

Statement for Rep. Derek Kilmer (WA-06)
House Committee on Education & the Workforce
Member Day Hearing
December 1, 2023

Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee, thank you for hosting today's Member Day hearing and for the opportunity to share my priorities.

First, I would like to talk about a bill that stems from the first-hand, real-world impacts of conflict, division, and polarization. Two years ago, there were a number of attacks against religious institutions, and the people affiliated with these institutions, in the region that I represent - including incidents of arson, vandalism, and physical attacks. Unfortunately, other community spaces in our region were experiencing severe conflict too. When meeting with our local YMCA at the time, we learned about how fights were literally breaking out at the gym over political issues. In many ways, we saw the consequences of division, hatred, and polarization show up in painful ways in our community. But in the wake of actions meant to stoke hate and fear, I watched our community reject these values and instead, come together to provide support and protection for one another. In response to the violence we saw against faith-based institutions, an interfaith alliance was formed to stand up against hate and foster social cohesion and solidarity. In response to the conflict at local YMCAs, we saw the development of programming to find common ground across differences. In addition to these responses being deeply inspiring, we also know that they're critically and urgently needed – more than ever.

That's why, last Congress, I introduced the bipartisan, bicameral Building Civic Bridges Act—cosponsored by 12 Democrats and 12 Republicans—including Members of this committee. While we fund democracy and bridgebuilding abroad, a lot of that work is also needed here at home. The bill would create a pilot program at AmeriCorps focused on building relationships across lines of difference through grant and research opportunities, as well as Corps' member training in civic bridgebuilding skills and techniques. This bill has received wide support – from civic bridgebuilding organizations, to faith leaders and groups, to the business community, to institutions of higher education. I look forward to introducing this legislation in the near future and encourage the Committee to consider its inclusion in a future markup opportunity. Seeing this bill over the finish line is one of my top legacy priorities, as I know this next year is my last serving in Congress.

Another issue that has long challenged my district, has been persistent economic distress, stemming from the decline of the timber industry. Ensuring Americans have the education and skills needed to find and keep good jobs is an issue impacting many districts beyond just mine too. This is why I am encouraged that you are working on a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) reauthorization. Broadly, my colleagues on the New Democrat Coalition where I am the Vice Chair of Policy and I support, modernizing workforce programs to take into account new technologies and updated technical needs. My related Investing in Digital Skills Act was previously included in WIOA last Congress when it passed the House, and I hope for its inclusion again. The New Dems have also rallied behind creating more opportunities for Americans to be introduced to STEM and trades both in the K-12 system and through community partnerships with industry and institutions of higher education. I hope you can include the bipartisan Creating Opportunities to Thrive and Advance (COTA) Act that I co-lead, to this end. It would expand career counseling and allow for public outreach, so that more folks know about, and can take advantage of, WIOA programs.

Finally, the New Dems have called for ensuring access to quality workforce development opportunities across all regions, especially in our rural and distressed communities. One specific policy idea to help distressed communities that I have been working on, on a bipartisan basis, is called the "time tax." Washington State has been doing small demonstration projects to facilitate individuals without stable employments' access to a wide array of benefits up front. Essentially if you meet the poverty threshold for one program, allowing that eligibility to count for other programs, so that you aren't paying the "time tax" of additional meetings and paperwork collection. The idea is this will help folks get some semblance of economic stability faster, and put them on a quicker timeline to getting a job and back on their feet for the long-term. Last Congress a related study amendment passed the House through WIOA, and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has been working on a report related to this work. I urge you to consider including related language this year, authorizing a few states to test this concept.

I appreciate your leadership and consideration of these requests, and I am happy to provide additional information as you review them. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today.