



**MEETING OF THE
TEXAS WORKFORCE COMMISSION**

DATE

MAY 4, 2021

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TUESDAY, MAY 4, 2021

CHAIRMAN DANIEL: I've got 9:00 [inaudible].

COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Let's rock and roll.

CHAIRMAN DANIEL: All right, well, good morning, everyone. The meeting is called to order. Mr. Trobman, has anyone signed up for public comment?

MR. TROBMAN: No, they have not.

CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Thank you very much. Good morning, Ms. Miller.

MS. MILLER: Good morning, sir.

CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Thank you. This brings us to the end of Agenda Item 3 through 7. Let's pause for a few moments to reset for the rest of the meeting.

COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Thank you, Sherri, guys.

[pause - 00:42:09 - 00:44:16]

CHAIRMAN DANIEL: This is Agenda Item 8, decision, consideration, and possible action regarding funding for the information technology registered apprenticeship program.

MS. BALLAST: Good morning, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Good morning.

MS. BALLAST: [Inaudible-off mic]

CHAIRMAN DANIEL: It's a little fuzzy.

MS. BALLAST: Okay.

1 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Can you turn the volume
2 up?

3 MS. BALLAST: Just got better?

4 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: So now we know it's
5 not the audio.

6 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Kerry, you're on
7 mute. You're on mute.

8 MS. BALLAST: That's it, that's it.

9 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Yeah.

10 MS. BALLAST: Wanted to make sure that I
11 could be heard. And wanted to also let you know how glad I am to
12 be back here. Good to see all of you.

13 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Glad to have you
14 back.

15 MS. BALLAST: So, good morning, Chairman
16 Daniel, Commissioners Alvarez and Commissioner Demerson, and Mr.
17 Serna. For the record, Kerry Ballast, Workforce Development
18 division. On November 10, 2020, the Texas Workforce Commission
19 three-member commission approved the use of three million in
20 WIOA statewide reserve funds for the information technology
21 expansion program. Following the commission approval, technical
22 assistance discussions with our designated federal project
23 officer led apprenticeship staff to find innovations and
24 opportunities in its implementation of the federal state
25 apprenticeship expansion grant, particularly in achieving the

1 grant's goals and in strengthening the system alignment. So
2 today, staff seeks direction in returning 1.5 million to the
3 WIOA statewide reserve, and replacing that 1.5 million with
4 state apprenticeship expansion grant funds. If approved, the
5 registered apprenticeship program that you approved earlier will
6 maintain its original funding level of \$3 million; 1.5 million
7 will be from WIOA statewide reserve, and the other 1.5 million
8 will be from the SAE grant. Thank you, and I'm available for any
9 questions.

10 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Comments or questions?

11 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: None here, Chairman.

12 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: None.

13 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Is there a motion?

14 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Chairman, I move that
15 we approve returning 1.5 million to the WIOA state reserve and
16 replacing that 1.5 million with SAE, or better known as state
17 apprenticeship expansion grant funds, as described by staff,
18 therefore--thereby maintaining the original funding level for
19 the information technology registered apprenticeship program of
20 three million, as follows: 1.5 million in WIOA state reserve,
21 1.5 million SAE grant.

22 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Second.

23 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: It's been moved and
24 seconded, we're unanimous. Thank you.

25 MS. BALLAST: Thank you.

1 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: It's good to see you.

2 MS. BALLAST: Good to see you.

3 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: And it's good to hear
4 you.

5 MS. BALLAST: Oh, glad to--

6 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Good to hear you.

7 MS. BALLAST: Glad to be here, and glad to
8 be heard. Thank you.

9 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: That was [inaudible].

10 Nothing on Agenda Item 9. I'm not showing anything. Agenda Item
11 10, this discussion, consideration, and possible action
12 regarding guidance on resource utilization and implementation of
13 services and strategies to target disaster relief efforts and
14 public health emergencies.

