

Congressional Written Testimony

Putting America Back to Work: The Role of Workforce Development and Small Business Rehiring

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Kelly Folks

Arapahoe/Douglas Works! Workforce Director

President of Rocky Mountain Workforce Development Association



My name is Kelly Folks. I am the Workforce Director for Arapahoe/Douglas Works! Board and Workforce Center and the President of the Rocky Mountain Workforce Development Association (RMWDA). The views I express in this testimony are my own, based on experience in working within the Workforce Development System at a local, state and national level holding a variety of positions to include the above two positions, as well as I serve as the Region 4 liaison for the National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB), the Region 8 Board representative for the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP), and have been appointed by the Governor as a member of the Colorado Workforce Development Council.

I want to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to discuss the needs of the Workforce Boards and One-Stop Centers, the needs of the Workforce Development System as a whole, the innovative practices that have been occurring at the state and local levels with business/industry in particular with small businesses pre-COVID19 and throughout COVID19, the Workforce Development System (Local Boards and One-Stop Centers) response to COVID19 and the current trends that have transpired in my local Workforce Region and throughout the State of Colorado since COVID-19 came into play.

Background:

Arapahoe/Douglas Works! Workforce Center and Workforce Board serves the community as a labor exchange and work-skill development center supporting the local economy and general public. Its operations are governed by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Wagner-Peyser Act, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, Food Stamp Act, Title 38 and any other relevant grants and/or contractual obligations.

Arapahoe/Douglas Works! Workforce Board and One-Stop center is a member of the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment's statewide and national network of Workforce Centers, which provide a variety of no-cost services to job seekers and businesses. Arapahoe/Douglas Works! serves as a critical resource to connect people and businesses in Arapahoe and Douglas Counties, and throughout the Colorado, Denver/Aurora metropolitan region.

The Workforce Center offers an array of tools to support local job-seekers, including offering resources and workshops for a self-directed job search, one-on-one employment counseling, and training assistance. The center utilizes Connecting Colorado, which is an online database system through the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE) that keeps track of the statewide job openings and registered job-seekers, to facilitate the match between skilled workers and businesses.

Arapahoe/Douglas Works! offers free workforce development services to businesses in the metro Denver area, to ensure that the region remains economically competitive and boasts an adequately skilled workforce for the future. The Board offers an array of services to economic development, chamber and business/industry partners beyond job fairs/hiring events, assistance filling open positions, workshops, and assessments. We provide a multitude of data driven reports and products

which enhance their ability to make sound decisions in regards to relocation, hiring, competitive salary adjustments and offerings, etc.

The Workforce Center is guided by a Workforce Development Board comprised of local community members to include, but not limited to business/industry, Chambers, Economic Development entities, Education, Non-profits, and WIOA mandated partners, etc.

Arapahoe/Douglas Works! Mission

To strategically invest in Human Capital which contributes to regional economic vitality.

Arapahoe/Douglas Works! Vision

A best-in-class workforce development organization that is responsive to the dynamic needs of job seekers and business/industry.

Arapahoe/Douglas Works! Agency Key Results

- 100% employability for all those who want to work
- Results that are best-in-class
- Metro-area workforce center of choice
- Exceptional delivery of services
- Provide the highest rate of return on public investment

Rocky Mountain Workforce Development Association (RMWDA)

RMWDA serves as the State Workforce Development Association. It is a 501c4. Its membership base consists of the 10 Workforce Regions, the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment-Employment and Training Division, the Colorado Workforce Development Council and the Colorado Department of Human Services.

RMWDA Mission

Create the conditions for excellence in Colorado's workforce ecosystem through collaborative advocacy and capacity building for our members, so as to enhance opportunities for employers, job seekers, and those striving to obtain self-sufficiency.

RMWDA Vision

The workforce ecosystem is aligned, recognized for excellence, and driven by well-trained staff.

The Workforce Development Boards are the agent and convener of the Workforce Development System on a local level in the State of Colorado. They are business-led, governed and supported by their local elected officials.

The Workforce Boards are charged with bringing together industry, education, labor, community, government, and other key stakeholders in workforce to develop demand-driven strategies to make certain a connection occurs within the regional economies and labor markets.

Needs of the Workforce Development System:

Although WIOA has not been cut at a national level, unfortunately the formula utilized for allocating funding to states and then locally lags with the market and the current demands, therefore it makes it very difficult at a local level to provide the level of service delivery needed, especially during times such as this. The nuances to the WIOA law creates problems nationally and locally because the labor market information lags, therefore skewing the formula for which what is really occurring with unemployment trends in a state and/or local area at the time. The WIOA system has not been funded nationally over the past several years at a level to keep up with the demand or speed of the market.

