

**Testimony of Mr. Mark Kessenich
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**Before the Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce
Development**

U.S. House of Representatives

On-the-Job: Rebuilding the Workforce through Apprenticeships

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Industry led, Worker centered, and Community focused



My name is Mark Kessenich and it is my pleasure to serve as the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership & BIG STEP Inc. (WRTP/BIGSTEP). On behalf of myself and our Board of Directors, I would like to extend my appreciation to the Committee for the opportunity to share our experience and expertise on the important link between apprenticeship and the workforce development system. WRTP / BIG STEP is widely recognized across the country as a leading industry-driven nonprofit workforce intermediary dedicated to connecting people to family-sustaining jobs. Our mission is to enhance the ability of public and private sector organizations to recruit, develop, and retain a more diverse, qualified workforce in construction, manufacturing and emerging sectors of the regional economy. By being **industry led, worker centered, and community focused**, WRTP/BIG STEP helps under-employed, under-served, and under-represented individuals across Wisconsin succeed in well-paying careers while exceeding industry's workforce needs.

Over the last twenty years of my engagement in workforce development I have seen an evolution towards a more demand driven system, in part through a renewed focus in recent years on registered apprenticeship. Unfortunately, public investment has not met the tremendous demand in our communities. It is incumbent upon policymakers to drive resources to innovations and practices that offer high wages, benefits, and a clear pathway to advancement within their workplaces. Expanding registered apprenticeship, supporting an infrastructure of local partnerships between workforce development system, local industry partners, education provider and community-based organizations, and strong federal investments in workforce and education are crucial to meet business demand and worker needs.

WRTP/BIG STEP trains workers for a variety of different employment opportunities, including Registered Apprenticeship (RA). RA serves as the premier standard for ensuring the delivery and development of a skilled, qualified, and dependable workforce according to industry standards. Our apprenticeship preparation programs operate in tandem with labor and business leaders running RA programs and we work with those same partners to continually innovate, develop, expand and enhance both the apprenticeship preparation and the RA programs and systems in the state.

The primary focus of our organization is to ensure our industries have the skilled and prepared workforce necessary to create a strong economy today and that citizens have access to and confidence in a workforce development system that delivers education and training that ensures pathways to economic success and independence. Registered Apprenticeship combines key elements to securing both objectives are met:

1. Clear wage progression and career advancement
2. Standards, skills, and certifications that are portable and recognized within industry
3. Integration and recognition of competency and time basis of skills attainment and excellence
4. Related technical education and instruction is critical to attaining competency as well as structured workplace learning
5. Local guidance from industry-experts representing both workers and management

Not all workers are prepared to enter a registered apprenticeship without additional training, however. It can take many years to prepare individuals to reach even a pre-apprentice level yet alone the high standards of a Registered Apprenticeship. To address this, WRTP/BIG STEP works with industry partners, the workforce system and other community groups to identify workers needs and business demand to develop training programs that can bridge this divide, particularly for workers with barriers to employment.

The foundation of WRTP/BIG STEP's work is the relationships we have built in our local community. Through these partnerships with representatives from labor unions, the workforce and education systems and other community organizations, we can tailor our programs to best meet industry and worker needs.

We partner with over 600 constructions, utility, and manufacturing employers throughout the state, and we are extremely proud that our industry partnerships are built around the labor unions that partner to advance the interests of the industries and workers they represent.

Building and bridging powerful relationships between labor unions, employers/contractors, and industry associations enables us to predict and align the programs we offer with employment and career opportunities in the communities we serve. This means we can better inform and align funding and create partnerships with government agencies, the public workforce and education systems, as well as organize the power and skill of community and faith-based organizations to serve their constituencies or members. Between 2016-2017, we placed 1600 individuals at average entry wages of \$22.54 an hour. Individuals who come into our programs are unemployed or highly underemployed with 30% having a family income of \$3,000 or less per year.

