

STATEMENT OF
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
BEFORE THE
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Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to join you today to talk about the efforts that the U.S. Department of Labor's (Department) Employment and Training Administration (ETA) is leading to help workers, job seekers, and businesses in rural areas throughout the United States.

In the most recent Employment Situation Report released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics,¹ the American economy added 311,000 jobs in the month of February and remained near its historic low unemployment rate at 3.6 percent. With 12.4 million jobs added since President Biden took office, and an average of 351,000 jobs added per month over the past three months, this growth continues the steady, stable progress that is bringing opportunities to more workers and security to more families across the country. Despite this job growth, it is critical that we ensure all workers and communities can participate and benefit from this progress.

ETA is considering how we can invest in underserved communities, including rural communities, to ensure that all workers in America succeed. Specifically, we are looking at how to rebuild the communities that have fed and fueled our country over centuries so that America enjoys a stronger tomorrow. The potential that rural America holds in driving our nation's growth is why the Department has been intentional in our focus on equity and access for rural America to ensure that individuals from underserved and underrepresented rural communities have equitable access to the services of the workforce system. By ensuring access to resources and directing investments to smaller communities, we recognize that a well-invested and employed rural America can continue to thrive. Rural America is central to America's strong economic recovery. However, our rural communities also face unique challenges.

According to the 2022 National Healthcare Quality and Disparities report produced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, nearly

¹ The Employment Situation, March 10, 2023: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>

63 percent of U.S. counties are considered “whole county” primary care health professional shortage areas, indicating a lack of primary care professionals that threatens access to services. Rural counties have disproportionately received this designation. Between 2010 and 2021, 136 rural hospitals closed, threatening rural residents’ access to services provided by those hospitals. These problems were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, because of the Affordable Care Act, the percentage of people under age 65 with health insurance coverage is at historically high levels, but people in low-income households and rural communities, among others, are significantly less likely to have health insurance coverage.²

Other challenges include slower population growth, higher average age, and a declining working-age population. 2021 marked the first time in U.S. census history where people aged 65 years and older made up more than 20 percent of the population in nonmetropolitan areas, a 25 percent increase from the 2010 rate. Comparatively, in metropolitan areas, just 16 percent of the population was aged 65 and older in 2021. In nonmetropolitan areas, while the 65+ population has substantially risen over the last decade, from 2010 to 2020, we saw a decline in the working-age population by 4.9 percent, and a decrease in the population under age 18 by 5.7 percent.

Workers in rural America face comparatively high rates of long-term unemployment and often lack of access to training opportunities to develop the skills aligned to growing and emerging jobs in critical industry sectors. Further, approximately 22 percent of Americans in rural areas and 28 percent of Americans in Tribal lands lack quality broadband access, according to the FCC. Rural areas are typically comprised of some of our most vulnerable workers from our underserved communities. By developing our rural workforce, we empower families and their communities to attain economic stability and prosperous communities.

Despite these challenges, through targeted investments, we can develop and unleash the exceptional skills and talents of a rural workforce. Our rural communities are dynamic and have become *more* economically diverse and *more* racially diverse over time. We are seeing growth in rural industries that are employing higher and higher shares of high-skill workers in our rural communities. From 2001 to 2019, the six highest growth industries in rural America were in real estate, education, administrative, professional services, health, and finance.

To better support these changing communities, the Department is providing job training and supportive services to workers in rural communities impacted by energy transitions. We are building pathways to good jobs in a reindustrializing American heartland. We are expanding job training and workforce pathways for underserved and marginalized youth in rural communities to ensure they have the soft and hard skills necessary to succeed in today’s and tomorrow’s workforce. We are driving broadband access and digital literacy initiatives to ensure our rural communities are included, and not left behind, in upskilling efforts. The Department is prioritizing good jobs in the workforce system through guidance, performance management, strategic use of funding opportunities, cross agency collaboration, and provision of technical assistance to support good jobs workforce strategies. In 2022, the Department, along with the Department of Commerce, published the Good Jobs Principles, which describe common

² <https://www.ahrq.gov/research/findings/nhqdr/nhqdr22/index.html>

characteristics of good and stable work and emphasize diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility to help ensure that individuals from underserved communities do not face systemic barriers in the workplace. Underserved communities are persons adversely affected by persistent poverty, discrimination, or inequality, including Black, Indigenous, people of color; LGBTQ+ individuals; women; immigrants; veterans; individuals with disabilities; individuals in rural communities; individuals without a college degree; individuals with or recovering from substance use disorder; and justice-involved individuals. By embedding these Principles into workforce strategies with state and local areas, we are developing the workers in some of our most underserved communities.

