Written Testimony

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Chairman Hinojosa, Ranking Member Keller and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today regarding the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). I am Rachel Gragg, Federal Policy Director for The Workforce Alliance, a national, multi-stakeholder coalition that advocates for improvements in our federal workforce development system.

TWA is a coalition of community-based training organizations, community colleges, unions, business leaders, local officials, and leading technical assistance and research organizations from the field of workforce development. This alliance of stakeholders, who have not previously come together, ensures that our efforts are not in the self-interest of a particular group, but are instead in the broader public interest of the nation. Our mission is to advocate for public policies that invest in the skills of America's workers, so they can better support their families and help American businesses better compete in today's economy. Many of our member organizations will be directly tasked with implementing any changes Congress makes to WIA, and our reauthorization recommendations reflect their considerable experience and expertise.

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to thank the members of this committee for holding this hearing and demonstrating your commitment to WIA reauthorization. Globalization, shifting demographics, technology and variable market demands have indelibly affected the American labor market and resulted, appropriately, in an increased focus on maintaining and promoting our economic competitiveness. Although Congress has struggled for several years to complete WIA reauthorization, we believe that this legislation is an important part of wider efforts to build a U.S. workforce that has the skills needed to compete in a global economy, attract and retain good jobs, meet business demands, and ensure broadly shared prosperity. We look forward to continuing to work on these issues under the Committee's leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Creating a skilled workforce to ensure America's economic competitiveness is a popular topic of conversation both in Congress and in the national public dialogue – as it should be, given that our place in the global economy affects the quality of life of every American. It seems in these conversations, however, that talk about policy solutions often quickly turns toward high school and college students. We are concerned that these conversations increasingly exclude the vast majority of America's future workers – that is, *adults already in the workforce.*

The workforce of today *is* the workforce of tomorrow. Roughly 65 percent of the 2020 workforce and 43 percent of the 2030 workforce are already working. And employers are already facing a significant skills gap today, not in some distant future. In a 2005 study by the National Association of Manufacturers, 90 percent of respondents reported shortages of qualified skilled production workers across a range of occupations. To address the true needs of our nation's labor market, the adult workforce must be central, not peripheral, to the discussion about U.S. competitiveness.

Furthermore, the national conversation about skills attainment and competitiveness is increasingly focused on improving the number of workers with bachelor's or advanced degrees, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. Yet this focus alone will not prepare U.S. businesses and workers to compete because the major skills gap in our country is not just at the top of the labor market. The reality is that the most significant skills gap in this country is in occupations that require more than a high school degree, but *less* than a four-year degree. These middle-skills jobs represent over 40 percent of our labor market, they are crucial to our nation's infrastructure and economy, typically cannot be outsourced, and are experiencing some of the greatest growth and gaps.

Occupations experiencing skills gaps include construction workers, operating engineers, carpenters, iron workers, cement masons, bricklayers, truck drivers, plumbers, welders, auto mechanics, medical technicians, and some nursing fields. The total number of jobs requiring a post-secondary vocational award or associate's degree is projected to grow 21 percent between 2004 and 2014, faster than the overall increase in employment projected for that same period. Of the 55 million job openings between 2004 and 2014 filled by workers who are new to their occupation, 15 million (more than one-quarter) will be filled by workers who have some college education or an associate's degree but do not have a bachelor's degree.

Given this reality, it is vitally important that our federal workforce development system – of which WIA is an important piece – play a key role in a comprehensive national human capital investment strategy.

And, given this reality, we believe it is time for the United States to guarantee that our workforce has access to a new minimum standard of skill attainment: at least two years of postsecondary education or job training, the level required to obtain the jobs in greatest demand. A new 21st century skills guarantee – one that updates the minimum high school standard that our nation established a century ago – is the right thing for America's workers and industries. Ensuring that every U.S. worker has at least an industry certification, vocational degree or two years of college should be a national priority and Congress should use WIA reauthorization to begin to meet this priority.

REAUTHORIZATION PRIORITIES: BUILDING A ROBUST FEDERAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

When considering WIA reauthorization, we urge Congress to measure policies against such a skills guarantee and consider what it would take to provide every worker with 2 years of postsecondary education or training, ensuring a workforce with the skills to compete and providing business with the skilled labor force it demands. It is this kind of guarantee that will bring about the greatest returns for our nation.

