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*Written statement of*

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*Before the*

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*Subcommittee on Highways and Transit*

*“Examining Workforce Development and Job Creation in Surface*

*Transportation Construction”.*

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Good morning, Chairwoman Holmes-Norton, Ranking Member Davis, Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves and to all the members on the committee.

My name is Shoshana Lew, and I am the Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Transportation.

Thank you for inviting me here to address the State of Colorado’s CDOT’s Central 70 Workforce Development Program.

The interstate system, originally introduced by President Eisenhower in 1956, was designed to provide a high-speed, high-capacity network of highways without stoplights and with exits spread apart. As much as the System has helped the United States economy boom and

allowed more opportunity for movement for all, many interstates across the nation were built in the middle of lower-income and, oftentimes, minority neighborhoods. The first segment of Interstate 70 in Denver, built in 1961, was no exception as it was a 2.6-mile stretch that followed the route of 46th Avenue between Jackson Street and the junction of Interstate 25 and cut the Elyria and Swansea neighborhoods in half and disrupted connections in the Globeville neighborhood. The six-lane I-70 viaduct followed quickly thereafter and was completed in 1964, at a cost of \$12.5 million, without public input and no evaluations of the environmental, social and economic impacts that would later be required by National Environmental Policy Act, which passed in 1969.

From the late 1800s, immigrants have called the neighborhoods of Globeville, Elyria and Swansea home. Globeville was originally settled independently around the Globe Smelting and Refining Company, eventually becoming part of Denver in 1902. Elyria and Swansea were likewise founded and annexed separately. Over the years, the neighborhood has evolved and seen Central and Eastern European settlers move on, replaced by new residents with Latin American roots. Sitting at the literal crossroads of Interstates 25 and 70, the nearly 100,000 residents of Globeville, Elyria and Swansea today face the evolving impacts of massive nearby infrastructure projects in Denver, including the Central 70 Project which focuses on reconstructing a 10-mile stretch of I-70 through the heart of Denver. While these projects have started to bring the attention, funding and infrastructure the Globeville, Elyria and Swansea neighborhood has been lacking for years, they also bring new and very real concerns about gentrification, rising taxes and rent, and displaced residents.

The Elyria and Swansea neighborhoods have one of the largest Hispanic populations in Denver. Nearly 84 percent of the residents in Elyria and Swansea and 68 percent in Globeville identify as Hispanic. These neighborhoods also experience unemployment rates that are ten times higher than that of the rest of Denver. Many do not have adequate transportation or childcare that is needed to get to work or go to doctors appointments. As such, the Globeville, Elyria and Swansea neighborhoods are classified as Environmental Justice communities.

When I-70 was built in the early 1960s, the bridge and drainage structures were designed to last 30 years. In preparation for the inevitable upgrades needed, the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) began planning for the Central 70 Project in 2003 with the I-70 East environmental process. By 2008, nine structures on the corridor were classified as either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete and in critical need of repair, rehabilitation or replacement. That same year, CDOT completed the Environmental Impact Statement between I-25 and Tower Road.

The Globeville, Elyria and Swansea community did not agree with the preferred alternative CDOT originally presented for this stretch of roadway and requested that CDOT continue to evaluate a variety of solutions, keeping the community top of mind. In response, CDOT conducted five additional years of neighborhood outreach during which the community and CDOT came to an agreement to lower the highway between Brighton and Colorado boulevards and add a cover park adjacent to Swansea Elementary School.

This ‘preferred alternative’ was presented in the supplemental Environmental Impact Statement in 2014 and the final Environmental Impact Statement in 2016. Ultimately, federal approval was given to the Project in January 2017, and in August 2018, construction began on CDOT’s largest-ever infrastructure project. The \$1.2 billion project includes the total reconstruction of I-70 between I-25 and Chambers Road, including adding one new Express Lane in each direction, removing the 57-year-old viaduct, removing and replacing several structurally deficient bridges and constructing a 4-acre cover park in the Elyria and Swansea neighborhoods.