Targeted Investments in Rural Workforce Development

Enacted in 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is the backbone of America's workforce development system - with approximately \$3.6 billion in formula funding per year going to states and local areas to provide training and career services that help working people across the country get the skills they need and help employers secure a qualified workforce. The Department allocates these funds to states and outlying areas via a statutorily defined formula. In turn, states allocate funds by formula to the local areas, where local workforce development boards make policy decisions and services are delivered locally by a network of approximately 2,300 American Job Centers (AJC).

In the most recent program year (PY 2021) for which data is available, the formula programs served approximately 2.7 million participants, of which 1.2 million had a barrier to employment. Despite these barriers, WIOA participants earned the highest wages since WIOA was enacted. Our data shows individuals who complete WIOA training programs have higher rates of employment than those who did not complete training, so increasing training opportunities for underserved communities remains a priority. As the nation has rebounded from the COVID-19 pandemic, states and local areas have relied on support from WIOA funding and programs to prepare Americans for good-paying jobs in high-demand fields and across communities.

In addition, ETA has made targeted discretionary investments in rural regions and provides technical support to our grantees, including States, Outlying Areas, Local Workforce Development Boards, and other entities, to help them succeed and overcome unique challenges and needs such as those experienced in rural areas.

An example of these targeted efforts includes the Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) Initiative, a partnership with the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Delta Regional Authority, and the Northern Border Regional Commission to support workers in rural communities impacted by economic transitions, especially in the energy sector. WORC funds provide job training and supportive services to dislocated workers, incumbent workers, and new entrants to the workforce to help connect them with good jobs in high-demand occupations.

- Last year, Alabama's Department of Commerce received a \$1.3 million WORC grant to implement clear and proven strategies—such as work readiness, career coaching, mentoring, supportive services, and employment-driven training—to prepare residents to enter five

highly in-demand industries, including the Advanced Manufacturing, Healthcare, and Information Technology fields. This grant will lead to jobs paying at least \$15/hour with benefits.

- The First Tennessee Development District also received \$1.3 million through a WORC grant to design and implement a one-of-a-kind project that not only offers resources for an employer and their current workforce but cultivates an additional pipeline of peer navigator-supported employees from the justice-involved and recovery communities.
- Through four rounds of WORC grants, ETA has awarded more than \$121 million to 81 grantees to serve participants in these regions. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, ETA announced a fourth round of WORC grants for a total of nearly \$35 million to 26 grantees and is increasing these investments in FY 2023 with an expanded reach to include the Northern Border Regional Commission.

To address access barriers to good jobs, the Department is also committed to helping individuals and communities impacted by the opioid epidemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has shown that rural Americans may be disproportionately impacted by opioids. Rural Americans face less access to healthcare and health insurance, which can lead to poor health outcomes.³ To address the opioid crisis, the Department has awarded approximately \$121 million to entities through its National Health Emergency Dislocated Worker Grants and nearly \$20 million for the SUPPORT Act grants (Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act). These grants provide grantees with resources to offer workforce services for individuals in communities impacted by the health and economic effects of opioids, including skills development and retraining. The SUPPORT Act grants delivered training and employment services that encourage individuals to enter professions that could address the increased need for workers in fields that assist individuals impacted by opioids. States and other eligible grantees can apply for National Health Emergency grants at any point.⁴

