

Testimony of Matthew Dickerson, Business Development and Strategy Officer, Mid South Extrusion,  
Monroe, LA, before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions

Hearing on “The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Supporting Efforts to Meet the Needs of  
Youth, Workers and Employers”

June 12, 2024

Chair Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, members of the Committee, and my fellow panelists, I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today about the pressing need to build a strong and adaptable workforce in our nation. I am Matthew Dickerson, Business Development and Strategy Officer at Mid South Extrusion. I have been deeply involved in workforce development and have over a decade of experience in various roles, such as educator, career and technical education supervisor, small business owner, and executive at a rapidly expanding and innovative plastics manufacturing company in Monroe, LA. I'm also honored to serve on the Louisiana Workforce and Social Services Reform Task Force, appointed by the governor. We aim to create a plan enabling individuals to transition from poverty to prosperity by coordinating our workforce and social services systems more effectively.

Like many industries, one of our challenges is recruiting and employing individuals with essential reading, writing, and math skills and the specialized skills required to operate our production lines. Our goal is to deliver high-quality products to our customers, which requires a skilled workforce. Our projected growth and the expansion of our production capabilities hinge on our ability to not only develop our current workforce but also recruit individuals who can produce that high-quality product.

I'm pleased to report significant progress in this effort in northeast Louisiana—despite being one of the most impoverished regions in the country—through two sector partnerships in healthcare and manufacturing. As Chair of the Northeast Louisiana Manufacturers Alliance and Consortium, I am proud to say that business and industry leaders are taking real action to break the cycle of generational poverty through the development of education and workforce programs that align with our region's available careers. These leaders work with our local workforce boards, chambers of commerce, K-12 systems, and higher education institutions to create a pipeline that leads to real careers, not just a certificate. I believe it's time for the industry to take the lead in discussions on workforce development. We must stop being passive consumers of the workforce system and complaining about the quality of the product. This is our opportunity to lead the discussion and produce the ideal candidates for our available positions. We have dedicated extensive time to collaborating with our K12 partners, the

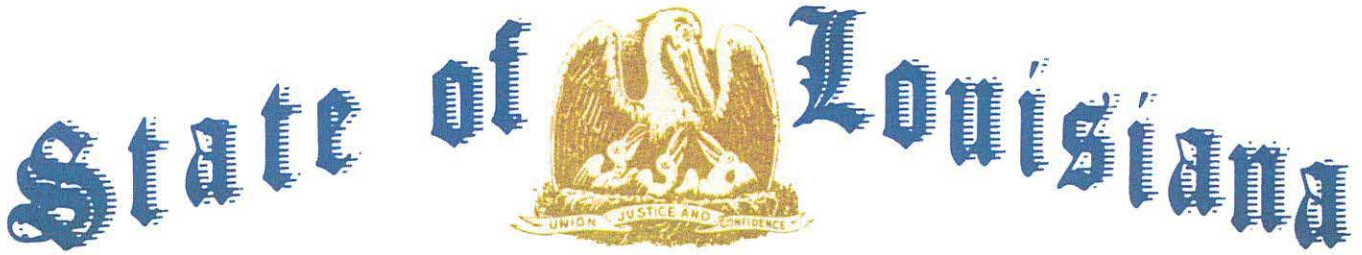
Community and Technical College System, local universities, and various community organizations to address the constantly evolving needs of our regional industry.

Collaboration with industry leaders is crucial to developing a partnership-driven process for enhancing workforce development and addressing public and private sector needs. There's been a shift where businesses increasingly shoulder the burden of training, a role traditionally filled by community partners, who now struggle with adapting to industry changes due to policy and resource limitations. I believe the sector partnership model is a practical accountability framework, with industry partners at its core expressing their challenges and needs while community partners collaborate on how to address those needs effectively. However, a significant obstacle has been the fragmentation of resources, which leads to inefficiencies in funding distribution and service support and fails to meet employers' needs effectively. By increasing investment in training and optimizing the utilization of existing supportive services, we can enhance the ability of individuals to move from poverty to prosperity more effectively.