Simultaneous construction projects in the Globeville, Elyria and Swansea neighborhoods have a cumulative effect on the community that CDOT takes seriously. In conjunction with data and information received from over 300 public meetings held prior to construction, CDOT made nearly 150 community commitments to be completed over the Project’s lifespan.

These commitments include major renovations to and expansion of Swansea Elementary School (located just 100-feet away from I-70), contributions to local affordable housing efforts, and continuous air monitoring for dust during construction. In addition, the Project offered home improvements to nearly 300 homes within a one-block radius of I-70, providing these residences with air conditioning units, attic insulation, interior storm windows and better weatherization.

Taking into consideration the high unemployment rate in the Globeville, Elyria and Swansea neighborhoods and the community stating fears of being forced out of the

neighborhood due to higher costs of living, the Central 70 Project also set a goal of hiring 20 percent of the workforce from the 13 zip codes adjacent to the Project.

The economic benefits of the Central 70 Project are both significant and long lasting. The Project anticipated requiring an estimated 4,000 positions - from skilled craft workers to administrative support. In February 2016, CDOT received approval from the Federal Highway Administration to implement a local labor hiring preference for the Central 70 Project. This approval was granted under a one-year program (Special Experimental Project No. 14 – Local Labor Hiring Pilot Program) created to encourage state transportation departments to pilot local hiring provisions on projects receiving Federal funding.

CDOT is one of nine state transportation agencies across the United States participating in this program that allows requirements for contractors to hire a certain percentage of workforce from within specific geographic boundaries. In the case of the Central 70 Project, CDOT focused hiring targets on neighborhoods adjacent to the Project corridor. As part of CDOT's contract with the Project Developer, Kiewit Meridiam Partner, during the estimated four and a half-year Project, Kiewit Meridiam Partners is required to hire 20 percent of its employees, full-time, from the local community.

To support successful design, implementation and evaluation of local hiring preferences for Central 70, CDOT solicited proposals in 2015 for a partner to help develop and implement the Central 70 Workforce Development Program. CDOT contracted with the Community College of Denver's Center for Workforce Initiatives in 2016 to advise the Department on an appropriate

goal and to prioritize programmatic recommendations. Community College of Denver was able to collect data and insights through:

- 20 targeted neighborhood statistical profiles;
- 15 focus groups with 147 participants;
- 528 unique resident surveys;
- 69 stakeholder interviews; and
- Four employer focus groups and/or interviews with regional contractor organizations.

The insights shared by neighborhood residents, community organizations, education and training partners, civic leaders, and local employers supported the identification of goal recommendations and program action strategies related to the outreach, training and skills development, and supportive resources needed to help residents attain and retain employment on Central 70. Some of the programmatic recommendations identified in the study included:

- Identify and recruit for positions that would attract a broad candidate pool and provide transferable career pathways, such as laborers, equipment operators, commercial drivers, on-the-job trainees, administrative assistants, and accounting clerks.
- Establish a sole workforce convener that would coordinate community intake hubs, standardize assessment and referrals, and track training and placement outcomes.
- Align multiple training programs to create a pipeline system capable of preparing a wide range of students, job seekers, and workers, and ensuring existing or new training is included on the Colorado's Eligible Training Provider List.

- Continue partnering with experienced construction workforce partners, trade associations, and the Colorado Building Trades, to inform and educate community organizations, local residents, and training partners on industry practice and expectations.
- Commit to public and transparent reporting on the local hiring program with periodic collaborative forums that engage all stakeholders in identifying and resolving potential issuers.

A 2012 report issued by the National Skills Coalition cautioned that federal investments that create jobs and federal investments that prepare people for jobs are not always aligned. [1] This can lead to a disconnection between economic development initiatives such as infrastructure expansion and workforce development priorities that build the skills and increase the earning potential of community residents. Through thoughtful collaboration, the approved Local Labor Hiring pilot helped CDOT and its partners bridge workforce and economic community development efforts. The alignment of training and job opportunities that help local residents in low-income neighborhoods to access training, high-quality jobs with connected career pathways, increases not only individual economic mobility but also the number of skilled workers to fulfill future project needs.

