League Job Security Fund (JSF), which was established in 1992 and is also funded by collective bargaining contributions. Over 300 employers in the long-term and acute care industry currently participate in the JSF. Together, labor and management accept joint responsibility for the employment security of over 125,000 employees. Since 1993, there have been more than 12,000 lay-offs from 214 institutions in New York. The Fund provides a safety net and re-employment for laid-off workers within the healthcare industry. Over 11,000 of those laid-off have accessed JSF services, 8,000 of whom have been re-employed in the industry. Others have chosen to retire, relocate, change industry, and so on.

Laid off workers receive supplemental unemployment benefits, continued health coverage and re-training benefits as well as priority placement rights in other participating institutions. This safety net is a clear example of a benefit that prevents people from falling into poverty when faced with job loss. The intervention of the JSF enables Fund participants to get the support and assistance they need to quickly re-enter the workforce. It also helps to supply participating employers with well-trained, experienced workers. It is clearly a program that can work where there is a network of employers jointly committed to the workforce in their industry.

One person who benefitted from both TUF and JSF is Jorge Negron, a 2008 graduate. Growing up in "El Barrio" in East Harlem, New York, Jorge dropped out of school, became a father at 19 and went to work as a housekeeper at Mount Sinai Hospital. Years later, after obtaining his GED, Jorge was promoted to a job in Materials Management in an operating room. He would spend his lunch hours observing procedures and talking to nurses about their work.

Jorge learned about the Fund's HC-4 program from one of these nurses. With Fund counseling and tutoring services, and the support of his fellow union members in class, Jorge completed the HC-4 program and continued his pre-requisite classes at New York City College of Technology. He was able to become an Anesthesia tech and Operating Room Aide at St. Vincent's Midtown Hospital while still pursuing his RN degree. Sadly, St. Vincent's closed down and Jorge lost his job while in his last semester of school.

Being an 1199 member, Jorge was able to access the services of the Job Security Fund. This allowed him to continue his education, with full tuition being paid, and preserved his medical benefits. Today, Jorge works as a Registered Nurse at Mt. Sinai, where he once swept the floors. He earns nearly double what he was making prior to being laid off. Jorge still lives in "El Barrio" and because of his knowledge of his community and Spanish fluency, is making a great contribution to both the quality of care at the hospital and to the health of his community.

We are encouraged that even in these difficult economic times, programs like TUF and JSF are continuing to grow and make a difference---demonstrating the value-added of the labor movement, joint labor management partnerships, and that it is still possible to implement initiatives which provide pathways to the middle class.

In addition to the established funds, in states like Minnesota, Illinois and Michigan, healthcare employers and SEIU are collaborating on fledgling training initiatives. These projects are giving workers access to education opportunities they never had. They also are giving employers the chance to create local career pathways and site-based projects that engage incumbent workers and improve the quality of care that is delivered. I predict that these pilot initiatives, in these states and elsewhere, will result in the creation of new Taft-Hartley funds in the next several years.

I would like to thank the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee for this opportunity to testify and to share our programs with you. I urge the Committee to look for ways to encourage these initiatives through support from the Departments of Health and Human Services, Labor, Education and other federal agencies. We must not give up the hope that our children will have a secure and fulfilling future. Thank you.