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The Importance of Workforce Development During COVID

Column by Rep. Barbara Dittrich

Each September, states throughout the US celebrate National Workforce Development Month. This is an opportunity to highlight the programs in our state that have been successful in helping jobseekers in Wisconsin and take time to thank those professionals who help them achieve their goals. However, with the backdrop of Covid-19 affecting our local communities, businesses, and families, these messages become even more important than ever.

As vice-chair of the Assembly Committee on Workforce Development, I will continue to advocate for programs that will help people find new careers and strengthen our talent pipeline. Before COVID-19, a majority of employers stated that the labor shortage was their number one priority issue. That is why in the last budget we passed several proposals to help our talent pipeline in Wisconsin:

- Youth Apprenticeship – We were able to fully fund this exceptional program in the budget, which will help over 5,500 students connect with an employer.
- Project SEARCH – The budget included additional funding to help those with disabilities get on-the-job training while in high school. This successful program has helped people transition from the K-12 system to employment following graduation.
- Transitioning from Prison – The budget expanded programs to give inmates portable job credentials before they are released. Also, the state will now begin placing job centers in correctional facilities to help with resume building and job searching.
- Wisconsin Fast Forward – This program gives businesses access to a match grant program to create a customized training program to “skill up” the workforce that meets their needs.
- Technical Colleges – We invested an additional \$25 million to help these schools address our workforce shortage.

Now more than ever there are thousands of people who lost their job through no fault of their own and are looking for a new career, and we need to provide them the support they need. That is why I sent a letter with some of my legislative colleagues to the governor urging him to allocate some of the CARES Act funding for workforce training. This funding is under the sole discretion of the governor as he does not need legislative approval to allocate this money.

By putting some of these funds in workforce development he could help connect unemployed workers with available jobs. It could also help our local workforce development boards, who are seeing surges in demand for their services.

Because of our investments in the past, and in the last state budget, Wisconsin continues to advance when it comes to people find and keep a strong career in our state. But we need to continue to move forward and are hoping the governor agrees with us on this important investment. Our recovery will need a strong workforce system to help support it, and we will continue to advocate to keep the talent pipeline strong in our state.

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