

**Written Testimony of Bruce Ferguson, Jr.**

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Chairman Owens, Ranking Member Wilson, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee: my name is Bruce Ferguson and I serve as the CEO of CareerSource Northeast Florida. We are the Regional Workforce Board serving Jacksonville and Northeast Florida.

As Congress considers the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, I would like to address the importance of work-based learning as a tool to upskill our nation's workforce as well as the importance of regulatory flexibility, and reducing administrative waste.

Some 25 years ago, our board of directors made a key decision that put the skills needs of our business community at the center of our strategies. This has driven our team of professionals to understand and respond to the needs of our companies for over 25 years. During this time, we have become inseparable partners with our regional economic development entity, the JAXUSA Partnership, as well as the Economic Development Councils and Chambers of Commerce in each of our counties. Additional partners include the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Community Based Partners, Early Learning Coalitions, the State College System, school districts, Department of Corrections, industry associations and small business centers. These relationships have enhanced our ability to understand our regional economy and focus our resources on our targeted industries such as advanced manufacturing, distribution and logistics, and healthcare and life sciences to name a few.

We are currently experiencing one of the tightest labor markets in history and employers are having a hard time finding the skilled workers they need. This has created an opportunity to further enhance our region's focus on work-based learning in the form of WIOA's customized training and apprenticeships. Businesses are seeking ways to invest in and upskill their workforce and increase productivity. Using tools such as WIOA customized training acts as a catalyst for companies to build their own skills development pipeline and create career pathways for their workforce. Employers know best what skills their workers need to succeed and are investing their dollars with an offset from WIOA funding.

The key to getting companies, particularly small companies, to utilize WIOA customized training is to keep it simple! We have business consultants for each targeted industry and they promote skill building grant opportunities at Chamber meetings, through industry associations such as the First Coast Manufacturing Association, and the local chapter of SHRM. Our Director of Training then assists interested employers with a simple 8-page application for a grant. Once approved, the rest of the agreement is only another few pages. Similarly, we have an Apprenticeship Navigator on staff who assists companies, or a group of companies, establish a registered apprenticeship program. Too often our system and regulatory bodies (state agencies or counties) turn what should be a simple and concise application and agreement into an overly complex document running over 40 pages. This is a recipe for turning employers away from our system. Businesses, especially small businesses, need skill building programs and systems that are simple to understand and easy to use.

I'd like to share a few examples of our successes in work-based learning using a simple process that is focused on our targeted industries:

### **GRACE Aerospace Certified IPC Specialist**

GRACE Aerospace is a small manufacturer in Northeast Florida who has been working with CareerSource NEFL to provide upskilling opportunities to their employees. GRACE Aerospace provides full-service electrical and structural manufacturing, systems integration, and engineering support services for the United States military and commercial clients. Due to the support provided through our WIOA Customized Training Program, a GRACE Quality Manager was able to become a certified Institute for Printed Circuits (IPC) trainer. The company has since leveraged the Quality Manager's new certification to upskill seven additional employees – they all are now Certified IPC Specialists and it resulted in a minimum pay increase of 10 percent. While the new certification was clearly beneficial in supporting internal employee growth, this new skillset enabled GRACE Aerospace to enter into new market segments and perform electrical work for the Department of Energy and NASA — which required certified IPC technicians to perform the manufacturing.

### **Flagler Health+ Surgical Tech Registered Apprenticeship**

To meet the growing need for more surgical technologists, Flagler Health+ reached out to CareerSource NEFL for assistance. Through our staff Apprenticeship Navigator, we provided introductory apprenticeship information to Flagler Health+ and assisted them through the development and approval process with the Florida Department of Education. Flagler Health+ then launched the first apprenticeship program for surgical technologists in Northeast Florida in 2022.

The first class began with five participants receiving classroom and on-the-job instruction over a 12-month period. All apprentices were already employed by Flagler Health+ in other areas of the hospital and were interested in moving into a new career. Apprentices did not need any required education above a high school diploma or GED and are considered full-time employees during the program – receiving full benefits and pay increases as they learn new skills. Surgical Tech Apprentices start as full-time employees with benefits at \$15.00/hr. Once they achieve 50% competency completion, at approximately 6 months, their wage will increase to \$16 per hour. Upon program completion, their final wage will be \$19.20 per hour, a 28% increase in salary.

### **University of Florida Jacksonville Physicians, Inc. (UFJPI) -MA/CSR**

CareerSource NEFL has used WIOA customized training to help fill a critical gap in the medical workforce faced by University of Florida Jacksonville Physicians, Inc. (UFJPI) by partnering with Florida State College of Jacksonville (FSCJ) to help develop qualified candidates for Medical Assistants/Customer Service Representatives positions. UFJPI is a network of more than 60 primary and specialty care centers that offer care from the nearly 400 faculty physicians based in Northeast Florida and Southeast Georgia. The

network includes two dozen primary care centers throughout Jacksonville, with additional locations in Baker, Clay and Nassau counties.

