



"Promoting Excellence in Competency Assurance"

National Organization For Competency Assurance

Statement for the Record

Submitted by
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To the
Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC

Regarding its Hearing
*Modernizing the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998
to Help Workers and Employers Meet the Changing
Demands of a Global Market*

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Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma... And so tonight, I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.

– President Obama, Address to Joint Session of Congress, February 24, 2009.

Introduction

On behalf of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA), an international association representing over 400 organizations¹ that grant occupational certifications, I am pleased to provide the Subcommittee with our views on the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

WIA Reauthorization Should Recognize Importance of Certification

NOCA recommends including information about occupational certification and licensure opportunities as a core service available through One-Stop employment and training career centers. The Department of Labor (DOL) launched its CareerOneStop² website several years ago. This user-friendly website allows job seekers to easily search for certification options in a number of different fields and professions. NOCA recommends that Congress encourage the expansion of this valuable tool by authorizing DOL to raise awareness about the site to workers as well as career development professionals.

In 2003, both the Senate and the House passed different versions of WIA reauthorization. NOCA supported the Senate version of the WIA reauthorization (S. 1021) in particular as it included provisions directing One-Stop centers to make available information about occupational certification and licensure opportunities to those seeking re-employment or new career directions. The Senate bill also called for a national study of the benefits of earning an occupational certification. The results of the study were to be presented to Congress and were required to include recommendations designed to promote the acquisition of occupational certifications.³ S. 1021 also authorized grants for the development of new certification programs for emerging competencies. Competencies relative to new technologies and emerging sectors will provide new job opportunities, and certifications based on the known regimes for certification programs, will provide the competency assurances to employers and the general public. We recommend that any WIA reauthorization undertaken by this Committee include similar provisions.

Help Dislocated Workers Pay for Certification

Spiraling costs are putting the dream of a higher education out of reach for many Americans. Many workers will not be able to achieve a valid occupational certification – which will serve

¹ A full list of NOCA's organizational members may be viewed at <http://www.noca.org>. NOCA members represent more than 10 million individuals worldwide and include certification programs of some 150 professions and occupations. NOCA members certify individual skills in fields as diverse as construction, healthcare, automotive, and finance.

² <http://www.careeronestop.org/>.

³ Sen. Feingold introduced S. 175, the Skills Standards Certification Evaluation Act of 2009, earlier this year which also calls for a national study to evaluate certifications and provide confirmation of their value to employers. S. 175 would only evaluate "skill certifications" that receive federal funding. It should be noted that occupational certifications are overwhelmingly regulated at the state level, hence there are only a small number of certifications that are codified into federal law or recognized in federal regulations.

many as the key to a new career – without receiving some form of financial assistance. At the same time, federal dollars should not be put towards academically questionable programs.

NOCA suggests allowing displaced workers to be eligible for financial aid to pay for the costs of taking an occupational certification exam. The Montgomery G.I. program was expanded a decade ago to allow veterans to use their education benefits towards this purpose and this could serve as a model for the Committee when retooling of WIA begins. As with the Montgomery G.I. system, NOCA recommends that only those certifications that have been accredited by a nationally recognized accreditation body be eligible for any type of federal financial aid or reimbursement.

Occupational Certification Leads to Better Jobs and Better Wages

Many organizations in today's challenging economy have recognized their workforce as their most valuable asset. Likewise, as President Obama stated in his February 26 joint address to Congress, individuals recognize that now more than ever before they must acquire and maintain more comprehensive skill sets to ensure their own attractiveness and ability in the workplace.⁴

Certification offers a meaningful and a direct pathway to re-employment for individuals eligible for assistance through the One-Stop system. Certification may be a part of the training for specific job skills required in local markets. Including information about the vast array of certification programs and opportunities available to job seekers when they visit One-Stops is an excellent way to assist individuals in obtaining new work and possibly better career opportunities.

