

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED 3/22/11

Introduction

Good morning. My name is David Mathis. I am the Director of Workforce Development for Oneida County. I have more than 30 years of experience in workforce development, and have been director of the Oneida County Office of Workforce Development for 25 years. I am also a trustee of Mohawk Valley Community College, a position I have held for over 34 years now. In my testimony, I will discuss the employment, training and education issues facing our region and our society wearing both hats. Two hats, however, does not mean two perspectives. It is important for me to note at the outset that both the workforce system and the community college system are vital parts of our Oneida County workforce partnership, and the collaboration runs so deeply that without both systems, the workforce of the present and the emerging one of the future will be hard-pressed to succeed. At a time when middle skills jobs in New York are projected to increase 38% -- the highest of all skill levels -- strong community college-workforce linkages are essential to meet the needs of our employers and communities. Our system of One-Stop Career Centers is a great resource to help guide workers towards new career pathways and to help them find future employment, but the community colleges are the backbone of our public workforce system's training mission. Through our close partnerships with the community college system, we prepare our workforce for lucrative job opportunities that can lead to life-long careers in high growth and emerging industries such as healthcare, technology and clean energy.

Oneida County Workforce Development / Background

One of the pitfalls of discussing workforce issues is that we end up in the minutiae of formulas and acronyms to the extent where the point of our work is lost. I want to start at the root of our

purpose. To that end, let me share this quote from Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was speaking at a time much like ours – when people who lived up to their end of the bargain with society one day woke up and found the economy had changed and left their lives as collateral damage.

Roosevelt said: *“Not only our future economic soundness but the very soundness of our democratic institutions depends on the determination of our government to give employment to idle men.”*

Ronald Reagan said it with less of a flourish when he said: *“I think the best possible social program is a job.”*

Both presidents reflect the pivotal role of the workforce system – to get people working so they can have better lives, and we can have a stronger society. That is our goal, our mission and our guiding purpose. Oneida County has four main elements to our system:

- 1. Our One-Stop Centers located in Utica and Rome**
- 2. Our community-based programming**
- 3. Education & Training Programs**
- 4. Our youth programming**

We have One-Stops in an Oneida County downtown office building, to serve the needs of Griffiss and western Oneida County, and one in Utica’s State Office Building, which serves the eastern end of the county. These centers are the major points of contact between our system and job-seekers out looking for work. In the 2009-2010 Program Year, more than 12,000 people were served at these centers. For point of reference, that’s a little over 10 percent of the civilian labor force as measured by the U.S. Census. Let me stress that. **One in 10 people in the civilian labor force of Oneida County came to a One-Stop Center, mostly due to unemployment.**

It's important to know who these people are. Let's be honest about the world of work.

Networking is the most important way to get a job. Depending upon which study you read, between a third and half of all hires are made because a job-seeker knew someone who could steer them to a job, put in a good word, or otherwise open a door. The people who come to One-Stops who need help are the ones who don't have those connections. Some local data from last year helps paint a picture of who comes in our door:

- 16.3% of laid off workers did not have a high school diploma, compared with 13.4% of the state overall.
- 58% of laid off workers had education no higher than a high school diploma or GED, as opposed to 47.6% statewide.
- 11% had either an associate's or bachelor's degree, as opposed to 16% statewide.
- 28% had worked for their employer 20 to 30 years as opposed to 19% statewide;
- 48% were between the ages of 30 and 50; far higher than the statewide figure of 34%

In short, the people we see are the people who have more barriers to employment than the average population. That's why they are at the One-Stop. They do not have a Safety Net of contacts – they have us.

When they enter our One-Stops, we provide core services available to anyone who enters the door. These include assessments of knowledge, skills and abilities, job search and placement assistance. Some of what we do is old-fashioned case management and counseling for workers who have no idea what to do with the next 20 to 30 years of their working lives. We provide an array of seminars about the process of finding work – from how to write a resume to how to deal with job interview questions. Partners at the One-Stops help out with the referrals and services

they provide. For example, MVCC uses the One-Stop as a prime place to recruit out-of-work men and women for training programs.

Our region operates One-Stops in Herkimer, Madison and Oneida Counties under the *Working Solutions* brand, with a commitment to combine the best of high-tech delivery of information and services along with personal counseling by trained experts. *Working Solutions* services include employment, career information, education and training, vocational rehabilitation, financial aid and scholarship assistance, information on hiring incentives and information on the latest grants to help upgrade employee skills. For employers, *Working Solutions* offers recruitment and screening of job applicants, computerized matching of job requirements and skills with *Working Solutions*' pool of thousands of applicants, information on hiring incentive programs and tax credits, resources to support the training of new hires and to upgrade the skills of existing workers, education and wage information, assistance to workers impacted by downsizing, interviewing and meeting space and more.

