

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Frederica Wilson (FL-24)

Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

“Examining America’s Workforce Challenges: Looking for Ways to Improve Skills Development”

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

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Thank you, Chairman Owens, and good morning. Thank you so much to our witnesses—welcome today—thank you for your time and I’m looking forward to your testimony.

Investing in workforce development is a critical step we must take to ensure a brighter future for our economy. With today's hearing, we're taking a step in the right direction to support both workers and employers alike.

The need for this investment is more urgent than ever, not because our economy is struggling, but because it is thriving.

The reality is that the unemployment rate is still near record lows and wages are increasing. This a direct result of key legislation we delivered last Congress.

These legislative victories are creating millions of good-paying jobs. Combined with President Biden’s work to build the economy from the bottom up and middle out, we have created, on average, 470,000 jobs every month since the start of this administration.

For workers to benefit from this historic job growth, they need the skills and credentials to succeed in new careers. And, for employers to benefit, they need access to a dedicated and skilled workforce.

There is no better tool to meet both of those needs—and connect people with quality jobs—than the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*, or WIOA.

WIOA is the backbone of our workforce system. But our investment in workforce development falls short of where it needs to be to stay competitive in the global economy. Other developed countries spend half to one percent of their gross domestic product on workforce development. We, in America, spend only *one-tenth* of one percent. We can't afford to fall behind in this critical area, and increasing our investment is the only way to stay competitive.

That is why, last Congress, Committee Democrats led a series of bipartisan hearings to craft the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2022*, which was designed to enhance WIOA funding, expand access for underserved communities, and ensure that workers are connected to high-quality jobs. The House passed the bill last year with four Republican votes.

I believe my Republican colleagues agree that we must strengthen skills development. Yet, just last month, House Republicans passed a debt ceiling proposal that takes us backwards. By cutting workforce funding, the *Default on America Act* would prevent roughly 750,000 job seekers from accessing services and skills programs.

This is the wrong approach. Today's hearing can help us correct course and build on last Congress's progress towards a bipartisan WIOA reauthorization.

There are two fundamental goals a meaningful reauthorization must achieve: expanding job seekers' access to workforce programs and meeting the needs of businesses.

Far more workers would benefit from skills development programs—and enter higher quality jobs—if we finally put serious money behind WIOA. In fact, the *WIOA of 2022* included \$80 billion over six years to help train more than a million workers each year.

Importantly, many job seekers need additional support with child care, transportation, and housing to complete skills programs. Take, for example, job seekers with children. If they don't have child care, they won't be able to attend classes or go into work for on-the-job training. It's time to stop putting up barriers and start breaking barriers down. By investing in critical support services, we can empower job seekers to achieve their full potential and succeed in the workforce.

We must also ensure that skills programs and support are accessible to those who need them most, but currently have the least access: workers of color, young people, workers who have been forced out of their jobs, and justice-involved individuals. For example, I led the *Strengthening Job Corps Act of 2022* last Congress to ensure that the Job Corps program utilizes work-based learning to get young people into good jobs.

Skills programs and support must be accessible to those who have the least access—young people, displaced workers. These groups face significant barriers to education and training programs, limiting their job opportunities and hindering their success to the workforce.

For our workforce system to truly succeed, it needs to be a win-win for both job seekers and employers. Without adequate funding, WIOA programs for employers are being utilized by just *eight* percent of employers. That has to change. But currently, WIOA programs are only used by a measly 8% of employers due to insufficient funding. It's time for a change. A reauthorization of WIOA that prioritizes employment-based training and sector partnerships can help businesses find the skilled workers they need and boost local economies with higher-paying jobs.

The bottom line is that an effective reauthorization of WIOA must put access first—quality and innovation also—that meets the needs of workers and businesses. Today, I look forward to charting a path forward that achieves those priorities and prepares workers and businesses for success.