Emphasizing the importance of local and state control over funding for workforce development programs is crucial to enhancing strategic effectiveness and ensuring successful outcomes. Local and state agencies possess a deep understanding of their regions' distinct challenges and opportunities, granting them the ability to customize workforce development programs that precisely cater to the unique needs of both employers and employees. This level of control offers the adaptability and agility needed to keep up with new industry trends and changes in the job market, where a universal federal approach is not practical. By increasing the flexibility of the distribution of funds while collaborating with industry partners and seeking their input on spending decisions, we can guarantee that investments are explicitly directed toward programs catering to the distinct needs of local industries and workers. Through this targeted and localized investment approach, we can cultivate a more robust, resilient workforce that can uphold our nation's economic growth and competitiveness with confidence and optimism.

In conclusion, as we stand at the crossroads of essential economic and social reform, our collective action or inaction will determine the future of workforce development in our nation. Our advancements in northeast Louisiana showcase the tangible benefits of industry-led initiatives and the power of collaboration with educational and community partners. We must recognize that the prosperity of our industries and the well-being of our communities are inseparably linked. I urge Congress to consider directing significant investments to industry-led, partnership-driven workforce development strategies that realistically address the skill gaps and efficiently utilize resources to empower individuals

toward economic prosperity. Together, let us commit to fostering an environment where every citizen can contribute meaningfully to our economy, ensuring the United States remains a beacon of innovation and prosperity. Thank you for your attention and for considering this pivotal step towards securing our nation's future.



**EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT  
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
EXECUTIVE ORDER NUMBER JML 24-44**

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***ESTABLISHMENT OF THE  
LOUISIANA WORKFORCE AND SOCIAL SERVICES REFORM  
TASK FORCE***

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**WHEREAS**, Louisiana needs an educated and skilled workforce for employment in diverse occupations and industries;

**WHEREAS**, the Louisiana workforce is increasingly in need of access to high quality education and training programs aligned to the growing technological competencies required in occupations;

**WHEREAS**, Louisiana has over 110,000 unfilled jobs every month, yet a labor force participation rate under 59%;

**WHEREAS**, Louisiana's public workforce system is a maze of confusing and inefficient programs and is not meeting the challenges faced by employers and workers;

**WHEREAS**, a recent legislative audit report of federally-funded workforce and social services identified staggeringly low program outcomes and highlighted the need for a unified vision, integrated service delivery, stronger coordination and partnership, and improved oversight for positive outcomes;

**WHEREAS**, the audit report found that the state needs increased collaboration among agencies and stake holders in order to implement a unified vision and plan for how to best coordinate and administer these programs;

**WHEREAS**, the audit report found that public assistance programs and workforce development programs in Louisiana are overseen and administered by various state agencies such that an individual may have to go through multiple doors to access services;

**WHEREAS**, the audit report found that although Louisiana has a unified Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act state plan, the state still needs increased collaboration among agencies and stakeholders in order to implement a unified vision and plan for how to best coordinate and administer public assistance and workforce development programs;

**WHEREAS**, Louisiana does not have a centralized location that includes a clearing house of the available public assistance programs, how to access them, and eligibility requirements;

**WHEREAS**, Congress is currently considering reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and new opportunities to grant states the ability to pilot comprehensive innovation demonstration programs; and

**WHEREAS**, research has shown that an integrated system of workforce and social services more effectively supports Louisiana's most vulnerable citizens in escaping poverty through targeted supports and work to achieve dignity and self-sufficiency, which not only lifts individuals but also strengthens Louisiana's economy.

**NOW THEREFORE, I, JEFF LANDRY**, Governor of the State of Louisiana, by virtue of the authority vested by the Constitution and laws of the State of Louisiana, do hereby order and direct as follows:

Section 1: The Louisiana Workforce Reform Task Force shall be composed of 17 total members representing the following:

- A. The Commissioner of Administration or his designee;
- B. The Secretary of the Louisiana Workforce Commission (LWC) or her designee and one additional staff member having knowledge of workforce programming;
- C. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services or his designee and one additional staff member having knowledge of social services programming;
- D. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Economic Development or her designee;
- E. The President of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System or his designee;
- F. The State Superintendent of the Louisiana Department of Education or his designee;
- G. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Health or his designee;
- H. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs or his designee;
- I. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Corrections or his designee;
- J. The Speaker of the Louisiana House of Representatives or his designee;
- K. The President of the Louisiana State Senate or his designee;
- L. The Louisiana Legislative Auditor or his designee;
- M. One (1) member who represents the local workforce development boards authorized under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, appointed by the Secretary of the Louisiana Workforce Commission;
- N. One (1) who represents a non-profit organization providing services throughout Louisiana to individuals in poverty, appointed by the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services; and
- O. One (1) member who represents employers, appointed by the Governor.

