



**WORKFORCE
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Testimony from Amy Desjardins, Executive Director of the Workforce Development Institute (WDI), to the New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Labor, Subcommittee Task Force on Women’s Issues, Assembly Subcommittee on Emerging Workforce

Monday, November 15, 2021

Assembly Hearing Room C
Legislative Office Building
Albany, New York 12248

Subject: Employment Trends from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Purpose: To examine employment trends in New York State caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

Good morning.

Thank you Assemblymember Joyner, Assemblymember Bichotte Hermelyn, Assemblymember Zinerman, and Committee and Sub-Committee members for the opportunity to testify before you today on this important topic. Thank you also to the other witnesses for their contributions.

My name is Amy Desjardins. I am the Executive Director of the Workforce Development Institute of New York or WDI. I provide direction and leadership on workforce development grant programs, services, and workforce supports. Prior to recently joining WDI, I had spent many years working for the NY State labor movement, where I have seen firsthand how labor standards can raise workers' pay, benefits, and safety on the job. Unions, through collective bargaining, help close gender and racial pay gaps. However, in low-wage sectors, women and communities of color have seen tremendous job loss during this pandemic, partly due to a lack of essential childcare. WDI is committed to helping ensure that they are front and center in an equitable recovery.

WDI is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to strengthen New York’s workforce. Since our founding in 2003, WDI has been a trusted partner with labor, the Legislature, and those in the business community who understand that high-road, family-sustaining jobs with good pay and benefits are critical to bringing people out of poverty, back into the workforce, and into the middle class. Our goal is to set a path for workers to attain and adapt to the skills needed to compete and succeed in the “future of work.”

We are grounded in our worker-centric approach and form strategic partnerships to:

- Create a more diverse workforce in industries where women and people of color are underrepresented, and build a pipeline to high-quality jobs with on-the-job training.
- Grow an equitable cannabis industry that includes skills training and job-readiness programs for disenfranchised communities.

- Build a greener economy with renewable energy supply chain opportunities for workers in construction, maintenance and operation, and manufacturing American-made components large and small.
- Enhance infrastructure projects that support apprenticeship programs to rebuild roads and bridges, rail and transit, and modernize the electrical grid.
- Advocate for human infrastructure needs and workforce supports like affordable and accessible child care and help improve wages for those who care for our most vulnerable.

We address emerging workforce challenges, propose innovative solutions, and support employers that place workers as full partners to improve economic productivity in New York State.

WDI has a proud history of supporting and elevating women in the workplace.

WDI's Child Care Subsidy Facilitated Enrollment Program helps eligible working families apply for financial assistance. WDI staff provide valuable support to guide families through the application process. In addition, WDI provides information to aid families in choosing quality, developmentally appropriate care for their children.

WDI's regional programming has provided grants and technical support to women-owned businesses, developed unique pipeline programs for occupations where women are historically underrepresented, and highlighted the stories of female veterans as well as women working in the building and construction trades. Our commitment to workforce diversity, equity, and inclusion has only strengthened over time. The pandemic's impact has reinforced an idea that WDI has long promoted: Effective workforce development means prioritizing services and support for women. It must break down the historical divisions between women's work and men's work. These divisions have only served to disenfranchise women and deny them equal footing in the workplace.

In your roles on these committees and sub-committees as well as in representing your districts, you have no doubt seen numerous accounts of COVID's negative impact on employment for women. Women, in their roles as personal and professional caregivers, have been hit doubly hard by this pandemic. Many have been displaced from jobs that – due to long-standing equity issues – paid below a family-sustaining wage. The most common occupations for women, teachers, nurses, and direct care providers, have faced unimaginable challenges in caring for the sick, comforting families, and educating our youth, all while navigating health care systems and bureaucracies that were buckling under unrelenting strain. Women who lost their jobs during the pandemic might take years to recover their earnings and professional standing, if they recover at all.

Looking back, we can see that many of the pandemic's most harmful effects to gender equity were accelerated by trends that originated decades ago. The tremendous gains of women in the workplace since 1950 had slowed around 2000. The same can be said for pay equity. Child care professionals and advocates know all too well that the current crisis is not new at all. Job quality and pay have suffered in child care for decades. At the same time, families have struggled to afford the cost of accessible, quality care for their young ones. As can be said about a lot of the pandemic's impact, COVID didn't create the child care crisis, but it certainly made it worse. And it's been hardest on low-income families and women.

