

SPEECH BY SENATOR JACK REED

On the Occasion of the U.S. Senate Approval of WIOA, June 25, 2014

Mr. REED. Madam President, I rise in strong support of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. This legislation represents a long-overdue upgrade to our workforce investment system. I wish to commend the bipartisan work of Chairman Harkin, Senator Murray, Senator Alexander, and Senator Isakson in negotiating this compromise legislation that will move our job training and adult education systems forward.

The need to improve our workforce investment system has crystallized during this recovery from the great recession. My home State of Rhode Island continues to struggle with high unemployment--the highest rate in the Nation. Many of our unemployed workers have been out of work for an extended period of time. Yet employers tell me they have open positions they cannot fill because they cannot find workers with the skills they need today. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act takes important steps to help address the skills mismatch that keeps jobs open and potential workers unemployed.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act streamlines the current workforce development system by requiring a single comprehensive plan that incorporates all of the core programs and is aligned with economic development plans for the States. It also establishes shared performance metrics that apply to all of the programs in the system. In other words, it makes sure that employers, educators, and the workforce system are all on the same page.

The legislation before us today makes some tough choices, eliminating 15 programs. However, it also maintains and strengthens vital national programs such as Job Corps and Youth Build, which have made a difference for so many young people in Rhode Island and across the Nation.

I am particularly pleased that the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act strengthens the partnership between our workforce investment system and our public libraries. Libraries are where people go when they need help or information. They are a critical part of the delivery system for adult education and job training.

In fiscal year 2011, the Institute of Museum and Library Services reported that there were 1.52 billion visits to public libraries across the Nation. Senator Cochran and I introduced the Workforce Investments through Local Libraries Act to harness the potential of public libraries to expand the reach of the workforce investment system and ensure that job seekers and adult leaders had the opportunity to develop the critical digital skills necessary for today's economy. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act includes many of the provisions of this legislation. I was very pleased to work with Senator Cochran and have great gratitude for Senators Alexander, Isakson, Harkin, and Murray for incorporating some of our ideas.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act also strengthens adult education and includes many of the provisions of the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act that I introduced with Senator Brown.

For 2012, data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies show that an estimated 52 percent of adults age 16 to 65 in the United States lack the literacy skills necessary to identify, interpret, or evaluate one or more pieces of information. These are critical skills for postsecondary education and the workplace. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act will help address this critical need for adult education and literacy by ensuring that adult education programs are aligned with job training and postsecondary education, supporting the professional development of adult educators, offering technical assistance for adult education providers, and strengthening the research and evaluation of best practices in adult education.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act is an example of what is possible when we work together to solve problems and strengthen the tools available to our communities to improve the quality of life. We have libraries. We have adult education programs throughout this country. What I think the sponsors of this legislation so creatively did is pull them together, so the sum of the parts is much greater and will have a much more effective impact on the employment opportunities for Americans and our productivity as a nation.

In that regard, I would like to discuss for a moment a new bipartisan bill I have introduced with Senator Heller to restore emergency benefits for jobseekers for 5 months. What we have done here is we have addressed the issue of training, but we still have an issue with people who are desperately looking for work and need the assistance of the unemployment benefits to do that.

I think this legislation will help us make the case because one of the legitimate reasons that were raised with respect to the extension of benefit was, well, we do not have a job training program, so we are not preparing people for jobs. That is what we should be doing. Well, this bill goes a long way to do that. I think it helps us in trying to make the case.

As we know, in April we voted on a bipartisan basis to send the bill to the House. Unfortunately, it languished there, and then ultimately the time expired. Our new plan would provide prospective emergency benefits--just going forward--for those eligible job seekers who lost their benefits on December 28. They would essentially pick up where they were on December 28.

This is something that, hand in hand with this new job training bill, will give people both additional advantages of training and resources to make it through the training period, pay the rent, have a cell phone so they can call for a job, do those things that are necessary to get by. It is fiscally responsible. It is offset. We are waiting for an official score from CBO, but our intention is to make it a bill that is fiscally responsible. Madam President, 3.1 million Americans lost these benefits--that number grows by approximately 72,000 a week. We can do better. We must do better.

We are doing a lot to try to get people back to work. I commend this legislation. It is an important step forward.

It is an important step forward, because as so many of my colleagues have noted, one of the things that is amazing in this recession--and I have mentioned it previously--is to go into Rhode Island to companies even with the state unemployment rate of 8 percent--and have the owners say they are desperately looking for four or five workers. They can't find them.

Why is that? The skills that 20 years ago got someone a good job in Rhode Island and for the past 20 years kept them working, after this downturn slowed their company or pushed them out, those skills are out of date. Good workers, long work history, they need not only the help to retrain, but they also certainly need the help to get from day to day until they can get back in the workforce.

With that, let me again commend and thank the sponsors and authors of this legislation.

I yield the floor.