15 MS. MILLER: Good morning, Chairman,
16 commissioners. For the record, Reagan Miller with the Childcare
17 and Early Learning division. This morning, I'd like to present
18 some information about the approximately 1.1 billion in federal
19 childcare funds that TWC was awarded through the December
20 Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act,
21 or CRRSAA, as we're calling it, to shorten the name. You
22 previously approved a planned use of funds report which was
23 submitted to the Administration for Children and Families Office
24 of Childcare in late February. That report provided our initial
25 considerations about how Texas might invest these one-time

1 funds. Today, we're bringing forward our first initiatives for
2 CRRSAA funding consideration. Issue one in the discussion paper
3 lays out all of the funds and identifies some initial estimates
4 for how much money TWC might invest for each of these
5 strategies. Because of the large influx of funding, it will take
6 us some time to get project proposals developed for all of the
7 initiatives under consideration. Today we're recommending that
8 our first prioritization of spending these funds focus on the
9 implementation of childcare relief funds, which will be provided
10 to approximately 14,000 regulated childcare providers. We're
11 asking for approval to budget 775 million towards this effort,
12 and we're also asking for approval to budget 15 million for
13 technical assistance business coaches that all providers will
14 have access to. The second issue provides additional detail
15 about the proposed childcare relief funding. We have outlined
16 the proposed methodology for calculating the amounts that
17 providers will receive, which is based on a provider's size,
18 type, and the cost of care in their area. The methodology would
19 provide for an enhanced amount for Texas Rising Star quality-
20 rated providers, as well as for quality programs who have
21 nationally recognized accreditation. And providers within
22 childcare deserts would also receive an enhanced amount. We've
23 included an attachment one, example grant amounts, for each of
24 the 28 workforce areas. And with your approval, we're aiming to
25 roll out funding in an online application system on June 1.

1 Providers would not need to submit an application to us; we'll
2 simplify this by sending information out to them. And the last
3 issue provides detail about investing funding to secure
4 technical assistance business coaches. These entities will help
5 providers who have questions about the childcare relief funding
6 and provide other business supports, and we will also measure
7 and evaluate the impact that these efforts have had on childcare
8 providers. And as I conclude, I want to express my appreciation
9 to the TW team that has been working to develop the
10 infrastructure that's necessary for providers to apply for these
11 relief grants, and to get legal documents, contracts issued to
12 14,000 entities. It's just been a tremendous effort. We've had
13 staff from IT, business ops, finance, OGC, [sounds like] Red,
14 workforce, and childcare all pitching in to try to get this
15 done, and we couldn't have done that without that incredible
16 team effort. And with that, I'd be happy to answer any
17 questions.

18 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Comments or questions?

19 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Chairman, I'd also
20 like to acknowledge the great work that Reagan and her team have
21 displayed--

22 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Mm-hmm.

23 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: --during this COVID
24 period. I wanna thank you, Reagan, for inviting the
25 commissioners to participate and listen to stakeholders

1 regarding childcare, and I just wanted you to know that we're
2 very pleased with the work that you have done to provide great
3 quality childcare throughout--for all these infants, you know,
4 and thank you for that. And so I just wanted to acknowledge you
5 and your team's great work during this difficult time, and the
6 quality of childcare you provide to our infants. So, thank you.

7 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Chairman and
8 Commissioner Alvarez, this is very important work. It's a big
9 piece of the puzzle as we try to get employees back to work. And
10 so, appreciate the work that you guys are doing, Reagan, and I
11 too appreciate the input of the stakeholders during the well-run
12 public hearing that you held about a week or two ago. It was a
13 lot of input, a lot of good conversation taking place, and I'm
14 glad to see that we're listening to the stakeholders and
15 [inaudible] this amazing work into action. So, thanks to you and
16 the team, the whole TWC team, for what you guys are doing.

17 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Is there a motion?

18 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Chairman, I move that
19 we approve the prioritization of CRRSA projects, use 775 million
20 for childcare relief funding, and use 15 million for technical
21 assistance, business coaches, and to elevate the impact of these
22 efforts, as presented by staff.

23 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: [Inaudible] second
24 the motion.

25

1 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: It's been moved and
2 seconded, we're unanimous. Thank you.

3 MS. MILLER: Thank you.

4 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: This is discussion,
5 consideration, and possible action regarding approval of local
6 workforce development board nominees.

7 MS. WILLIAMS: Good morning, Chairman,
8 commissioners, and Mr. Serna. For the record, Shunta Williams
9 with the Workforce Development division. And before you for
10 consideration we have workforce board nominations for three
11 areas. Staff recommends approval for Workforce Solutions Concho
12 Valley, Gulf Coast, and Coastal Bend. That concludes my request,
13 and I'm here to answer any questions you have.

14 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Comments or questions?

15 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: None here, Chairman.

16 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: None.

17 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Is there a motion?

18 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: I move that we
19 approve board nominees for Concho Valley, Gulf Coast, and the
20 Coastal Bend.