The value of acquiring an occupational certification is underscored in existing data. Research conducted by the American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS) (a NOCA member) "document[s] a high level of agreement among certified nurses, non-certified nurses and nurse managers that certification is greatly valued among nurses."⁵ Respondents to the ABNS survey revealed that among the incentives their employers offer to promote and recognize nursing certifications are reimbursement of exam fees, a listing of their certifications on nametags and/or business cards, and receiving reimbursement for continuing education.⁶ Other surveys indicate that certification results in higher wages for credentialed employees, as well as bonuses.⁷

Certification programs whose prerequisites and requirements displaced workers may quickly access—like those in the nascent "green" jobs movement--would enable those workers to move back into gainful employment and possibly enhanced career opportunities. Certification of one's specialized skills learned from years on the job may well be one of the quickest pathways to reemployment.

In many instances, an occupational certification does not require a four-year college degree. College is an expensive and time-consuming undertaking which may not represent a viable alternative for all job seekers. Persons who do not wish to pursue a bachelor's degree can pursue

⁴ See also Su Bacon, "Setting Strategy: Earning professional credentials has many benefits for businesses." *Kansas City Star* (Jul. 2, 2007), available at <http://www.kansascity.com/business/story/174730.html>.

⁵ *Value of Certification Executive Summary*. American Board of Nursing Specialties (May 2006), 4. Available at http://www.nursingcertification.org/pdf/executive_summary.pdf.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Poll Indicates Certified Workers Earn More*, press release, Sept. 5, 2003. Available at: <http://www.noca.org/portals/0/Poll%20results.doc>. See also *CertMag's 2006 Salary Survey*. Available at http://www.certmag.com/articles/templates/CM_gen_Article_template.asp?articleid=2479&zoneid=223. See also *12 Money-Making Certifications to Boost Your Career*, Yahoo! HotJobs. Available at: http://hotjobs.yahoo.com/career-articles-12_money_making_certifications_to_boost_your_career-653.

rewarding careers in fields such as automotive mechanic, construction trades, and medical assisting, among many others. Examples of occupations not requiring a baccalaureate degree include:

- Court reporters. This profession remains in high demand. According to the National Court Reporters Association, 81% of those holding the Registered Professional Reporter (RPR) certification say their professional designation is important to them.⁸ Court reporters earn close to \$64,000 annually on average.⁹
- Crane operator. The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists the annual mean salary for crane operators as \$42,940.¹⁰ Most states require crane operators to have a certification obtained from an accredited certification body.
- Automotive technician. According to the National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation, automotive technicians receiving the Automotive Service Excellent (ASE) certification can earn \$60,000 or more per year.
- X-ray technician. There continues to be a demand for trained professionals in the healthcare field. X-ray technicians can expect to earn a mean annual wage of over \$51,000 according to BLS statistics.¹¹

These are just a small sampling of the occupations available to dislocated workers, new workforce entrants, and others seeking meaningful employment and living wages, who may choose not to go on to pursue a 2 or 4 year degree. Occupational certification is in most instances an affordable retraining option for many workers. A 2004 survey conducted by NOCA indicated the average cost of certification tests is \$350.¹²

The certification sector is also recognizing the changing face of the American workforce. While the United States has always been a nation of immigrants, U.S. Census figures indicate that the number of persons who speak a language other than English at home increased from 31.8 million in 1990 to 47 million in 2000.¹³ In addition, while some immigrants enter the United States with high quality training and education, others lack advanced skills and will need to obtain training in order to advance in the workforce.

Certification bodies are adapting swiftly to meet the needs of America's changing workforce. For example, many certification boards are administering their coursework and examinations in languages other than English. Certification examinations for numerous occupations are now administered on a global scale. A 2006 survey of NOCA member organizations revealed that over 50% of respondents administer their exams in countries other than the United States and that 37% of respondents translate their exams into languages other than English.¹⁴

⁸ See <http://ncraonline.org/certification/Certification/rpr/default.htm>.

⁹ See <http://ncraonline.org/NCRA/pressroom/AboutCourtRep/>.

¹⁰ <http://www.bls.gov/oes/2007/may/oes537021.htm>.

¹¹ <http://www.bls.gov/oes/2007/may/oes292034.htm>.

