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**Opening Statement of Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT), Chairman  
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development Hearing:  
“Examining America’s Workforce Challenges: Looking for Ways to Improve Skills  
Development”  
May 11, 2023**

(As prepared for delivery)

If these past three years have proven anything, it’s that America has an extremely resilient workforce. Through the COVID pandemic, we prevailed.

Nurses found creative ways to assist patients through telehealth. And truckers showed up day in and day out to get food delivered to America’s kitchen tables.

I am proud of our resilience. With it, America can overcome any hardship.

But our workforce faces another challenge: The skills gap.

Simply put, the skills gap is the growing disconnect between employer needs and employee competencies. Nearly 10 million jobs remain unfilled in the U.S. These jobs require in-demand skills and our workforce system has failed to provide those skills to America’s workers. Without swift action, the skills gap is in danger of becoming a skills canyon.

There are many reasons for the skills gap, but only with a workforce system that effectively re-skills and upskills individuals can we begin to address these issues. Innovation and a fresh approach is needed for the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* to achieve its potential and equip more jobseekers with the skills needed in the modern economy.

Employers across the country are searching for talent, and good-paying jobs are available for those who possess the right skills. Yet too few Americans are upgrading

their skills through the workforce system. Only about one-third of those participating in WIOA engage in any type of skills development. Less than 100,000 individuals nationwide completed their program in the most recent year. We're not going to close the skills gap if we stay on this trajectory. Skills development must be a greater priority in the system.

But government acting alone cannot meet the historic challenges facing our workforce. Private sector involvement and investment are essential to align skills development programs participation with industry needs and give workers hands-on experience. Employer-led and work-based learning must be a focal point in the law. When it comes to skills development, employers must be in the driver's seat.

And while skills and competencies become the new currency in our labor market, we cannot carry on allowing programs to participate in WIOA if they are failing to deliver the skills our economy demands. Reforms are needed to ensure all eligible programs lead to good outcomes – and to give jobseekers the information they need to choose the best pathway to their own success.

At this critical moment, Congress cannot simply double down on the status quo. More taxpayer dollars will not magically fix the problems that are being identified in our workforce system.

Today's hearing provides an opportunity for us to hear from experts on these issues and identify solutions together, because this is an area where we have a lot of bipartisan agreement.

In fact, back in 2014, we found a deal that worked for both sides of the aisle. Legislators, regulators, employers, and employees engaged in countless talks to responsibly outline a system to connect workers and employees.

Those discussions resulted in WIOA's passage in 2014. At that time, the American government looked very similar to today. A Democrat was in control of the White House. Democrats were in control of the Senate. And Republicans were in control of the House.

I hope, with good-faith discussions once again, we can reach an agreement that reforms and strengthens WIOA – delivering results for jobseekers, job creators, and taxpayers.