- For example, Connecticut received approximately \$4.8 million through an opioid disaster recovery grant which is being used to provide eligible participants with disaster-relief employment as peer navigators in American Job Centers (AJC) and community centers, in rural areas of Fairfield, Hartford, Litchfield, Middlesex, New Haven, New London, Tolland and Windham counties. These positions provide the opioid-impacted population with the appropriate referrals for counseling and supportive services, as well as guide them through preparations for reemployment. Additionally, funds will assist with the provision of career and training services to eligible individuals wanting to transition to fields addressing the opioid crisis, such as credentialed counselors and recovery coaches.
- Maryland received \$4.6 million in SUPPORT Act funding to implement its Beating the Odds project, which focuses on two goals: supporting local areas hit hardest by the opioid

³ [About Rural Health | CSELS | OPHSS | CDC](#)

⁴ [National Health Emergency | U.S. Department of Labor \(dol.gov\)](#)

crisis through delivering holistic, integrated workforce solutions aligned with the state's strategic response; and increasing the pipeline of workers by providing training and support activities to those who have been impacted by opioid use disorders (OUD) or those who seek to transition to professions that support individuals with SUDs. These funds are planned to serve over 700 participants through the end of 2024 including participants in the rural counties of Frederick, Washington, Alleghany, and Garrett.

WIOA's Indian and Native American (INA) Program also strengthens rural economies through its investments in tribal workforce development. The program is designed to help American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian individuals obtain jobs and become self-sufficient through the provision of employment, education, training, and supportive services. In FY 2023, Congress appropriated \$60 million for the INA program.

The INA program allows tribes to design their programs in a manner that best fits the needs of those communities, consistent with the principles of the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act. Sixty-five of our tribal grantees participate in what is referred to as the 477 program (based on the original enactment in 1992 under P.L. 102-477, which was amended in 2017 under P.L. 115-93), which allows Federally recognized tribes to combine multiple federal employment and training programs into a single award, putting decisions about program design and implementation into the hands of tribes. The Department continues to work closely with the Department of the Interior to support this program. We are proud of the Memorandum of Agreement that was signed last year after tribal consultation and provides more flexibility for tribes, and we're looking forward to partnering with tribes that are looking to expand how they use the 477 program.

Finally, ETA and the Biden-Harris Administration are working to improve and fortify community colleges through our Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grant Program, which aims to build the capacity of these colleges to collaborate with employers and the public workforce development system to meet local and regional labor market demand for a skilled workforce. We recently awarded the third round of grants, providing \$50 million to 15 colleges to increase educational and economic opportunities for people in underrepresented communities, including rural areas. These grants will fund a variety of different projects across the country, including projects in New Jersey, Texas, and California.

- For example, Chippewa Valley Technical College in Eau Claire, Wisconsin received almost \$5 million through the most recent round of funding to recruit, train, and prepare rural secondary and postsecondary students, including students of color, for essential healthcare careers across rural western Wisconsin and focus on addressing existing equity gaps preventing widespread access to educational and economic opportunities.

Two years ago, we awarded \$40 million in H-1B Skills Training grants for Rural Healthcare. Those grants 1) increase the number of individuals training in healthcare occupations that directly impact patient care; and 2) alleviate healthcare workforce shortages by creating sustainable employment and training programs in healthcare occupations (including behavioral, mental, and substance use disorder healthcare) serving rural populations. Those grants will operate through 2024. In the next few months, we will award approximately \$80 million for Nursing Expansion Grant Program to address bottlenecks in training the U.S. nursing workforce and to expand and diversify the pipeline of qualified nursing professionals who can fill quality jobs in healthcare.

To help identify and address barriers workers faced regarding access to state unemployment insurance benefits, the Department has awarded to date more than \$200 million in funds through Unemployment Insurance Equity Grants to states. Funded by the American Rescue Plan Act and administered by ETA, the grants allow states to implement projects that seek to remove barriers related to race, age, ethnicity, language proficiency, disability status, geographic location, or other systemic issues that make it difficult for people to access unemployment insurance benefits.

Sector Strategies to Meet Critical Workforce Needs in Rural Areas

ETA's strategies to put America back to work following the COVID-19 pandemic and help American businesses compete in the global economy include investing in high-quality workforce training programs and expanding access to underserved communities; scaling evidence-based practices including sector-based training and career pathways; and expanding and increasing access to Registered Apprenticeships and effective work-based learning.

