

L. Harmon Written Full Statement  
House of Representatives Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training  
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**Introduction**

My name is Laura Harmon, and I serve as the Project Director for Greenville Works in Greenville, South Carolina. Before I get started, I would like to thank Representatives Virginia Foxx and Trey Gowdy for allowing me to testify on behalf of Greenville Works before the Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training field hearing. I was asked by the Subcommittee to speak about the innovative and strategic work that we have initiated to address important workforce-related issues. I am pleased to do so. This work is led by twelve Greenville Works member organizations, which include the major economic development, workforce development, and educational institutions in our area. Through its partners, Greenville Works provides a wide range of services to the business community and to Greenville County's workforce. As a partnership, Greenville Works provides overall strategic direction for long term integration of workforce development and economic growth activities. It also involves the input of nearly twenty other organizations that have a hand in assisting youth and adults with employment. It involves the support of funders who seek to provide workforce opportunity and strengthen workforce quality through their investments. And, most critically, it involves the ongoing feedback of almost 300 businesses that employ citizens in jobs throughout Greenville County.

In addition to speaking about the accomplishments of Greenville Works and its many partners, I will also touch on the strategies that fuel our accomplishments, the challenges that we face, and the actions we recommend to support and expand this work.

## Accomplishments

**BREP.** Greenville Works established and operates a county-wide **Business Retention and Expansion Program (BREP)** to establish communication with existing businesses, learn about their challenges and plans, and respond efficiently to their needs with coordinated services. Through the BREP program, Greenville Works' staff calls on the largest employers in the county down to small businesses with particular attention to the manufacturing, logistics, headquarters and administrative operations, health care, and customer service industries. Since these visits began in 2007, we have heard from businesses concerning supply chain issues, infrastructure issues, and public policy issues. But the overwhelming set of issues concerning Greenville businesses are workforce related issues. In fact, 67% of the businesses visited by Greenville Works named workforce concerns more than any other issue by a wide margin.

The dialogue we have directly with local businesses, in an ongoing fashion, is fundamental to a quick and appropriate response by Greenville Works and its partners. It allows for a better understanding of the real issues at hand. Though labor market data is important to understanding the overall economic landscape, direct contact and relationship building on a local or regional basis is a requisite to any effective workforce response. For example, if we were to rely on labor market data alone, we would believe that licensed practical nurses, or LPNs, are a growing field and that we should expand training opportunities for LPNs to meet the projected demand. Yet, through the BREP program, we found that health care organizations in our geographical area use a combination of medical assistants and registered nurses, or RNs, rather than LPNs. We might also believe that, according to labor market data, employment in manufacturing is rapidly declining. For our area of Upstate South Carolina, this is clearly not the case. Manufacturers *are* doing things differently than many had before the recession. For example: 1) They are relying more heavily on temporary and contingent staffing; 2)

They have higher skill requirements and demand for technical skills; and 3) They require flexible workers who can handle multiple responsibilities and solve problems “on the floor.” We know this from one-on-one conversations with local employers.

So what do we do with this knowledge? We share it with our members and partners. We review BREP findings during monthly Greenville Works board meetings and during regularly scheduled meetings with job developers and educators working on the front lines. We share it to avoid duplicate visits that confuse employers and waste time. We share it to gain a common understanding of our economic landscape. And we share it to coordinate and improve the quality of our collective response. My point is that there is no substitute for direct, regular communication with the business community. Any program or initiative that seeks to impact job creation, job retention, or education and training for jobs, must include an effective business calling program from the onset.

**Industry Clusters.** One of the points Greenville Works learned through the BREP was that businesses are sometimes isolated from each other, with limited communication between businesses in the same industry sector. This can impede their ability, particularly in the smaller organizations, to secure business related incentives, establish local supply chain relationships, or share best practices. So, Greenville Works organized industry cluster meetings to help facilitate cross-communication between businesses. Last year, the Aviation and Aerospace Industry Cluster came together to secure an incumbent worker training grant provided through Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds to train workers from several businesses in blue print reading. The Life Sciences Industry Cluster did the same and provided a shared supervisory training program. The resulting increase in workers skills contributed to job retention and productivity. This type of training incentive and shared strategy can even result in the addition of new jobs. This year, the Chemicals Industry Cluster identified a shared need for Chemical Operator Training. Though South Carolina eliminated the incumbent worker training program due to WIA funding reductions, we hope to find an alternate solution so that this training need can be realized.