CDOT is also participating in the USDOT's official on-the-job training program targeted to move women, minorities, and disadvantaged individuals into journey-level positions to help meet highway construction hiring needs and address the historical underrepresentation of these groups in highway construction skilled crafts. CDOT's contract with Kiewit Meridiam Partners requires 200,000 training hours be provided to employees in the skilled crafts. In June of 2015,

Federal Highway Administration awarded CDOT \$400,000 from its Ladders of Opportunity Initiative On-the-Job Training/Supportive Services Pilot Program grant to support these efforts. These funds have been used to establish a collective impact workforce program, WORKNOW.

Through various outreach events and partnerships, CDOT and Community College of Denver were able to catch the attention of a local private foundation, Gary Community Investments. The foundation invested \$1.06 million into the Program, which provided assistance to mitigate barriers to employment, such as affordability of personal protective equipment, transportation and childcare.

To encourage the local community to attend on-the-job training courses, CDOT opened a Neighborhood Training Center on CDOT's right of way in a walkable area in the Elyria and Swansea neighborhoods. Construction Careers Now, a 48-hour basic skills boot camp, started offering courses at the Neighborhood Training Center. The first cohort to graduate at this location were all from the local hire area, indicating that the new location helped with retention among local participants. A Community College of Denver Career Coach also began holding regular office hours at the Neighborhood Training Center, which coincided with the Construction Careers Now boot camp, providing program participants with direct access to coaching services in the late afternoon and evening. Kiewit Infrastructure Co., the Central 70 Project's prime contractor, also assisted in developing two additional entry-level courses designed to connect more job seekers to highly needed industry positions. Additional classes included English as a second language and math skills.

Prior to the groundbreaking of the Central 70 Project in 2018, Kiewit Meridiam Partners hired a Workforce Development Coordinator whose responsibilities include coordinating workforce recruitment, outreach, and hiring, as well as monitoring and reporting on Central 70 workforce efforts. Kiewit Meridiam Partners and WORKNOW have co-hosted several Contractor Meet and Greet sessions at the Neighborhood Training Center to support informal community connections with job seekers interested in working on the Project. Sessions featured project contractors, local unions and registered apprenticeship programs for carpenters, laborers, operating engineers, and electricians.

Kiewit Infrastructure Co. is a signatory to the Union, so the Project's workforce is pipelined via the Carpenters, Operators and Laborers Union. One of Kiewit's main electrical subcontractors is also a signatory to the Unions and works with the electrical Union for their workforce. Kiewit Meridiam Partners continually cites its partnerships with Unions as being one of the key factors to the success of the Workforce Development Program. It was through Kiewit's close partnership with the Unions that they were able to make residents aware of open positions and the Workforce Development Program. Kiewit Meridiam Partners also held a number of hiring fairs that included coaching and personal protective equipment at the event itself as a way to bring in more employees. These hiring fairs were held at the Neighborhood Training Center or other convenient locations within the local communities. In 2019, Kiewit Meridiam Partners began co-hosting "Building an Inclusive Workforce Series" with WORKNOW and developed a "Women in Construction" hands-on workshop in partnership with Kiewit Meridiam Partners' signatory unions.

“Workforce Development is very important to Kiewit, as a contractor,” said Jason Proskovec, Kiewit’s Central 70 project director. “We’re a local contractor, we’ve been in Denver and in the community for over 70 years and know that wherever we go it’s important to not only help train and develop our construction workforce [since] it’s widely known that it’s an aging workforce and that we need to develop people to help, not only on this Project, but when we take on more work as well. We need to develop skilled craftsmen and women to build projects such as this one.”

