



## United States Senate

July 10, 2024

The Honorable Bernie Sanders  
Chairman  
Senate Health, Education,  
Labor, & Pensions (HELP) Committee  
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy  
Ranking Member  
Senate Health, Education,  
Labor, & Pensions (HELP) Committee  
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy:

I am writing in response to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) discussion draft of the bill aimed at modernizing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). This draft represents a significant step toward the long overdue reauthorization of our nation's core workforce policy. I fully support HELP's commitment to crafting a reauthorization that prioritizes investment in Generation Now, the youngest members of our workforce. As the Committee advances this important legislation, it is crucial to prioritize and uplift the voices of Generation Now, maintaining robust youth funding, and incorporate diverse perspectives to create a stronger and more inclusive workforce development system.

Since its inception 10 years ago, concerns have arisen regarding the effectiveness of WIOA in achieving its goals. Reports suggest that WIOA participants face bureaucratic hurdles and receive inadequate training. These limitations impact their ability to compete for skilled roles and contribute to occupational segregation, where workers are concentrated in low-wage jobs with limited advancement opportunities. This is particularly concerning given the challenges faced by young people entering the workforce today. Persistent inequities within our educational and workforce systems create hurdles for young people, limiting their access and opportunities based on factors like race, gender, income, and ability. This impacts their financial stability regardless of whether they have a college degree. Today's young people struggle to achieve the same level of financial stability as their parents. The ability of young adults to make essential investments in housing, healthcare, education, and childcare, which were once accessible to previous generations, is now increasingly out of reach. This economic reality intensifies the challenges young people face as they transition into adulthood.

There are approximately 39 million young adults aged 16 to 24 in America, with an additional five million categorized as "opportunity youth" who are neither employed nor enrolled in school. This pivotal stage of life, both in terms of development and economic impact, demands strategic investment to mitigate the risks associated with disconnection and to provide pathways for these young individuals to address our workforce needs. The House's proposed reauthorization bill, the A Stronger Workforce for America (ASWA) Act, includes a concerning reduction in the

required state spending on opportunity youth from 75 percent to 65 percent. Any reduction in youth investments is counterintuitive for this program. I commend HELP for maintaining the requirement that a minimum of 75 percent of state and local youth funding be directed toward these vulnerable groups.

Further, I support HELP's initiative to establish diverse standing committees in the discussion draft of the bill. These committees are critical in providing specialized expertise and guidance to local workforce development boards, enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of workforce programs. By incorporating standing committees focused on youth services, individuals with disabilities, workforce engagement, educational entities, and justice-involved individuals, the HELP Committee's discussion draft paves the way for a broad spectrum of perspectives and expertise to contribute to the development of comprehensive and equitable workforce solutions.

As the Senate HELP Committee prepares to markup its WIOA reauthorization legislation, I urge for the prioritization of Generation Now in our workforce investments. I respectfully request the Committee consider the following priorities to empower Generation Now and tackle broader workforce challenges:

**1. P.16. Line 24. Section 111 and P. 35. Line 18 & Section 116: Update the Composition of Workforce Development Boards (WDBs)**

These boards oversee and shape local and state workforce policies, making vital strategic planning and funding decisions to address employment, training, and education needs within our diverse communities. Currently, these boards are dominated by business and industry representatives—a trend maintained in both House and Senate reauthorization proposals. While I appreciate that HELP's discussion draft notably encourages the addition of HBCUs and Minority Serving Institutions to WDBs, it still does not expand labor representation.

The Committee should consider reforms that ensure workers and young people have equitable representation. Specifically, labor unions should be given greater or equal representation on state and local WDBs. Shifting the composition of WDBs to be worker-centered enhances workforce development by prioritizing the needs of workers in their respective fields. Additionally, the Committee should consider the inclusion of a youth representative on state and local boards—ideally a young person who has successfully completed a WIOA Youth Program or a representative from a youth-serving organization. By harnessing their energy, ideas, and experiences, we can craft more impactful programs—programs that meet the ever-evolving needs of our workforce, empower our youth, and effectively prepare the next generation for lasting success.

**2. P.16. Line 24. Section 111 and P. 35. Line 18: Establish a State-Level Standing Youth Workforce Committee**

To enhance the influence of these youth-focused standing committees, I propose extending their scope beyond local levels to state workforce development boards. These committees, appointed by the State board, would offer recommendations on youth

workforce investment activities to the full State board. This expansion would ensure that youth voices and needs are address at all levels, leading to more effective workforce development strategies that benefit young people across the country.

**3. P.37. Line 11. Section 116: Changes to the Standing Committees**

While the current discussion draft aims for diverse representation among standing committees, it would benefit from incorporating the perspectives of community organizations specializing in behavioral health, foster care, and substance abuse counseling. These organizations possess valuable expertise in addressing the complex barriers to employment faced by many young people, and their inclusion could significantly enhance the effectiveness of WIOA programs. Additionally, the draft overlooks the crucial perspective of youth experiencing homelessness, a population estimated to be 4.2 million strong in the United States each year. To develop truly effective workforce policies that empower these vulnerable individuals and drive systemic change, it is imperative to include a representative who serves and represents unhoused youth on these committees. Their lived experiences can offer unique insights into the challenges and needs of this population, informing policies that cultivate greater opportunity and support.

I am encouraged by the efforts and attention given by the House Education and Workforce Committee and Senate HELP Committee to modernize our foundational workforce policy. However, I believe we can go further. Our duty is clear: we must seize the opportunity to reauthorize WIOA to create inclusive workforce strategy that centers workers, prioritizes high-quality programs, and empowers young people. I am eager to work with you to establish a resilient workforce system that meets the needs of both present and future generations.

Sincerely,



Laphonza Butler  
United States Senator

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