

Testimony to the United States House of Representatives

Committee on Education and the Workforce

Thursday, April 21, 2011

Presented by: Dean Dickey, Mayor

City of Columbia, TN

Good morning, Chairman Kline, Representative DesJarlais, and all others in attendance today. My name is Dean Dickey, and I have the honor to serve the people of the City of Columbia as their Mayor. I wish to welcome you today and thank you for hearing our testimony and allowing us in the City of Columbia and Maury County to be heard. As the Mayor, since 2010, City Council Member for two years prior, and former Business Service Manager at the Tennessee Career Center, I have a strong background in helping people find employment and realizing the effects our economy plays in that role.

As a business owner who served on the workforce board in the late '90's, I have worked with the Tennessee Department of Labor/Workforce and was involved with consolidation and relocation for the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). I have worked with employers and local elected officials across the state to understand their needs and what it takes to hire skilled workforce. I have also been involved in developing financial incentives to help them succeed through this job creation.

For eight years, I served as Employer Services Manager for the Workforce Alliance in the Workforce Area 10. The Workforce Alliance serves eight counties, and our office was involved in many projects resulting in several thousand dollars of state and federal assistance. These projects led to the creation of new jobs and the retention of existing jobs.

In order for the economic development of our city and county to succeed, the workforce agencies and colleges in our area are key components in developing the workforce of our future. College students need to be aware of the expectations of the working environment as well as their obligation to meet high standards through their learning process. Columbia State Community College as well as other colleges/universities that are attended outside of our immediate area urges graduates to use the information provided through job placement services such as job search and job fairs. Students are also briefed on interviewing opportunities and provided resources to help assist these students in order for them to successfully move into their career fields. Mentoring is also available to students who request it; however, it is the students' obligation to seek career opportunities. As a leader of the City of Columbia, I want to be instrumental in helping to meet the needs of our employers and employees. It is my desire for employees to have the needed training in order to carry out their tasks and perform well in their duties, but in order to do that, I further expect our colleges and training facilities to meet the current expectations of the students and employers.

Several partnerships have developed within our local business community. One partnership that comes to mind is when Johnson's Controls located to our area several years ago. Those of us on the local level looked at the economic potential when this company located to our area. We realized that we needed to develop a partnership so that our area could reach its full potential for growth, whether we had one or twenty employers in our area. The partnership developed through that process included the Workforce Alliance, Workforce Investment Board, Tennessee Valley Authority, Tennessee State Department of Labor, Tennessee Department of Economic Development Council, Columbia State Community College,

the Tennessee Technology Centers, and the Tennessee Career Center. Columbia State Community College looked at this as an opportunity to increase our region's training capacity. The entire partnership was committed to developing the workforce for our area, and we were successful, because every organization spent the time and put forth the effort needed on the process.

Another important partnership that exists is with Maury Alliance, our local economic development organization. In the past year, we have restructured the organization to be better equipped to attract new jobs into our area. We have also just completed a partnership with the business community which included a fundraising campaign. We received pledges of \$2.5 million that will be used for new recruiting opportunities and to update the website information with other marketing opportunities specific to our area.

We have developed partnerships into positive working relationships with the business sector of the City of Columbia, City of Mt. Pleasant, City of Spring Hill, and Maury County governments as well. Our local governments are unified in our efforts to create new job opportunities for our citizens. The City of Columbia has a tax incentive plan that is part of the Maury County Industrial Development Board. The incentive plan was put into place to attract prospects that are interested in locating to our area and allow us to be more competitive.

At the last report from the Tennessee Department of Labor, the unemployment rate for the City of Columbia was 16%. This is the highest rate for cities in the state of Tennessee. The unemployment rate for Maury County, at the last report, was 14.2%. These are not positive numbers and are indicative of our struggling economy. There is not an abundance of quality jobs in our local area for the job seekers. Those searching for employment often times end up

taking a lesser paying job and thereby becoming underemployed. Others drive many miles to find quality employment and even worse, still leave the area permanently for employment.

We are living in revolutionary times where we know the importance of education and maximizing the skills of the workers we have. The Workforce Area 10 economy must also adapt to global economic changes and a demographic shift creating urgent needs to upgrade workforce preparation for all segments of our population. We are no longer able to be content with the skill sets of our parents and grandparents. We no longer have the luxury of training for a career with the expectations that the training will serve us a lifetime and provide adequately for our future. We no longer can remain comfortable in the belief that current businesses and industries in our area will remain viable into the future. Our future depends upon our ability to renew ourselves and retrain ourselves. Our future depends upon not only retaining a current population of skilled workers but also providing a business climate and community environment that is attractive to business and industries that may not now exist.

I appreciate all the efforts of this committee and understand it is not an easy task to designate federal funds to improve our job opportunities. I also realize that the government cannot create jobs – only the private sector can accomplish this. Thank you again for allowing us to be heard today, and I will be glad to answer any questions you might have.