

Written Testimony March 22, 2011, Oneida County Executive Anthony J. Picente, Jr.

Good morning. My name is Anthony J. Picente, Jr., and I have the honor to serve the people of Oneida County as their County Executive. I wish to welcome you today and thank you for hearing our testimony and allowing us in Herkimer and Oneida Counties to have our voices heard. As the County Executive since 2007, and assistant to a prior county executive for five additional years in the early 1990s, I have a strong background in working with employers and our community college.

As Regional Administrator for the New York State Labor serving ten counties in the late 1990s and early part of this century, I led the transformation of what was known as the unemployment office to the One Stop System of Workforce development. I've worked with CEOs across this county to understand their needs from what it takes to hire a skilled workforce and in developing financial incentives packages to help them grow.

For the next five years I served as Vice President and Regional Director for Empire State Development Corporation, the state's arm for economic development. With Empire State Development serving six counties my office was involved in 87 projects resulting in over \$29 million of state assistance. These projects led to the creation of over 3700 new jobs and the retention of over 13,000 existing jobs.

Successful economic development not only requires that we create shovel ready sites, but also develop and attract the work force that can fill the plant the day it opens. Our work force development and educational system must also be ready to handle the challenges that are on our horizon. We cannot simply expect that the workforce of the future will develop on its own. We need to work differently.

Several years ago, Empire Aero – an aircraft repair firm -- located here. As those of us at the regional level looked at the economic potential of that sector – not just the one employer – we realized that we did not need to just create a course, train a few people and hope for the best. We needed a well-developed, intentional plan so that this sector could grow to its full potential, regardless of whether we had 1 or 10 employers in the area.

That process brought together a number of partners. These partners included Mohawk Valley EDGE, our economic development agency, the Workforce Investment Board, Oneida County Workforce Development, The New York State Department of Labor, Empire State Development and Mohawk Valley Community College. The college looked at this workforce issue as an opportunity to increase our region’s training capacity. MVCC went far beyond the needs of the moment by creating a full program aimed at the Airframe and Power plant credentials needed in the industry – a program that is still going strong . We all probably crossed over into one another’s sphere of authority about a hundred times in the course of the process, but that is why the process worked. In the end, the entire partnership was developing the workforce for this sector, which is why even after the initial employer who started this chain of events has transitioned from the region; we still have a successful and growing sector as well as programs that are meeting the needs of employers. We built something from scratch to serve the needs of our region, and we have been successful because every partner invested time and resources.

I think there’s a very strong message in that, and one I wish to focus upon. I want to make sure that we are doing the same to meet the needs of employers and create a skills base that will enable us to attract new industry. For example, our region is working hard with a tremendous show of perseverance to develop a site right near this hearing that can become a

nanotechnology facility. We are up to our ears in permitting and infrastructure and all of the other pieces of a major economic development project.

At the same time, staff from our workforce system, Mohawk Valley Community College, Herkimer County Community College, the Utica School of Commerce, SUNY Institute of Technology and others have been meeting to discuss how we can adapt current career pathway models to continually raise the bar in programs that lead towards advanced manufacturing. I think it says volumes about the commitment of our colleges and our workforce system that a partnership of staff members from both systems have been behind virtually every successful training grant project in the last few years. Not every partner gets a windfall in every project; but the partnership endures and our efforts become stronger due to all of this effort.

For Oneida County, the stakes are getting higher and the challenges are growing. We know the day we enter the nanotechnology business there will be some very strong demands for very high-skilled people. Whether our training programs build partnerships or try to refine ways to move training under the broad nanotechnology umbrella, the preliminary infrastructure for those training programs is being built through our workforce system and our colleges.

It's slow going because this is one more task on top of many others. I believe this represents one of the great challenges facing our community: with understandably limited resources, how does a medium-sized community such as ours embark on the capacity building it needs to do in order to develop a workforce development education and training infrastructure that keeps pace with the needs of the future? As our economy is requiring higher and higher skills, the capacity of our systems to deliver those skills must continue to grow.

When the One-Stop System began, one central precept was to be ready to respond to employers. Even in the short time since WIA was adopted, that has taken on new meaning.

Employers are now demanding – and needing – employees who cannot be trained in days or weeks, but require months or in some cases years. I believe that efforts to help regions build the capacity to deliver high-level skills training and postsecondary education are every bit as essential as the training provided to people in need. Developing quality technical and professional curriculum is not the same as hiring a machinist to teach a course in running an old-fashioned milling machine. However, support for those kinds of efforts is not consistent. If we really want to plan for the future of our economy and build a system of postsecondary training and education that works, then we need to invest in that effort. As someone who has to live within a budget and say the word “no,” I’m not going to tell you the answer is in billions of new federal dollars. However, the way we invest resources should align with our critical priorities, and I am convinced that investments to build capacity are a critical priority to develop key growth sectors in our region, or any region.

Management is the art of getting things done. We all have different styles. I commend the attention all of you must pay, when making allocations, to ensuring that there is strict accountability for the money the government spends. I’m a taxpayer. I want my money used wisely. I also know that flexibility is a vital element to success. As this committee looks at the Workforce Investment Act for refinements and updates, I strongly encourage you to provide the local Boards that make up the system with the greatest possible degree of flexibility to set needs and priorities. One of the ways that all of us at all levels of government can address the reality that there are more needs than we can ever fully fund is to ease regulatory burdens and mandates so that the agencies and governments on the front lines of delivering services – those who know best what is needed – can react and respond without being constrained by rules imposed with the best of intentions that end up being burdens. One of the reasons we are here in the first place is

that community colleges are able to operate with maximum flexibility because the decision-making capability is close to the community. One of the two key partners in the workforce-college system can move fast. In a private sector world where employers move fast, all parts of the system need the flexibility to be innovative and creative. Each community faces at least one complex problem that is so unique to that region that no best practice is going to work. Let's empower communities to tackle those issues and develop the capacity to create workforce and training solutions.

We are living in revolutionary times. The Mohawk Valley economy must adapt to global economic changes and a demographic shift creating urgent needs to upgrade workforce preparation for all segments of our population.

Educating a workforce that requires extensive postsecondary education and training will not happen overnight, but we are working overtime to be ready for the day when opportunity arrives.

We continue to look at every possible way to maximize the skills of the workers we have, the potential of those in transition and the educational achievement of those who have not yet graduated.

We will need to develop programs that learn from the past and focus on the changing demographics of our communities, so that we are not just providing one-shot training, we are engaging lifelong learners.

Workforce development is the cornerstone of economic development. Just as the jobs of the Industrial Revolution grew up around natural resources such as water, the jobs of the knowledge revolution of the 21st Century will cluster in regions that can provide a diverse, trained, highly motivated workforce.

The strategies and programs we develop as part of our partnership between the workforce system and community college system will do more than shape the future of our economy; they will shape the lives of the Mohawk Valley's future generations.