**WorkKeys® based Career Readiness Certificate.** I mentioned earlier that manufacturing businesses now require more skills than in the past. This holds true for many industries. Yet, we know from our state’s high unemployment rate, our relatively low educational attainment levels, and the local BREP employer feedback that worker skills have not kept pace. Greenville Works launched an initiative to lessen this skills gap by supporting student and adult attainment of the WorkKeys®-based Career Readiness Certificate, coupled by increased recognition of the Certificate by employers. This Certificate program, which is the first step in the National Association of Manufacturer (NAM) Skills Certification System, assesses work-based skill levels in applied mathematics, reading for information, and locating information (such as interpreting graphs and tables). Not only does this Certificate give employers in any industry a verified, unbiased assessment of workers’ skills in applied math, reading and graphs, it gives the students and adults who earn it a means to prove their work related skills to employers. Through this initiative, Greenville Works educates job seekers and incumbent workers on the importance of advanced preparation before taking the assessment so that they may achieve high scores. Now, in addition to free self-directed online study software provided through the State, assessment takers in Greenville County can prepare by enrolling in free or extremely low cost classes tailored to their needs. This effort to encourage existing and future workers to prepare for and take the WorkKeys-based Career Readiness Certificate involves more than twenty public, non-profit, community-based, and faith-based organizations, all of the high school career centers and three high schools, the Greenville Society for Human Resource Management, and 80 Upstate area employers who have each agreed to recognize, request, or require the Certificate within their hiring process. The buy-in and participation of employers cannot be underestimated, because the real motivator that results in job seekers preparing for and taking the WorkKeys assessment is not Greenville Works’ message that it is a smart thing to do. It is the employers who ask, “Have you earned your WorkKeys Certificate?” In fact, many companies such as Michelin, N.A. require the Certificate as part of hiring for certain positions. Because of

employers' use, backed by the education, workforce, and economic development communities' support at the state and local level, we have seen a 30% annual increase in the number of Greenville County job seekers, students, and incumbent workers earning the Certificate. We anticipate an even higher percentage increase going forward due as prominent organizations like the United Way of Greenville County, Greenville Technical College, and Greenville County Schools expand their support for WorkKeys, and as state legislators consider measures to link the Certificate to secondary education.

**Working Groups.** Working groups allow Greenville Works the means to turn the BREP findings into action. The Employer Incentive Working Group produced and maintains a comprehensive guide of 29 workforce-related incentives provided by 17 different public and non-profit organizations. This past February, another set of 17 organizations collaborated in a working group to produce the soon-to-be-released Workforce Readiness Competency Guide. This guide outlines the many competencies that job seekers should develop in order to be ready for work. The guide will help front line staff of helping organizations tailor their assistance to the individual needs of their job seeking clients. The Greenville Society for Human Resource Management, through their Workforce Readiness Council, will evaluate the Guide to ensure it accurately reflects local business needs. In the words spoken just last Thursday by Quiwana James, one of SHARE LADDER employment program's most dedicated and effective case managers, "In my ten years of working with clients, I have never seen anything like [the Guide]. This will help me do my job better, [which is] to help people get back to work and be successful."