WDI is fortunate to have many collaborative partnerships around the state and we work with organizations that share our mission of win-win workforce development that place workers as full partners to improve economic productivity. We have spent the pandemic engaged in ways to help our partners and promote worker advancement around the state. We have organized our approach to the recovery efforts into two main areas. The first is to support and promote job quality and opportunities for advancement within the occupations where women are most likely to be working or seeking employment. The second is to build and scale opportunities for women to obtain and retain positions where they have been historically underrepresented.

So, how do we shape workforce development in a way that prioritized gender equity and high-road jobs?

Inclusive, high-road workforce development programs should include the following components:

Earn while you learn models: Job seekers and upskilling workers should not always be expected to pay out of pocket to improve their skills and advance their careers. If we expect women to be incented to

non-traditional occupations, we must make it worth their while by offering training programs that pay and allow trainees to gain on-the-job experience.

Wraparound services: We have learned that training and education must be aligned with current and future industry needs and be supported by wraparound services that meet the needs of trainees and job seekers. These services include access to reliable affordable transportation, child care, mentoring, counseling, and job search support.

Regional, industry-aligned collaborations that center on worker advancement in ways that also deliver benefits to employers: Programs that connect women to job opportunities must be grounded in the needs of the local labor market, both now and in the near-term future. We must discontinue use of our inherent biases that overpromote certain careers for women at the expense of less common, and often more lucrative ones. At the same time, workforce developers must be able to show the benefits that certain jobs offer. Industry must equip workforce developers with this information to signal that it can be a partner in achieving gender equity.

Data-informed, evidence-based models: Workforce developers and gender advocates often have access to a lot of data. Using it to demonstrate how program models can address inequalities take hard work and a culture of evaluation and continuous improvement. Collaborations between education, community-based organizations, and government can improve the ways data insights are translated into practice.

Adequate, flexible, accountable funding resources: High quality workforce development costs money. It is crucial to strike a balance between accountability and flexibility, especially when public funding is involved. Funders should make their priorities, like gender equity, clear while allowing their partners to run programs that best serve workers and job seekers.

Measurable, transparent goals around diversity and inclusion: Workforce programs that place women in historically underrepresented occupations must also include diversity and equity components. This can come in many forms, all grounded in the principle that resources should match need and not blindly adhere to a one-size-fits-all approach. Women should be placed in leadership roles. Programs should be structured to allow for meaningful, long-term mentoring. Peer mentoring and support should also be part and parcel of these programs.

Effective advocacy and training on gender equity issues must accompany programs that target advancement for women. It is our collective responsibility to demand safeguards that prevent backsliding or erase hard won progress. Further, protections for non-binary or genderqueer workers are vital to achieving an equitable and inclusive workforce.

Recent and expected investments in our energy and physical infrastructure is another great opportunity to open doors for women and people of color. New York's renewable energy and environmental goals require us to prioritize justice and equity among our workforce. WDI is actively working with the labor movement, community partners and the industry to raise awareness of these jobs, building up pipeline programs that will connect local communities to generate high-road careers.

Our partners are all committed to opening doors for women and people of color to this emerging industry. The labor movement along with countless advocates and policymakers have seen to it that this work should generate high-road jobs and broadly shared prosperity. We cannot effectively fight the climate crisis and rebuild our physical infrastructure if we exclude half of our workforce. It is not feasible or morally justifiable.

WDI is working to increase gender equity in new emerging industries with our Statewide Pre-Apprentice Program. This program is a collaboration of WDI and the NYS Building & Construction Trades Council - that works to advance opportunities for entry-level workers through apprenticeship readiness education and training programs for women and underserved populations.

For several years, WDI has been the fiscal agent and program support for pre-apprenticeship programs around the state in Buffalo, Rochester, Long Island with newer programs this past year in the HV and Capital District.

These programs connect underserved communities, including women, to union construction jobs helping to prepare participants to enter apprenticeship programs in one of a number of the building and construction trades unions.

Another emerging industry with lots of potential to create good jobs is New York State's adult-use cannabis industry. We have learned from other adult-use states that, without deliberate and thoughtful policy action, these markets are likely to exclude women and people of color, especially those harmed by the criminalization of cannabis. Through the Cannabis Workforce Initiative, a collaboration between WDI and the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations, we are working to ensure that this industry's workforce is as diverse as possible. This includes specific support for women and minority-owned businesses.

In closing, I want to thank the Committee and Sub-Committee members for the opportunity to share WDI's insights and experiences. The pandemic has brought into focus the scale of the challenge in achieving gender equality in the workplace. At the same time, for me and my team at WDI, it has hardened our resolve to leverage our resources and our partnerships in furtherance of this cause. The importance of gender equity has never been clearer. We look forward to continuing to work with the Assembly in furtherance of our shared goals.

Thank you.

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