

House Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment Holds Hearing Entitled “Innovations in Expanding Registered Apprenticeship Programs”

by Shayla Britton

Yesterday, Wednesday, March 27, 2019, the House Education and Labor Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment hosted a hearing focused upon funding for existing Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs) and the Administration’s new proposed Industry Recognized Apprenticeship Programs (IRAPs).

Higher Education Subcommittee Chairwoman Susan Davis (D-CA) and Ranking Member Lloyd Smucker (R-PA) made opening remarks concerning possible expansion of funds for Registered Apprenticeship Programs (predominately Democrat’s position) and/or the potential to expand the use of existing or additional funds in the promotion of a new program outlined in the Administration’s proposed budget for FY 2020 – Industry Recognized Apprenticeship Programs (IRAPs).

To address the skills and employment gap currently occurring across the nation, the Administration in their recommended budget, has elected to opt for a more innovative approach to fulfilling those skills and employment gaps with a second track for apprenticeships called IRAPs—and introduced ideas regarding pre-apprenticeships (Republican position).

In response to the introduction of these proposed IRAPs, a majority of Democrats in the House, including Rep. Jayapal (D-WA), Rep. Harder (D-CA), and Rep. Levin (D-CA), pointed out the lack of regulatory conditions, accountability measures, and other defining measures for this suggested new sector of apprenticeship/career training that have yet to be defined in any substantive detail, under the proposal.

Republicans such as Ranking Member, Smucker countered with support for the new proposals stating that he welcomed these new innovative measures—or increased federal investment in Registered Apprenticeship programs—to combat high unemployment, small business lack of exploration into creating such apprenticeship programs, in effort to augment the current conditions of struggling sectors, communities, and their families.

But, not all Members on the Republican side of the isle were as ardent in their support of new proposals suggesting that any modifications to the program(s) should be used to target the inconsistencies in skills, job awareness, and job readiness/training.

Rep. Grothman (R-WI) cited the national deficit in job placement in fields struggling to hire qualified workers as the result of the “snobbishness” of a system that directs individuals toward 4 year degree completion. Rep. Watkins (R-KS) and Rep. Grothman (R-WI) both pointed out that their concerns with the misdirection of individuals, coupled with increased mandated regulation for potential employers creates trepidation, reluctance, and overall inability for businesses to engage in these apprenticeship programs and train potential employees.

Many of their Republican colleagues echoed similar concerns in support of the Administration's introduction of IRAPs to combat those issues through the establishment of viable, innovative, and new ways to target those struggling sectors and high unemployment in specific states.

These statements were met with some mixed reviews, tensions, and recommendations by the witnesses called upon to testify at the hearing.

Jennifer Carlson, Executive Director of Apprenti, recommended the expansion of federal funds to the existing RAPs citing that apprenticeship mediating structures such as Apprenti want clear guidance and regulation for administering these programs, supporting the position that it is not the job of employers to set such regulations.

Ms. Carlson along with Bridget Gainer, Vice Chancellor of Workforce and Economic Development at Dallas County Community College stated that they would recommend the continuation of RAPs to maintain the quality control and return on investment for risk sharing entities. They, in turn, questioned the potentially "watered down" versions of the high quality apprenticeship programs that is RAP – which they stated leads to 91% employment after completion of those programs.

Testimonies from James G. Pavesic (Director of Education and Training for the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing, Pipefitting and Sprinkler Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada) and Mark Hays (Vice Chancellor of Workforce and Economic Development in Dallas County Community College) offered more diversified opinions on the IRAPs proposal.

Their testimonies encouraged expansions in either RAPs or IRAPs to begin to close the skills gap and increase awareness of certain careers and also to increase access for all students across different sectors and programs—especially those non-traditional students hard-pressed to support their families.

Despite the differences in specific recommendations to and statements made among the Committee, it was quite evident that there is general support for expansion of Apprenticeship Programs and potential common ground regarding modifications for Apprenticeships—and pre-apprenticeship programs—**final proposals for House recommendations for budget FY 2020 determinations.**