**National Fund for Workforce Solutions: Advanced Manufacturing Workforce Partnership.** The combined efforts of Greenville Works and the United Way of Greenville County over the last 4 years resulted in the competitive selection of our area for a National Fund for Workforce Solutions (NFWS) grant through the Social Innovation Fund. The NFWS supports innovative work in 31 communities throughout the country, with ours being the only site in South or North Carolina. Greenville Works

assembled a funder collaborative of public and private organizations (including the Greenville County Workforce Investment Board) that pooled and aligned money to fund a bridge training program. The program teaches the foundational skills necessary to work and advance in the manufacturing industry. The program is provided at no cost to low and moderate income job seekers who are selected for the training. To ensure alignment with industry needs, Greenville Works assembled a Transportation Fabrication Industry Cluster comprised of several leading manufacturers. Together these employers defined the skills necessary to succeed in entry level employment with their companies. Their work formed the basis of a new manufacturing training program that is tailored to real, local employment. This group of industry partners is also comparing notes to identify the career pathways that manufacturing job seekers and workers can take to advance in manufacturing careers. And they are sharing information about their hiring processes. Educators have taken this information and developed an accelerated, contextualized job training curriculum that includes both technical and soft skills, as well as two certifications that are in line with the NAM Skills Certification System. Job coaches are preparing to identify, refer, and support unemployed or underemployed citizens that, with this training, will meet employer needs and expectations. And as the marketing takes place, interested job seekers will begin to apply for the training by taking the first step: earning the WorkKeys-based Certificate. Those that complete this bridge program will progress to on-the-job training, continued education, apprenticeships, and/or employment. What makes this project unique is the collaboration between public and private organizations to share strategic goals, align systems, and provide flexible funding. We have found that flexible public funding serves as a catalyst to attract and involve private funding. When working with lower income job seekers, flexible funding is absolutely necessary to provide the comprehensive, holistic training and support that results in high levels of successful employment, retention, advancement, and productivity gains.

### **Challenges**

Though Greenville Works has accomplished a tremendous amount in four short years, we continually face a number of challenges. Insufficient funding is a continuous threat to the BREP operation and the systems change efforts that emerge as a result. We operate with two staff members. Funding for one staff member will expire in December. Outside of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions project, there is no funding to implement initiatives. We must have committed and ongoing financial support in order to continue our strategic work with business and the workforce. It must be noted that workforce issues are extremely complex. Improving workforce systems involves significant changes in the behavior of students, job seekers, workers, industry, government, non-profits, and many others. It involves changes in policy. It involves relationship building and extensive collaboration. These challenges are not “quick fixes” that can be addressed by a two year grant. These challenges require sustained levels of committed funding, effort, and leadership in order to realize long-term results.

The second issue involves political boundaries. While our work is focused on Greenville County, industry operates across county lines in a regional fashion to meet business needs, including the recruitment and training of workers. For example, BMW Manufacturing Co., LLC attracts workers from a range of counties within driving distance. We hope to expand our collaboration beyond Greenville County so that the industry and workforce we serve is not deterred from receiving consistent, quality services by county lines.

The third is the reduction in funding for training programs, including training for incumbent workers and training for unemployed and underemployed workers. I mentioned earlier the elimination of the state’s incumbent worker training program. Here is another example: beginning September 1<sup>st</sup>, the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce will no longer fund the printing and mailing of WorkKeys-based Career Readiness Certificates. This decision removes an important incentive that contributes to the quality of our workforce.

### **Recommended Action**

Greenville Works recommends the following actions to support meaningful improvement in workforce issues:

- 1) Find ways to support “backbone” organizations, like Greenville Works, that leverage the collective impact of many. High performance backbone organizations facilitate solutions that make sense for the regional economy. They form lasting relationships with public and private organizations - a must for effective workforce initiatives. They find ways to leverage stakeholders’ strengths and hold them accountable. They move beyond assumptions and policy constraints to accomplish real, meaningful results.
- 2) Support sector-based regional industry partnership development, career pathway development, and entry-level bridge programs that have strong support from local industry. Place workforce readiness and industry-recognized credentialing as high priorities when creating or refining workforce policy.
- 3) Fund the replication and expansion of innovative strategies that communities such as those involved with the National Fund for Workforce Solutions have developed. These strategies involve dual customers (employers and workers), flexible funding, partnerships across organizations, and backbone organizations that facilitate the process.

### **Conclusion**

Despite our challenges and buoyed by our accomplishments, Greenville Works remains focused on implementing long-term economic and workforce development strategies in Greenville County. On behalf of the Greenville Works Board, I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about our work to support local business and the local workforce.