UFJPI was having trouble finding qualified candidates for these positions which perform administrative and certain clinical duties under the direction of a physician. All the local hospitals and medical practices are competing for the small number of graduates from local MA/CSR programs. CareerSource NEFL coordinated with UFJPI and FSCJ to develop a skill building program that could provide current employees with the skills needed to transition to a medical assistant career. For the first cohort, over 100 employees expressed interest and participants were selected from UFJPI customer service and administrative teams.

CareerSource NEFL has supported four Medical Assistant Cohorts with UFJPI. To date, 26 staff members have successfully completed the program and the fourth cohort is currently in progress with 9 participants. The majority of the participants worked as customer service representatives, access center representatives or administrative assistants with wages ranging from \$13 per hour to \$17.84 per hour. Successful completers of the program are offered a position as a MA/CSR with a wage up to \$24 per hour.

### **Trucking Apprenticeship Program - Florida Rock and Tank & SkillBridge**

We have also worked with Jacksonville-based trucking firm Florida Rock, and Tank (FRT) to get its own state-registered apprenticeship program up and running. FRT is a bulk tank carrier serving the southeastern United States, transporting petroleum and other liquid and dry bulk commodities. FRT started its apprenticeship as part of the national Department of Labor 90-Day Trucking Apprenticeship Challenge and is now spreading its program throughout the State of Florida. We are assisting with recruitment and providing funds for CDL programs through WIOA ITA funding since CDL certification is a requirement to enter the apprenticeship program. FRT, CareerSource NEFL, and FSCJ have also partnered with the Department of Defense SkillBridge program that provides separating service members an opportunity to enroll in the program and has become the pilot program for the rest of the state.

### **Northeast Florida State Hospital – CNA and LPN Programs**

Eighty-seven employees have become certified nursing assistants (CNAs) at Northeast Florida State Hospital in Macclenny, Florida thanks to WIOA funding provided through CareerSource NEFL. The 600-plus bed hospital has provided continuous service to persons with severe and persistent mental illness since 1959 – one of three state-owned facilities providing inpatient psychiatric care and treatment to individuals in Florida.

WIOA Customized Training is offered to numerous healthcare employers such as Northeast Florida State Hospital to meet specific skills needs of existing employees as it relates to the introduction of new technologies, new production or service procedures,

workplace literacy, or helping employees upgrade to new jobs that require additional skills. At the hospital, each CNA participant completes a 120-hour program that is completed in about eight weeks. The program includes 80 hours of classroom-led instruction followed by a minimum of 40 hours of clinical and a skills lab. The skills lab starts with the basics like proper hand washing then on to providing bed baths, foot care, and hand and nail care. There are a total of 24 skills to complete the program. Northeast Florida State Hospital tries to do four classes a year with 12 people per class but were able to do two additional classes last year due to the WIOA customized training funds we received. After hospital employees receive their licenses, having a CNA certification allows them to move up at the hospital with a pay increase and allows them to work directly with patients at nursing homes and hospitals. CareerSource NEFL has held ten CNA cohorts with Northeast Florida State Hospital with 87 participants successfully completing the program. The majority of the them were human services workers within the transportation department with salaries ranging from \$10.15 per hour to \$11.63 per hour. After completers pass the CNA Certification Exam, the wage increases to \$12.29 per hour.

In addition to the CNA certification, CareerSource NEFL is currently supporting two licensed practical nurse (LPN) cohorts, a total of 4 participants, with Northeast Florida State Hospital. The employees were either in an administrative role, earning \$17.03 per hour or a unit treatment and rehabilitative senior supervisors, earning \$14.98 per hour. This program supports the career path of non-medical staff into medical occupations in order to fill the dire need for LPNs. After passing the LPN certification exam, the wage increase will range from \$25 per hour to \$29 per hour.

These are a few of the examples of how our focus on skills enhancement through WIOA customized training and apprenticeships are positively impacting our region's workforce and businesses.

### **Considerations for WIOA Reauthorization**

As this committee studies ways to increase the number of individuals receiving skills and improve program outcomes, we believe that can be achieved by making work-based learning a higher priority. On average, we have found the investment per person in work-based learning programs is significantly less than a WIOA Individual Training Account. By enhancing the current WIOA legislation to create an even more integrated, flexible system, we can really make a difference. With the current flexibility around work-based learning, our regional workforce board has been able to shape policies and training to meet our local business needs. Our philosophy is that "if the law and the rules don't say we can't do something, we take it to mean that we can do it", within reason. However, additional, explicit flexibility is encouraged to counter those who tend to operate with a philosophy of "if it doesn't say we can, then we can't".

Additionally, for the local boards to be able to focus more funds on skill development we must eliminate the tremendous amount of administrative waste in the process of separately tracking multiple funding silos, eligibility processes, and data entry. While we

strive to streamline our services to businesses and job seekers, the multiple programs that all support employment and skills development services make streamlining more difficult than it should be. Too often, the systems we are forced to use focus on extensive data collection and reporting to the state and federal level as their top priority. The customer experience of job seekers, businesses, and professional staff tend to take a back seat. This approach is backwards and needs to be addressed as part of reauthorization.

We have demonstrated that creating simple application and contracting processes result in positive outcomes for both workers and businesses. This same approach needs to be used throughout the entire system from data collection to case management and to reporting.

Chairman Owens, that concludes my remarks. I want to thank you again for this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee.