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Rep. George Miller (D-CA) Opening Statement for the Hearing on H.R. 4297

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), the senior Democrat of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce for the full committee hearing on H.R. 4297, “Workforce Investment Improvement Act of 2012”

Today, the committee meets to examine a bill to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act. This is no small matter. The need for robust federal investments in the nation’s workforce is readily apparent. It’s made apparent by the rise of global competition. And it’s made apparent by the deep impact the last recession has had on employment opportunities for certain populations.

Those investments need to be smart investments. They need to be made efficiently and effectively, ensuring job training and employment services get to people who need them. And those services need to reflect existing and future labor market demands.

We need to demand greater accountability for those investments. We need to know whether they are working both for short-term reemployment needs and for long-term skills attainment and credentialing. And we need to support and foster innovation in the system, engaging partners and leveraging resources.

Importantly, there is a bipartisan consensus that the law in this area needs updating. How the Congress reauthorizes WIA is of vital importance to working people, their families, businesses, and the national economy. We must get it right.

And so, as we examine the legislation before us, there are a number of important questions to consider.

First, does the bill focus sufficient resources toward individuals with the greatest barriers to employment? We must not turn our backs on those who may need the most help from a workforce investment system, including workers with low incomes, the nation’s youth, individuals with disabilities, English language learners, veterans, and the long-term unemployed.

Equity in the system will grow and strengthen the middle class.

Second, does the bill contain strong accountability measures? Does it incentivize programs to improve outcomes for individuals and businesses? Taxpayers must know that these programs are producing results. Workers and employers deserve to know as well. And those accountability

measures cannot be subject to gaming. They must not discourage helping those who are hardest to serve.

Third, does the bill seek to build on successes and avoid replicating failures from the past? Successful innovations should be supported, and new innovations should be encouraged. Inefficiencies must be wrung out of the system, and accurate, detailed data should be available to help people tell the difference.

Fourth, does the bill effectively leverage the expertise and commitment of all stakeholders? For example, community colleges have often played forward-thinking roles in job training programs. A successful workforce investment system must value the voices of service providers and those who represent people in need of training.

Fifth, does the bill provide a vision for long-term skills attainment? A successful workforce investment system recognizes that mere job placement is not enough. People need careers. The system must provide even the lowest skilled workers with pathways toward credentials and marketable skills beyond the first job they find.

Sixth, does the bill effectively gauge demand from industry? A successful workforce investment system is demand-driven in both the short and long term. And, it must anticipate future needs and drive training toward where demand is and will be. In other words, we should be investing in real workforce development, not a temporary staffing agency.

On many of these questions, I have serious concerns about this bill.

It seeks efficiencies by rolling a number of programs into a single, co-mingled fund. But in doing so, it allows limited resources to be diverted away from where they are needed most.

Youth, especially the disadvantaged, older workers, farm workers, workers with disabilities, displaced homemakers, English language learners, veterans, and low-income workers are among those who face the greatest barriers to profitable employment. And yet all of these populations face the greatest risk of losing access to services under the bill as drafted.

The bill provides for a stronger accountability system. However, I question whether the system works when funds intended to serve different populations are comingled into a single program.

The bill calls for innovation, but it locks out key partners in developing that innovation, leaving the system with one hand tied behind its back. And, in that sense, it fails to build on what we have learned over the years.

I am also concerned that the bill does not sufficiently recognize the critical role that federal workforce investments play in meeting longer-term economic needs. Long-term planning to meet future industry demand will allow workers to be given careers, not just jobs.

While the bill takes steps in the right direction, these fundamental flaws need to be fixed. I cannot support it in its current form.

Democrats understand the need to modernize WIA to serve its clients more effectively and efficiently. For example, we believe WIA must streamline access and better align its programs. We need to demand real accountability, not subject to gaming, so everyone knows what works and what doesn't. We need to strengthen, not water down or eliminate, WIA's capacity to help those with the greatest barriers to employment.

And, we must promote innovation that fully engages partners and existing infrastructures like the community college system, so local areas can respond more effectively to economic challenges and meet future industry needs.

Last month, Congressmen Tierney, Hinojosa, and I introduced a bill to reauthorize WIA with these needed reforms. And I hope our bill can be as much a part of today's discussions as the Republican bill. And I hope that today's hearing can help foster further discussions about these different approaches and help us work together toward a bipartisan WIA reauthorization.

Before I close, I would like to recognize leaders from local Goodwill agencies from Oakland, Los Angeles, Boston, Michigan, and San Francisco who are joining us in the audience today.

Those agencies are an example of how federal investments can leverage additional resources and expertise to help to get people back to work and onto career paths.

Welcome!

And I welcome our distinguished panel of witnesses.

I look forward to your testimony on how Congress can modernize the Workforce Investment Act for the benefit of all and move the economy forward.

<http://democrats.edworkforce.house.gov>