21 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Second.

22 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: It's been moved and
23 seconded, we're unanimous. Thank you.

24 MS. WILLIAMS: Thank you.

25

1 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Nothing on Agenda Item 12,
2 or yes?

3 MR. SERNA: The executive [inaudible].

4 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Hm?

5 MR. SERNA: We have nothing on there.

6 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Okay, great. Legislative
7 report? Oh, we'll take you up on that. I was getting ready to
8 talk about Agenda Item 12, Mr. Serna, and Michael Britt, like,
9 sprung into action back there. It was contradictory to my notes,
10 but he was springing into action on this one.

11 MR. SERNA: A slow spring.

12 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Well--no, it was
13 impressive. It was--he was in the ready position.

14 MR. SERNA: [Inaudible] turtle.

15 MR. BRITT: Good morning, Chairman Daniel,
16 Commissioner Alvarez, Commissioner Demerson, and Mr. Serna. For
17 the record, Michael Britt, governmental relations. We are now
18 about one month away from the conclusion of the 87 Texas
19 legislature regular session. They will conclude on Memorial Day,
20 Monday, March 31. Last week was actually a busy week for the
21 legislature. First and foremost, Chairman Daniel and
22 Commissioner Demerson were confirmed by the Texas senate.
23 Congratulations, gentleman. [applause] Also, last week, both the
24 Texas house and senate established a conference committee for
25 Senate Bill 1, which is the General Appropriations Act, and that

1 conference committee began its work last Thursday. The Texas
2 senate also passed House Bill 7 by Representative Button, which
3 relates to the replenishment ratio used to determine an
4 employer's unemployment compensation tax rate. That bill will
5 now go to the governor for his action. Also, the Texas house
6 passed House Bill 1153 by representative [inaudible] last
7 Monday, and this is TWC's legislative proposal related to Fair
8 Housing Act amendments. The bill now goes to the senate for
9 their consideration. And the senate companion to that bill,
10 Senate Bill 1264, has already been reported favorably from the
11 Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Economic Development.
12 Moving to this week, on Wednesday, the Senate Committee on
13 Health and Human Services will consider House Bill 1792 by
14 Representative Button, which is TWC's legislative proposal
15 related to the TRS assessor and evaluator functions. And on
16 Thursday, the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Economic
17 Development will be considering House Bill 1799, also by
18 Representative Button, which is TWC's legislative proposal
19 related to reporting requirements for the apprenticeship
20 program. This concludes my remarks, and I'm happy to answer any
21 questions y'all have.

22 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Comments or questions?

23 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: None here, Chairman.

24 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: None here.

25

1 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Do you happy to recall,
2 Michael, do you happen to recall what the vote was on
3 Commissioner Demerson's confirmation?

4 MR. BRITT: It was close, sir. I believe it
5 was unanimous.

6 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Yeah, like--

7 MR. BRITT: As was yours, sir.

8 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Oh. [laughter]

9 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Mr. Chairman, I
10 think our vote, and we'll talk about this a little bit later,
11 compared to Commissioner Alvarez's vote, is a little different,
12 from what I've heard.

13 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Remember, I'm not the
14 only one there. They vote on many folks at the time, so--I know
15 what you're trying to get out. So, we had three people that
16 didn't vote, all right, but--

17 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: I just--

18 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: --there were other
19 folks.

20 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Having gone through the
21 process, I will tell you, it is amazing how many nominees the
22 senate conducts a hearing on, does all the appropriate work on,
23 and then the senate as a body passes out in the course of a
24 session. It is A, an impressive number of people the governor
25 nominates to the various boards and commissions and other jobs

1 in state government, and the ability for the senate to do that
2 in the four months, roughly, that they're able to do that, while
3 conducting the rest of their business, it's a large number of
4 people, and there's a big team that makes sure all that happens
5 so that the people of Texas can have their government in place.
6 It was a very well-run process on all accounts, and I'm
7 privileged to be a part of it.

8 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Commissioner
9 Demerson, you made the varsity team.

10 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: I made variety--
11 thank you for the swearing-in.

12 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Anything else, Mr. Serna,
13 in your executive director's report?

14 MR. SERNA: I think we have one item in the
15 executive director's report to discuss, foster [inaudible].

16 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Foster [inaudible]
17 I'll take that, then.

