



**Education & Labor Committee
Higher Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee
“Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Reauthorization: Creating
Opportunities for Youth Employment”
May 13, 2021**

Chairwoman Wilson, Ranking Member Murphy and distinguished members of the Higher Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all today.

My name is Deb Lindner, and I am the Human Resources Manager at Precor Inc., located in Whitsett, North Carolina. I have over 20 years of Human Resources experience. As the HR Manager with Precor, my main areas of responsibility include workforce planning and development, organizational development, employee relations and leadership development. I have served as an Executive Board Member with both the North Carolina local and state boards. I am also a part of the National Skills Coalition and Business Leaders United Manufacturing Industry Recovery Panel, which will share recommendations with the Biden Administration to ensure an inclusive economic recovery from COVID-19. I am passionate about North Carolina and the manufacturing industry creating strong workforce initiatives that create a viable workforce across all industries.

In North Carolina, Precor has approximately 120 employees, with dozens of current open positions. We believe that the hiring the best affords us to produce quality products. At Precor, our people are our greatest asset, and we know it. Our candidates for the manufacturing floor are someone who want to be part of a winning team, are dependable and with a passion to learn quickly. Our core values are customer focus, accountability, teamwork, communication, and innovation. At Precor, part of helping people live the lives they desire includes creating a rewarding and enjoyable workplace. We work together in an empowering, collaborative, and innovative environment to deliver the very best fitness experiences possible. We look for passionate individuals who share the common goal of improving the ways people improve themselves.

Companies like Precor are actively engaging in efforts to build a skilled pipeline of young workers into our industry. We need Congress’ support in these efforts, however. To scale and amplify the work I and Precor do, I urge Congress to support industry or sector partnerships that bring together education and industry partners, to support on-the-job learning and incumbent worker training that helps us upskill existing workers and create entry level positions for next generation workers and to support costs associated with transportation and childcare that too often serve as barriers to young people’s success on our job site.

Precor needs skilled workers

Prior to the pandemic, while finding candidates for the production lines appeared to be on pace with our hiring rate, finding skilled workers was a challenge. The past fourteen months have only exacerbated that challenge.

The current economic and health crisis meant Precor had to scale back operations, in part to keep our workers safe and in part because our largest clients – gyms who had to close – were no longer ordering product at the same rate as prior to the crisis.

In 2020, we had to furlough most of our workers and eventually had to reduce our workforce by 10%.

Now, demand from our customers has increased, but finding workers to meet this demand is a challenge. Over the next year alone, I need to hire more than 200 workers – nearly twice what I've hired in recent years prior to the crisis.

On top of the scale of the demand we're facing, the workforce landscape has changed, and we've lost a year of developing the next generation workers. Workers that we furloughed were forced to find jobs in other industries or manufacturing sub-sectors or have left the area. Partnerships that were the foundation of our hiring pipeline – those with the workforce board, high schools, community organizations of community colleges – are not producing the number of candidates we are used to. In 2018, our quarterly job fair would draw over 100 applicants. This week, we had just 15. Many employers are asking many questions – Do we raise our pay rates and hire less employees? Do we pass on orders since we do not have the required workforce? What do we do, where do we go, how do we find more employees?

Precor is investing in our Workforce

1. Participation in Partnerships that form the foundation of our recruitment efforts

Precor has partnered with the local Manufacturing Council, run by the [Greensboro](#) Chamber and started by our local workforce development board. The Council was founded with funds from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and relies on that and continuing public investment to meet needs of employers like Precor. We were also a founding member of the Guilford Apprenticeship Partnership, a collaborative of manufacturing companies that worked together to build a youth apprenticeship pipeline in our area. Expanding beyond just youth apprenticeship, I also am a founding member of the Workforce Apprenticeship Alliance.

We invest in these partnerships for two key reasons – first, public investments in the infrastructure that brings together small and mid-sized companies enables us to scale our impact. No single company can succeed alone, but the infrastructure of these partnerships makes it possible. Precor hires 1 apprentice for every 100 workers a year and onboards on average 20 new workers a month. Many of these workers will need short-term training at the local community college to get up to speed on the welding or other skills necessary to be successful on the job. But Precor alone does not hire enough workers for the Community College to run a dedicated cohort for our needs. By partnering with other companies, we're able to jointly identify welding skills necessary for our new hires and engage with our local Community College to create a curriculum that jointly serves all the participating companies. Second, we rely on organizations within these partnerships – including the local workforce board, Triad Goodwill and the Community College to identify potential applicants and help us hire young people who will be our workforce of the future.

