

Prepared Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr

COVID-19 Recovery: Supporting Workers and Modernizing the Workforce Through Quality Education, Training, and Employment Opportunities

April 20, 2021

Good morning Chair Murray. Thank you for working with me to schedule this hearing.

I'm glad that we are working together in a bipartisan effort to modernize our workforce programs and I hope that Democrat leadership will stop their threats to use a partisan reconciliation bill and commit to listening to Republican ideas and working together, as we are doing in this Committee.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

Today we are here to discuss the state of the American workforce. COVID-19 has changed a lot about the way we live, including the ways we learn and work.

Before the pandemic our economy was booming, jobs were available, and unemployment was at a 50-year low.

Today, a year later, nearly 10 million people are out of work and unemployment is at 6 percent.

At the same time, as of today, more than 84.3 million Americans have been fully vaccinated. By May, every American who wants a vaccine should be able to

get one. And I suspect very soon, our bigger problem is going to be convincing more people to get a vaccine, rather than concern about the supply.

If we want to return to a booming economy, we need a plan to get there. As part of that plan, we need to make sure we have better systems in place that are equipped to connect job-seekers, employers, and education opportunities.

Last month, Chair Murray and I asked the public to send in ideas for this committee to consider to strengthen workforce development and job training. I thank the Chair for joining me in this call to action, and for her commitment to address these issues in a bipartisan way.

As we begin these discussions on how best to help American workers get the skills they need, we have to look at what we have already done and what new ideas we need to include.

We can start with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. This is our country's primary law focused on workforce development, and it's due to be reauthorized.

We need to take this opportunity to see how this important law can be updated to meet the needs of workers and employers.

So what does that look like?

We need to be innovative. More bureaucracy and paperwork is not the answer.

We have to look at the system as a whole and make sure it is equipped to meet the demands of 2021 and beyond.

If we just add another layer of requirements to an already complex system and call it a day, we have not done our job.

If we want these programs to prepare people for good jobs, employers need to have a seat at the table. If training programs do not teach anyone the skills employers are actually looking for then we haven't really helped anyone.

We need to make sure that this law fosters strong collaboration between the public and private sector.

Job-seekers should know that if they go to a One Stop Center, they will get the assistance they need to find a good job. Employers should know that if they need skilled workers, the workforce system can help.

Last year, state and local workforce boards had to respond to the pandemic and quickly adapt to a world where virtual services are the norm.

These systems should be able to rapidly respond to meet the needs of their community, and we need to make sure that the law supports this responsiveness.

Many members of this committee are also interested in expanding apprenticeship programs.

The apprenticeship model is a great way for individuals to earn a wage while learning an in-demand skill. Unfortunately many employers are unable to access the federal system because of red tape and rules that favor labor unions.

We saw a glimpse of the type of innovation we need through the Department of Labor's rule on Industry Recognized Apprenticeship Programs that was issued by the previous Administration. This policy can expand the apprenticeship model to include more industries and provide new opportunities for training.

To build on this idea, a bipartisan apprenticeship bill will need to find a way to support both traditional registered apprenticeship programs and programs that are developed and recognized by industry.

I understand that there are important conversations to be had about accountability and quality for industry recognized apprenticeship programs, and we welcome that.

For example, we should look to the work done with our military veterans and how we have successfully helped veterans leave the military with training from the military and then test out of state-based occupational licensing standards and be certified for occupational licensure in their state.

In the 2018 defense bill, we created a pathway for military-trained medics to ease into civilian life more efficiently and without having to jump through a lot of unnecessary hoops.

So we need all the tools in our toolbox to get people back to work – an “all of the above” approach.

But that does not mean we need to create a variety of new programs.

The federal government already funds dozens of training programs across multiple federal agencies. We need to take a look at how we can improve and better align these programs, not just add a new layer of programs and mandates, so that state and local leaders, employers, and job seekers can reap the maximum benefits.

Workforce development has been and should continue to be a space for bipartisan solutions.

In 2014, Congress achieved a bipartisan victory when the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act was signed into law.

We saw the same effort in 2018 with the reauthorization of the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act. I know this committee and this chamber can achieve the same success this year.

Bipartisan solutions exist to all of these problems. Today’s hearing is a step toward finding them.

This is just the beginning of the conversation. We all have a big task ahead of us.

I look forward to working with our witnesses, Chair Murray, and our colleagues to get our workforce programs up to speed and our country back to work.

I thank the Chair.