According to the USDA, trucking accounts for 70 percent of agricultural and food product transportation and represents 30 percent of all ton-miles moved on U.S. transportation systems.⁵ A strong, stable, and safe trucking workforce that offers good-paying jobs to millions of truck drivers is a critical lifeblood of our economy. That's why we worked with the Department of Transportation to launch the Trucking Action Plan to Strengthen America's Trucking Workforce, which promoted Registered Apprenticeship to get more well-trained drivers on the road. Through this initiative, 102 new apprenticeship programs were developed and approved, surpassing the goal of 90 employers in 90 days, and 574 new truck driver apprentices were hired as a direct result of the challenge. This shows how the public workforce system can respond to the workforce needs of industry and business, adapting to changes in the economy.

Education is foundational to success regardless of geography, but rural America is experiencing a teacher shortage crisis. Together with the Department of Education, we developed an alternative affordable option to develop and train educators through Registered Apprenticeship. We are seeing Registered Apprenticeships grow and giving rural school districts opportunities to

⁵Agricultural Transportation Research and Information Center, USDA:
<https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/transportation-analysis/research>

develop their teacher pipeline through this proven “earn and learn” model. We are prioritizing using funds to expand Registered Apprenticeship to new sectors and occupations, and increase access for underrepresented populations and communities, including rural areas. Funding for Registered Apprenticeship will provide critical support for states and other partners looking to start and expand teacher apprenticeship programs. Students need qualified teachers who are prepared to teach them, and who reflect the diversity of our students.

The Department recently published a Request for Information (RFI) on using Sector Strategies to Meet Critical Workforce Needs Across Industries. We asked for input from all stakeholders involved directly and indirectly in economic and workforce development on the use of models that address the workforce needs of specific industry sectors within a local or regional labor market through a strategic sector partnership. This stakeholder input will inform the Department's efforts in developing sustainable and scalable sector strategies that can support rural communities through economic development and workforce collaboration to meet local and regional sector needs for skilled workers in quality jobs while meeting broader Administration objectives, such as equity and the inclusion of historically marginalized populations and underserved communities within those sectors, and responsiveness to the needs of businesses and the economy in critical industries during and beyond the pandemic.

Innovating Workforce Development to Meet Rural Community Needs

The COVID-19 pandemic and other emergencies required states and local areas to adapt service delivery strategies to meet the accessibility needs of job seekers. Several states have noted that they have emphasized virtual service delivery or partnerships with schools, libraries, and other government agencies to further expand the reach to rural and underserved communities. ETA's Regional Offices work together with state and local partners to ensure individuals receive the services they need to enter and re-enter the workforce.

When Hurricane Fiona hit Puerto Rico, the State of Connecticut and a local workforce development board in southwestern Connecticut, the WorkPlace, stepped up to help. Working with ETA's Regional Office and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Connecticut provided Puerto Rico with a mobile unit that Puerto Rico could use to serve individuals in rural areas who could not access necessary services. This is a perfect example of federal, state, and local partners working together to meet the unique challenges faced by rural areas.

The Idaho Department of Labor has expanded its footprint by creating approximately 50 mobile AJC locations in rural Idaho for on-line unemployment insurance claims filing, job placement, and WIOA career services. These mobile AJCs are co-located at various sites, including libraries and community centers. AJC staff visit these locations on a rotational basis, anywhere from three days a week to once a month. It is not uncommon for some individuals to commute more than 50 miles to visit a brick-and-mortar AJC, so these mobile AJCs serve a critical need in rural areas.

The Oregon Employment Department uses an Equity Framework applied to new projects and programs to identify access factors that disproportionately impact rural populations, including

lack of internet, inability to travel lengthy distances for in-person services and needing services in Spanish, which is the second most common language for rural Oregonians. The Equity Framework assists Oregon in taking these factors into consideration to reduce or eliminate disproportionate impacts on rural communities. Oregon is also conducting outreach to historically underserved populations. This outreach includes tribal consultation, as Oregon's nine Federally recognized tribes are located in rural areas, as well as calling unemployment insurance claimants living in rural areas to assist them in filing claims and accessing reemployment services.

