



Chris Stricklin, 4 June 2024 Testimony



Good afternoon Chairman LaHood, Ranking member Davis & Distinguished members of this Subcommittee. On behalf of the Alabama Workforce Council, I am Chris Stricklin, a retired Air Force Colonel, with an encore career as a construction industry executive at Dunn Companies, in Birmingham, Alabama. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on our belief that the answer to reducing the number of people on Unemployment Insurance, as well as increasing labor force participation and getting people back to work lies in revolutionizing our workforce, both removing obstacles to entry and improving the opportunity to earn a livable wage while on a career progression pathway. This requires teamwork and an all-hands-on deck approach with business, government, and education leaders to create multiple pathways for individuals to receive the education or skills, the training or retraining, needed to be successful and remain employed. Our team of industry partners, the State of Alabama, the Department of Labor and our Workforce Councils simultaneously focus on training those searching for employment for the first time, upskilling those yearning for advancement and retraining those on unemployment. To be successful, we must ask ourselves... what leads people to need unemployment compensation. Our group of leaders began efforts with a belief that the workforce issues and UI could not be solved by merely putting a hammer in someone's hand. Instead, we must capture their hearts and inspire motivation in both our industries and their future. This is not a labor crisis... it is an issue finding one's personal identity and purpose. After reading Gallup's 'Wellbeing at Work,' we confirmed what we had suspected. When people have the opportunity to do work they are naturally gifted at and properly trained to do...they enjoy their work...find it stimulating...and want to do more of it.

Our efforts initially targeted areas of Alabama with some of the highest unemployment rates and least skilled population. The training model delivered awareness of job options in different specialties so one could find what interested them then reduced barriers to entry. Training is provided at reduced cost, designed to be accomplished quickly, and focused on one simple task, train the first two weeks on the job. This delivers a measure by which to guide course development while delivering to industry partners an individual who

understands safety, personal protective equipment, and basic operation of the heavy equipment on which they are trained. This translates for employers to a reduction in on-the-job training, improved safety outcomes, and increased retention.

Through our efforts, we enabled unskilled, under skilled and unemployed individuals the ability to obtain skills certification which follows for their career and is universally recognized. We are now reaching a previously untapped or underserved pool of motivated individuals and enabling their career pathways. Not merely jobs.

Our model of certification is hybrid in which an individual takes the theory portion of the class on-line, on-demand, at their pace and then moves on to in-person lab. Course development is led by our Innovation Center which offers rapid, non-credit training courses in high-demand fields. Instruction on the videos is conducted by actual operators who are motivated to train others. Once finished with the theory, a student then schedules one of the upcoming 8-hour in-seat training labs at their local community college.

Through this effort, over 3,000 Alabamians have earned credentials to date, and the training has extended to other industries including food and beverage, hotel operations, meat cutter, and mental health worker. Along the same motivation, courses have been conducted in our prisons to reduce recidivism and build a positive future for parolees, specifically developing a Commercial Driver's License Program which has graduated 78 parolee students to date. A next innovation is occurring this month at Dovetail Landing with a focus on veterans reentering the workforce after their military service with a 'reverse boot camp'.

Alabama has developed a comprehensive approach to decreasing the need for Unemployment compensation while increasing the labor force participation and postsecondary attainment rates by concurrently developing new modalities of training that integrate supportive services, work-based learning, enhanced career navigation, and short-cycle training programs to allow individuals facing benefits cliffs to persist in training and the

workforce. By unbundling and modularizing degrees, Alabama is providing multiple points of entry and exit for Alabamians to enter training and the subsequent workforce.

What I am most excited about with regard to reducing Unemployment is Governor Kay Ivey's December 2023 launch of the Alabama Talent Triad as the nation's first full-scale talent marketplace to connect education and training providers, students and jobseekers, and employers based on a direct skills match. In March this year, Alabama's State Workforce Development Board adopted a policy to require the Alabama Talent Triad to be used for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act training program intake and assessment process. Where these best impacts our conversation today will be a policy to be adopted shortly which will enable unemployment insurance claimants to apply for all available and suitable employment using the Triad. This will also allow the state to instantly verify work search requirements. Rather than the traditional analog process of applying for three jobs per week, Alabamians will now be able to apply for all jobs (potentially hundreds) with the click of one button and this will be required as the first step of signing up for Unemployment.

In closing, we are a state working together for a better tomorrow for our individuals, companies, industries, communities, state and our nation. Together this will revolutionize our social dialogue and develop career routes with progression pathways, especially for those people who may have fallen behind. Thank you for the opportunity to sit before you today and explain why we truly believe Alabama is Number One in the nation for Workforce Innovation.