18 MR. SERNA: [Inaudible]

19 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: So, Mr. Chairman,
20 Commissioner Alvarez, as you know, I've been working in the
21 foster care space for quite some time. Commissioner Alvarez
22 introduced me to that. I'd known about foster care for quite
23 some time. We were in a meeting years ago, where it kinda
24 sparked my interest when we were talking about the numbers not
25 moving. And I wanted to take it upon, in this position, making

1 sure that we're providing recognition to employers that are
2 hiring transitioning foster youth and the like. At the agency,
3 Jen Troke and her team takes on that foster care space, and this
4 month is actually foster care month, so we're gonna kick that
5 off here. I'll be participating in a number of events. I'll go
6 to El Paso in a couple of days--no, tomorrow, as a matter of
7 fact--to kick off their event as well. So, Governor Abbott has
8 provided us with a proclamation, and I wanna read that into the
9 record, and then ask Jen to come up to make some remarks as
10 well. We have a number of folks that are in the audience--Gaye,
11 from the Department of Family and Protective Services that's
12 joining us today, and then Hunter Beaton with Day 1 Bags, has
13 joined us as well. And then Erica with Together We Rise is back
14 there as well. Those are the three that I know. Jen will pick up
15 the other ones that I may have forgotten in that state. But I
16 wanna read the proclamation from Governor Abbott. It's very
17 important work. Ms. Abbott has been at the forefront of the
18 efforts here with us from day one, and we're very proud of the
19 work that we've been able to do with her office as well. But it
20 says, "We cherish our young Texans, and understand the
21 importance of providing them with the care, guidance, and
22 support they need to grow into healthy, successful adults. Our
23 children represent the hard work of our past and the promise of
24 our future, and ensuring they reach their full potential is one
25 of the most important causes we can support. This is especially

1 true for young Texans in foster care who are among our state's
2 most vulnerable children. We must continue working to ensure
3 these children have the care and support they need to continue
4 chasing their dreams. When intervention and separation are
5 unavoidable in family units, many different entities step in to
6 provide safe, nurturing environments to young Texans in need,
7 including dedicated individuals, families, the Texas Department
8 of Family and Protective Services, and faith-based and community
9 organizations. While we have always been committed to the health
10 and unification of families and the futures of these young
11 Texans, in recent years we have also committed to reforming our
12 state's foster care system in order to better protect children
13 and support families. In 2017 I was proud to sign several bills
14 into law that allowed child protective services to place more
15 children with relatives, increase capacity of foster homes by
16 streamlining regulations, and move towards a community-based
17 care system. First Lady Cecilia Abbott has also partnered with
18 DFPS and launched the Network of Nurture, a community of
19 families, friends, local leaders, nonprofit organizations,
20 businesses, faith leaders, and others willing to open their
21 hearts or their homes to the children in the state's child
22 welfare system. In order to continue to support the children in
23 our state's foster care system, the month of May is dedicated to
24 raising awareness of high-quality foster care in Texas, and
25 highlighting the compassion of those who open their homes and

1 give their efforts to children in need. As we continue to
2 provide caregivers, parents, and children with the resources and
3 services they need to thrive, these reforms and community-based
4 networks will create lasting change in our foster care system
5 and in the lives of many young Texans. At this time, I encourage
6 all Texans to learn more about foster care and how they may be
7 able to help young Texans in need, and to join in celebrating
8 the dedicated men and women of our foster care system who work
9 tirelessly to improve the lives of many children throughout our
10 state. By placing a spotlight on the system and the people who
11 support it, we can create a better and brighter future for our
12 next generation of leaders, and in turn the Lone Star State.
13 Therefore, I, Greg Abbott, governor of Texas, do hereby proclaim
14 May 2021 to be Foster Care Awareness Month in Texas, and urge
15 the appropriate recognition whereof. In official recognition
16 whereof, I hereby fix my signature this, the 28 day of April,
17 2021. Greg Abbott, governor, the great state of Texas." And so,
18 this is a proclamation that we'll receive from the governor's
19 office, and we'll be handing that out to DFPS and the others.
20 And so, just a round of applause and thank you for Governor
21 Abbott [inaudible] work. [applause] [Inaudible] Jen.

22 MS. TROKE: Good morning, it's so wonderful
23 to see you all. And [inaudible] Pat, I can't provide these
24 remarks without our partners from the Department of Family and
25 Protective Services. So, I'm so glad that they're here.