To begin working toward such a goal, we believe a strong federal workforce development system should do three things well: train workers; maintain a well-resourced public infrastructure; and create designated, institutional capacity to organize industry or sector partnerships. Our recommendations for reauthorization reflect this belief.

Increasing Access to Training under WIA

The WIA system must adapt to the needs of the 21st century economy by providing more training for skilled jobs in local economies. Our labor market is experiencing significant skills shortages across occupations and many workers struggle to support themselves and their families in low-wage jobs yet the WIA system is providing less training than it did five years ago.

- **A smaller percentage of participants are receiving training** under WIA than under its predecessor program, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), even though the number of individuals who exited the WIA program in 2004 (545,000) exceeded the 413,000 participants in the last year of JTPA (1999) by almost one-third. In 2004, 49 percent of adults who exited WIA received training, compared to 76 percent of adults who participated under JTPA in 1999.

- **More WIA dollars are spent on infrastructure than on training.** Of the $2.4 billion in adult and dislocated worker funds spent locally during 2003, only about 40 percent was spent on training. The rest was spent on program costs (including job search assistance, case management, and supportive services) and administration.

- **WIA's design overly restricts access to training.** Because of the wide range of mandated activities that must be provided with WIA funding, local areas have had to use WIA funds – which, under JTPA, could have been devoted entirely to services – to develop the system's infrastructure (including WIBs, one-stop centers, and ITA systems). Infrastructure spending continues to be needed to support core and intensive services and sometimes leaves little left over for training.

  Furthermore, WIA's "sequence of services" requires that participants must be unable to obtain or retain employment after core services before they can engage in intensive services and then they must be unable to obtain or retain employment after intensive services before they can receive training. Although WIA does not mandate any minimum length of time that individuals must spend in core or intensive services before they can start training, many one-stops consider training as a last resort for clients. Centers have focused on the initial use of lower-cost core or intensive services to move clients into a lower-skilled job than what they might have achieved over time with additional training. This is too restrictive in both theory and practice.

To improve access to training under WIA, Congress should:

- **Eliminate the sequence of services.** Local WIA systems should be able to offer services (core, intensive, or training) in any order or in any combination, as needed by the individual job-seeker and by local market conditions.

- **Ensure that the WIA system invests more resources in training.** Congress should establish a required percentage (consistent with current averages) of allocated WIA formula dollars that must be spent by states and localities on worker services, with an emphasis on training. Congress should allow a portion of that base percentage to be achieved by leveraging new public or private-sector dollars for a portion of that service provision.

<u>Maintaining and Improving the Public Infrastructure</u>

While we feel WIA should be training more workers, we also fully support continued, well-resourced investment in and improvement of the two public systems that comprise our nation's workforce development infrastructure: the Wagner-Peyser Employment Service (ES), and the WIA One-Stop Career Centers and associated Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs). Together, these two systems provide a range of important core services related to eligibility assessment and referral, labor exchange, and labor market information. In addition, WIBs are attempting to bring a new level of coordination between the private-sector and federally funded public agencies with some connection to local workforce training and placement.

- **Efforts to dismantle the public infrastructure are detrimental to the system**. Rather than devoting attention and resources toward ensuring that we have a strong and efficient public infrastructure, some WIA reauthorization proposals have been more focused on essentially ending the federal government's commitment to the maintenance of either system. These proposals have included the block-granting and elimination of the Wagner-Peyser and WIA Title I programs; elimination of the merit staffing provisions that have contributed to the stability of the Employment Service dating back to the 1930s; Career Advancement Accounts (CAAs) intended to circumvent One-Stops in the distribution of WIA training funds; and various grant programs proposed as an alternative to the formula-funded WIA infrastructure. Such proposals, if adopted, could lead to the quick dismantling of ES or One-Stop infrastructures in many states. The resulting chaos, rather than achieving new efficiencies, would more likely lead to further frictions in the dispersal of training funds, unemployment insurance, or sound labor market information to workers in need.