For job seekers, *Working Solutions* offers a fully equipped Resource Room to access job listings on line and in print, workshops and seminars to help improve work skills, information on quality jobs with a future, education and training resources, and the one-to-one assistance of workforce professionals to craft and individualized job search strategy.

In addition to people who have lost a job, the One-Stop Centers and One-Stop System are a vital part of the effort to find jobs for adults who may never have been employed. Let me be blunt.

This population includes ex-offenders, disconnected youth and adults who may never have worked and may never have made it out of high school, as well as men and women whose lives have fallen apart along the way. The titles of two programs operated in our area say a lot: the

Workforce Investment Board’s “Second Chance” project for ex-offenders and my office’s “Jobs and Hope” project for the homeless. These programs are not all we offer. Major efforts include:

PROGRAM	WHO FUNDS IT	WHO IT SERVES	WHAT IT DOES
Green Careers	NY Dept. of Labor	Offenders, adults, disconnected youth aged 19-24	Training in green occupations with case management, support services.
Re-Entry Task Force	NYS Division of Criminal Justice Services	Adult state parolees, returnees from state prison, other offenders	Case management, referral, counseling, job search assistance
Life Skills Program	Federal Workforce Investment Act, County funding	County jail inmates under age 25.	Teaches life skills / GED, referral to community for support services, job search
CareerLink	US Dept. of Education, Projects With Industry Grant	Young adults 16-25 with a disability, serves offenders as part of the population.	Provides skills training, job placement, job retention
Second Start	Oneida County, WIA, state grant	Older youth, 19-21, with no diploma/GED or low basic skills	Case management, referral, counseling, job search help, education assistance.
Second Chance	NYS Department of Labor	Adult ex-offenders, with focus on those leaving County Jail.	Case management, referral, counseling, job search assistance, mentoring.
Probation Employment	Oneida County Youth Bureau	Youth 16-21 who have interacted with the juvenile justice system	Case management, counseling, job search assistance, assistance completing school.
Jobs & Hope	HUD	Homeless adults.	Case management, job search
Jail-to-Community	Oneida County Youth Bureau	Youth 19-21 who have interacted with the justice system.	Case management, referral, counseling, job search assistance, GED referrals.
YouthBuild	USDOL	High-risk youth 19-24	Construction skills training, placement, support services
Wheels for Work	NY Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA)	Low-income area residents	State-funded project to connect entry-level workers with transportation
Wage Subsidy Program	OTDA	Low-income adults	Provides wage subsidy for adults entering employment
Career Pathways	OTDA	Low-income adults / older youth	Provide training, supports for Pathways Training to help adults, youth enter good-paying jobs.
Renewable Energy Task	USDOL / NYSDOL	Adults / youth	Regional project to convene partners to support green jobs

Force			in biofuels & construction.
CyberJobs (MVCC)	USDOL	Adults	Regional project to develop the IT sector

The people we serve in these community partnership programs are much less likely to come into the One-Stop, because they've interacted with government in the past – school, military, justice system, social services system, and they don't want to see it again, even if they need it. That's why our workforce system developed strong community partnerships to meet the needs of these high-needs, high-risk customers. Many, such as the young adults in the WIB's YouthBuild project, are part of our system without ever going in our centers. Our system brings its services into the community. A few years ago, we successfully were awarded a federal grant to provide Life Skills training to offenders in the Oneida County Jail., and although funding to support this effort has all but dried up, we have maintained a small presence to start offenders on the road to employment before they ever leave the jail.

That's not the traditional role of a workforce system, but we have adapted the system to serve as the community connecting point for various systems that need employment to succeed. For example, employment is the critical factor in offender recidivism, yet until our efforts began in the past five years, there was little community outreach focused on employment. This is not just a community issue. An Urban Institute study, "Employment Dimensions of Reentry," suggested that 30% of the annual growth of the labor force is due to offenders leaving institutions and looking for work. Oneida County Workforce Development has had a unique role, along with the Workforce Investment Board, in bringing partners together to serve populations like offenders, the homeless, and young adults with minimal education and skills. We have done so through securing state and federal grants that provide an added layer of services on top of what we

already provide through the One-Stop Centers. Even before declining funding required new alliances, we have been forging partnerships because the people we serve have needs that overlap traditional funding silos.