1 Commissioner, thank you. This is such a big, important day for
2 us. All of you have worked tirelessly on behalf of foster youth,
3 and your support of those foster youth initiatives here at TWC
4 and with DMPS really energizes our work. And so, the work of the
5 local foster youth transition centers, all of our workforce
6 boards and local Workforce Solutions offices, is better because
7 of you all and your support. So, thank you so much for that.

8 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Thank you.

9 MS. TROKE: We're also extremely grateful to
10 the governor, Governor Greg Abbott, thank you so much, for his
11 leadership in this space, and also his wife, First Lady Cecilia
12 Abbott, who was an extremely important speaker at our recent
13 foster youth conference. And she has been such a passionate
14 advocate for a long time, so we're really thrilled to see this
15 Foster Care Awareness Month. We embrace it. We have a whole
16 slate of activities prepared throughout the month. We have
17 training activities between the Texas Workforce Commission and
18 DFPS, we have a vocational rehabilitation webinar that we're
19 looking forward to highlight their great work for our foster
20 youth, and how they can access those services. And really, I
21 wanna recognize the team. You got Gaye. I've got--if our special
22 guest could stand up, that would be fabulous. From Together We
23 Rise, we have Erika Arambula. Together We Rise has been an
24 invaluable partner to us. They do amazing work for foster youth,
25 providing bags and other things to young people, and

1 transportation when they most need it. So, thank you, Erika, for
2 being here. Hunter Beaton is also here. He's with Day 1 Bags.
3 Hunter is a college student. I don't want to embarrass you,
4 Hunter. But he is a very industrious young man, he has his own
5 company. He's sent bags and backpacks to every single transition
6 center--18 of them across the state. So, I wanna give him a
7 special round of applause, too for his leadership in this space.
8 [applause] Nick, where are you? Nick? Nick. And Nick Winowsky
9 from LifeWorks. Nick has also been working in this space for a
10 long time. They hosted us at an event just prior to the
11 pandemic. So, glad to see Nick here as well. So, a round of
12 applause for all of our special guests today. [applause] Thank
13 you all for joining. And I really just wanna encourage anybody
14 who's listening today to get involved. So, if you're not already
15 involved in working with foster youth, we encourage you to get
16 on board. If you need help, you can contact me or any one of my
17 great team members--James Fulton, Jen Lieb, and [inaudible]
18 y'all stand up too, I wanna give y'all a round of applause.
19 [applause] And you can find all that information on our website
20 just by searing for foster care programs. So with that, I wanna
21 give Gaye and opportunity just to say thank you to Gaye. We have
22 so many amazing plans in the pipeline that aren't quite ready to
23 announce, but they're coming soon. So, Gaye, please.

24 MS. VOPAT: Yes. Well, good morning, my
25 name's Gaye Vopat. I'm in a newly created position at DFPS. I'm

1 the youth employment program specialist. On behalf of the Texas
2 Department of Family and Protective Services, we wanna thank you
3 all for all your support, all the services that you provide. We
4 really cherish the relationship and the partnership that we have
5 with TWC that we've had for many, many years. All the services
6 and supports that you're providing, they're really gonna help
7 our young people, youth and young adults, successfully move on
8 to their adulthood. As Jen said, we have a lot of new projects.
9 I'm excited, because in my position, before I was the lead for
10 all the transitional living services, but now I get to focus on
11 this topic and helping youth stay successful and improve their
12 outcomes. So again, I thank you so much.

13 MS. TROKE: And with that, sir, we turn it
14 back to you. Thank you so much for your leadership.

15 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: Yeah, thank you
16 guys. And Chairman, thank you for allowing the opportunity,
17 commissioner and Ed as well. Gaye, make sure you let
18 Commissioner Masters know that we appreciate the work that she's
19 doing over there, and we look forward to working with her even
20 more so. And then Jen pointed out Nick as well--First Lady
21 Abbott kicked off that event about two years ago or so, two or
22 three, at LifeWorks, and we appreciate you being here, Nick,
23 because Sandra Modrano [SP] on my team is heading up the efforts
24 in our office, dealing with the foster youth as we recognize
25 employers that are making a difference in that space by hiring

1 these tioning foster youth. So, thank you so much for the
2 opportunity.

3 MR. SERNA: And I have nothing else to
4 report.

5 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Any other order of
6 business to come before the commission?