- **WIA's design – particularly when coupled with significant federal funding cuts – pits infrastructure spending against training**. There are valid concerns about whether the current level of public infrastructure expenditures in some states or localities is warranted, particularly in those areas where such expenditures seem to have come at the expense of worker training. Congress is asking valid questions about how much is being spent by state and local systems on administration, governance and even basic core services relative to what is being invested in training that will bring workers to some level of industry certification or vocational credential. However, the current structure of WIA formula funding creates no incentive for states and localities to begin addressing these issues. Wholesale efforts by USDOL and others to just eliminate these systems has similarly prevented constructive discussions in Congress about how to create stable funding for both ES and One-Stop systems in a manner that will encourage better local coordination.

To maintain and improve the public infrastructure under WIA, Congress should:

- **Reject efforts to block-grant ES and WIA Title I Programs.** This has been a recurrent stumbling block that has prevented WIA's reauthorization in previous Congresses which we hope the 110th Congress will avoid.

- **Establish a separate budget line for WIA infrastructure.** Currently, as states try to meet federal WIA mandates, the public infrastructure is funded almost entirely out of limited Title I dollars that otherwise could go toward worker training, contributing to the perception that WIA infrastructure is taking scarce resources away from training. In fact, Congress has created a public infrastructure without designating what it feels is the proper level of funding to maintain it. Establishing a federal WIA Infrastructure line-item, comparable to the existing line item for the Employment Service, would both establish a relatively predictable amount of funding available to state and local WIA planners for infrastructure activities from year to year, and at the same time allow Congress to set some balance between what is being spent on WIA training services versus infrastructure operation.

Creating Designated Capacity for Industry or Sector Partnerships

Our above recommendations will improve WIA's formula-funded services and infrastructure. However, by considering new investment strategies in Industry or Sector Partnerships, Congress could bring WIA current with the cutting edge of today's workforce development field.

Currently there are such Industry or Sector Partnerships in operation or being developed across the country. Examples include Project Quest in Texas, the Extended Care Career Ladder Initiative in the healthcare sector in Massachusetts, the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, Focus:Hope and the State's Regional Skills Alliances in Michigan, Washington State's Industry Skill Panels, and Pennsylvania's Industry Partnerships initiative. National evaluations, such as those conducted by the Aspen Institute, have documented significant results for both participating workers and businesses. Philanthropy, including the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the new National Fund for Workforce Solutions, has been a prime investor in these efforts, particularly in low-income communities. Several states have initiated their own state-funded sector initiatives, such that the National Governors Association recently established a Sector Academy to help states expand and replicate these efforts.

- **Industry or Sector Partnerships create unique capacity to organize industries for business expansion and worker advancement,** by bringing together various stakeholders connected to a local industry and helping them plan for long-term industry survival and growth through new shared investments in the people of that region. However, this requires creating a specialized, industry-specific capacity that can regularly convene multiple firms, unions, colleges, community-based organizations, economic developers and representatives of the local workforce system, to assess how that industry might be saved or expanded through new shared workforce pipelines, investments in new technologies or other means of production to better harness the local skilled workforce, and develop new pathways for advancement that ensure all local workers have a chance to share in an industry's future prosperity.

- **Sector Partnerships involve different activities requiring distinct investments and performance measures**. These partnerships focus on a single industry because the specific challenges that industry faces are likely to vary dramatically from those of other local industries – even as every industry in the region, once it determines its future direction, will eventually need access to a public workforce system that can fund training designed by these partnerships, refer workers trained to industry specifications, and provide access to other public resources or information that can help further an industry's goals. In other words, these partnerships comprise a new set of industry-specific activities and capacities that can complement and target the services and infrastructure already established under WIA. Different from overseeing a labor exchange infrastructure or running a training program, sector partnerships engage in activities that are currently not funded by WIA formula dollars (nor evaluated by WIA performance measures), including:

    - *Regularly convening industry players who have otherwise not collaborated in the past*;

    - *Conducting research on market trends and innovations that could help the industry develop and retain a more productive workforce*;

    - *Developing shared training capacity, overseen by all stakeholders in the industry, to begin implementing these new innovations*;

    - *Developing new career pathways, either within firms or across firms in the industry, whereby local workers can advance into higher-skilled and higher-paying jobs; and*

    - *Leveraging resources to implement those strategies, whether they be targeted services from local WIA systems or dollars from other public or private sources.*

- **Congress has failed to adequately invest in Sector Partnerships**. WIA, authorized nearly ten years ago, provides no funding to directly support the development or maintenance of Sector Partnerships, even though they are responsible for catalyzing some of our most successful local WIA systems. (WIA's greatest indirect contribution is through its 15 percent state set-aside, which some states have used toward their sectoral efforts.) As a result the implementation of sector initiatives has been uneven across the country, largely dependent on those areas where there are additional state or philanthropic funds.

