

Testimony of Sherry Johnson
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Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for the opportunity to speak before you today. I am the Workforce Investment Board Director for the Employment and Training Department at the Lincoln Trail Area Development District, an eight county regional economic planning and development agency located approximately 40 miles south of Louisville. I have been employed in this position 24 years. The region is the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln, whose 200th birthday we celebrate today. Additionally, it is the home of the Fort Knox Military Installation.

Kentucky was one of the first states to implement the Workforce Investment Act in 1999. We saw it as an opportunity to be on the cutting edge of a new day in workforce training programs. The Act has provided us with many new tools to provide workforce services to individuals and businesses throughout our region, but there have been many challenges along

the way. We'd like to use our time here today to discuss some of our challenges and successes in the Lincoln Trail region and the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

There are several influences that are changing the regional landscape for many years to come. We have not been immune to the challenges of businesses closing or reducing their workforce because of the current economic situation in our country. Kentucky is losing manufacturing, primarily in the automotive related industry, and in retail positions every day. In the Lincoln Trail region alone, we have lost 1000 manufacturing and retail positions since July 1st. We are also faced with addressing the needs of 1000 federal civilian workers who may choose not to relocate to Fort Benning, Georgia when the Armor School moves in 2011. Another challenge will be to recruit, train, retrain and retain up to 1800 individuals needed to fill the positions with the two new commands arriving at Fort Knox – the Army's Accessions and Human Resources Command. And that challenge is at the

forefront, because as many as 400 positions in the Human Resources Command advance party will be arriving this spring.

The higher educational levels and skill sets required for these positions presents us with significant challenges in the region and the Commonwealth. Gone are the days when a high school diploma was the primary entrance to a good job, as is the 3rd or 4th generation family member working for the same company. We are focusing our initial efforts to recruit workers from across the nation, and even the world, to fill these knowledged-based positions. Positions will require, at a minimum, a college degree--and in some cases, highly technical skills to manage the day-to-day operations of both commands. We literally have the equivalent of two Fortune 500 companies relocating to our region, and we have to make certain that we are able to fill their workforce requirements *NOW and* in the future, a future that will require the development of career pathways and pipelines initiatives in our high schools and post secondary institutions to meet the continuing need for a qualified workforce.

Other regional challenges have been in the healthcare arena. Several years ago, we were faced with a shortage of respiratory technicians. We partnered with the local community and technical college and local healthcare providers to start a respiratory technology training program. This effort addressed the immediate short fall, but we have only scratched the surface in addressing the shortage of healthcare workers. Access to allied health training programs is limited and waiting lists are the standard of the day. We must invest in developing more access to healthcare training programs.

We have also invested workforce funds for an entrepreneurial academy of excellence in order to stimulate the development of new ideas, innovations and businesses. This project is in its first year and, already, over 100 individuals have signed up for the workshops. This is a partnership between our local workforce board, Western Kentucky University, and the Lincoln Trail Innovation and Commercialization Center.

We are also one of the 39 WIRED designated regions across the country looking to develop and strengthen our regional economic prosperity. We cover a 26 county, 2 state area and are addressing the challenges of educating and training our workforce for the 21st century.

Other communities throughout the Commonwealth have developed targeted one-stops and training programs such as utility lineman and coal mining training for dislocated workers, youth, and other growing industry sectors. Increased business services activities and developing strong relationships with local economic development professionals have given us an edge in taking a proactive position, instead of just reacting to change.

The current economic conditions in our country are unprecedented and we must work collectively to address these enormous challenges. Unemployment continues to rise and the President's stimulus package offers individuals extended benefits, but we also need to focus much more attention on retraining workers and developing employment opportunities in small

businesses. We need to infuse federal, state and local investments into these efforts to get our economy back on track and our workforce back to work.

The challenges we face in the Lincoln Trail region and Kentucky are daunting but not unique to us alone. Each day brings news of people losing their jobs in the automotive related industry. The retail industry continues to suffer. We need to offer hope. There is a new day dawning in our region with the BRAC transformation at Fort Knox and the spinoffs of new retail, service and contractor businesses that will follow this growth.

The Workforce Investment Act must not be viewed as a “poverty program” but as a vital tool in the economic stimulus and recovery of our country. We must have the resources and funding in place to address these challenges and opportunities. We must have unprecedented flexibility in our program design and delivery at this critical juncture. The Workforce Investment Act programs cannot do it alone. Workforce, education and economic development efforts must unite as one to address these challenges

of the workforce system. Our customers deserve hope and we must generate that hope through a unified and streamlined delivery system. Mandated partner agencies must come to the table and actively participate in the one-stop system with their programs, services and funds. The challenge is enormous, but one that we stand ready to engage, embrace and successfully execute.