

Testimony of Dr. Lisa Bly Jones

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Supporting Efforts to Meet the
Needs of Youth, Workers, and Employers
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
June 12, 2024

Introduction

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the importance of upgrading our public workforce system. My name is Dr. Lisa Bly Jones, and I am CEO of the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC), a workforce development intermediary in Chicago, Illinois. I lead an organization that develops tools, resources and offers training to build capacity for workforce organizations and set priorities for an annual policy advocacy and member engagement. Prior to this role, I was the executive director of The Workforce Connection, a local workforce board in Rockford, Illinois, where I was responsible for leadership and implementation of strategic workforce development initiatives in partnership with the mayor and other elected officials. Over the more than 20 years I have worked in workforce development and held a variety of roles across the spectrum of organizations and community colleges that help workers access skills necessary to enter good jobs.

I am also a beneficiary of our workforce development system myself. When I graduated high school, my family wasn't able to afford college. I got my first job through the Mayor's office of workforce development. I interviewed and landed a quality job that offered tuition reimbursement as a benefit. I took general educational courses at Loop College and completed my course work and graduated from Moraine Valley Community College. I will always remember the care and concern from faculty who understood the complexities of students who work full-time while pursuing their education. Their commitment to student success set me on a career path that fit my strengths and established a good foundation for me to pursue all of my educational and professional goals. These include a terminal degree and being the CEO of an organization that allows me to advocate for others who I understand, because I've had some similar experiences along the way to arriving here. I'm humbled and honored to be here and contribute to today's conversation to help this committee better understand what workers, businesses, communities and our country needs.

My organization, Chicago Jobs Council keeps jobseekers at the center of all we do. CJC is keenly focused on honoring the full humanity of workers who are seeking economic security and we facilitate transformative relationships to address the larger economic system. To do this, we bring together workforce leaders from public

agencies, businesses, community and technical colleges, workforce boards and community based organizations.

We convene a state-wide coalition every year, the Illinois Skills for Good Jobs Coalition that advocates for legislation that embodies 4 Workforce Policy Pillars:

- 1) Dedicate state funding for workforce training using a racial & gender equity lens,
- 2) Promote policies that eliminate structural employment barriers disproportionately faced by people of color, foreign-born workers, and women in Illinois,
- 3) Ensure that no Illinoisan – regardless of race, gender, age, or nationality – lives in poverty by promoting good jobs and a strong safety net and
- 4) Increase research, data sharing, and transparency across state agencies that touch education and workforce training to identify and address equity gaps in our public investments.

Illinois Workforce Overview

Illinois has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country overall and the unemployment rate for Black men and women is nearly double that of the state's overall unemployment rate standing at around 9.5%.¹ And yet, Illinois has 385,000 job openings in March and one of the highest job openings rates in the country.² These measures usually run in opposing directions. The fact that both the unemployment rate and the job openings rate run high relative to the rest of the nation suggests a sizeable skills mismatch between the skills that workers currently have and those that employers require for the jobs that they are working to fill.

On top of that, generation defining investments in clean energy, semiconductors and building and infrastructure has put an even more intense demand on workers and businesses. These investments are expected to create 3 million jobs each year and nearly 70% of these jobs will be available to workers without a bachelor's degree. However, additional training beyond a high school diploma will be essential for workers to access these opportunities.³

And in the state of Illinois, as a member of the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition, CJC was a key partner in helping to pass the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) which aims to invest in Illinois to mitigate the impacts of climate change, move to clean power sources, reduce energy costs, and support communities and workers. The law

¹ <https://www.bls.gov/web/laus/laumstrk.htm>; <https://www.bls.gov/lau/ptable14full23.pdf>

² <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/jltst.t01.htm>; <https://www.bls.gov/charts/state-job-openings-and-labor-turnover/state-job-openings-rates.htm#>

³ National Skills Coalition, [Unprecedented Opportunity: Meeting the Workforce Demands of New Clean Energy, Manufacturing, and Infrastructure Investments - National Skills Coalition](#)

importantly provides over \$80 million annually for workforce development and contractor programs in disadvantaged communities.

Investments in infrastructure and energy present an immense opportunity for workers in Illinois and nationwide. Paired with the employment picture there is a growing need to support workforce training and supportive services through our workforce system in order to effectively seize these opportunities. States and localities are working to address growing training demands but a much larger federal commitment is required.

