

OPINION

Cutting work force investment shortsighted in these times

By JOHN LIVELY
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In a period of long-term unemployment unprecedented since the Great Depression, the U.S. House of Representatives has passed a continuing resolution that would eliminate funding for the Workforce Investment Act, which funds our country's comprehensive work force development system.

If the continuing resolution passes the Senate in its current form, Workforce Investment Act skill development services will cease on July 1.

Financial support for people in job training at Lane Community College, Pioneer Pacific and other training institutions will stop. Stay-in-school services for low-income youth will stop.

Services to return low-income dropout youth to school will stop. Help for businesses to improve the skills of their current employees will stop. Recruitment assistance for new and existing businesses will be diminished significantly.

How could those results possibly be in the best interest of the American people, our country's economic competitiveness or the prosperity of American families and businesses?

Does dismantling our country's primary work force development system make sense in a period of unprecedented long-term unemployment? Across the nation, nearly 2 million low-income adults receive career advice, basic and occupational skill development and job placement assistance through the act.

In Oregon, some 280,000 adults were served between July 1, 2009, and June 30, 2010. In Lane County, more than 21,000 people received assistance during this same time period. In our state, WorkSource Oregon offices provide these services, and they have seen only increased demand.

In Oregon and Lane County, we continue to see double-digit unemployment. While the economy is showing some signs

of improvement, economists predict we won't reach pre-recession job levels until 2014 at the earliest.

Many of these jobs will require different technical skills than were required just a few years ago. In fact, even in today's challenging economy, employers are experiencing difficulty in finding employees with the skills and credentials they need, as evidenced by the recent manufacturing survey completed by the Lane Workforce Partnership.

In addition, we are experiencing the lowest labor market participation rate for young people (16 to 19 years of age) since World War II. Teens who lack early work experience are more likely to drop out of school, be unemployed for long periods as adults, have reduced lifetime earnings, and exhibit behavior that produces negative consequences. WIA-funded programs are proven to make a difference for these young people.

Yes, our country's deficit needs to be reduced. Like some American families, the government has lived beyond its means. We agree that dramatic steps need to be taken to foster economic growth. We do not agree that dismantling the work force development system is the answer, because the ability of businesses to grow and compete is directly linked to the skills of their employees.

Investing in work force training and development is critical to our economic recovery. Here's how we can support a robust work force development and skills training system:

- ◆ Reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act: Appropriations have continued since 2003, even though the law expired that year. Failure to reauthorize this act continually puts funding at risk.

- ◆ Expand opportunities for the unemployed and underemployed to develop the skills they need to put them on a path to new jobs and careers.

- ◆ Expand on-the-job training programs that reimburse companies for training workers for hard-to-fill jobs, so that people can earn and develop skills that help businesses thrive and prosper.

- ◆ Provide youth with meaningful work opportunities to learn work readiness through applied academic and occupational skills.

- ◆ Integrate basic and occupational skill training to address skill deficits in our community.

- ◆ Enhance the coordinating role of local work force investment boards, such as the Lane Workforce Partnership, to align federal investments based on local employer needs.

We ask members of Congress to consider their constituents, the people who live and work in their communities. For those without jobs, it is imperative that our country provides access to assistance that helps them rejoin the work force.

We must focus on helping people acquire the job skills that will be necessary in the future. Not only does this benefit these individuals, but it also benefits our economy, because we strengthen local businesses and their ability to compete in a worldwide market.

We understand that Congress must cut the federal budget, yet Congress also must consider broad economic issues. Support for work force development directly affects the ability of businesses to compete, to generate economic activity and to contribute taxes based on their increased earnings.

Cutting funding for the Workforce Investment Act is shortsighted and will not serve our country well.

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