

Testimony of Eileen Illuzzi, North Country Career Center Director
to the Vermont Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs
March 30, 2018

Senator Sirotkin, Senator Clarkson and members of the Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs;

I would like to thank you for asking me to testify regarding H 919, an act relating to workforce development. My name is Eileen Illuzzi and I am the director of the North Country Career Center in Newport.

I have been working in Career and Technical Education (CTE) at the North Country Career Center for twelve years; first as the Adult Services Coordinator (now known as Assistant Director for Adult Education), then as Assistant Director and beginning in 2012 as the director; prior to that I worked in Adult Basic Education, now Adult Education and Literacy, for fifteen years. During that time I have attended many meetings, been a member of countless groups and boards and testified in this building regarding workforce education and training. I was a member of the Human Resources Investment Council (HRIC), the State and local Workforce Investment Board (WIB) and currently serve on the State Workforce Development Board as well as serving on the CTE sub-committee of the S135 Committee with Senator Clarkson. I tell you this not as an exercise of resume review, but rather as a way to try to explain the history and perspective I have regarding the workforce education and training “system” in Vermont.

The current system of education and training is more like a network of available option. It can be confusing to both employers and the consumers using the system. Many times one training provider doesn't know what another is doing and it leads to duplication of services in one area or a lack of programming in another. But there are many good training programs and examples of coordinated work in various regions that could be model programs. I believe the intent of section 2 of H 919 is for the State Workforce Development Board to involve employers in the review of these services and collaboratively recommend improvements for a coordinated system. While those of us who have been doing this work for a long time may look upon this as “yet another study” I believe that employer engagement is different, and in this case crucial to the success of building such a system. Too often, we in state government and education plan our services around what we believe consumers need (in this case employers and potential employees) without asking them what is important to them. If we do not have the participation and buy-in from employers, no “system” will be truly effective. It may be exactly what we think is needed, but if employers and employees are not using it, it will be unsuccessful.

I believe the Career Pathways model described in H 919 is the structure for a workforce education and training model. It begins in seventh grade when students first identify education and career goals in their Personalized Learning Plans, and spans through adult/post-secondary/continuing education and training. We often talk about “seamless integration of services” and a career pathways model can provide that. Whether it is an adult student with no diploma taking a secondary CTE program; a high school student supplementing their education and training with an evening Adult CTE program; a college student who needs additional technical training, or a high school graduate who wants to further their occupational skills through training or an apprenticeship programs, students, no matter the age, need to be able to

access these pathways at various points to increase their chances of successful employment. Coordinating the training services available around this model will create a system. The training programs themselves do not need to change, there just needs to be a centralized method for monitoring what programs are being offered and what programs are needed in a region.

This already happens in many areas with the regional Department of Labor (DOL) offices collaborating with the regional workforce education boards- whether they are a WIB or CTE Regional Advisory Boards also known as a RAB. Take Newport for example. We are far from perfect, but at the career center we have a full time Assistant Director for Adult Education (that is supported through our school budget) who works with both employers and the Department of Labor to respond to area employment needs by creating training classes and programs. The regional DOL person is also a member of our RAB and helps to advise what programs are needed, both at the secondary and adult levels, as identified by job projections. We do things this way because it makes sense to work together. But that may not be the case in all districts, primarily because there is not language to define what adult technical education should be offering and how it should be funded. Because of this, there is not consistency. I have heard from legislators that some people feel that there is no oversight and accountability in adult technical education, but I would counter that by saying that there is no set expectation for the program. Once these expectations are defined in statute, the oversight and accountability can be provided through the CTE centers by the directors and the governing school boards. Adult CTE does not need oversight; it needs clarity around expectation of the program.

While I could discuss my thoughts around this topic for hours, I will not take your time but would like to make a final point regarding career pathways. It is important that we begin the conversation about being college/training and career ready with students much earlier. If we wait to discuss careers with students until they are well into high school, they will miss the opportunity to truly prepare for a successful career. And isn't that what workforce development and education are for? Currently, career awareness is done in some middle schools, but many students do not receive this service. Many middle schools simply do not have the capacity to do one more thing with their students. CTE staff are experts in this field and should be visiting local middle schools throughout each region to provide information and equitable opportunities to all students. At some CTE Centers this may require hiring an additional position for this outreach, while other centers will be able to reprioritize the work of existing staff to accomplish this goal. But it can, and should be done. Until we commit, both financially and in policy, to support a career pathways system from middle school through post-secondary education and training, we will not develop the skilled workforce necessary for Vermont to succeed in the global economy.