7 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Chairman, if I may
8 just add to the last presentation that was done. I wanna thank
9 you, Jen, for the great work, and your passion for serving those
10 individual that are in foster care. And your commitment,
11 Commissioner Demerson, for your work. I was excited when I heard
12 last week that our Gulf Coast building trades will be meeting
13 with a transitional center there in Houston to talk about
14 registered apprenticeship programs. So, thank you for that and
15 for the introduction, and fully utilizing our support services,
16 and, you know, doing that--blended services, I should say. So,
17 thank you for that.

18 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Any other order business?

19 COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: None here, Chairman.

20 COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: None here.

21 CHAIRMAN DANIEL: Yeah. Cisco's [SP]
22 attendance would suggest to me that there'll be photos following
23 this session, which is a good thing. Is there a motion to
24 adjourn?

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COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: I move that we adjourn.

COMMISSIONER DEMERSON: I second that motion.

CHAIRMAN DANIEL: It's moved and second to adjourn. We're adjourned. We're gonna take pictures with Cisco, and then 180 seconds after that, we're gonna reconvene for a work session on awards for the annual meeting. So, let's take all the pictures we wanna take, but then we've gotta come back. We've got a little more work to do.

Texas Workforce Commission Meeting
May 4, 2021

Item 2A: Public Comment

Written Comments



To: Members and Chairman of the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC)
From: The Board of Directors, Senior Leaders and Staff Members, RespectAbility
Re: Public Comments on Workforce and WIOA Plans for Texas
Date: May 3rd, 2021

RESPECTABILITY

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Gerard Robinson
Jim Sinocchi
Delbert Whetter

Dear Chairman Daniel and Executive Director Serna

Thank you for your deep commitment to strengthening Texas, expanding opportunities for people who want to work and to building a better future.

We are writing about the more than 1.6 million working age people with disabilities in Texas. RespectAbility is a national non-profit that fights stigmas and advances opportunities for people with disabilities. Our organization's connections to Texas run deep. Our current chairman is the Honorable Steve Bartlett, former Congressman and former Mayor of Dallas who was a lead co-author of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Likewise, our Board Treasurer is Linda Burger, CEO of Jewish Family Service (JFS) in Houston since 2005 and a long-time resident of the Lone Star State. JFS is a leading provider of services to people with disabilities in their area. RespectAbility also has staff in Dallas.

As such, we wanted to take this opportunity to offer our comments on how to improve Texas policies and practices under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) as well as drive innovative approaches to apprenticeship through a lens of equity, intersectionality, and disability. Here are several proposals:

- **Track working-age disability data to drive decision making and disaggregate it by race:** All too often, disability status is not a data point that guides the actions, investments and efforts of state or local workforce development boards. Even though WIOA designated people with barriers to employment as a priority population under the law, many states are using inadequate data that does not use focus efforts on the right metrics or best practices.

First, it is critical to recognize that the overwhelming majority, [fully 70 percent](#) of people with disabilities want to work and are striving to work. According to the 2020 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, there are in total 1,658,935 working-age Texans with disabilities. In the economic expansion prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 695,898 (or 41.9 percent) of those Texans have a job. However, because of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, more than 1 million workers with disabilities nationwide have lost their jobs. As such, effectively and equitably rebuilding the economy is going to require investing in retraining, preparing and supporting those with barriers to work as they navigate a changed labor force. Further, given the tremendous diversity of both the wider nation and Texas specifically, it is critical to disaggregate data by race. The disability community intersects with other, underrepresented communities. As such, understanding the disparate impacts of race and disability needs to begin with good data driving the decision-making process.