2. Upskilling opportunities that create onramps for youth

Where we are not able to move fast enough with partnerships, we do it alone. Just this month, Precor is launching an Incumbent Worker Maintenance and Welding program. We have passionate employees that want to contribute more to Precor however do not have the ability to go back to school while working a full-time job. We are investing in our employees and launching two incumbent worker industrial maintenance and robotic welding programs to build an internal pipeline of workers. By creating this internal structured training program, it will create a pathway to help build and retain our talent capabilities. The programs will be a hybrid between on-the-job learning and job-related education.

Once the workers in that program advance within our workforce, we will then need to hire even more entry level workers.

3. Consistent efforts to retain workers – especially young people – in our workforce

At Precor, consistently the most challenging aspect of hiring new workers – especially young workers – is their access to reliable transportation. Our plant is located 20 miles outside of the closest city, Greensboro, and off any public transportation routes.

For our high school apprenticeship program, we were limited to hiring students who had transportation out to the plant – meaning students who most needed access to skills offered in our apprenticeship program were excluded from the opportunity.

Even outside of high school students, we have young adult employees who do not have reliable transportation and must rely on others to get to/from work. Unfortunately, this usually ends up in losing an employee because their ride has been cut or eliminated. We probably have at least 1 out of 15 employees who ride with someone else to work for a variety of reasons from not being able to afford a vehicle or gas, that they belong to a one car family, or do not have a license. They find rides from another employee, a family member or someone they paid to drive them to work. Many times, I don't find this out until attendance becomes an issue and the employee finally tells us their transportation issues. I personally have driven an employee home when their ride didn't show up or cancelled on them. For example, we hired a great candidate as a welder. Within the first week, he started having attendance issues. In speaking with him, he revealed that his family member who promised to get him to/from work decided to stop providing a ride. We decided to book and pay for a hotel room for him that was within a 5-minute walk from the plant so he could get to/from work. We did this for about three-four weeks, so he could get paid and purchase a used vehicle.

Precor needs Congress to scale and partner with industry efforts to ensure more young people have access to good manufacturing jobs

Precor is investing time, energy and funding in convening and running partnerships with those in our industry and community, in upskilling our workers and creating on-the-job learning opportunities for young people in our community and in helping workers access transportation and other support services. But, we need Congress to support these efforts, too.

I applaud the Committee's bipartisan efforts to modernize the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and for taking the time to identify the diverse strategies necessary to ensure our public workforce system serves both businesses like Precor and youth, people of color and people without a high school diploma who have been hardest hit by the current crisis. Job training will not solve our current crisis, but it is part of the solution and critical to ensuring an inclusive economic recovery.

First, ensuring public support for partnerships that bring together small and mid-size companies, like Precor and our partners in the Manufacturing Council, and community and technical college and the public workforce system would make a huge impact in our community. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) currently supports these industry or sector partnerships but provides no dedicated resources to empower states and local areas to invest in this strategy. For Precor, dedicated resources to support industry partnerships – through WIOA reauthorization, National Apprenticeship Act reauthorization and any response or recovery to the current crisis is critical to our ability to support the infrastructure we already have established. These partnerships should bring together employers as well as community organizations that have historically served youth, in particular opportunity youth who are not connected to school or employment.

Next, manufacturing companies like Precor need you to invest aggressively and effectively in the skills that industries demand and workers need to be competitive in a global marketplace. These investments should support all workers – including young people’s – access to good jobs. According to polling in spring of 2020,¹ 82% of voters wanted to see public investments in skills training in response to the crisis and 81% wanted to see investments over the long-term. Right now, the U.S. invests less in workforce and active labor market policies than every other industrialized nation except for Mexico and we would need to invest \$80 billion more annually just to reach the median of other industrialized countries.² Companies like Precor are making the investment in our workers, and we can best leverage and scale investments like ours when matched with robust public investment. To be the most effective to Precor, these investments would also support costs of providing incumbent worker training, of helping our workers develop digital skills and of scaling on-the-job training opportunities for more young people.

Finally, to effectively reach the most robust and diverse pipeline of young people in our communities, Precor needs Congress to support investments in transportation and support services as part of WIOA reauthorization.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today and I look forward to answering any questions.

¹ <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/09-2020-NSC-Skills-for-an-Inclusive-Economic-Recovery.pdf>

² <https://www.americasworkforce.org/latest-action-list/2019/9/19/investing-in-americas-workforce-a-national-imperative-for-the-21st-century>