What CJC/IL have done to address these challenges

Chicago Jobs Council collaborates with partners across the state to ensure that, as our economy adapts to a changing climate and both state and federal investments are implemented, groups who have traditionally been economically disadvantaged are now able to benefit from these efforts and gain access to the newly created jobs.

In 2020, we released a report entitled Building Pathways to Clean Energy Jobs in Illinois, which highlights the importance of investing in the future clean energy workforce as part of public investments in clean energy infrastructure. The report is informed by interviews with clean energy employers, workforce development practitioners, policy experts, and uses publicly available labor market and job posting information to illustrate how the state can effectively invest in workforce development so that people marginalized by racism, sexism, and environmental injustice can directly access [clean energy] jobs, advance within green industries, and benefit from public investments in clean energy.”⁴

Clean energy continues to be an area of focus for CJC due to the immense opportunity it poses, At the same time, we are working closely with partners to improve the workforce system, increase funding into the system, expand pathways for job seekers and eliminate barriers to accessing good jobs.

What still needs to be done on WIOA

While Illinois has worked to address the needs of our workers and businesses as best we can, we rely on federal policy and investments. WIOA reauthorization offers a critical opportunity to scale what is working in Illinois to other states and to supplement the work we are doing to ensure that Illinois workers – and workers across the country – can access the skills they need and for which businesses need to hire.

4

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63a0838721aff66b22dd2598/t/63a0986c2f41ed099d83a59c/1671469164785/Building-Pathways-to-Clean-Energy-Jobs-in-Illinois-March-2021.pdf>

The workforce system should prioritize every worker's future financial stability, career pathway, and economic security. It must honor the humanity of all people, be inclusive and address the larger economic system. Our work prioritizes policies that build transformative relationships between people and systems, focusing on equitable access, providing quality jobs, and removing funding obstacles that inhibit progress.

Congress should fund WIOA commensurate with need

Structuring funding at the Federal and State level that is consistent, adaptable and relevant to the changing needs of the economy safeguards everyone's professional progress, no matter what situational changes they encounter during their careers. Yet, one of the most consistent calls we hear from partners is the need for more funding for the programs under WIOA to better meet demand.

Indeed, underlying many of the opportunities to improve WIOA so that it better serves all stakeholders is the need for Congress to consistently invest more in programs that support skills and supportive services so that more people can access training programs that lead to family-sustaining wages, and more businesses can hire skilled workers for in-demand jobs. When factoring inflation, Congress has steadily cut investments in workforce programs, Career and Technical Education, and adult education programs over the past twenty years.⁵

While I recognize this committee does not appropriate funding, as the authorizing committee, the Health Education Labor and Pensions committee plays a key role in advocating for the funding levels that should be set each year. Levels proposed in the House passed A Stronger Workforce for America Act continue this troubling trend of under-investment.

This Committee can also support investments in training by expanding Pell Grant eligibility to students enrolled in short-term high-quality training programs that help businesses fill open jobs and help workers access career pathways. Many students enrolled in these programs would qualify for federal higher education grant aid based on income if not for program eligibility limitations. The Jobs Act has the capacity to allow for rapid upskilling of workers by lowering the time threshold for Pell Grant eligibility to programs that are at least 150 clock hours and 8 weeks in length. The JOBS Act would also institute a number of accountability standards that tie programmatic eligibility for these shorter-term programs to quality metrics.

Investing in skills training is popular with the public. In recent polling, 82% of voters indicated support increasing government funding for skills training in America.⁶ Given the public's strong support for increasing government funding and the growing need

⁵ https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/NSC_LegislativeAgenda_118Congress.pdf

⁶ https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/NSC_PublicPerspectives_TopFindings_Brief.pdf

lifted up by our partners, this Committee should demonstrate a stronger commitment to WIOA programs as you work to craft legislation to ensure that authorized funding levels match current and future demand.

Congress should support industry or sector partnerships that help businesses engage in the public workforce system

With WIOA there is a lot of emphasis on individuals, but we are responsible to local employers and there needs to be an increase in funding to better support business-related activities, like sector strategies and sector partnerships. Each local community has a local economy and employers in those communities are best able to identify what skills and training are needed and what trends are emerging in a given industry. We never want to train people for jobs that no longer exist or have declined while we're working on developing training programs. It's critical to involve employers on the front end to ensure that does not happen. Industry or sector partnerships bring together local businesses, unions and worker organizations, community colleges, training providers, and community organizations to develop industry-specific workforce strategies and provide training that supports local and regional demand.