Section 2: The duties of the Task Force shall include the following:

- A. Conduct research and collect data on state models for coordinating and fully integrating workforce, social services, education, child care, and health care programs and develop alternative approaches that Louisiana should consider to achieve improved outcomes. Such programs shall prioritize but not be limited to:

- i. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs, including oversight for an integrated regional service delivery system;
  - ii. Unemployment Insurance (UI) program;
  - iii. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program;
  - iv. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program;
  - v. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP);
  - vi. SNAP Employment and Training Program (SNAP E&T); and
  - vii. Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).
- B. Conduct research and collect data on performance outcomes of various workforce programs, including an analysis of the number of common participants enrolled in multiple programs across state agencies;
- C. Conduct an asset map that incorporates office locations, case management systems, and customer intake and eligibility procedures the above services and programs;
- D. Issue a final report containing recommendations for the integration of aforementioned services and programs, including any state department or agency reorganizations needed to achieve desired outcomes for the people of Louisiana. The report shall address the following key components:
- i. How current services and programs are organized and administered at the state agency level;
  - ii. A vision for how service delivery can be integrated for the benefit of all Louisianans who rely on such services and programs, including those currently delivered at the state, regional, and local levels;
  - iii. Opportunities for financial integration and efficient methods for allocating costs across multiple services and programs;
  - iv. Recommendations on how supportive services, such as child care, trauma recovery, health insurance, can better support employment outcomes; and
  - v. Identification of efficiencies leading to cost savings that can be used for enhanced services, such as increased resource availability for Louisianans to access education and training.
- E. The Task Force may form work groups of Task Force members to focus on specific issues or topics as needed; and
- F. The Task Force may utilize non-Task Force subject matter experts to facilitate meetings, conduct research, and/or provide technical assistance.

Section 3: The Secretary of the Louisiana Workforce Commission and the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, or their designees, shall serve as co-chairs of the Task Force and shall jointly convene the first meeting no later than May 1, 2024. The Louisiana Workforce Commission shall provide staff support to the Task Force as needed.

Section 4: The Secretary of the Louisiana Workforce Commission shall provide updates for members of the Task Force relative to efforts by the United States Congress to reauthorize and reform the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, including, but not limited to, opportunities to incorporate recommendations contained within the final report through new

demonstration and waiver authority or other changes to current federal laws. The final report shall identify opportunities for Louisiana to participate in any federally-authorized workforce demonstration project, including specific provisions requiring waiver requests.

Section 5: The Task Force's final report shall be provided to the Governor and each member of the Louisiana Legislature no later than January 31, 2025.

Section 6: Task Force members shall not receive additional compensation or a per diem from the Office of the Governor for serving on the Task Force.

A Task Force member who is an employee or an elected public official of the State of Louisiana or a political subdivision thereof may seek reimbursement of travel expenses, in accordance with PPM 49, from his or her employing and/or elected department, agency and/or office.

Section 7: All departments, commissions, boards, agencies and officers of the State, or any political subdivision thereof, are authorized and directed to cooperate in actions the State may take in response to this event.

Section 8: This order is effective upon signature of the Governor, and it shall remain in effect until the Task Force has provided the final report in Section 2 to the Governor, or until amended, modified, terminated or rescinded by the Governor, or until terminated by operation of law.



**IN WITNESS WHEREOF**, I have set my hand officially and caused to be affixed the Great Seal of Louisiana in the City of Baton Rouge, on this 22<sup>nd</sup> day of March 2024.

  
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Jeff Landry  
GOVERNOR OF LOUISIANA

**ATTEST BY THE SECRETARY  
OF STATE**

  
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Nancy Landry  
SECRETARY OF STATE

# Northeast Louisiana Manufacturing Alliance & Coalition (NELA-MAC)

Launch Meeting – Oct 5, 2022

Summary & Next Steps

**On October 5<sup>th</sup>** a group of manufacturing executives from the greater surrounding areas of Monroe and West Monroe gathered in the Fireside room of the Bayou Desiard Country Club to launch a new, regional manufacturing alliance, NELA-MAC.

