

Comments for the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pension
Mr. Steven Partridge, President/CEO
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Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Alexander and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Steven Partridge and I am the CEO of Charlotte Works, the local workforce board in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Previously, I served as the senior vice president of the Charlotte Chamber; prior to that, I was the assistant deputy director of the Arizona Department of Commerce, where I oversaw all statewide Workforce Investment Act (WIA) programs. In addition, I currently serve on the U.S. Conference of Mayors Workforce Development Council's Board of Trustees, which develops policy priorities in the area of workforce development for the nation's mayors.

Job creation continues to be the number-one issue for many communities such as Charlotte, and so I come before you today to encourage support for a bi-partisan reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act. Reauthorization of the WIA, which was passed in 1998 and originally due for reauthorization in 2003, is well overdue and much needed to help close the skills gap hurting America's employers, workers and our economy. I appreciate the many challenges facing Congress, and know the complicated history of past attempts to reauthorize the WIA.

Local workforce investment boards serve as important conveners for shaping and implementing local and regional workforce development strategies to grow local economies.

There are countless examples of successes; a few from my area include:

- **BAE Systems**, a global defense company that opened a shared services center in Charlotte. We helped promote the expansion of this new service center to a pool of qualified candidates, leading to impressive retention rates among those hired.
- **Marbach**, a small German manufacturer, was expanding its workforce and needed help finding and screening for key positions that would require candidates spending months in Germany learning how to operate its precision equipment. We provided that help.
- **Siemens Energy** worked with our team to develop a high-tech recruiting and screening tool to hire hundreds of new employees. The company needed a streamlined mechanism to advertise the opportunities; screen and test thousands of candidates; and interview, hire and train them as needed. Siemens' human resources team collaborated with Charlotte Works and Central Piedmont Community College to ensure they filled the positions when they needed them and with the best candidates.

The web portal we created for Siemens pre-screened 8,000 applicants using a series of questions that were developed by managers from the manufacturing floor about their experience and skills. Candidates then participated in the Career Readiness Certification (CRC) testing process that demonstrated achievement and a certain level of workplace employability skills in applied mathematics, locating information and reading for information. Approximately 80 percent of the candidates earned the CRC and were invited to participate in two additional, more specific, testing processes prior to interviewing with Siemens.

The end result was not only that Siemens gained a better-qualified workforce, but also that those candidates earned a transferable career credential that made them more employable.

These are only a few examples of the hundreds of Charlotte businesses of all sizes and industries that have used WIA-funded tools including on-the-job training, skills certifications,

customized recruiting events and services and more to ensure that jobs are created – and stay – in our nation.

However, the search for talent is heating up. Prior to selecting a location for its newest office, a mid-sized insurance company recently approached Charlotte Works to inquire about conducting interviews of potential employees prior to deciding if they would expand to Charlotte. Over the course of a week, more than 50 interviews were held for jobs that did not yet exist. Within a few months of the interviews, Charlotte was selected for the expansion; the reason less to do with local incentives and everything to do with the depth and quality of our local workforce.

To showcase American talent, our local workforce boards must position themselves as the entry point into a vast national network of workforce resources that includes K-12, community colleges, universities and other federally funded workforce partners. Failing to do so puts America's competitiveness at risk and leaves us with a fragmented system that is difficult to understand and access.

Charlotte Works' success in helping WIA job-seekers can be attributed to the close relationships we maintain within our local business community. These relationships give us the local labor-market intelligence that job-seekers find extremely valuable. "Who's hiring, or is about to start hiring? How does the company screen out (or in) job applicants? What is the company culture like?" These are the types of questions job-seekers ask us every day. Hiring is done *locally*. Job seekers receive training *locally*. Economic and community development happens *locally*. I believe workforce development must also happen *locally* and be governed *locally*.

I also believe that a successful workforce system must be built on a model with clear roles and responsibilities for both the state and localities, and that both should be led by businesses, who are the true local job creators. Business representatives are often my most insightful board members when it comes to identifying local employment trends and skills gaps.

Yet, despite the successes I've just shared with you, the current law governing the local workforce system is not without its limitations and need for modernization. Some ideas for your consideration include:

Encourage regionalism – With more than 550 local workforce boards, our national system ignores the realities of local job markets and labor-shed areas. Most businesses, when looking to hire, understand that job-seekers are willing to drive up to 50 miles for a good job. We need to encourage consolidation and alignment where possible to ensure that both businesses and job-seekers receive consistent and seamless services.

Encourage inter-agency data-sharing – A truly integrated system would also allow for data exchange between various federal and state agencies. A case-in-point is the lack of information the workforce system receives on returning veterans. Prior to leaving the service, a soldier shares the location of the community to which he or she will be moving after separation. However, this information is not shared with local workforce boards. If it was, we could use our local resources and contacts to assist that veteran to quickly get back to work.

Connect the dots between the Adult/Dislocated and Youth Programs – Many of today's most critical skills shortages are in areas that will not be quickly solved by offering re-training opportunities to today's workforce. Many older or experienced workers would rather continue to seek employment in their current sectors of employment rather than be re-skilled and start over. It is for this very reason that WIA must put a renewed focus on arming educators and students

with localized job-growth information. Local workforce boards must work with industry to help create awareness campaigns and re-image industries that face skills shortages. I am disappointed with how often national and statewide meetings and conferences I attend ignore the critical connection between our Adult/Dislocated and Youth programs. Yet that is where we will solve America's long-term skills gap, and the workforce system should be where local solutions take shape.

Focus on critical sectors – The skills shortages across our nation tend to focus on a few key sectors such as advanced manufacturing, energy, healthcare and information technology. Yet the workforce system does not specifically hold itself accountable to addressing these shortages. All too often, local boards focus on only the demand side of the equation and train individuals in areas where job growth is occurring, yet they ignore the current market supply in the training decision. Training hundreds of individuals in fields that already have an adequate supply of talent often leads to dim employment prospects for those who were just trained but lack adequate experience. Prioritizing training and a national campaign to address the very real skills need to be top priorities of any WIA reauthorization.

Over the past year, nearly 8.4 million people were served and more than 4.6 million people were placed in jobs thanks to our nation's WIA system. The Act needs to be updated and aligned with post-recession, and beyond, job-market realities. I urge you to realize the cost to job-seekers, employers and the economy of *not* re-authorizing WIA. No one wins if we don't modernize, or worse, start from scratch.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Alexander and members of the committee, I am hopeful that you have the will and courage to come together to find a bi-partisan solution to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act.

Thank you.