



**WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT
INSTITUTE**

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**New York State Senate Standing Committee on Civil Service and Pensions
Testimony from Amy Desjardins, Executive Director
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Thank you, Chairman Jackson and members of the Committee, for inviting us today. My name is Amy Desjardins. I am the Executive Director of the Workforce Development Institute, a statewide non-profit that works to increase opportunities for all New Yorkers to succeed in the workforce while earning family-sustaining wages. I am joined by Dan Cullen, WDI's Director of Field Services.

WDI's work supports our partners from Organized Labor, employers, and education and training institutions to think and act differently regarding hiring, training, and retaining an inclusive and productive workforce.

Our depth of expertise, network of partners, and statewide presence empower us to understand the needs of the modern workforce and drive toward solutions that remove barriers. Our goal is to ensure workers can meet those needs while attaining economic self-sufficiency.

As new sectors emerge and create opportunities for workers, we fill gaps not covered by other organizations, with the goal of improving the lives of workers and strengthening our workforce overall.

None of this could be done without the great support from all of you, members of the Committee and your colleagues in the Legislature, and so many of our partners who have been on previous panels today. We thank you for your ongoing partnership.

We work across many sectors and industries, including with unions in the Building and Construction Trades, private and public sector; as well as with employers in manufacturing, transportation, healthcare, and nonprofit.

Our work in the public sector includes partnerships with organizations that represent members serving our communities at State Agencies, in local governments, in school districts, and in public transportation.

We are grateful for those who heed the call to serve and improve their communities. This calling to serve, whether in the public or private sector, should not reduce opportunities for economic mobility.

What all of the industries we serve have in common is they are all subject to the same demographic and market factors that are requiring employers to look for new ways to offer quality jobs, and be attractive and competitive to workers. Civil Service careers are no different.

We cultivate partnerships with those who are hiring and training workers for quality jobs. Those that are most successful have common characteristics, including:

- family-sustaining wages that allow people to go beyond subsistence survival,
- comprehensive benefits that protect employees both now, and in the future,
- employer-supported training to develop skills, and earn certifications and credentials,
- clear pathways for future career growth, and
- safe and inclusive workplaces.

All of these are the hallmarks of Civil Service careers.

Career pathways are key to retention in every sector. When workers see their effort to learn new skills or take on new responsibilities has a direct effect on growing their careers, they can take an active role in creating their future.

Union Building and Construction Trades offer us the gold standard of training and career pathways with their registered apprenticeship programs. It is no coincidence that apprenticeship is having a resurgence in other sectors.

Incumbent Worker Training

WDI has supported training for promotional opportunities for public sector workers. This includes support for Civil Service test preparation, and in-service learning opportunities for workers to develop new skills. These include technical skills and foundational skills (often called “soft skills”).

There is great demand in both the public and private sector for individuals with Commercial Drivers Licenses. At the same time, several institutions that provide this training are closing around the state and the cost of training is continuing to rise. For individuals with CDLs to consider public employment, such as for snowplow drivers or school bus operators, it must be competitive with the vast number of open private sector jobs. On-the-Job training, and assistance with the cost of attaining a CDL, could be major incentives to potential workers.

We have a long history of supporting the training necessary to keep the vehicles that are key to our infrastructure on the road. As technology has changed for buses at local transit authorities, we have supported training on everything from engines to digital displays, helping workers stay ahead of the curve.

As school districts transition to zero-emission buses, WDI is continuing to take proactive steps to accelerate the adoption of new technologies in ways that prioritize incumbent public sector workers. We are collaborating with labor unions that represent pupil transport professionals and have built relationships with charging station and bus manufacturers, school district officials, higher education, and national electric vehicle experts.

Last year, WDI conducted a workforce needs assessment in the EV school bus transition. One of the main recommendations that emerged from [the report](#) is a need for a familiarization training that all workers would receive even before the buses reach their lots.

We are developing curriculum and training resources designed to inform and prepare the tens of thousands of public sector driver-operators, bus aides, mechanics, technicians, and dispatchers who deliver students to and from school every day.

This training will demystify the basics of battery-electric school buses through engaging content on topics like safety, operations and maintenance, and fundamentals of battery-electric motor systems. WDI’s battery-electric bus training complements other learning offerings from unions, manufacturers, and school districts.

We are developing learning content that inspires excitement about this transition and illuminates a path to zero-emissions. This excitement is also key to attracting the next generation of talent for pupil transport. We intend to share our learning content with our labor union and workforce pipeline partners to use the training as a recruitment and marketing tool.

Removing Barriers to Employment

The need for affordable, high-quality childcare is one of the most common challenges we hear from our labor partners and their members. We know that investing in child care is an investment in our future.

With recent funding in this year’s state budget, WDI was afforded the opportunity to administer its own Child Care Scholarship program. The pilot program launched this month provides financial support for working families to help cover child care costs. The Scholarship Program expands eligibility for working families not covered by existing

programs. Our scholarship program is now live in nine regions of the state outside of NYC, where a similar program is administered by our partners at the Consortium for Worker Education.

WDI also expanded our role in providing outreach, education and recruitment to working families eligible for county child care subsidies. This pilot program will not only help increase utilization of Child Care Block grant funds available at the county level, but our program also allows working parents to apply for child care funding at worksites, other community-based venues, and off-hours through our union partner network. WDI's staff helps facilitate the application process, saving applicants from having to take time away from work to pursue this workforce support.

In addition to supporting working families, this program supports child care centers, many of which are woman-owned small businesses.

When families spend less on child care, they can better afford housing and transportation or pay student loans and other bills.

Forging Connections for the Future Workforce

Our vast network of partners includes community-based organizations in every part of the state. These organizations are always looking for opportunities to train the future workforce for in-demand careers. We can help to forge partnerships that help CBOs understand the language of Civil Service, learn the career pathways, and prepare their participants for success.

This can start with test preparation for Open Competitive exams, or pre-employment training for pre-requisites for positions that do not require exams. A few examples could be general Career Readiness training, ESOL, driver training, software certifications, or certifications and licenses for medical careers.

WDI can bridge the gap and convene partners to ensure these CBOs are aware of the great opportunities for people they serve. We have done it for the Building and Construction Trades, manufacturing, and software development and can do it for public sector careers.

Promoting these careers should be focused on the opportunity for economic security, but also should celebrate the opportunity to serve. The importance of public service cannot be overstated: the public workforce is responsible for the immediate and ongoing daily needs to educate our children and keep our communities safe and operational, but also for enacting new policies that will move the needle on issues like climate change and creating a more equitable society.

Public sector jobs have led the way in inclusive employment, providing careers that have the potential to be a great equalizer regardless of gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background.

We must be sure that people from all backgrounds are aware of these opportunities and see them as a pathway to economic opportunity.

In a labor market where competition for talent is fierce, it is important that the next generation of public servants sees that their calling and commitment to public service is met with security for their future as they shape the future of New York.

In closing, I want to thank the members of the Committee for the opportunity to share WDI's insights and experiences. WDI has been proud to support the public sector workforce and looks forward to continuing to work with our partners in the Legislature to further our shared goals.