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## Building a Better Workforce System for Tomorrow

by [Seth Harris](#) on March 5, 2013 · [0 comments](#)

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Last month, I visited ArcelorMittal's steel mill in Cleveland. Let me tell you, this isn't your grandfather's manufacturing. The plant is a high-tech, advanced manufacturing operation that produces 3.8 million tons of steel annually, which is used primarily in American-made cars and Whirlpool washing machines. Every aspect of production is run by intricate, computer-driven systems that are operated by highly skilled members of the United Steelworkers of America.

Employment Connection, the local workforce investment board in Cleveland that is a part of the Labor Department's nationwide workforce system, has been an important partner in ArcelorMittal's success. Together, Employment Connection and ArcelorMittal collaborated with area community colleges to create a program that trained individuals to meet the specific needs of the plant. More importantly, this partnership illustrates the importance of giving U.S. workers the skills they need to succeed in the 21st-century global economy, a topic President Obama emphasized in his State of the Union address.



Acting Labor Secretary Seth Harris talks with a quality assurance employee during a tour of the ArcelorMittal steel plant in Cleveland, Ohio, on Feb. 15, 2013.

The Workforce Investment Act, which provided a framework for the public workforce system, was passed in 1998, but it has not been formally reauthorized by Congress since then. It is time for Congress to act. WIA reauthorization legislation should build on the workforce system's strengths, like the example I witnessed in Cleveland. It also should address the system's challenges, promote innovation and spread best practices across the country. The administration strongly supports efforts to streamline the current system, but it must be done in the right way.

President Obama has laid out five key principles to strengthen the public workforce system:

1. **Streamline and improve services** – Our state and local partners need more flexibility in how they provide easy access and clear information to jobseekers, workers and employers.
2. **Provide true "one-stop shopping"** – Every American worker should have access to the full range of services they need to succeed in their communities.
3. **Employ regional and industry-driven economic development strategies** – A one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Programs must serve their most important industries and those likeliest to grow and prepare workers for labor markets that may stretch beyond one town, state, or country. ArcelorMittal and Employment Connection's partnership is a great example of this.

- 4. **Toughen accountability** – Every entity spending taxpayer dollars should be held accountable. We need reliable, consistent metrics throughout the workforce system so that workers, employers, and my Labor Department staff will know which services and training-providers work best.
- 5. **Promote innovation and replicate best practices** – We need a process of continuous improvement and innovation. There should be incentives for creative solutions in the public workforce system, with information about the most successful strategies widely available to communities that would benefit from them.

The Workforce Investment Act of 2013 (HR 798) offers a solid approach to implementing many of these principles. It will establish a Community College to Career Fund, a Workforce Innovation and Best Practices grants program, and will place a greater emphasis on the attainment of industry-recognized credentials.

By contrast, the SKILLS Act (HR 803) attempts to address some of these principles but does not succeed in guaranteeing funding to address the needs of jobseekers with barriers to employment. The likely result would be that many individuals belonging to populations with specialized needs – like veterans, people with disabilities, disadvantaged youth and migrant farmworkers – would not receive the range of services they need to find a good job. In addition, the bill does not do enough to promote continuous innovation, or the identification and replication of effective practices.

The right path is to modernize, streamline and strengthen the public workforce system, giving Americans the skills they need to succeed in middle-class jobs. In the process, such improvements will help employers find the qualified workers they need, ensuring that the U.S. continues to be a magnet for job creation. That’s the path to a growing economy and broadly shared prosperity.

*Seth Harris is the acting secretary of labor.*

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