

Press-Republican

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Job training should match industry demand

PAUL GRASSO, In Perspective

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---- — My feelings about the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) and the disservice it's doing to the people it's intended to help are no secret. It was good legislation, but for another time and another economy.

As I've written ad nauseum, the architects of the legislation wisely opted to have WIA sunset in 2003 so that it might be modified or completely overhauled because training a competitive workforce is a dynamic, not static activity.

Alas, it was not to be.

Congress has kept WIA on its version of life support, the continuing resolution, every year since 2003 rather than adopt better legislation that might actually help people in a more meaningful way. Don't misunderstand me; people would be far worse off without any job-training program, but that's not the point.

The point is, job training programs can, and should, do so much more than WIA allows.

But for eight years, three years longer than the legislation was intended to be in place, Congress has struggled with passing new workforce legislation.

Why? Hey, I only get 700 words here. The "why" will have to wait for another day and another forum. Suffice it to say, other priorities took precedence.

Recently, Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), chair of the Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions (HELP) Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety, expressed her intention to introduce new workforce legislation. The discussion draft looked promising, but formal introduction and markup of the bill has been postponed twice.

Senate staffers are busily making changes to the discussion draft in response to comments received from various stakeholders, including those offered by my employers, the North Country Workforce Investment Board.

Unfortunately, the pundits predict that even if the bill passes in the Senate it will not pass in the House of Representatives. Why? See above.

This is not to say that nothing is happening to improve how America trains its workforce.

Recognizing the constraints on the public workforce system, as well as on public schools, four national organizations recently announced an initiative to "shape a national skills strategy to address structural skill shortages that are putting the brakes on economic recovery and job creation."

The initiative, Business Leaders United, is a Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) Commitment to Action. The four national organizations are Skills for America's Future, National Fund for Workforce Solutions, National Skills Coalition and Corporate Voices for Working Families. The Joyce Foundation is the initiative's first philanthropic investor.

Joyce Foundation President Ellen S. Alberding was spot on in saying that "job creation and job-training strategies must go

hand in hand.

That won't happen unless business leaders are at the table shaping workforce policy. Business Leaders United has identified concrete measurable goals to help ensure public workforce training investments are targeted at the jobs that will be part of our post-recession economy."

Hmmm, "ensuring that public workforce training investments are targeted at the jobs that will be part of our post-recession economy?" Maybe Sen. Murray should have been invited to the meeting. Maybe she was. If not, she should certainly get on their listserv.

If public workforce training investments need to be targeted at "the jobs that will be part of our post-recession economy," then any new workforce legislation needs to have at its core locally driven public-private partnerships whose sole purpose is preparing job seekers with skills and industry-recognized, portable certifications that lead to careers in demand occupations.

Equally important would be requiring public-private partnerships to focus on sectoral initiatives aimed at identifying workforce needs and opportunities within a growing local or regional industry.

Sectoral initiatives are an effective way to assist specific populations, such as low-income workers, the long-term unemployed and incumbent workers. The goal is to meet the need for a competitive workforce and the needs of those targeted for improved job opportunities.

The challenge is the public workforce system's general lack of knowledge about specific industry sectors and the mistrust and negative perception that many employers have about government workforce development initiatives.

I can't prove it, but the negative perceptions and mistrust may have been a motivating factor in forming Business Leaders United.

Or maybe they just got tired of waiting; after all, it's been eight years.

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