Training and education are vital parts of making anyone ready for a better job. Our workforce system has taken a broad, regional view to providing training in health care, renewable energy and technology in partnership with our local colleges, chiefly our community colleges. It's a pretty simple formula. We ask employers what they need, we ask our colleges to adapt what they do to meet those needs, and we work to secure grant funding that lets us establish creative, flexible programming that focuses on the needs our employers have expressed. Over the past 10 years, we have totaled about \$10 million in training scholarship funds alone that have helped workers acquire degrees and advanced higher certifications. This successful formula is facing some serious strains, because so much of what employers want is now getting to be costlier and require more training time. It's an accepted truth that most jobs being created in our economy require some type of postsecondary training. It's also a fact of life that the national average for community colleges is that about 23% of people who enroll (adults, traditional students, everyone) completes a degree in three years. It's also a fact of life that funding to support training and education has not kept pace with costs. This brings us to a situation where the training adults need may be too costly, take more time than they can afford to spend in training, and require developmental courses to fill holes in an academic background that might be 5 to 15 years in the past. The area of developing new, innovative, shorter term programming to move adults like those I mentioned earlier through training and education at a faster pace with a lower cost is a critical challenge to our system, because until we can do that, we cannot fully meet the needs of our employers.

Having worked in the area of workforce development for 30 years, I can say without reservation that the Summer Youth Employment Program is one of the most important programs our governments can offer. A strong Summer Youth Employment Program can help low-income, unemployed youth get their first job, and point them towards increased academic and career success. The Center for Labor Market Studies at Boston University has made it very clear, year after year, that the job market for youth is drying up, and that lines of class and race separate those who find work through family connections from those who never get jobs because they don't have those connections. Our Summer Youth Employment Program, historically financed through TANF dollars annually appropriated by the state of New York, annually gets 800 or more applications for 300 or fewer slots. This program, which serves youth below 200% of poverty, is an important part of helping young people learn the lessons that come with work. We need to have a national investment in this effort. The youth who flood our program – mostly minority, all low-income – are the backbone of the emerging workforce. We use Workforce Investment Act funding to augment this and support year-round programs that offer summer sessions. This is what two of the youth we served this past summer said back then:

“My teachers in the Upward Bound Program taught me things that I need to know and learn, and we all worked together as a team to get the job done. When I got paid, I bought things that I needed like clothes, things for school, and food for my family and me. It was very helpful to get money to buy what I need and not have to ask my parents all the time.”

-Rebecca Di

“I loved this opportunity because we worked hard and got paid for it. We earned it, and that's what life is mostly about. I bought many things with the money I earned, like materials for school.”

This is what we do at Workforce Development: We provide those looking for work with the vital connections no one else can give them, and we start those looking for careers along a path that can help them succeed in life.

Employment opportunities:

At this point in our regional economic cycle, ripples of the recession are still dominant. The national economic recession continued a long-established trend of contraction in the manufacturing sector, while sectoral growth was chiefly in health care and technology. Within these broad trends, there are areas – such as human services or hospitality -- that have experienced growth due to growth of either a major employer or several large ones. The aviation sector had a boom with Empire Aero, a lull when that employer left, and is now growing strong with new employers in the picture.

Of greatest concern for our workforce system is the disconnect between what employers indicate through focus groups they will be needing as the recovery takes hold, and the skills levels of adults who have either lost jobs in the past few years or who have never successfully held a job.

Overall, employers want new hires with some very important qualifications:

- **Strong math skills that equate to roughly the level of algebra**
- **Strong technology skills to operate or oversee precision equipment in a manufacturing environment.**
- **Strong IT skills to oversee networks, security and systems work in a service sector environment.**
- **Strong science skills in health care, manufacturing and renewable energy sectors.**
- **Strong writing skills to communicate with internal and external customers**

- **Strong reading skills to understand e-mails and instructions**

In all of these cases, employers are responding to the changing face of work. Within my lifetime, a high school graduate was able to find a job – a good-paying job – and stay with that employer for decades. Training took place when a new machine arrived. Now, change is such a constant that only with a strong set of foundation skills can anyone ride the changes that are taking place in every sector of our economy. **The only way to get the skills employers demand is to get to a postsecondary or adult training course and learn them.** Community colleges have the very unique position of covering the range of skills that are so vital to the economic well-being of this region, and our country. That is why we need such strong efforts to link workforce programs with community colleges. I have tremendous respect and admiration for the adult education efforts provided locally by our Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) and in other states by adult education providers. They are essential partners to bring the lowest-skills, highest-need adults to the level where they can participate in vital postsecondary programs. But the needs of our employers are such that we cannot expect success in a training continuum that stops short of a college campus. The message from employers is very clear: They do not want us to train for job titles: They want training to prepare their workers for learning and doing. They want what a community college is created to provide – a combination of skills and theory that will not fade away at the next technological change.

College partnerships:

The past 10 years have been a time of increased partnerships between our colleges and the workforce system. Funding secured through grants by Oneida County Workforce Development and the Workforce Investment Board has helped us develop partnerships with a number of our local colleges.

