

**Written Testimony of Ms. Kris Stadelman
CEO, Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County
Before the Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety
United States Senate
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Chairman Murray and Honorable Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. My name is Kris Stadelman and I am CEO of the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County. I am honored and grateful for this opportunity to talk with you about one of our time's most vital issues: the preparation of Washington state's youth for careers.

This preparation has two goals: to ensure a skilled workforce to meet the needs of employers, and to ensure that today's young people can become happy, self-sufficient adults. The first goal is all the more urgent because of the demographic tidal wave of Baby Boomers who are set to retire in the next decade. The second goal—self-sufficiency for today's young people—is also subject to a shifting economy. More specialized work requires more training, often including college, to put good-paying jobs within reach.

As the local Workforce Investment Board, the WDC of Seattle-King County addresses both goals by partnering with the private sector to bring youth into contact with the world of work and promising careers.

In 2005, the WDC published a report called *Youth@Work* that called attention to the serious decline in employment for teens and young adults. The previous summer, the national teen employment rate was the lowest in 57 years. African-American and other youth of color are far less likely to have work opportunities.

Why, when we need to focus on the problem of high-school dropouts, does this matter? Shouldn't youth be focusing on education and college instead of work?

The answer is no—not *instead of* work. Youth should be focusing on education *because of* work, and *in addition* to work. When we show them the connection and allow them to learn in the context of the real world, they are less likely to drop out of high school. They are more likely to pursue further education and training. They learn social and work skills that cannot be taught in school. And they are given both the tools and the inspiration to forge their own futures.

But if, in the name of academic rigor, we cut young people off from work experience and career education, we are failing them—especially at-risk youth who do not have role models or connections to help them chart a path.

In Seattle-King County, we at the WDC have seen the results of work-based learning opportunities, career exploration, internships, work experience and other employment services. We have linked these important services to high-demand occupations and industries that offer career paths ending in high wages. We have linked them to academic support for staying in

school and credit retrieval for returning to school, as well as GED preparation for dropouts. And we have linked them to case management and other services to address the barriers of at-risk youth—mental health, chemical dependency, homelessness, basic-skills deficiencies, disabilities including learning disabilities, and criminal activity/court involvement.

Sector-Focused Efforts

In Seattle-King County, according to the state’s 2007 job vacancy survey of employers, 73% of vacancies paid a median wage of \$10 an hour or less—dismal in the face of our area’s high cost of living. The top seven occupations (including laborers, cashiers and security guards) had an average median wage of \$8.81.

But right behind them came Registered Nurses, with an average wage of \$32 an hour, and Carpenters, at an average of \$16 an hour. This dichotomy illustrates the challenge of workforce development in an area where both our economy and our individual prosperity depends on the ability of our education and training systems to meet the needs of industry for high skills.

As a result of intensive research into the sectors in our region, the WDC of Seattle-King County selected five that provide living-wage jobs, opportunities for advancement and partnerships with employers. These five are health care, life sciences/biotechnology, construction, manufacturing, and information technology. We brought together industry, higher education, labor, K-12 and community leaders in each one to discuss the most critical workforce issues.

This work has allowed us to address both supply and demand in each industry: we understand better how to connect employers to the skills and workers they need, and we understand better how to open pathways for workers—and youth—to higher-skilled, higher-paying jobs.

The following provides a few examples of our work to connect low-income and at-risk youth to high-demand sectors in our region, using Workforce Investment Act youth dollars and leveraged funding from our partners.

Health Care

This vital industry, with multiple well-paying jobs for nurses and technicians, is experiencing critical staff shortages which will be exacerbated as more of the health-care workforce retires. Since 2003, the WDC has led a series of partnerships with hospitals, colleges, and public schools that start students on career paths in health care.

These programs, with the full commitment of the private sector, linked young people in and out of our Workforce Investment Act youth programs directly to health-care certificate programs at local community/technical colleges and to work-based learning opportunities in hospitals. Youth could take prerequisite and training courses while still in high school and be assured of earning an LPN or even higher certificate within a year of graduation.

One young person, Shenise Gordon, took advantage of several WDC programs. When she was just 14, she began exploring careers and getting real-life work experience at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center. As a sophomore in high school, she began taking courses at Renton Technical

College through another WDC partnership, and passed the state certified nursing assistant exam in her junior year. Shenise graduated last June with four years of nursing experience under her belt—and her RN degree less than a year away.

The newest WDC program to address health careers for youth is a public-private partnership that includes the Washington State Hospital Association, the City of Seattle, several local community colleges, and faculty/staff of Seattle public high schools. The 19 students earned high-school credits for courses such as Fundamentals of Health Care, CPR, Orientation to College and CNA coursework and are taking the CNA exam as a gateway to a wide range of nursing and other health care professions. Most are enrolled in both high-school and college courses, earning credits for both.

Life Sciences/Biotechnology

In 2005, the WDC partnered with the Puget Sound Regional Council, Prosperity Partnership, and the Washington Biotechnology and Biomedical Association to bring together a panel of 30 leaders in the life sciences industry, the education system, employers, local government and economic and workforce development.

Recognizing the importance of drawing young people into the field to ensure a pipeline of trained workers for these highly technical jobs, the WDC worked with the panel partners to offer a six-day workshop to local science teachers to help them understand the latest research and technology—in hopes they would use the information in the classroom to inspire students.

The panel also worked to develop a dynamic website on life-sciences careers that can be used by youth and others who are interested in entering this growing field.

Construction

The construction industry has been a leading source of job growth in Washington State over the last decade. Over 80 percent of all jobs in the industry and 67 percent of entry-level jobs pay a living wage.

In YouthBuild, funded by the WDC and other partners, dropout youth alternate between two weeks of work and two weeks of school, constructing house for a family in need as they earn wages, build work experience, complete high school, and transition into a job or further education/training.

A WDC-led partnership for Pre-Apprenticeship Construction Training (PACT) helps prepare students at Seattle Vocational Institute—most of whom are young adults—to enter union apprenticeships in the construction trades. The two-quarter program covers foundation skills for construction as well as “soft skills” such as work ethic and positive attitude. At the end of the program, PACT helps to place students in union apprenticeships.

Information Technology

Information technology jobs and careers are spread throughout almost all industry sectors, making IT skills as fundamental as literacy for well-paying careers. The WDC has incorporated IT into our youth employment services in a variety of ways.

In addition, we help to fund the Digital Bridge Technology Academy, which provides technology training to low-income, at-risk youth. This collaboration of partner organizations and agencies is for students between the ages of 16 to 21 who have dropped out of high school and are currently working to earn a high school diploma or G.E.D. Youth explore technology and careers through hands-on classes, workshops, guest speakers, job shadow opportunities, field trips, service learning, and internships. Students also install and maintain computer labs at community centers throughout Seattle as a way of both putting their learning into practice and giving back to their community.

Manufacturing

Manufacturing remains a significant industry in terms of volume of jobs, quality of jobs and wages, encompassing welding and machinist jobs that pay up to \$34 an hour through electrical engineering at \$50 an hour. The WDC has long-established partnerships with local industry groups and with the nationwide Dream It, Do It campaign to interest and train youth in manufacturing careers.

In addition to these high-demand sector efforts, the WDC targets specific barriers that keep young people from succeeding in school and charting their futures. These include homelessness. The WDC helped to establish the Barista Training and Education Program, which trains homeless youth to be baristas—an occupation always in high demand in Seattle-King County. Youth in the barista program find skills to earn money today as well as a springboard, through case management, housing and on-site services, to further education and training that lead them away from hopelessness and poverty.

These barriers also include criminal involvement and court adjudication. King County's Juvenile Court has been a strong supporter and partner of WDC employment/education programs for their effectiveness with this population. Just a few weeks ago, the WDC learned that we have been selected for a \$2 million Department of Labor grant that will enable us to create two new career and education centers to focus on youth offenders. We have you, Senator Murray, to thank for your assistance in bringing this extremely important funding to our community. It will allow us to serve 200 youth offenders with intensive support both for education and employment goals—a model that has proven highly effective in stopping the cycle of criminal involvement.

All these pathways and partnerships have been possible because of federal funding for youth employment programs—all Workforce Investment Act youth funds, except for the new youth offender grant. Once again, we thank you, Senator Murray, for being a champion of WIA youth funding. You have fought hard for this community against the tide of severe funding cuts over the past few years.

But in the context of these budget cuts, I would like to emphasize to the subcommittee that despite all of our work to bring career-focused services and work experience to at-risk youth, we know it is only a drop in the bucket when we consider the thousands of youth who are dropping out of our education system without work skills. These innovative programs are extremely staff intensive and serve only a few dozen young people, compared to the hundred who could thrive with these opportunities. Without federal investment, highly effective programs such as PACT and Health Careers for Youth will remain pilot projects that eventually fade, along with the vital employer and education partnerships that made them a success. Continued funding is needed to take them to scale and perpetuate them.

In addition, if we have hopes of affecting the dropout rate, our legislators and communities must support career and technical education in schools. High-stakes testing and budget constraints are leading schools to shortchange CTE—programs that integrate academic coursework with career awareness and exploration, occupational training, and work-based learning. In many school districts, CTE programs are still seen as educational ghettos (with all that implies for youth of color) for low-achieving students whose teachers have given up on them. Our experience, and the research, shows that the conflict between college and career training is a false one. In Washington State, those who complete a CTE program are expected to earn almost \$60,000 more by the time they are 65 than those who have not participated in CTE. These students understand not only *what* they are asked to learn in school, but *why* they are learning it. We must find a way to support career and technical education alongside rigorous academics.

I also urge you as legislators to support federal funding for summer job programs, which have suffered greatly in the past decade and experienced a one-third decline just since 2001. Because of these cuts, thousands of low-income, at-risk youth in Washington state no longer have the option of spending the valuable summer months gaining work experience. We need to bring summer job programs back into our communities—not just for the experience itself, but for the better outcomes it brings during the nine months of the school year.

In Washington state, we have some important assets. We have employers and industry associations who are eager to work with education and workforce development partners to ensure that the next generation is a skilled workforce. We have excellent community and technical colleges that are responsive to the needs of both students and employers. We in workforce development have many successful models of partnerships among all these stakeholders, and a wealth of experience in making them work. With adequate investment and shared goals with the K-12 education system, we can address both the high-school dropout issue and the critical need for future skilled workers.

But if we continue to consider workforce issues and education issues separately, we will not be successful in addressing either.

Once again, thank you for allowing me to participate today and for your consideration.

Kris Stadelman
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