**NELA-MAC is intended** to be the forum by which manufacturers come together to tackle common challenges and opportunities, alongside education, workforce training and economic development partners in the region who share a stake in a thriving manufacturing industry.

**NELA-MAC will be** driven by manufacturers, professionally facilitated, staffed by Workforce Development Board (WDB) 81, and jointly supported WDB 83, the Monroe Chamber of Commerce, the West Monroe Chamber of Commerce, Delta Community College and the Manufacturing Extension Partnership. It is modeled after [similar partnerships](#) up and running in over 20 states, and after an award-winning Healthcare Alliance also in NE Louisiana.

Here are NELA-MAC's initial opportunity and priority action areas.

## Opportunities in NELA Manufacturing

The group on October 5<sup>th</sup> began with a discussion about opportunities in manufacturing in NE Louisiana. Topics were diverse, including:

- **Shared learning about industry automation** for simple tasks, allowing for the opportunity to free up talent for other, higher value tasks;
- **Growth in markets** and the opportunities to grow market share and access together;
- **Supply chain connections** within the region that may not be well mapped or utilized;
- **Stronger connections with education** providers for equipment and specific technical training; and
- **Combined impact on keeping young people and young professionals *here*** by combining messages and marketing about manufacturing jobs: accessible (less than 4-year degrees), well-paying and strong economic multiplier, regional cost of living and quality of life. Target young people (K-8 + high school), "returners" who left the region for five years and came home, educators and parents.

## Shared Priority Actions

Based on the Opportunities discussion, the group quickly moved into answering the question: What will be required of us as an Alliance to realize these big opportunities? The following priority action areas, along with committed sign-ups to dive deeper into success metrics and needed actions, were created.



## 1. Build the Core

- a. **Initial Focus:** Create the vision/mission/top metrics of success for NELA-MAC; build the Directory of all local manufacturing companies, and its usage rules; create an aligned agenda of priority areas, and identify the resources/programs that can add value; immediately grow the core with additional companies.
- b. **Initial Team:** Debbie Sawyer (Sawyer Plastics), Eli Finister (Neighbors Cookies, LLC), Joe Tannehill (Steel Fabricators of Monroe), Mitch Reppond (Steel Fabricators of Monroe), Ron Mason (MidSouth Extrusions), Ronnie Hines (Voith Group)
  - i. Recruit: Graphics Packaging, Hodge (Debbie Sawyer), Drax Biomass (Mitch Reppond)

## 2. Market Manufacturing

- a. **Initial Focus:**
  - i. **What:** Key message points should include quality of life, net cost of living, “Come Home to Family”, Quality jobs – be a part of “making our world”, education and training pathways exist (and they’re accessible, not always 4-year college degree)
  - ii. **Who:** Define target audiences and customized messages, including K-12, college students, parents/teachers, returners, target a 45 mile radius
  - iii. **How:** Social media, local media, a go-to place for NELA-MAC info
- b. **Initial Team:** Frederick Moeller (Bancroft Bag), John Mark Whilhite (Louisiana Plastics), Mitch Reppond (Steel Fabricators of Monroe), Paul Little (ABP)
  - i. Recruit: Southern Steel Fabricators (Joe Tannehill)

## 3. Create Community Partnerships

- a. **Initial Focus:** Prioritize 1-2 big issues; create the partnership of NELA-MAC with elected officials (the Mayors) on ways to improve the community (e.g. crime reduction); create partnerships between NELA-MAC and community based organizations who are already addressing key community issues (e.g. battling substance abuse issues)
- b. **Initial Team:** Justin Marsh (Pulpmill Services Inc), Eli Finister (Neighbors Cookies, LLC), Ron Mason (MidSouth Extrusions)
  - i. Recruit: Premier Products (Marty Herlevic, James Machine Works)

## 4. Identify Specific Training

- a. **Initial Focus:** Partner with training and education institutions to identify the critical positions and their needed skills and knowledge; create a shared and single education program that targets high schoolers, focused on the “economics of job/career opportunities” in manufacturing in our region
- b. **Initial Team:** Justin Marsh (Pulpmill Services Inc), Marty Herlevic (James Machine Works)