1. Here at SUNY Institute of Technology, the WIB and SUNY IT staff worked to developed the concept of Information Technology apprenticeships in a project that had a 90 percent placement rate, and that has served as a pilot for other efforts to focus training on the employment competencies taught in any class instead of the more traditional college course catalog approach. Although most of the training efforts that are the major focus of our work take place at lower skill levels than those taught at SUNY IT, the college has remained a valuable strategic partner in all of our project development efforts, so that as we build career pathways, they can lead to the higher degrees offered at this campus.
2. Over in Madison County, the Renewable Energy Training Center at Morrisville State College was launched because of the partnership between the college and workforce system.
3. One county to the east, in Herkimer County, Oneida County Workforce Development staff have networked with the college to include Herkimer County-based training options in health care and technology training projects.
4. Mohawk Valley Community College has been the centerpiece of our college-workforce efforts. For example, our Summer Youth Employment Program is entirely based at MVCC, which means our local high school youth have exposure to a college campus just from work readiness activities that are an integral part of our program. MVCC piloted a project called Ready, Set College to increase the numbers of young people getting a college degree before seeking work. That transitioned into an Upward Bound project that now functions as part of our summer workforce youth programming. When we wanted to pilot a concept for training disconnected youth in “green careers,” MVCC converted the concept into a summer program and created a project that not only renovated facilities in

downtown Rome and downtown Utica, we also had about 70 percent of our young adults (aged 19-24) either employed or going to college full-time.

5. All four of these colleges send staff to strategic planning sessions that outline how we can respond to employer needs in ways that fit the needs they see as well as the programs they offer. The dialogue has been constant for several years, and is a reason we are able to operate as a regional system. Yes, all the lines of geography are there. However, we plan regionally and act that way because employers and our customers care only about results, not turf.
6. Our private colleges, which have less a focus on workforce training, remain a part of our workforce system. Utica College works with us in its Young Scholars program, so that summer work experience goes hand in hand with year-round academic skills training for at-risk students. Utica College is linked with MVCC in its current CyberJobs effort.

Workforce / community college perspective:

Community colleges are ideally suited to be partners with the workforce system. The emerging system that has been shaped by our experience is that the One-Stop Centers and its community-based outreach programs are ideally suited to assessing the skills and needs of unemployed adults and laid-off workers. One-Stop / workforce staff can understand the difference between someone who wishes he or she could have an IT career and someone who actually has the ability to find work in that sector. There are some hard calls to make, before we spend public money on training that will not work out. We're willing to make those calls.

The many unemployed adults who need basic skills – including, in this community, refugees whose English is not sufficient to bring them up to the next level of wages – are served well by BOCES and the similar adult education providers in other states.

Community colleges fit into the mix by serving as the connection that moves our customers from being either under-qualified or outdated to the level they need to be – whether that means short-term training, certificate programs, degree programs, transfer programs, or a combination of on-line and in-person courses. The rich texture of opportunities offered at community colleges is unrivaled.

But there's a catch. Sooner or later, everything comes down to money. We love to think outside the box, but we cannot deliver powerful programs outside of funding streams. If local boards and local community colleges are going to be unleashed to address local problems in new, creative partnerships, the workforce and community college systems must have flexibility at the local end and the capability to respond to unique regional opportunities.

Oneida County developed its strong partnership with community colleges over time. The type of partnership we enjoy is now a major workforce priority everywhere. As a recent National Skills Coalition report entitled “New York’s Forgotten Middle Skill Jobs” notes: *“Middle-skill jobs—those that require more than a high school diploma but not a four-year degree—account for nearly half of all current jobs in New York, and a substantial share of future job openings. Prior to the recession New York was experiencing shortages of middle-skill workers in crucial industries, like health care and information technology. Although the state has lost jobs across most skill levels during the economic downturn, this has not fundamentally changed the structure of New York’s labor market: the majority of all jobs still require more than a high school diploma. As recovery takes hold in New York and across the nation, a large share of the new jobs created will require middle-skill credentials. With high unemployment in the state, now is precisely the time to ensure that New York is training its residents for the middle-skill job opportunities that will be critical to the state’s recovery and long-term economic success.”*

If disaster tomorrow swept through this region, regardless of deficits, there would be action to help the people of this area rebuild their lives. The long-term economic contractions that have taken away job after job have been so gradual they lack the obvious impact of a disaster, but the result on the lives of those impacted has been the same. The response to this should be clear: empowering and strengthening the workforce system and its partner, the community college system, is the most essential step that can be taken to rebuild our workforce, to rebuild our economy and to rebuild the lives of people who deserve a hand up after the economy has knocked them down.