Our construction pre-apprenticeship program utilizes the North American Building Trades Unions' (NABTU) Multi-Craft Core Curriculum (MC3). The MC3 provides individuals with 120 hours of preparatory experience including applied math skills, hands on and practical safety and worksite practices, tool identification and proper handling, effective communication, and general principals of construction work that are applied in hands on activity – including everything from pouring constructing forms and pouring concrete to fundamentals of electrical, plumbing, and other mechanical trades. To complement the curriculum, we bring in experts from the industry – contractors, trades, and apprenticeship directors – all of who are able to share their knowledge and expertise as well as assist students in transition from student to apprentice. This allows our participants to better understand the industry, for leaders within the industry to meet and interact with our participants and to build and deepen the relationship our organization has with these industry leaders. By relying on an industry-verified curriculum, we provide our participants with exposure to actual tools, worksites and experiences they will encounter once on the job. This kind of exposure is important for all workers, especially those without much industry experience or workforce history or those with barriers to employment. In 2017, 26% of those we served came from a felony conviction. This training, coupled with their desire to succeed, has lead to a cohort of successful workers who now can support their children, hold their head high and make incomes up to \$50 per hour. Pre-apprenticeship training, linked to local industry partnerships, provides an on-ramp to opportunities most of our participants would not have had without WRTP/BIG STEP programming and ensures our industry partners that the workers we help them recruit are prepared to succeed in the workforce.

WRTP/BIG STEP has also been instrumental in expanding the Industrial Maintenance Technician (IMT) RA program operating across the country, now one of the fastest growing and most diverse RA programs in the country. The IMT program can be completed in approximately a year and half, during which time employers recognize and validate workers' continued skill development. As part of WRTP/BIG STEP's efforts to expand access to the IMT program, we have convened quarterly roundtables with manufacturers across the state. These meetings bring together experts in different subsets of the manufacturing industry and allow industry leaders to discuss best practices in recruiting workers, establishing on-the-job training practices and building career pathways for program graduates after

their apprenticeship. WRTP/BIG STEP offers technical assistance to companies in starting and running programs, in recruiting and retaining participants, and in training incumbent workers through other upskilling opportunities or to be effective mentors to incoming apprentices. For even the largest or most dedicated companies, many of these components of running an apprenticeship program can be difficult for them to put into practice.

WRTP/BIG STEP relies on a variety of funding sources to run our programming, and alignment and braiding of funding is one of the most complex and important functions of an intermediary and root of our success. Through a combination of federal resources including Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP E&T), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), and the H-1B Visa Job Training Program our total budget is comprised of 30% private and philanthropic investment and about 70% public investment from federal, state, and local sources. This kind of combined funding permitted us to serve over 3,000 youth and adults last year alone.

WRTP/BIG STEP and our workforce development partner also receives a significant amount of our funding from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Our partnerships with workforce boards throughout Wisconsin and the country are critical and represent great examples of the value of investments pre-apprenticeship and RA. Through the Midwest Urban Strategies Consortium, a group of thirteen workforce development boards (WDB) across nine Midwestern states, we are building and scaling effective workforce development practices developed in Wisconsin. Through this work, we are able to share best practices, discuss funding strategies to expand access to these best practices and respond to challenges our peers have encountered.

One of the key issues the Midwest Urban Strategies Consortium is working to address is declining investment in programming under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) - since 2001, funding for WIOA has declined by 40 percent. Industry partners like those we work with are investing in expanding apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship, and they need the support of the federal government to truly take these programs to scale. The expansion of quality pre-apprenticeship programs is the joint responsibility of workers, employers, and the public interest.

The ability to utilize and maximize resources that have different functions and allowable uses requires and allows our staff to cobble together comprehensive programs that ensure quality training, access to the range of supportive services needed to aid in learning and navigate the early stages of a career. Most importantly, our focus and expertise in building programs reflects a core principle often missing from all workforce discussions – our job is to pave a clear path, understand and bridge the risk and sacrifice that the individual seeking to upgrade their career may have to make. We need to ensure that if we are going to build a qualified, skilled, diverse, and productive workforce, the pathway has to lead to employers and careers that are built on the basis of strong Registered Apprenticeship programs where the wage progression and career progression are something to work toward, where the skills gained are recognized industry wide and portable regardless of where you are in the country, and where skills are relevant to success today and there is on-going training

It is critical to our efforts to address and attack barriers and not seek short-term solutions. Based on my experience both at WRTP and many years work in the workforce system, we have observed we have greater success when the following are present in our efforts:

- Local and State Boards dedicate funding for Industry Partnerships and Intermediaries that enhance and expand pre-apprenticeship linked to registered apprenticeship and increase the engagement of Industry including Employer & Labor Associations to promote Registered Apprenticeship
- Continuity between K-12, community & technical colleges and Registered Apprenticeship programs to provide a seamless pathway for young people
- Investment in and performance expectation for both pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs reflect the time and related support needed for individuals to succeed
- WIOA is linked to sustainable and credible workforce programs, like Registered Apprenticeship, that benefit and protect the public investment for the benefit of both employers and student/workers.

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