

Testimony regarding H-7200, Article 11

House Finance Committee

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The RI Workforce Alliance is a collaborative initiative of adult education and training providers, business, labor, philanthropic organizations and advocates. Our mission is to ensure that lower skilled Rhode Islanders and residents of varied skill levels who need English language services have access to the services they need to succeed in the workforce. Providing opportunity for the 75,000 working age adults who do not have a high school diploma and 35,000 residents who have limited English language skills is critical to employers seeking skilled workers as well as to individuals who want to obtain a job that pays a family-sustaining wage.

The Alliance monitors state policies and investments in the workforce development system across state agencies including the Department of Labor and Training, the Governor's Workforce Board, the RI Department of Education (adult education), the Office of Post-Secondary Education and the Department of Human Services (RI Works Program and SNAP Employment and Training).

We have comments on two proposals in Article 11.

Real Jobs RI

Organizing the state's workforce development system around industry partnerships can be an effective way to ensure that businesses have the employees they need to meet current and future demands, encourage collaboration across businesses for training efficiencies and provide access to available jobs for work-ready adults. Real Jobs Rhode Island implements that strategy in our state and Article 11 proposes to enshrine that strategy in state law.

The Real Pathways program, more recently established and funded by the Governor's Workforce Board, is designed to provide adults who need basic workforce skills (literacy, English language) either to obtain a job or to improve their employment opportunities and earnings.

The Alliance would like to see the Real Pathways program included in state law, if Real Jobs is going to be enshrined in statute. Director Jensen has agreed to discuss amending Article 11 to ensure that the organization of the workforce development system around industry partnerships includes a commitment of resources and strategies to address the needs of lower-skilled adults.

The Work Immersion Program

The Alliance has concerns with the proposed changes to the State Work Immersion Program. The program should continue to be targeted to adults and create incentives for employers to hire individuals funded through the program. When state dollars are used to pay employers, the primary goal should be to provide opportunities for adults who otherwise might not be able to "get a foot in the door" with an employer. The current law limits the use of state funds to 50% of the cost of a work-experience for a maximum of 10 weeks. Then if the employer hires the individual, the employer can be reimbursed an additional 25% of the cost of the work-experience. This structure provides an opportunity for an employer to create a work experience for an adult with limited work experience, lower-skilled individual, person with a disability or formerly incarcerated or other person they might not initially be willing to hire, see whether there is a good fit, with the hoped-for goal of hiring that person at the end of the 10-week period. We oppose the proposed changes that open the use of funds to secondary students, lifts the time-limit on the subsidy to the employer and eliminates the incentive to hire, replacing the 50%/25% payment with a flat 75%.