

Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness

New Innovations and Best Practices under the Workforce Investment Act

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Prepared Statement by:
Rebecca Metty-Burns
Interim Director
Division of Workforce & Economic Development – College of Southern Nevada

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the Workforce Investment Act.

My name is Rebecca Metty-Burns and I am the Interim Director for the Division of Workforce & Economic Development at the College of Southern Nevada. The Division of Workforce is a collection of programs that include an Adult Language and Literacy Program, Prison Program, Community Enrichment courses and contract training programs. Our skill intensive courses are primarily delivered through non-credit, customized training to local business and industry.

I am encouraged that a focus in discussion around the Workforce Investment Act involves innovations. Innovations require program flexibility and continuous feedback by stakeholders and in that process you can develop programs of excellence. I believe that by responding to what we have learned in operating programs with WIA funding there is an opportunity to make the programs more effective for participants and employers while also allowing the education partners to more comprehensively respond to the needs of their communities.

In feedback from two recent students in our Certified Nursing Assistant program, I found points that not only illustrate the promise of what that program can deliver but also where efforts are needed to ensure improvements are implemented. Their comments are specific to their experiences in one program but they also apply in general to WIA funded workforce programs. I'd like to share their observations with you today as well as some additional insights from the staff overseeing this program for the division.

The Certified Nursing Assistant program for the Division of Workforce & Economic Development operates in collaboration with the credit program at the College of Southern Nevada. Students receive the full CNA program offered by college instructors in a focused and intensive set of courses that spans seven weeks. Participants receiving WIA funding attend an orientation to the program conducted by workforce staff to help them with administrative items. Throughout the seven weeks each Friday afternoon there is extra assistance available to workforce participants needing additional educational support.

Charles Curtis recently completed our CNA program and at 57 years old exemplifies what an impact the program can have. He is brimming with enthusiasm about his new career path and, with his willingness to be flexible in a work schedule, feels his employment options are excellent. Charles had previous experience in working with senior care and while being initially nervous about returning to school, he gained confidence as the support offered and program structure reaffirmed his capabilities. He particularly liked the Friday review sessions and having access to that additional support. Charles had been unemployed for months and with his experience with senior care and an associate's degree it would seem he would have been identified as great candidate for the program. Yet, he only received a referral after he happened to hear about the program on a public television segment and then persistently pursued a referral to the program.

Scott Lester is also a recent student in our CNA program and only found out about the program by word of mouth. He also took the initiative and went to a referral agency and requested the program. Scott made a good candidate as he had some previous work in healthcare as well as having completed a degree. The case worker he spoke with about the program explained in "eye-opening" detail what a job as a nursing assistant would entail. While Scott felt his previous work in healthcare prepared him, he mentioned that a number of students had not received that "eye-opening" information from their case worker and that they really should be aware of the realities of the job. Scott also mentioned his academic background prepared him for the rigors of the intensive program. He felt the additional assistance was an excellent option but was concerned that a number of his classmates were not prepared for the academics involved. He noted that a number of the students did excellent in the labs but struggled with keeping up with required reading and taking the tests.

Scott successfully completed the program and very much wants to continue in the nursing program to become an RN. He would seem to be a terrific candidate and in a state that badly needs more nurses in the workforce so he was disappointed to find out that WIA funding is not available for him to continue with a degree program.

Our Healthcare Workforce Coordinator, Sue Folds, has worked in cooperation for years with the credit nursing program to make the CNA program successful. As she herself was an RN, she is also concerned that students need to be prepared upfront for the coursework and what the job will entail. While she can tell you of many successful students she also is quick to point out that she has had students go to one lab class and come back and drop out saying there was no way they were going to do that for a job. While there may be a number of circumstances that cause a student to drop – we do know there is a need to better inform and match candidates to the program. The students that complete the program but did not pass demonstrate that perhaps if there was an upfront assessment of foundational academic skills we could better prepare those students for successful completion.

Sue has built solid ties to healthcare employers in the community and provides several healthcare programs as well as contract training. She has many more programs on hold that would be beneficial for skills enhancement of the current workforce or allow entry into a healthcare position. Our programs are demand driven and currently start-up and administrative costs prevent those programs from being implemented. As much as she would like to implement more courses and support career paths in healthcare, limited resources determine priorities and pace of development.

