March 13, 2013

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chair
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies
      Appropriations Subcommittee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Harkin:

On behalf of National Skills Coalition—a broad-based coalition of business leaders, union affiliates, education and training providers, community-based organizations, and public workforce agencies advocating for policies that invest in the skills of U.S. workers—I am writing in support of your amendment to the Continuing Appropriations Act of 2013 that would provide explicit funding levels for programs under the Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations Subcommittee’s jurisdiction.

The Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations bill funds many critical programs each year, including most federal employment and training programs. Right now there are more than 12.5 million unemployed workers, and about 3.6 million job openings. We know that these jobs are going unfilled—despite an unemployment rate of 7.7 percent—in part, at least, because employers cannot find workers with the right skills. It is critical that Congress invest in programs that help workers gain the skills they need to get decent jobs, and help employers find the skilled workers they need to grow their businesses and strengthen the economy. The failure of Congress to take up and consider a full Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations bill undermines these investments.

National Skills Coalition supports several provisions in your amendment that strengthen and improve federal employment and training programs: the $14 million increase in funding for the Wagner-Peyser Employment Service will help workers access supports and services to help them through periods of unemployment and re-enter the labor market; the partial restoration of the “ability-to-benefit” provision under the Pell grant program will help low-skilled individuals obtain the postsecondary credentials they need to succeed in the workplace; and increasing the statewide set-aside under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) from 5 to 10 percent will help those states that were using the funds to support innovative strategies such as career pathways and sector partnership.
Thank you for your work on this amendment. It reflects an important commitment to these programs, and ensures that Congress carefully considers how limited federal investments are best used.

Sincerely,

Rachel Gragg, Ph.D.
Federal Policy Director
National Skills Coalition