Mother Lode Job Training (MLJT) is a rural workforce development agency covering four California counties, more than 5,000 square miles, and housing two state prisons with populations over 4,000 inmates each. Currently funded through WIOA and other grants to prepare the workforce with the skills needed to meet the demands of business and provide a self-sustaining wage to workers, MLJT has successfully completed a statewide pilot to launch secure versions of California's Management Information System and workforce development tool, CalJOBS, to prisons. This successful program has achieved "first-in-nation" status, with real-time data-sharing from within the prisons to the State Workforce Development MIS System. To reduce recidivism, MLJT uses this tool to provide workforce development services inside the prisons to provide a continuum of service pre- and post-release. It has been proven that employment cuts recidivism in half. Providing pre-release workforce development services with uninterrupted transition to post-release services is the method needed to accomplish this. With incarceration costing the state \$100,000 per inmate annually, the cost savings this program will bring the state is substantial, and the goal of the grantee is to cut recidivism by 24 percent.

It's not just where we invest, it's how we deliver our services and how workers get trained. While there are approximately 2,300 AJCs across the nation, this number has steadily declined over the past 20 years and broadband, transportation, and childcare barriers continue to create challenges for the rural workforce in accessing services. This is why state and local workforce boards have pursued the concept of bringing services into the rural areas. As demonstrated by the examples shared, this is done through a variety of ways, to include mobile units, connection points at libraries, community-based organizations or faith-based organizations, to virtual services that are administered through cellphones. The innovations occurring at the state and local level are providing promising practices about how to reach underserved and marginalized populations throughout the country and should inform future efforts to invest and strengthen the public workforce system.

Broadband and Digital Literacy

Access to broadband is important for economic opportunity in rural areas, which need the technological capability to connect with the global economy. Digital skills are workforce skills, which is why the Department joined Commerce, Education, and the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences in developing an RFI, published in December, requesting information on digital literacy and resilience. Specifically, the RFI sought public comments on successful approaches related to digital skills attainment and competency development in education and training efforts, the strategies our education and workforce development systems are employing to assess and

ensure individuals are digitally resilient, and any challenges the education and public workforce systems are facing. ETA also requested information on strategies to advance digital equity and inclusion in the workforce.

ETA and its federal partners will use the information collected through this RFI to inform competitive grant opportunities, further develop technical assistance, inform public policy on the expansion of digital skill-building training programs that facilitate upskilling the workforce, and address demands related to digital literacy and access.

Additionally, this month the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) at the Department of Commerce published a request for comments on the Digital Equity Act passed under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which will provide \$2.75 billion to promote digital equity and inclusion activities and build capacity for state-led efforts to increase adoption of broadband by their residents. The Department will watch this effort closely and collaborate with Commerce to identify the lessons learned from comments and share our expertise from prior experiences developing a pipeline for the digital workforce.

WIOA can also serve as a powerful tool to support digital literacy efforts. Within our guidance, ETA has highlighted that states can use WIOA funding to overcome digital skills gaps by paying for devices and broadband internet services and referring participants to the Affordable Connectivity Program, which helps families and individuals access affordable broadband and discounts on devices like laptops, tablets, or mobile phones.

We are also highlighting success stories where our grantees have established promising practices in digital literacy, including on the Central Coast of California, which launched a project that offers job seekers workshops on digital literacy. The county is providing digital literacy training, equity in access, and upward mobility in government work for individuals of color, and ongoing support of partnering to address the digital divide in communities resulting from lack of access to training or internet service. The experience gained from this grant will be applied to improve digital literacy for youth, including youth with disabilities.