- Prioritize Closing Gaps in Labor Force Participation Rate Outcomes by Race and Disability:*** Workers of color with disabilities faced different outcomes in the labor force even before COVID-19. According to Census Bureau data from 2019, only 35.2 percent of working-age African Americans with disabilities had jobs, compared to 43.1 percent of working-age Latinx people with disabilities and 44.2 percent of working-age Asian Americans with disabilities. Likewise, Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) people with disabilities had significantly higher rates of poverty than other elements of the disability community. In 2019, 29.1 percent of Texas’s African Americans with disabilities lived in poverty, as did 26 percent of Hispanic/Latinx people with disabilities, 15.8 percent of Asian Americans with disabilities and 13.9 of white people with disabilities. Disparities and inequities have grown worse due to COVID-19.
- Building the Caring Economy through Proven Models of Disability Employment:*** In looking for ways to both provide quality care to older Americans and to get more workers with disabilities into the labor force, policymakers should significantly expand the proven Project SEARCH model. [Project SEARCH](#) is a transformational school-to-work transition program for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities that prepares them for good paying careers in hospitals, elder-care and the caring economy. The SEARCH model is a win-win-win for the host employer, the workers with disabilities, and the many older Americans helped by Project SEARCH trained workers. As a model it has already been replicated in 47 states, with dozens of satisfied employers, and hundreds of workers with disabilities earning minimum wage or more. This model is perfectly suited to the challenges of the present and could be expanded widely. There are already SEARCH sites actively placing young people with intellectual disabilities into the workforce in [Dallas](#), [Houston](#), and [San Antonio](#). Other states such as Wisconsin have rapidly expanded the number of Project SEARCH sites to meet the needs of transition age youth with disabilities and Texas could easily do the same in the months ahead.
- Expand on the use of online, cohort-based apprenticeships for workers in the knowledge economy and the non-profit sector:*** The past year and the pandemic has made remote work an accepted reality for thousands of workers. This has been a “silver lining” of expanding and normalizing a common reasonable accommodation request long championed by workers with disabilities. Microsoft has dramatically expanded their accessibility features, including built-in speech to text technology which makes it possible for people with even the most limited mobility to use computers. This, along with free instant captioning on Zoom and other breakthroughs, has opened an unprecedented window for people with disabilities to contribute to the success of nonprofits, communities and beyond. Remote work also has great promise at expanding apprenticeship programs into more diverse sectors of the American economy, especially the knowledge economy. RespectAbility has retooled our own National Leadership Program from being a cohort-based, Washington D.C.-located internship program into an all-virtual, work-from-anywhere skills-based training program. Such approaches have major implications for efforts to train workers for good paying jobs in the knowledge economy and the non-profit sector.
- Reduce Gaps in Disparate Impacts and Prioritize Equity:*** In order to rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic and pave the way for an equitable economic recovery, it is critical to recognize the losses experienced by workers with disabilities over the past year. The nation’s overall [labor force participation rate](#) dropped to 61.4 percent in March 2021. At the same time, the data shows that workers with disabilities have seen an even bigger drop in their labor force participation. According to the [University of New Hampshire’s Institute on Disability \(UNH-IOD\)](#), the labor force participation rate for working-age people with disabilities is currently only 33.4 percent. As the economy rebuilds and people get vaccinated, it will be critical to close the gap in labor-force participation rates for working-aged people with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

- Look at Strategies to Close the Gap in High School Graduation Rates:*** Likewise, working to close gaps in high school graduation rates also needs to be a key priority in the years ahead. For example, [in 2019](#), Texas reported an overall high school graduation rate of 77.4 percent for students with disabilities. However, greater clarity is needed to address how the experiences of Black students with disabilities differ from Latinx, Asian and white students with disabilities. Overall, among [the class of 2019](#), 93.7 percent of white students without disabilities graduated with a high school diploma, as did 86.2 percent of African American students without disabilities, 88.2 percent of Latinx students without disabilities, 96.4 percent of Asian-American students without disabilities. Even now, far too many students with disabilities leave the school system without a diploma. Numerous studies have demonstrated that graduates of college will earn far more than college students who dropped out. By far, those earning the least are students without a high school diploma. A lack of a high school diploma is the negative ‘gift’ that keeps on hurting. As such, legislators have a moral imperative to invest in and expand services that will support the educational and employment success of more students with disabilities.
- A 13th year to close the educational gap left by the pandemic*** the pandemic has adversely impacted students with disabilities in the state of Texas. The loss of instructional time has made valuable employment transition skills nonexistent due the pandemic and shortened school year. High school seniors, especially high school seniors with disabilities have run out of time to complete their high school diploma and take advantage of school to work transitional services. In Texas, 588,317 students are covered under the IDEA: 27,759 of those students are high school senior students with disabilities that have missed out on high school completion with the goal to earn a diploma and vital year to gain skills needed for integration into the workforce. There is no make-up year unless one is created. An additional year of schooling or “13th year” is crucial to allow graduating students to succeed and enter the workforce. The pandemic should not deny transition services to this year’s seniors. As education is a civil right in the United States. If students fail to earn their high school diploma, then they will be denied the opportunity to go to college. Numerous studies have demonstrated graduates of college will earn far more than college students who drop out. By far those earning the least our students without a high school diploma. It is imperative that students with disabilities in Texas are given a thirteenth year of schooling to close the gap the pandemic has created and allow them to take advantage of the additional time to complete their high school diploma and take advantage of transitional services to employment for their lifelong success.
- Focus on Encouraging Disability Owned Businesses and Learning from Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation:*** Iowa’s Vocational Rehabilitation agency has embraced the current crisis by adopting a range of new virtual strategies, approaches, and procedures for providing high quality workforce service even amid a virtual pandemic. Some of those innovative approaches, have major implications for the future of VR. Iowa quickly invested in the technological infrastructure to provide virtual services statewide, adopted a cohort-based model for fostering social connections among VR clients on Zoom and tested other emerging practices throughout 2020. Many other states could learn from the innovations and ideas tested by [Iowa and Iowans](#) with disabilities. Iowa VR has embraced [entrepreneurship and self-employment](#) as one of the key virtual services provided to the youth with disabilities that they serve. This is a topic that merits deeper attention as the nation looks for innovative solutions to the challenge of building back better.
- Look at Expanding Access to Entrepreneurship as a Workforce Solution:*** In the pre-pandemic era, job seekers with disabilities were already turning to [self-employment](#) in far higher numbers than their non-disabled peers. For many, they did so because being your own boss and owning a small business served as an end-run around the barriers to employment that hold back far too many people with disabilities. In looking at the issue of self-employment and promoting

