

TESTIMONY before the Committee on Labor and Housing
Regarding LD 1359
An Act Regarding Local Workforce Development Boards
SUPPORT

April 10, 2019

Senator Bellows, Representative Sylvester, and distinguished members of the committee on Labor and Housing: thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Travis Kennedy. I'm the Director of Public Affairs for Cumberland County government, and I'm here to speak on behalf of the County regarding LD 1359.

While it may seem counterintuitive to direct funds into workforce development at a time when unemployment in the state is so low, we must consider who remains unemployed in the current market. Unemployment rates are calculated based on the number of people who want a job and cannot get one; today these are, by and large, people who are facing significant barriers to employment. They are people struggling with disabilities and mental health disorders, new Mainers including especially asylum seekers, people with basic hard and soft skill deficiencies, people in recovery from substance use disorder and people recently released from county jails and state prisons.

So the need may be smaller in terms of numbers, but the cases are more complex. Intensive services must be developed and supported. Before I agreed to testify on this bill I lightly grilled the Executive Director at our local workforce board about why they may need this money and what problems they could attempt to solve with it.

She reported back to me that as federal funding continues to decrease, the scope and scale of services that they're able to offer are shrinking. They will carry fewer caseloads than in years past, in some cases referring people to other services instead of taking them on themselves. She also mentioned that with appropriate funding, she would like to create a position focused on people recently released from incarceration.

As you may expect, Cumberland County has a specific interest in that last one. We manage the state's largest jail. The individuals that pass through our facility are almost always facing multiple significant barriers to employment, including struggles with substance use and mental health disorders, lack of reliable transportation and housing, and the stigma of recent incarceration.

A 2015 nationwide study by America Works revealed that immediate placement into a job after release from incarceration has a dramatic positive impact on recidivism rates. Employees who they were able to place in jobs immediately or soon after incarceration saw their recidivism rates drop from between thirty-one-to-seventy percent down to between three-to-eight percent in states like Virginia and North Carolina, and the success rates were especially powerful if the employee stayed in their position for at least six months.

This is, of course, just one study by one company. But there are heaps of evidence studying this exact subject all across the globe, in places where job placement after incarceration is done well and in places where it isn't. The results are almost always uniform; helping people find work when they get out of jail or prison reduces the chances that they will go back.

The effect of this drop in recidivism is significant, not just for the employees themselves but for the community and state they live in. While it may cost a few thousand dollars to help someone find employment, it will save the system tens of thousands of dollars in costs to keep them locked up and to support the public safety divisions making those arrests. Instead of producing a cost to the system, that person will be a contributor, who participates in the local economy and pays taxes.

This certainly seems like a worthy investment. If a little funding from the state can help to create and support the kind of focused, intensive workforce services that will help these folks with serious employment challenges to clear those hurdles and find jobs, our entire state will be the better for it.

Thank you for your time today, and for your consideration of this very important issue. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.