

Testimonial of Wesley Patch, Process Excellence Specialist, Vestas Americas.

Tuesday March 12, 2024. 2:00 PM

Good afternoon, Chair Hickenlooper, Ranking Member Braun, and Members of the Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety. Thank you for inviting me to testify and discuss with you about our youth apprenticeship program. My name is Wesley Patch, I am currently the process excellence specialist for Vestas Americas, a renewable wind generator manufacturing company located in Windsor, Colorado. In my 16 years with Vestas, I have been fortunate to hold many different roles as well as be on the team designing and implementing our youth apprenticeship program, which is one of the things I'm most proud of.

The youth apprenticeship program was realized and began talks of design in 2017 as we were introducing a new product into the factory and were starting to hire for a production ramp. We saw an opportunity of an untouched pool of candidates in high school students that were not headed to college and their options were military or join the work force. These students were attempting to gain employment with very little work experience or knowledge.

Vestas started discussions with Greeley Central High School from Greeley Evans School District 6. There was big push at that time by the local school district to get their students career and / or college ready. This was a perfect match for Vestas and Greeley Central to provide students with an opportunity to joining the workforce through an apprenticeship program where they can learn the skills needed in advanced manufacturing on the job, while earning a good wage.

Advanced Manufacturing companies in Northern Colorado are struggling to find enough skilled workers to hire in this competitive job market today. In fact, there are two job openings for every currently available worker in Colorado. This is where the youth apprenticeship program becomes a valuable asset for providing training, mentoring and allowing the youth of today's world an opportunity to gain business knowledge, earn a good wage and become good members of our community, starting in high school.

### Our Apprenticeship Program

The Apprenticeship Program registered, with the US department of labor, is designed to support juniors in the summer before their senior year. The apprenticeship opportunity is for 17 years, or older young people and we have them treat this as if they are applying for a job, with resume, interview, and feedback. We bring the team in as a cohort, put them through our new employee orientation, and assign them a mentor. Their mentor is with them throughout their initial 12-month journey. The new apprentice works 40 hours a week during the summer, and this is the most critical

time as the best learning is done with repetition and consistency. Once the summer is over and they are back to attending school for their senior year we will allow up to 20 hours a week, they pick their schedule based on their course load and extracurriculars. Attending and completing school with a diploma or equivalent is part of our apprenticeship requirements for them to continue working with us after their apprenticeship program.

Our first apprenticeship cohort class started in June 2018 we have had four cohorts which involved 50 students in the apprenticeship program over the four years. Since then, Vestas has partnered with CareerWise which acts as an intermediary between the systems of education and industry, developing occupations and competencies, providing training frameworks, training staff in best-practices for working with students and apprentices in workplace preparedness, to further expand the program including hiring high school Seniors. In these programs, the apprentices must complete a total of 144 hours of classroom training and 2000 hours of on-the-job training. We anticipate hiring another 40 apprentices this Spring semester.

Vestas, as part of the renewable energy space, has a bright future in the American market thanks to the bipartisan investments made during the recent clean energy transition. This act is supporting our growth and our investments in the communities we operate in now and ensures we will continue growing for the foreseeable future. With this and the competitive job market in Colorado, youth apprenticeship programs become an essential talent strategy to tap into a labor pool that is underutilized today.

Vestas has many career paths for the apprentices, paths into leadership, maintenance, quality and technical support engineers and logistics. Vestas has a tuition reimbursement program for all employees, and this works well for the apprentices as once they are hired on full time with Vestas, they can take advantage of this benefit. Not only does the apprentice gain the knowledge and skills needed in the advanced manufacturing industry, but they can also earn a degree on whichever path they choose, this is not only an alternative to college, but can be an alternative path through college.

Our first apprentice to complete all the requirements for the apprenticeship program, was a student name Raquel. She started the program as a junior in high school, worked throughout her senior year and was hired on full time with Vestas after graduation. Raquel finished her 2000<sup>th</sup> working hour in Nakskov, Denmark, on a temporary eight-week assignment assisting another factory in training new employees. Upon her return to Windsor, Raquel took advantage of our tuition reimbursement program and currently finishing her second year of college to gain her engineering degree. Raquel currently is a trainer on the night shift and is putting her apprenticeship skills she learned with her mentor to work by mentoring newly hired employees.

Vestas's registered youth apprenticeship program has been a great change to our business. These young apprentices bring fresh ideas, energy, and a willingness to learn everything they can. They've helped us start a mentorship program, streamline processes, improve productivity, and even come up with innovative solutions to challenges. It has been incredibly fulfilling to see them grow and develop their skills. Overall, youth apprenticeship has had a huge impact on Vestas and the surrounding community.

Vestas saw an opportunity to tap into a labor pool that was being unnoticed at the time. It took around a year to get the apprenticeship program designed and rolled out in both the factory and school district. If The Youth Apprenticeship Advancement Act is passed it will allow more businesses to give opportunities for our youth to be paid to learn and gain knowledge for better stronger skilled workforce in the future.

I attend roundtable meetings with other advance manufacturing businesses in Northern Colorado to discuss apprenticeship programs and the need for these. Their tentativeness of starting an apprenticeship program is due to cost and effort to putting a program together. The cost is real, but it is an investment in the company's workforce and one that has a guaranteed return if you structure your program well and commit the resources. The cost comes from training, added headcount for mentors and trainers, and overhead of a new program. If you could continue investing in youth apprenticeships and youth apprenticeship intermediaries, make reporting and registration processes simpler for employers and schools, and make high school more flexible to allow more students to fit apprentices in their school schedules, this would help more employers take advantage of this great talent strategy and ensure more young people have access to great jobs.

Vestas chose to start the program as we could see the benefit in hiring a new diverse and talented youth of today. It has shown us the potential of a skilled workforce if you give the youth of today a chance to become successful. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to answering your questions.