These sector partnerships also allow us to become educated about the industry, the numerous occupations that may exist within a sector and better positions the community to create progressive pathways that lead to sustainable careers. Established sector partnerships provide real-time conversations and innovation to pivot where needed based on emerging needs and keeping pace with technological advances. Localized collaboration supports employers in their recruitment and retention efforts to build a diverse workforce within their industry. Such partnerships are especially valuable for small and medium-sized businesses, which often lack the resources to develop independent programs. Instead, they can collaborate with other local employers to leverage collective strengths. These partnerships also provide an entry point for employers to engage with the workforce system in a role that goes beyond placing workers into jobs.

Although the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act requires states and local workforce boards to support sector partnerships as a method of workforce improvement at both the state and local levels, this policy does not contain targeted funding critical to realizing the impact these partnerships can have on businesses, workers and communities. Legislative provisions that provide dedicated grant funding to establish industry and sector partnerships and support ongoing convening as well as activities including training and supportive services for works should be included in a WIOA reauthorization. Legislative texts such as the Promoting Apprenticeships through Regional Training Networks for Employers Required Skills (PARTNERS) Act and Building U.S. Infrastructure by Leveraging Support for Skills (BUILDS) Act could serve as models for a reauthorization package. Both bills establish grant programs that support

partnership convening and maintenance activities and support training and workers access to training, education, and supportive services.

Congress should support robust career pathways that ensure student and worker success.

One of the key benefits of industry partnerships discussed above is providing workers with access to career pathways. Thoughtful design around career pathways can help ensure that all workers, no matter where they start, have the opportunity to advance to good jobs. Career pathways connect progressive levels of education, training, supportive services and credentials throughout an individual's career. Career pathways should include high quality industry recognized credentials that are stackable - they articulate toward a higher level of certificate or degree- and portable so that they are recognized beyond a single employer if individuals change jobs.

Career pathways strategies developed in tandem with industry and sector partnerships can provide a systemic approach to expanding training opportunities that can increase economic mobility for large numbers of workers in a sector.

The Gateways to Careers Act includes language that helps develop the systemic connection between education providers and industry sector partnerships through grant funding that can be used to develop or expand programs that support career pathways, support services, and the acquisition of equipment. Similar language could be included in a WIOA reauthorization to provide dedicated support to career pathways.

Congress should support needs of participants to ensure they can enter, succeed in and become employed after quality training programs

CJC works to improve the policies in workforce development that increase job access, provide wraparound workforce and employment benefit services, improve skill-building programs, and foster quality job creation that benefits those who need it the most.

Demand for training continues to increase and will be impacted further by increasing the need for workers in the clean energy and infrastructure sectors. Despite growing demand, funding for training programs is not increasing. Private and philanthropic which is often the most flexible funding for workforce programs is inconsistent which makes reliable, robust funding for WIOA critical.⁷

One way the House passed ASWA addressed this challenge is to require 50% of funding to be spent on training. This proposal creates two challenges in a state like Illinois.

7

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63a0838721aff66b22dd2598/t/63a0987639ba57582d347355/1671469174913/Supportive-Services-Summary-Report-Sept-2021-FINAL.pdf>

First, it prioritizes costs over participants. If there is a minimum measure to ensure more workers are getting quality training that leads to good jobs, then the proposal should include the flexibility states need to define what that measurement is. Second, the proposal excludes things like support services or career navigation from the calculation. For workers with the greatest economic need, the difference between entering training and actually being able to complete it is usually unexpected costs associated with childcare, transportation or challenge with career navigation. Restricting funds used on those strategies will not lead to more people getting to training, it will lead to more people being unable to complete training.

Instead, the congress should focus on ensuring that training expenditures include all training related costs in the calculation, including wrap-around supportive services and staff assistance costs to meet the needs of jobseekers and businesses.

Technology is increasingly prevalent at all career levels and across industries. Indeed, recent research shows that 92% of jobs require digital skills and that number is expected to increase. At the same time, only two-thirds of workers have the foundational digital skills necessary to enter and thrive in today's jobs.⁸ Workers and businesses require digital skills support especially related to upskilling opportunities for workers who are on the job and reskilling opportunities for those who have lost jobs. A reauthorization of WIOA should include language similar to the Digital Skills for Today's Workforce Act which would establish a formula grant program for states to develop digital skills training programs as well as provide funding to support digital equity among individuals who face barriers to employment and who have been historically underrepresented.