¹² *Average Certification Exam Fee Tops \$350*, press release, May 20, 2004. Available at: http://www.noca.org/portals/0/exam%20fee_header.pdf.

¹³ See Hyon B. Shin with Rosalind Bruno, *Language Use and English-Speaking Ability: 2000*. U.S. Census Bureau (Oct. 2003). Available at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-29.pdf>.

¹⁴ *NOCA International Staff Summary Report*. National Organization for Competency Assurance (Oct. 20, 2006). Not available online.

Certification bodies are also in full compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, thus allowing persons with disabilities to earn certifications with reasonable accommodation that does not compromise the validity or reliability of the testing process.

What is Certification?

The certification of professional and occupational skill sets affirms the importance and measurability of a knowledge and experience base for practitioners in a particular field, their employers, and the public at large. Certification represents a measureable demonstration of a particular individual's professional competence. In some professions certification is a requirement for employment or practice. In other professions and occupation, certification is a means of demonstrating mastery over skill sets and competencies required by the work place or consumers. In all instances, certification enhances the employability and career advancement of the individual practitioner or employee.

A certification is generally developed when an industry or profession is able to identify a "fundamental body of knowledge for the profession. There should be a relatively stable, expert-identified, peer-reviewed, objective, consensual set of tasks, activities and understanding that identifies what individuals in the profession do."¹⁵

Numerous occupations, such as doctors, nurses, accountants, and physical therapists, require a license to practice the profession at the state level. Certification is distinct from licensure in that it is voluntary and frequently requires recertification to maintain the currency of the certification.

About the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA)

NOCA, the oldest and largest international organization representing over 400 certification agencies, testing companies, consulting firms and individuals involved in professional certification, was created in 1977 as the National Commission for Health Certifying Agencies (NCHCA) with federal funding from the Department of Health and Human Services. Its mission was to develop standards for quality certification in the allied health fields and to accredit organizations that met those standards. With the growing use of certification in other fields, NCHCA's leaders recognized that what is essential for credible certification of individuals in the healthcare sector is equally essential for other sectors. With this vision, NCHCA evolved into the National Organization for Competency Assurance.

NOCA also brings the expertise of its internationally recognized accrediting arm, the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA). NCCA uses a peer review process to evaluate adherence to its standards by certification programs and grants accreditation to those programs that have met those standards. These standards exceed the requirements set forth by the American Psychological Association and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and thus help to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public.

NCCA accredited programs certify individuals in a wide range of professions and occupations including nurses, automotive professionals, respiratory therapists, counselors, emergency technicians, and more. To date, NCCA has accredited over 200 programs representing 98 organizations.¹⁶ NCCA is the largest accreditation program in the United States and recognition of NCCA accreditation is incorporated into many federal and state statutes and regulations pertaining to the regulation of various occupations.

¹⁵ John E. Kasper, Ph.D., CAE, *To Certify or...Not to Certify?*, Forum Magazine (January 2009), 28.

¹⁶ A full list of programs achieving NCCA accreditation may be viewed at:
<http://www.noca.org/NCCA/Accreditation/AccreditedCertificationPrograms/tabid/120/Default.aspx>.

Conclusion

The nation's growing numbers of unemployed are desperate to get back to work in an occupation that allows them to support themselves and their families. Improving the prospects for reemployment into new career opportunities represents the core of the Workforce Investment Act. Individuals, whether employed or self-employed, know that now more than ever before they must acquire and maintain more comprehensive skill sets to ensure their own marketability and competence in the workplace.

Certification represents an excellent pathway to employment opportunities for workers in all areas in the economy. It also serves as an important assurance for employers and the general public that individuals have attained the necessary skill sets to provide the services or carry out the scope of their employment.

NOCA urges inclusion of those provisions that will confirm the role of certification in our economy and the workplace and make investments to ensure that occupational certification and licensure opportunities are made a solid part of the Workforce Investment system, confirm the value of occupational certification by an objective study, and help launch occupational certifications in emerging sectors.

Respectfully Submitted,



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