    Given the appetite in the field for sector strategies, the U.S. Department of Labor, during both the Clinton and Bush Administrations, has supported industry-targeted partnership development. However these programs have not been formally connected to the public workforce system, and have been episodic at best. Concerns have been raised by some Members of Congress about these grants ("Hi-Growth" and WIRED) under the current Administration, particularly about how the grants were awarded, their lack of evaluation, and their disconnect from the congressionally authorized WIA system. There has been some discussion of curtailing the funding source for these grants – that portion of H-1B visa fees that have been funding USDOL workforce programs since 1998 – and redesignating those fees to another purpose. While we recognize the legitimate cause for concern, we would urge Congress to consider the continued use of these fees for a congressionally authorized sectoral grant program that could dramatically improve a reauthorized WIA.

To create designated capacity for Sector or Industry partnerships, Congress should:

- **Establish a separately funded Sector or Industry Partnerships competitive grant sub-title under WIA**. We urge the Committee to work with the Judiciary Committee to legislate that the portion of H-1B visa fees currently being used, without oversight, by USDOL grant programs instead be used to Sector Partnerships under a new WIA sub-title. Under the last Congress, the House WIA bill did include a small "Business Partnerships Grants" program, proposed by Rep. Andrews (D-NJ). The Senate WIA bill also included sectoral partnerships as an allowable formula-funded activity. We regarded both proposals as recognition of the importance of Sector Partnerships. However, to merely designate such partnerships as an allowable activity, without any substantial additional funding, would unfortunately create yet another demand on already over-extended WIA formula resources.

  Principles for a Sector Partnership grant program should include:

  - *True Multi-Stakeholder Consortia*: Federally funded partnerships should be comprised of the full consortium of stakeholders who can impact a local industry's success, including multiple firms (versus a single employer), unions or labor-management partnerships if an industry is organized, education and training providers (e.g., colleges, community-based organizations) that serve an industry, leaders from the public workforce system, and other participants deemed necessary by the local partnership.

  - *A Range of Workers Should Benefit*: To ensure that partnerships are not focusing only on high-end occupations, there should be explicit expectations that funded partnerships focus on industry workforce needs at a variety of levels, so that immediate interests in developing highly skilled workers for particular occupations is complemented by plans to train and advance lower-skilled workers in that industry as well. In addition, attention should be paid to the types of jobs which served workers are accessing, including pay and benefit standards, and the types of jobs that are being created or retained through these partnerships.

  - *States as Co-Investors, with Strategic Flexibility and Basic Standards*: Given the leadership already shown by some states in sectoral efforts, a federally authorized grant program should be a structured in a way that allows state flexibility, takes into account current state expertise, and rewards (rather than supplants) continued state investment. At the same time, a congressionally authorized grant program should include basic standards that reflect already established best practices from the field, and ensure that a full range of workers and industries – including those otherwise excluded from mainstream industrial development efforts – are served by these investments.

- *Congressional Evaluation, Based on Distinct Performance Measures*: Such grants should be evaluated for how well they are benefiting different types of workers, particular industries, and otherwise improving local WIA systems. Therefore, WIA common measures would not be sufficient. Rather, longer-term evaluations should assess outcomes such as the number of local firms participating in these shared systems, the creation of sustainable skilled worker pipelines, the actualization of career pathways across firms, the leveraging of public and private resources from outside the WIA system, and the quality of jobs created / saved through these investments.

Other Reauthorization Issues

Although these reauthorization issues – increasing access to training, investing in the public infrastructure, and creating capacity for Sector or Industry Partnerships – are among the most important for TWA and our members, there are several other areas where we feel WIA could also be strengthened.