Job Corps

Job training is often hard to come by in rural America. Job Corps, with 121 centers nationwide, has been an important education and training resource for young people and employers in rural areas. Job Corps provides academic and career technical training, counseling, and placement services for eligible youth into either an entry level job, registered apprenticeship, military service, or additional post-secondary education. Twenty-one Job Corps centers are operated by the Department of Agriculture, many of which are located in former Civilian Conservation Corps areas. These centers include a course of study on addressing, preventing, and fighting wildfires to train students on becoming firefighters. Amid more than 66,000 wildfires that burned nearly 7.6 million acres of land across the country in 2022, students in Job Corps Centers combined to provide 204,633 total hours of support to federal firefighters – a 20 percent increase over the previous year.

Government-wide Initiatives

The Department of Labor is a part of the Rural Partners Network, which is a whole-of-government effort to transform the way federal agencies partner with rural communities to create economic opportunity. Through the Rural Partners Network, primarily led by USDA, the Administration is marshaling the combined resources of federal agencies and other providers to partner directly with rural people and places and unlock the full potential of rural America. To support this effort, 13 key federal agencies, including DOL, identified Rural Desk Officers to serve as a front door for Rural Partners Network Staff and rural communities as they navigate the resources available across the federal government.

In addition to this interagency effort, the Administration also has made historic investments in rural communities through the American Rescue Plan and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, including investments that provide rural Americans with high-speed broadband, support economic development, and strengthen workforce development in rural communities. The Department has worked with our federal partners to ensure that these funds work for rural American workers—whether they are to build bridges, expand access to high-speed internet, or manufacture chips. As part of that effort, the Administration released a Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Rural Playbook⁶ that helps rural communities understand funding that is available under the law and other sources, as well as the Equitable Workforce Development for Infrastructure Jobs guide, which provides other sources of funding that can be leveraged to support workforce development.⁷

Again, the Department also partnered with the Department of Commerce to establish Good Jobs Principles, with the aim to improve job quality throughout the country by providing critical information to workers, employers, and government entities.

Through the administration of programs authorized by WIOA, the Department continues to provide guidance and technical assistance to the workforce system to promote equity and job quality and to leverage infrastructure and other funding to create economic opportunities for workers and jobseekers in rural areas. States and local areas can use funds from the other initiatives in coordination with the services provided by WIOA to ensure businesses have the workers they need.

- In October 2022, ETA published Training and Employment Notice 08-22,⁸ Building Pathways to Infrastructure Careers: Framework for Preparing an Infrastructure Workforce. This guidance provides a framework and vision for the public workforce system as a strategic partner in creating and supporting pathways to millions of good-paying infrastructure jobs.
- In January 2023, ETA issued guidance to the workforce system, Training and Employment Guidance Letter 07-22, Increasing Employer and Workforce System Customer Access to

⁶ Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Rural Playbook: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/build/resources/rural/>

⁷ Equitable Workforce Development for Infrastructure Jobs: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/build/resources/equitable-infrastructure-workforce/>

⁸ Training and Employment Notice 08-22, Building Pathways to Infrastructure Careers: Framework for Preparing an Infrastructure Workforce: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/advisories/ten-08-22>

Good Jobs.⁹ This guidance outlines how the workforce system should integrate good job strategies into its employer partnerships and workforce training.

- ETA also launched a Job Quality Academy in partnership with Jobs for the Future and other national partners, which presents a unique opportunity to help the workforce system and its partners to focus on enhancing good jobs and opportunities for workers.

A thriving rural workforce requires thoughtful strategies for recruiting and retaining workers and job seekers in rural communities. ETA is working to strengthen our federal, state, and local partnerships to address disparities that workers from underserved rural communities face to obtain good jobs with family sustaining wages and benefits, free from discrimination, and with the right to join a union. The moment is right to maximize the full potential of the unprecedented federal investments in infrastructure, clean energy, manufacturing, and technology, by strengthening the public workforce system to meet the country's workforce needs and be a powerful tool for connecting under-resourced and underrepresented workers and communities to good jobs.

Thank you again for inviting me today. I am looking forward to your questions about the work ETA is doing to address the workforce challenges in rural America.

⁹ Training and Employment Guidance Letter 07-22, Increasing Employer and Workforce System Customer Access to Good Jobs <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/advisories/tegl-07-22>