For several years now the Workforce Development System in Colorado and locally has continually realized tremendous budget cuts. Although many states, including Colorado pre-COVID19 had low unemployment rates, many business/industry leaders were leaning heavily on the system to assist with finding the “right fit” worker for their company’s needs. In some cases this included the need for additional training and upskilling and in other cases the data to show that they were not offering a competitive wage for the position, etc. Additionally, business/industry needed support in filling their hardest to fill positions.

Jobseekers that needed assistance in many cases had little to no work experience or had multiple barriers to employment, consequently needing additional assistance from the system to ensure that they were able to obtain and retain employment. Therefore the need for the Workforce Development System was and now during COVID19 even more prevalent. An example of budget restraints for my local region and other Colorado local regions in past years have been at times up to 20% cuts for each grant i.e. WIOA Youth, WIOA Adult, WIOA DW, Wagner Peyser, etc. With the continued funding cuts within in the system, this has placed additional burdens and strains on an already resource and funding depleted system to provide assistance for business/industry and jobseekers during this pandemic and crisis.

The Workforce Development System has unfortunately been the “best kept secret” for years. Due to funding constraints within the allow ability of the various grants that the system has, it is very hard for the system to “market” their value add for providing results that are best in class for the community and the return on investment that does occur when we are able to find jobseekers employment, retool, retrain and upskill them and provide business/industry workers in which meet their needs and the cost savings which they realize from lower turnover rates, etc.

In order for the Workforce Development System to meet the demands of the community to include the jobseekers and business/industry during the pandemic, the system needs resources and funding. During the Great Recession, the Workforce Development System was put to the test, receiving an influx in funding to serve the communities through a variety of mechanisms. The system as a whole rose to that challenge. Many jobseekers and businesses were able to get the additional supports that they needed to obtain and retain employment. The unemployment rates post the Great Recession prove the effects of the supports of the system. This type of bold and decisive action is needed even more today with the current economy devastated by the pandemic.

Examples of resources and funding include, but are not limited to the following:

- Additional resources need to be added to the overall WIOA funding streams to include Adult, Dislocated Worker and Youth.
- Additional resources need to be added to Wagner Peyser.
- Additional resources need to be considered for Youth Employment programming.
- Additional resources need to be considered for local areas to be able to provide a more robust Business Service delivery which allows for the innovation needed to meet the current demands of business/industry.

Response to COVID19:

Our response to COVID19 has taken the Workforce Development System as a whole, locally and within Colorado to the next level. When the State of Colorado shut down for several weeks during the height of cases in our State, we had less than 48 hours to get all of our services remote/virtual. Many local regions in Colorado to include Arapahoe/Douglas Works!, developed and implemented local call centers to assist the State of Colorado with the influx and demand on the unemployment calls to the system by jobseekers and businesses effected. All services went virtual with absolutely no stop in service delivery to the jobseekers and/or businesses. The offices have reopened, however as we saw significant positive results in offering virtual service delivery, both service models continue to date throughout the state. Offerings include, but are not limited to virtual-interactive workshops, assessments in person and virtual, one-on-one career counseling in person and virtual, virtual hiring events and job fairs, virtual career expos for youth, retraining, retooling and upskilling jobseekers, pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship options.

Current Workforce Development Trends:

The current Workforce Development trends that we are seeing nationally, within the State of Colorado and our local region include the following:

- People not going back to work with the company that they were furloughed from due to that company either closing and/or the particular job no longer available.
- The need for layoff aversion methodologies and incumbent worker training availability to be put in place with more flexibility to ensure that business/industry can continue to retool and skill up their current workforce rather than lay off.
- Although work-based learning is a key factor in being able to put funding into local businesses, right now they are having trouble with having time to look into developing apprenticeship programs and/or allow for on-the job trainings. They do not have the bandwidth. Flexibility in being able to pay 100% for a period of time of a jobseekers on-the-job training is needed.
- A need for more flexibility in the formula funds so that local communities can build the programming needed to put people back to work quickly.
- Public service employment should be re-examined to be able to place unemployed individuals in opportunities which assist both our local governments with recovery and their families with a pay check.