Day-long workshops were offered at the Carpenters and Operators training facilities to provide exposure for women and people of color to know which trades they would like to pursue as a career. Other outreach tools such as live streaming on Facebook and YouTube were done to help teach the local community about hiring opportunities from four contractors and three unions. These videos were done through a partnership between WORKNOW and Black Business Initiative and had nearly 200 people tune in.

“To Kiewit Meridiam Partners the benefits are many, a stronger and larger construction workforce base, a more economically sustainable community, and strong partnerships for future projects,” said Cathi Buckley, Kiewit Meridiam Partners chief financial officer.

As of February 1, 2021, only two and a half years into construction, the Central 70 Project exceeded its workforce goal and had 600 local workers contribute 760,000 hours to the Project. As of October 2020, the Central 70 Project’s on-the-job training goal of 200,000 hours was surpassed. The combined partnerships also had a goal to have at least 50 percent of the local

hires be new to the industry and the Project exceeded that goal with 75 percent of the hires being new to construction.

“Even though we have met our on-the-job training goal of 200,000 hours in October 2020, it’s still very important to us to continue that momentum to help train these apprentices and make these apprentices be more skilled workers to benefit not only them, but us in the future,” said Proskovec. “Being able to take that skill that they learned here and take that to the next job and the next job, even if it isn’t for us, it’s just more beneficial for the construction industry in general.”

The Workforce Program has been a life changing experience for those living adjacent to the Central 70 Project corridor. It has opened up opportunities for advancement, a secure job and a higher paying salary to help residents stay in the Globeville, Elyria and Swansea community. Che Derrera, a Groundsman and Traffic Signal Technician Apprentice for Sturgeon, which is a subcontractor to Kiewit on the Central 70 Project, found a second chance through the WORKNOW program, funded by CDOT and Federal Highway Administration. After enduring several tough years, including serving eight years in prison, and not being able to land a secure job, he found work on the Central 70 Project by attending one of the Workforce Program’s hiring fairs where he learned that he can enhance his skills through trainings and have an opportunity to work on a construction project in his community.

In a quote provided to WORKNOW for an article, Derrera stated “I enjoy improving the roadways and landscape along Central 70. This is a positive change for future generations and

I'm proud to contribute to that. What I love most about working in construction is the opportunity. There's so much I can learn that can open doors for me anywhere, even within the same company."

Governor Jared Polis was one of the first governors in the country to endorse the bipartisan infrastructure bill. In 2021 he said, "This important action means jobs and better roads along with a strong initial package to improve air quality and make progress on climate issues." There is significant potential in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to build a strong transportation workforce and programs like those implemented on CDOT's Central 70 project that can help achieve that goal.

The state of Colorado is committed to building a skilled workforce and continuing to grow a world class economy. Colorado consistently has one of the strongest economies in the country and high employment rates. In January of 2022, the state had one of the lowest unemployment rates at 4.1%, which is the lowest it has been since the pandemic began. Colorado's private sector has fully recovered jobs lost in early 2020. Colorado's job recovery rate is 103.1% which is significantly higher than the national rate of 89.8%. Construction had the strongest job gain of any sector adding around 2,000 jobs in January of 2022.

CDOT's Central 70 Workforce Development Program is an example of how successful hiring locally can be. It not only fuels the local economy, but it gives back to the community in a way that transportation projects have not done in the past. When the Central 70 Project finishes at the end of 2022, the residents hired as a part of the program will continue to reap the benefits

of this commitment and have a secure career, should they choose to stay in the construction industry and even if they do not, they can take the skills they have learned through training and coaching and apply that elsewhere. To make this program even more successful, it would be beneficial for transportation agencies to work out issues on the administrative side, which includes building out a better reporting system to track workforce job positions created as there are many lower-tier subcontractors who have craft workers working on the Central 70 Project that CDOT is unable to track. Hiring locally and providing funds for on-the-job training are commitments that CDOT will continue to pursue for other disproportionately impacted communities in future infrastructure projects.