

Testimony of Rick S. Bender
President
Washington State Labor Council – AFL-CIO
Before the
US Senate
HELP Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety
On
Reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998
July 17, 2009

My name is Rick Bender and I am President of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO. Thank you, Ms. Chairwoman, and members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the AFL-CIO including the more than 400,000 union members I represent on how best to streamline the decision making process involved with the Workforce Investment Act.

Washington State is proud to be in the forefront of innovation and accountability for our Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, of which I am a labor board member. We have transformed our system to work for the economy and the labor force.

Other states are in the process of copying our success and we hope this committee will recognize the value of what we are doing and incorporate it for the federal system and the success of students, job seekers, workers and employers nationwide.

I am excited to tell you about what Washington is doing, but first I want to talk about the core components we believe must be in place in order to make any workforce board function at its best. Including:

- First, a publicly operated employment system.
- Second, adequate funding for worker training which includes adults, youth and dislocated workers.
- And third, equal representation on state and local WIA boards between business, government and labor.

A publically operated employment security program is the glue between education, industry and worker re-training.

Only government systems can achieve statewide and federal policy integration – as well as equitable distribution of resources.

The second pillar, funding for adult, youth and dislocated worker training is imperative.

Job market upheaval requires us to get more training services to more participants. We must cast a wider net to get all workers the help they need.

Lastly, state and local WIA boards must have equal representation between business, government and labor. The financial meltdown revealed a system that relied too heavily on only one of the three pillars of our society. Chaos ensued. Workforce Investment cannot tilt the balance of power toward business – nor can it tilt toward government or labor. For everyone to be truly vested, it must be an equal partnership

In Washington State we have balance and it is working extremely well. Our state board has nine members – three from labor, three from business and three from government. We believe this model is what makes us stand out across the nation and has been the reason for our success.

We developed a roadmap in Washington to create a high skilled, high wage workforce by 2018. And we created the accountability to get there.

Before this, there was no system-wide accountability for workforce development. Every program was separate – we couldn't collect consistent data from agency to agency. Some programs didn't even look at what happened to their participants once they left. There were no guides for improvements. Now all this has changed.

We have implemented our “Performance Management for Continuous Improvement” program (PMCI). This system-wide framework provides us:

- increased accountability,
- improved strategic planning,
- more efficient use of resources,
- and a sense of shared responsibility among workforce development programs.

These changes improve the credibility of our programs, enhance the support they receive and increase our ability to serve customers.

I will submit a more detailed account of the PMCI system in my written testimony, but the bottom line is – this works.

This system helped us build programs that work for Students, Adults and Industry. Examples include:

For Students

Navigation 101 –a life skills and planning program for students in grades 6 through 12. It aims to help students make clear, careful, and creative plans for life beyond high school while involving teachers and parents too.

For Adults:

We've implemented the I-Best program – this program combines Adult Basic Education (reading, writing and arithmetic) with job skills training.

For Industry:

We have created skill panels to identify and close worker skill gaps in industry sectors. It allows partners to anticipate and respond effectively to industry's changing workforce needs.

These programs are just a sample of the achievements we've made through accountability and by listening to each others' needs. We have a strong public overseer in the Employment Securities Department and we have equal representation between government, labor and business.

We have learned to work within our means through accountability – but I have to stress the importance of federal funding in this endeavor. We suffered many set backs during the Bush Administration – but now, because the job market is changing so rapidly – funding is more crucial than ever. We must invest in our workforce to keep America safe, secure and productive.

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