entrepreneurship among people with disabilities, special attention should be directed to the equity issues of access to capital and systemic racism. Several [disability organizations](#) have been advocating for the inclusion of people with disabilities as a specific category under the rules of the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) and to advance racial diversity in the entrepreneurship space. Now it the appropriate time to begin digging deep into that work as an equitable workforce strategy.

- ***Leverage Community College Resources to Improve Employment Outcomes for Students with Disabilities:*** Community colleges are [crucial pieces](#) of the nation’s workforce development infrastructure and in [many states](#), community colleges help direct the investment of WIOA dollars in programs or agencies. State and local Workforce Investment Boards can build sector partnerships that leverage community colleges and other education and training providers to develop career pathways that align workforce supply and demand. WIOA emphasizes the value of recognized postsecondary credentials, and the attention given to career pathways in the act provides a way for community colleges to contribute to the growth of skilled and credentialed workers in their local areas. Community colleges in California received state funding for Disabled Student Programs and Services (DSPS) to assist in providing support services and educational accommodations to students with disabilities so they can have full and equitable access to the community college experience. Part of the community college experience can include job training and readiness. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Act), as amended by WIOA emphasizes the provision of services to students and youth with disabilities to ensure they have opportunities to receive the training and other services necessary to achieve competitive integrated employment. It also expands the population of students with disabilities who may receive services and the kinds of services that the VR agencies may provide to youth and students with disabilities who are transitioning from school to postsecondary education and employment. Making the connection /partnership with Disabled Student Programs across every state with WIOA Eligible Training Provider programs at community colleges creates a pipeline of trained /certified workers with disabilities ready for the local competitive integrated job market.
- ***Nothing About Us Without Us:*** People most directly affected by issues such as education, jobs, prejudice, homelessness, criminal justice, poverty and other issues deserve to have their voices, insights and experiences utilized in finding and implementing solutions. People with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by each of these issues. As such, some workforce development boards in other states and jurisdictions have formally or informally adopted policies to create board space for people with disabilities or their proven allies. By leveraging such lived experience and subject matter expertise, the board can achieve even more with their existing resources. RespectAbility hopes in future that the Texas Workforce Commission will considering giving a seat at the table to a person with lived disability experience or a proven ally with expertise on disability employment. Likewise, we hope that the Commission will leverage the expertise and leaders from the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities to advance their disability specific work.
- ***Implement Best Practices:*** Look to the collected best practices previously documented by critical organizations such the National Governors Association (NGA) [Better Bottom Line](#) initiative and the Council of State Governments (CSG): [Work Matters A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities](#). Likewise, look at the 2018 study completed by [Accenture](#) and the recently released report from [Mercer and Global Disability Inclusion](#).

As an organization that advocates on behalf of job seekers with disabilities and their families, we believe that collecting the best ideas, emerging practices and innovative policies is critical to ensuring that American with and without disabilities have equal access to good jobs. Without such ideas communities and policymakers cannot direct appropriate resources to the places that need them most, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. If you have any questions or would like to discuss these matters further, our team stands ready to help, however we can. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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