Improve the WIA Performance System

Few policy makers or advocates are satisfied with the data available for the WIA system, including the current required performance measures.

- **The data are not comprehensive**. Because states are not required to report on all participants, the data provide an incomplete picture of the system's outcomes. States are required to report only on WIA participants who receive intensive services or intensive and training services. Because most individuals participating in the system receive only core services, the performance system reports on only a small subset of individuals and only who receive the most intensive services.

- **Performance goals are not adjusted for the type of participant being served or local economic conditions**. The lack of adjustment for demographic characteristics (such as barriers to employment) or local economic conditions has encouraged "creaming" of participants, where caseworkers are more likely to enroll participants who would have done well without the program. This means that people who most need services may not be receiving them.

- **No measure assesses overall one-stop performance**. A significant amount of spending is invested in the one-stop delivery infrastructure, yet no performance measures attempt to quantify the outcomes or effectiveness of this spending.

To improve WIA's performance measurement system, Congress should:

- **Require the adoption of sensible common measures across federally funded programs with a workforce development goal**. Common measures should track placement, retention and earnings – but not in a way that encourages low-cost approaches (such as an efficiency measure) or discourages service to low-wage or participants with barriers to employment (such as average or median earnings).

- **Require that WIA performance measurement take into account local market conditions and demographic characteristics of individuals being served.** Local areas should have the flexibility to adjust negotiated performance levels according to changing local economic conditions and the types of clients they are serving. During recessions and in markets with significant dislocations or those experiencing a decrease in quality employment opportunities, for example, states and local areas have had difficulty achieving performance levels negotiated during WIA's implementation in the late 1990s. In addition, local areas and providers serving individuals with significant barriers to employment should be able to have their performance incentives adjusted or waived to relieve them of facing penalties for the lower outcomes or higher costs associated with such populations.

- **Require WIA to track its contribution to workers earning a skilled credential that lands them a skilled job over time.** The system should track over time the number of workers who have received, through WIA assistance (full or partial), a vocational degree, industry-certified credential, or other recognized set of skills equivalent to two years of training past high school. Setting national goals in this area will help assess how well WIA is preparing the U.S. workforce for the 21st century global economy.

Address the Issue of Eligible Providers under WIA

Rather than enhancing customer choice (one of WIA's goals), WIA has unintentionally narrowed the range of training providers available to participants in the system. In many areas, some training providers – which once ranged from large community colleges to unions, and from joint labor-management funds for specific industries to small community-based organizations serving specific neighborhoods or populations – have chosen not to participate.

- **Small, community-based training programs that rely on a limited range of funding sources may not be able to assume the cash flow risks of WIA's vouchers** (called Individual Training Accounts or ITAs), particularly if the start of a training class is contingent on the open enrollment of a certain number of ITA holders. This problem did not exist when training contracts guaranteed a certain number of paid slots.

- **Community-based organizations (CBOs) may not be able to afford to run a program if ITA amounts do not cover their actual costs**. As a result, some effective CBOs have chosen not to provide services under WIA. Their withdrawal has limited consumer and challenged local WIBs which, in some cities, have lost several of their best service providers.

- **Larger institutions, such as community colleges – which typically receive multiple sources of funding for any one classroom of students – have found WIA's performance requirements to be at odds with their statutory mission**. For example, an open admissions policy can result in significant drop-out rate and bring down WIA performance. Colleges have also found that WIA performance measures are too costly because they must report on the employment and earnings outcomes of *all* of a program's students, even if only a few were WIA-funded. Many colleges with strong workforce preparation records have opted out of WIA.

To expand provider participation in WIA, Congress should:

- **Allow states to set their own standards for eligible training providers.** Congress should give states the authority to establish their own criteria for determining who is an eligible training provider without, however, abandoning the collection of outcome data to ensure individual participants in the system are being adequately served by individual programs.

- **Reject efforts to enact a federal definition of preferred providers.** Congress should reject efforts to designate a particular type of education and training provider as categorically better than another. States and localities should have the flexibility to choose their training providers based on performance, not federal designation.