While training is crucial for workers to secure good jobs, it's often equally or more important to address and remove the barriers that hinder individuals from completing their training or retaining employment.

In 2021, the Chicago Jobs Council released Supportive Services: Lessons Learned from the Field which outlines the importance of expanding and enhancing supportive services within workforce development programs to address systemic barriers to employment, particularly for groups that have been marginalized. This includes childcare, housing, and transportation, which are essential for securing and maintaining employment as well as mental health services which have become increasingly important following the pandemic.

In that report, contributors identified that "six months or a year is not enough time for people who have experienced trauma, such as mental illness, homelessness, or incarceration, to seamlessly transition back into the workforce" and that "losing supportive services during the gap of time between when a client becomes employed

⁸ <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/news/press-releases/new-report-92-of-jobs-require-digital-skills-one-third-of-workers-have-low-or-no-digital-skills-due-to-historic-underinvestment-structural-inequities/>

and gets their first paycheck can make it hard for participants to meet their own needs.”⁹ Congress can ensure that there are sufficient resources to allow supportive services to extend past probationary employment periods in order to help give participants more time to adjust and settle into jobs. Language in the BUILDS Act could serve as a model for these efforts as the legislative text includes provisions to provide support to workers in the pre-employment stage and for as much as a year into a job.

Reliable transportation is a frequent barrier for individuals that is important to highlight. While this includes financial support for bus passes, it can also include support for those who have had their licenses suspended due to parking ticket debt, based on excessive fines and fees. Chicago Jobs Council was a critical voice in a campaign in Illinois ensure that individuals are able to drive to work regardless of their ability to pay tickets and traffic fines.

America needs a dynamic and inclusive workforce system equipped to address long-standing structural inequities in our labor market. Chicago Jobs Council works with partners to appeal to the workforce communities mostly accessing services, which are largely Black and brown workers. We want to ensure that service providers are aware of the barriers these communities face and are creating a path forward for individuals with these barriers in mind.

Career coaching and navigation services are increasingly important services for equity-advancing career navigation. Congress should increase support for frontline workforce development professionals to provide career navigation and services including asset-based approaches, assessments to determine strengths and needs, awareness of the impact of trauma and structural barriers on behavior and performance, culturally sensitive programming and targeted services for workers of color to support better outcomes.¹⁰

CJC also partners with re-entry organizations working on behalf of justice involved individuals to ensure that they do not face permanent punishments because of criminal records. An example of this is our role in influencing the policy in CEJA that addressed returning residents and our work to connect Equity Eligible Contractors who employ these returning residents. We brought together organizations to connect and understand how best utilize and leverage funding opportunities they were eligible to receive and we will continue to work with these organizations throughout implementation of CEJA. Congress should codify the Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO) program to ensure that justice involved workers have access to industry connected skills training programs. If we're truly interested in reducing

9

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63a0838721aff66b22dd2598/t/63a0987639ba57582d347355/1671469174913/Supportive-Services-Summary-Report-Sept-2021-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FinalWIOARecs.pdf>

recidivism, we must connect justice impacted individuals to work, because we know there's dignity in work.

Congress should capture data on participants outcomes and success into the future.

Access to workforce data enhances our ability to advocate for workforce equity. By receiving comprehensive data on the state's workforce, we can better identify areas of improvement, advocate for policies that benefit all residents and measure our progress.

Under WIOA, local areas are required, currently, to measure short-term employment and earnings outcomes for workers at six and twelve months after exit. These short-term outcomes do not sufficiently capture how people progress from entry-level jobs, experience wage and skill advancement with an employer, and continue their education to progress along a quality career pathway

To measure if workforce programs are leading to long-term economic gains for workers and businesses, WIOA performance indicators should be expanded to include measures on quality credential attainment, employment and wage outcomes for at least 2-years after program completion, occupation specific job placement and measures on job quality, such as hourly wages and hours worked.

WIOA should also disaggregate all training performance outcomes by race, ethnicity, gender, and other important demographic or socioeconomic factors like English language proficiency, income, and geography, in order effectively evaluate progress toward equitable outcomes and the efficacy of the public workforce system for all workers, including workers of color who are the majority of those accessing these services.

This Committee has a tremendous opportunity to innovate and enhance the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to meet the demands and specialized needs of all stakeholders. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide testimony today, and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.