



**Testimony of Joe Barela, Colorado Department of Labor and Employment  
U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment  
Thursday, May 27, 2021**

Chairwoman Wilson, Ranking Member Murphy, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Joe Barela and I am the Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE). I have more than 25 years of experience in workforce issues at the local, state, and federal level, including serving as a Senior Advisor with the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) in 2015 where I helped coordinate the implementation of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA). As this Subcommittee considers the reauthorization of WIOA, I am honored to share Colorado's approaches to serve dislocated workers and support lifelong learning, and to provide recommendations to ensure that all workers, learners, and employers are future-ready.

Colorado's workforce system is driven from the bottom up through 10 local workforce areas including 10 rural sub-areas, with activities delivered by the state's 57 Colorado Workforce Centers and their partners. The Colorado Workforce Centers are overseen at the state level by the CDLE, and are managed locally by each of the local boards comprised of businesses, labor, partner agencies, and other key stakeholders. The Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC) is the governing body charged with the continuous improvement of the workforce system and oversight of WIOA funds and programs. The partnerships and collaborative atmosphere guided by CDLE, CWDC, and the local areas create an integrated and resilient workforce system that provides impactful services throughout the state.

We responded to COVID-19 with agility, shifting to remote work and virtual service delivery so we could serve hundreds of thousands of Coloradans. Now, as we look to recovery from the pandemic and preparation for the future of work, we have an opportunity to create a proactive workforce system that builds lifelong learners and connects people with economic success.

**Our workforce system must be able to act proactively to support workers and communities.** In Colorado, our Just Transition Office is using state funds and existing WIOA resources to support coal workers, employers, and communities as they plan for the future closings of coal plants upon which their communities depend. We



know that the transition from coal and the COVID-19 pandemic are just a few of many disruptions our communities will face as technology advances and work evolves. WIOA eligibility that allows us to support workers **before they are laid off** will mitigate the economic impact of these transitions and it would help us keep communities together. To be successful, our workforce system must also be funded based on more recent data. Colorado has a dynamic economy, and a funding formula based on two-year lags in data prevents our system from providing adequate services when it is most needed in a community. Workforce areas also need an enhanced ability to transfer funds between Dislocated Worker and Youth so they can use funds strategically, where and when it is needed most.

**Our workforce system must support lifelong learning and facilitate upskilling, reskilling and next-skilling throughout a career.** Increased investments in work-based learning, especially earn-and-learn models like apprenticeships, are critical to this effort. Work-based learning combines skill development with training opportunities and is a key strategy in Colorado for developing talent and preparing Coloradans for the workforce and evolving labor market. CDLE partners with the local workforce system, USDOL, and partner organizations like CareerWise to implement a high-quality apprenticeship system with more than 6,000 apprentices and more than 400 Registered Apprenticeship Programs. These programs work. When Brandon, a General Manager at Old Chicago restaurant, was laid off due to COVID he decided to make a career change. With support from his workforce center, he became an apprentice with a local electrician, and had costs covered for his supplies and first year of related instruction. He's on track in an industry with great growth potential, and already received a raise.

Sector partnerships are partnerships of business leaders, from the same industry and in a shared region, who work with education, workforce development, economic development, and community organizations to address the workforce and other competitiveness needs of their industry. More than 1,600 businesses are actively involved in sector partnerships across Colorado. These sector partnerships inform competency-based career pathways that ensure education, training, and workforce systems stay attuned and responsive to the needs of the labor market in order to ensure businesses have access to appropriately skilled talent pipeline and prepare students and workers with the skills and credentials they need for jobs and careers.

For workers to reskill, upskill, and connect with quality career pathways requires effective career coaching. With support from Skillful and the Rework America Alliance, Colorado invests in professional development and support



for frontline career development professionals so they apply skills-based practices, labor market insight, and high quality coaching practices to connect dislocated workers to opportunities. I encourage you to consider increased investments in career coaching within the workforce system so people have access to this valuable resource throughout their careers.

Let me close by saying again how proud I am of Colorado's workforce system which promotes a thriving employment environment with opportunity for every Coloradan to prosper. I hope my remarks have been helpful as you work to reauthorize WIOA and ensure all Americans are able to find economic success in the future of work. I am happy to answer any questions from the Subcommittee. Thank you.

Attachments to include:

- [Colorado 2020 Talent Pipeline Report](#)
- [Talent Equity Agenda](#)
- [Office of Future of Work Annual Report](#)
- [Just Transition Action Plan](#)