LOOKING FORWARD

While we suspect that the issue is simply too large to address as part of the current reauthorization (at least if we have any hope of getting it done in this Congress), it does seem that the current workforce investment system suffers from the problem of trying to be all things to all people, and often falls short on all measures as a result. We believe that in the long-term, Congress should attempt to resolve inherent conflicts among WIA's laudable goals – especially between universal access to core services and access to training services for participants.

On the one hand, a main principle of the system is universal access. As DOL states in the preamble to the WIA final rule:

> "*Universal access.* Any individual will have access to the One-Stop system and to core employment-related services. Information about job vacancies, career options, student financial aid, relevant employment trends, and instruction on how to conduct a job search, write a resume, or interview with an employer is available to any job seeker in the U.S., or anyone who wants to advance his or her career." (65 *Federal Register* 49294)

In addition, WIA regulations specify that:

> "The system must include at least one comprehensive physical center in each local area that must provide the core services specified in WIA section 134(d)(2), and must provide access to other programs and activities carried out by the One-Stop partners." (§662.100(c))

The cost of creating and maintaining the infrastructure necessary for this type of universal access system is significant and undoubtedly deters WIA's ability to fund other services as intensely. Yet, WIA is routinely criticized for not providing enough training, or at least not providing as much training as JTPA. However, such criticisms seem akin to judging public libraries solely by how many people actually check out books, rather than considering the much wider range of services libraries typically provide to patrons and local communities.

We must decide what we want WIA to do, and adequately fund it to achieve those goals. If WIA is to be more of a training program – particularly one focused on a hard-to-serve clientele – then its goals, responsibilities, and expectations need to be adjusted to reflect that.

Congress needs better information on WIA to support such decision making. It is not currently possible, from publicly available documents, to determine how many individuals are receiving WIA services, at what level, and at what cost.

We recommend that Congress commission two studies of WIA:

- **A study of current WIA inputs and outputs that provides more thorough information about who is being served and through what types of services**. Such a study should:
  - *Quantify WIA spending by states and local areas on one-stop infrastructure and contributions from each required partner for such infrastructure*, including money spent on facilities, maintenance, rent, HVAC, supplies, etc.
  - *Quantify WIA spending by states and local areas and contributions from each required partner on services*, including training, case management, and supportive services (such as transportation and child care).
  - *Quantify the number of individuals served at all WIA levels*, including core, intensive, and training services.
  - *Quantify the spending per participant on services and the spending per participant on infrastructure*.
  - *Quantify state and local spending by mechanism (ITA vs. contract) for training*.
  - *Quantify how states are spending statewide funds* (i.e., on what activities and services).

- **A study of WIA reporting and performance requirements, including recommendations for the most appropriations reporting and performance requirements for future collection**. Relying on the data collected in the first study, as well as data from the current WIA performance system and other studies of WIA (including GAO studies), such a study should make recommendations about:

  - *The appropriate data to collect to judge the performance of the WIA system overall.*

  - *Whether data should be adjusted for the types of populations being served and local economic conditions and, if so, an empirically supportable method for doing so.*

  - *The feasibility of evaluating return-on-investment or other cost-effectiveness measures for the WIA system.*

  - *The funding necessary for states and local areas to adjust their data systems to conform to recommended changes.*

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would return to the point where we started: if we have any hope of ensuring that the workforces of 2020 and 2030 will be able to compete in the global economy, then we must invest in training for today's workers – as they will become tomorrow's workforce. Furthermore, we must also recognize that many of the jobs that support our economy, jobs where we are facing significant skills shortage both in the short- and long-term, are not just at the top of the labor market but also in the middle – jobs that often require more than a high school degree, but less than a four-year degree.

In the 1920s, the U.S. promised every American a high school education, in part to meet the needs of an industrializing economy. In the 1950s and 60s, the U.S. gave millions of adults and young people access to college *and twice as many again* access to vocational education through the GI Bill as a way to fuel the post-war economy. In both cases, visionary leaders developed bold, new education and training policies that addressed new economic realities.

Today, America's leaders want to build a U.S. workforce that has the skills to compete in a global economy, attract and retain jobs, meet business demand, and ensure broadly shared prosperity. Given the economic and labor market realities that we face today, the Workforce Investment Act must be an engine for raising our nation's guaranteed education and training floor and ensuring our workforce and businesses have the skills to compete.