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Thursday, June 7, 2012

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

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), the ranking member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce for the committee markup on H.R. 4297.

The committee meets today to consider legislation reauthorizing the Workforce Investment Act.

At a time when many businesses in this country tell us that they cannot find the skilled workers needed for vacant jobs, and with so many Americans still unemployed from the Great Recession, our task today is an important one.

If done right, the Workforce Investment Act can be a vital tool for helping Americans attain the skills and education they need to reach and stay in the middle class.

So today's markup should be an opportunity to draft legislation that will both reduce unemployment and improve our country's global competitiveness. It is an opportunity that we should not let go to waste.

The Great Recession threw millions of Americans out of work before President Obama took office. By 2009, 8.1 million jobs had been lost. Action was needed. President Obama and the previous Congress worked together to help jumpstart the economy.

Those efforts paid off. 4.25 million jobs have been added in the last 26 months.

But more must be done.

Last week's jobs numbers should have been another wakeup call to set aside political obstruction and help make the economy work for everyone. Both Democratic and Republican governors have come before this committee imploring Congress to work together to move the economy forward. Economists from across the political spectrum, including Republican advisors like Bruce Bartlett and Mark Zandi, have argued for the same.

Unfortunately, the Republican bill before us does not put us on a path to bipartisanship. It places ideology over practical solutions. It does not rise to meet the challenges our economy faces. And for that reason, I oppose the current bill.

A broad range of experts and practitioners who know how to run successful training and reemployment programs have raised serious concerns about this legislation. Many stakeholders, including labor organizations, civil rights groups, disability advocates and workforce investment organizations oppose this legislation.

They all agree that the Republican bill does not move the workforce system into the future.

First, the bill repeals, consolidates and block-grants training programs without regard to the impact on services. While a couple dozen programs are consolidated in this bill, the block grants effectively create 50 or more new programs across the 50 states.

By block granting WIA, the bill walks away from our national responsibility to create and sustain a high-skilled workforce, especially for our most disadvantaged workers.

Youth, older workers, farm workers, workers with disabilities, women, English language learners, veterans, and low-income workers are among those who face the greatest barriers to employment.

Youth employment is at a 60-year low. Older workers are struggling with long-term unemployment. The unemployment rate for workers with disabilities consistently outpaces that of the country as a whole.

These populations need the greatest assistance right now. Yet all of them are at risk of losing services under the Republican bill. The bill lumps programs together and does not require any reporting on whether disadvantaged workers are being effectively served.

Under such a system, taxpayer dollars will be directed away from those with the greatest need and toward those with the greatest political influence.

Second, the bill restructures the workforce system in a way that locks out key stakeholders, puts blinders on the system, and leaves the system vulnerable to favoritism.

For instance, the bill eliminates any requirement that labor, community-based organizations, community colleges, or people who work with youth, veterans, or workers with disabilities have a seat at the table. These are key stakeholders who can recognize when a program is or isn't working. They provide a voice for the very people who need training and the very people looking for work.

This bill silences that voice.

Under current law, business makes up a majority of each Workforce Investment Board and chairs each board. This bill, however, guarantees business 2/3 of the seats on a board, and up to 100 percent of those seats. It gives these businesses nearly unchecked power to spend government funds.

Finally, the bill freezes authorization levels for five years. This freeze actually leads to real cuts at a time when the need for quality services is greatest.

One has to look no further than recent budgets proposed by the majority to see where the priorities lie. These budgets cut billions of dollars from programs to help Americans find new jobs and gain new skills while preserving tax cuts for millionaires and billionaires.

This bill and these budget proposals send our country in the wrong direction.

My colleagues and I have a different vision of WIA reauthorization. And I expect that vision to be reflected in amendments offered today.

Rather than consolidating programs for the sake of consolidating programs, we can make job training programs more efficient and effective by requiring states to establish unified plans that streamline and coordinate these programs.

We should demand accountability in these programs. And that accountability should not subject to gamesmanship. Everyone should know what works and what doesn't, especially when it comes to our most disadvantaged workers.

We should strengthen, not weaken, WIA's capacity to help those with the greatest barriers to employment.

And, we should promote innovation in the workforce system, like those that fully engage community colleges, so local areas can leverage resources, respond more effectively to economic challenges, and meet future industry needs.

This committee should be building a system that honors our commitment to expand opportunity for all Americans, builds on what works, gives businesses the workers they need to compete globally, and grows the middle class.

I yield back.

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