Innovative Practices:

During the pandemic, the Arapahoe/Douglas Workforce Board developed a Recovery Taskforce for Douglas County and one for Arapahoe County. The taskforces are charged with ensuring that Economic Development entities, Chambers of Commerce's in each County, the Small Business Development Association, Municipalities within those Counties, the Workforce Board and Businesses are working collaboratively to focus on working with the business community to identify and provide available resources to assist the businesses return to pre-crisis operation levels. The taskforces are charged with analyzing the trends, needs and gaps that are occurring within business/industry and are working collaboratively on solution based ideas to implement to ensure business needs are met and they can reopen. Some innovative practices that are coming specifically out of the Arapahoe/Douglas Workforce Board-Arapahoe County Recovery taskforce include working hand-in-hand with the County to develop programming within key "Business Impact areas" that were outlined due to the pandemic. Through utilization of CARES Act funding, several business impact areas have been outlined. One area, Advance Arapahoe, concentrates on assisting small and medium sized businesses with Infrastructure/PPE grants and Business Interruption grants.

Another area, Retrain Arapahoe, concentrates on several components of retooling, upskilling, training and retraining jobseekers and provides assistance for business/industry regarding education components for business/industry in areas that have been outlined as gaps or needs for companies. These training areas may include, but are not limited to workshops regarding filing for bankruptcy and workshops on moving their business outside, within compliance of the Governor's orders. Virtual business roundtables and conferences with topic areas driven by the business community have also been implemented and well attended, topics for these conferences include, but are not limited to cybersecurity, hiring and onboarding in a virtual environment, teleworking best practices, current update on the paycheck protection program, the future of work and safety practices for business in a COVID world.

The retooling, upskilling, training and retraining jobseekers component of Retrain Arapahoe include customers receiving training assistance to make them more employable and or ensuring that a business can keep them employed through retooling and/or upskilling them if a position no longer exists in that industry, as well the taskforce working to re-employ jobseekers in other industries through their transferrable skills and retooling/upskilling them within those industries.

Close the Gap is another initiative that the Arapahoe/Douglas Workforce Board-Arapahoe County Recovery taskforce will be implementing. This is a collaboration with Arapahoe Community College, Arapahoe County, and the Arapahoe/Douglas Workforce Board and Workforce Center. A very significant gap that was realized in the height of the pandemic when the State of Colorado was in the Stay at Home order, was the various technology gaps within employees in all industries. The goal of the Close the Gap program is to assess jobseekers individual technology skills and provide the necessary training to enable them to apply for a job online, work remotely, understand email, social media, and a wide variety of business applications like Microsoft suite, the google platform, zoom, and go to meeting. The population concentration for this program is working with low-income individuals. Once the individual completes the program successfully, they will receive a Chromebook and/or laptop in order to be able to take employment opportunities if they need an option to work

from home during these most uncertain times, for example a single mom, whom has school aged kids and may not be able to work full-time in the fall based on whether or not the school district is in an online and/or in-person format.

Some additional innovative best practices that have been in place within the State of Colorado pre-COVID and continue to be very relevant during the pandemic are the following:

- Virtual hiring events through the Connecting Colorado platform, utilized statewide.
- The creation and implementation of the Business Service Alignment group, which includes representatives from each local area and the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, who work strategically to align business practices to ensure business/industry receives the same services and messaging.
- The formation of a data expert group, which includes representatives from each local area who work strategically to respond to data requests from a multitude of partners to include, but not limited to business/industry, education partners, economic development entities, chambers, non-profit organizations and other government agencies. The group also reports out the ROI of the Workforce Development System for Colorado.

The Role of Workforce Development in Putting America Back to Work:

The nation's Workforce Development System is uniquely suited to put relief money into the community quickly now similarly to when it was called upon during the Great Recession. The Workforce Development System has the following components, partnerships and infrastructure in place which will make certain that the current unemployment crisis from the pandemic can be addressed:

- The Workforce service delivery infrastructure already is in existence locally and nationally.
- The Workforce system has built relationships with existing short-term occupational training programs.
- The Workforce system has the experience and partnerships in place to ensure retooling, upskilling, training and retraining jobseekers is implemented and already provides assistance for business/industry.
- The Workforce system has the knowledge of local business/industry needs and how short-term work-based-learning options can apply.
- The Workforce system has demonstrated timely and thorough data on current labor force demand and trends in job listings.
- The Workforce system has timely data on the emergent demand for specific skills, and ability to create fast training around those skills with education partnerships.

In short the Workforce Development System stands ready to put America back to work!