



Friday, March 26, 2021

RE: Testimony regarding Senate Bill 885 An Act Implementing The Governor's Budget Recommendations for General Government.

Good morning Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Mark Argosh and I am the Chair of the Governor's Workforce Council, which serves as the state's workforce board as required under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. I would like to testify in favor of sections 11-54 of S.B. 885 An Act Implementing The Governor's Budget Recommendations for General Government. I thank the Governor for proposing such important legislation, which would statutorily establish the Office of Workforce Strategy and create the position of the state's Chief Workforce Officer.

The primary goal of the Governor's Workforce Council (GWC) and the Office of Workforce Strategy (OWS) is to ensure that Connecticut develops the most accessible, equitable, and high-quality workforce in the country. In October the GWC unanimously adopted an equity-based education and workforce strategy to achieve these objectives. This strategic plan was developed with over 100 stakeholders from business, education, government, and the nonprofit community.

The strategic plan includes 19 strategic initiatives that are critical for developing our current and future workforce. We would not have completed this important work without the strong support of the Office of Workforce Strategy under the leadership of Kelli Vallieres.

These 19 initiatives require the deep involvement of industry partners, education partners (both K-12 and higher education), the regional workforce development boards, many state agencies, and nonprofit and community stakeholders. This work will take thousands of hours to accomplish and cannot be adequately coordinated without the Office of Workforce Strategy.

For example, we are engaging the business community in establishing a network of regional sector partnerships in the five workforce regions. This will provide us a much stronger and proven approach for convening senior business leaders, educators, workforce and economic



development professionals, and nonprofits in building effective workforce strategies and programming for each high demand sector. We have heard from DECD and AdvanceCT that the biggest issue for companies in deciding to locate, stay, and grow in Connecticut is workforce development. This model of regional sector partnerships has been proven in over 20 states and will help Connecticut increase economic growth and employment, so that we can have the strongest possible recovery coming out of the pandemic.

We are also engaging the K-12 education system, colleges and universities, adult education, and training providers to build out a durable career pathway system that will enable all people to equitably access education and career opportunities. Our current career pathways system is fragmented and does not reach the vast majority of students and adults. Yet, education stakeholders are aligned on working together to break through silos and make this happen. Again, this would not be possible without the strong support of the Office of Workforce Strategy working together with the Governor's Workforce Council. The Executive Director will serve on many of the key education boards in order to bring these systems in stronger alignment.

Finally the GWC has an expansive equity agenda. We aim to break down the barriers to work such as childcare, transportation, benefit cliffs, and other social barriers. We are engaging state agencies and community stakeholders representing underserved populations such as minorities, opportunity youth, returning citizens, immigrants, and people with disabilities. All of this work takes significant coordination across agencies, as well as a statewide perspective that the Office of Workforce Strategy provides.

The GWC has looked at the ways that other states are coordinating their workforce activities. Nearly all 50 states have the equivalent to an Office of Workforce Strategy. While the intent is for the office to remain small and serve as a strategic and coordinating body, it is important to note from a fiscal standpoint, the OWS will be smaller on a per capita basis than any of our regional or national peer states. In essence, we are not overinvesting in the OWS. What is critically important is that the Office of Workforce Strategy have the organizational flexibility that it needs to take on this coordination role. Setting up the OWS as an APO within DECD is the best way of accomplishing this. Placing it as a branch of another agency would reduce its ability to effectively work across agencies and hinder the ability for its executive director to serve as the Chief Workforce Officer for the state.



My final point is that we don't have to speculate about the effectiveness or importance of the Office of Workforce Strategy, since it already exists. In my role as GWC Chair, I work closely with the OWS on a daily basis. I don't know how the members of the Council as volunteers could have made much significant progress in implementing our 19 strategic initiatives, addressing the pandemic, or bringing together all of the key stakeholders to work together on these important activities. OWS has demonstrated extraordinary leadership in addressing the pandemic through its statewide coordination of the CARES funded job training programs with our regional workforce development boards and higher education partners, as well as setting up online training opportunities for unemployed individuals. We owe Kelli Vallieres and her team a tremendous debt of gratitude for their incredible leadership at a time of crisis for our state and country. We now have the structure in place to help Connecticut be a leading state in job growth, economic growth, training, and equitable access to the workforce. Let's keep it in place and not start over.