The information I received from the students and our workforce coordinator highlighted that given the right client match to the program it can be an absolute success. Through close communication and collaboration workforce and credit programs can deliver training in a unique structure that answers a clear community need. The instructors and staff have worked to add key features such as an orientation and extra support to ensure student success. It is also clear that we need to continue with new innovations and expand support for the students to fill educational gaps and to work closely with referral agencies to make sure the program is promoted and candidates identified.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND INNOVATION OPPORTUNITIES

Community colleges are where much of the American workforce receives its education and skills. For innovations in WIA to have significant impact the colleges need to have the ability to play an important role with local businesses and agencies in developing a workforce strategy that answers the needs of the community. There is a current call for the building of career pathways but that requires a corresponding educational pathway in order to succeed.

- 1. An important step in determining an education pathway that promotes a career pathway is allowing the college workforce programs to offer more of the support services.**

In its recommendations, *Working it Out: Community Colleges and the Workforce Investment Act* notes, “Encourage colleges to provide case management and support services to ensure positive outcomes... Community colleges increasingly recognize the importance of support services, but because they are viewed primarily as providers of training and not of support services they rarely receive WIA funding for these services. To enable WIA participants to succeed in community colleges, the colleges should have the means to meeting all their needs.”¹

As demonstrated in the CNA program some students may need a details and realistic description of what the job they are training for entails. Students may need to brush up on basic skills and gain confidence to enter into a more rigorous program. How the colleges and its partners design and deliver the support services is one of those areas that should be rewarded for innovation. As core criteria, programs should require standard assessments of WIA clients that allow the workforce program staff, the case manager and the client to plan an education path for success. What assessments to use need to be determined by local educational institutions in partnership with local employers. Even clients that are not anticipating entering a formal training program should assess foundational skills to close any gaps prior to their employment search.

¹ Working it Out: Community Colleges and the Workforce Investment Act, Mary Visser and Donna Fowler, Institute for the Study of Family, Work and Community, December 2006

- 2. Encourage innovations to programs by allowing flexibility and adaptability for training programs based on the feedback of clients, educators and the employers and including and encouraging contract training.**

Workforce programs that provide contract training have the advantage of an employer partner providing specific criteria for outcomes. The relationship built between the college workforce program and the employer brings to it the continuous feedback, evaluation and improvement cycle that would be a positive for any workforce program. Another recommendation in *Working it Out: Community Colleges and the Workforce Investment Act* supports a WIA adjustment to contract training, *“Relax constraints on contract training. Constraints on using WIA funds for customized and contract training, a system that works well for colleges and demand driven models of workforce development, have inhibited college participation in WIA.”*²

A challenge highlighted in the economic recession has been how difficult the current structure of WIA has made it to assist employers and agency with needed skills training. Employers do not have the training dollars to spend and as a self-funded division we do not have the start-up funds to supply for equipment and curriculum development. *“Each type of provider – independent of its ability to train and place job seekers- has a different capacity to adjust to the payment system and reporting requirements imposed by WIA. As a result, some effective programs have opted out, or have been forced out, of the federally funded workforce development system because of its “one size fits all” approach.”*³ Needed programs would be developed and implemented quickly if funding could be directed to start-up costs.

- 3. Support a sustainable approach for creation of career-education pathways that rewards workforce strategies that build from short-term skills training to deeper education attainment.**

² Working it Out: Community Colleges and the Workforce Investment Act, Mary Visser and Donna Fowler, Institute for the Study of Family, Work and Community, December 2006

³ Training Policy in Brief, by Gwen Rubinstein and Andrea Mayo, pg 18, The Workforce Alliance, 2007.

The “work-first” focus that continues to push the interpretation on how to best assist WIA clients promotes a short-term solution and perpetuates a long-term problem. The focus on quick placement often moves clients into entry-level positions rather than gaining advanced training for a higher level position. Incumbent workers need the opportunity to gain advanced education to retain their jobs, handle increased responsibility or be eligible for career movement. Discussion of career ladders won’t lead to workable solutions unless workforce investment is viewed in career terms. Education and employer partnerships need to move from single program planning to comprehensive support for movement from short-term training to degree attainment.

If workforce investment is designed to reward community collaboration, support of unique local workforce needs and allowed to be responsive and flexible, I believe continued innovations in workforce development will quickly come forth.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to share the story about just one of our workforce programs. Your attention to the Workforce Investment Act is needed and appreciated.