



April 27, 2020

Governor Charlie Baker
Lt. Governor Karyn Polito
Senate President Karen E. Spilka
House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo
Secretary Michael J. Heffernan
Chairman Michael J. Rodrigues
Chairman Aaron Michlewitz

Dear Governor, Lt. Governor, Secretary Heffernan, and Senate and House leaders:

On behalf of our members, and during this time of great uncertainty, we write today about workforce development efforts and challenges across the Commonwealth.

The Massachusetts Workforce Association (MWA) is a statewide association representing the unified voice of the Commonwealth's workforce development system. Our members include an array of partners and stakeholders, including the MassHire Career Centers and Workforce Boards. Regionally, our members work to ensure the state's workforce system is responsive to the dynamic demands of businesses, job seekers, incumbent workers, and youth throughout the Commonwealth.

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, our Commonwealth is facing an unprecedented demand for unemployment assistance, with entire industries struggling to survive. The profile of impacted businesses cuts across a variety of industries and sadly, many of the industries responsible for fighting the COVID-19 outbreak, such as healthcare, continue to be extremely strained and desperate for new workers. We have seen and anticipate devastating impacts to small businesses throughout the Commonwealth. Unfortunately, a crisis like this also strikes the most vulnerable in our population in the earliest, deepest, and longest way possible. As unemployment claims increase, we are noticing many low wage workers being impacted disproportionately. These workers were barely getting by when the economy appeared strong and now they are faced with countless barriers, including re-connecting to the labor market.

Seemingly overnight, the MassHire workforce system has had to adapt to a very challenging and rapidly changing environment. While MassHire Career Centers and Workforce Boards are currently closed to the public, the work has not ceased. Staff are operating remotely, triaging



hundreds of calls a day from residents who have lost their jobs and businesses that are struggling to stay afloat. Simultaneously, many businesses have hiring needs and boards and career centers are working to connect those who lost their jobs, but still want to work, with employers who are hiring.

Since the COVID-19 state of emergency began, we greatly appreciate the ongoing support and investment that the Administration and Legislature have provided to frontline healthcare workers, first responders, businesses, individuals, and families. While more is needed, Massachusetts has acted quickly and with the needs of our most vulnerable citizens in mind.

As the Administration and Legislature begin to reassess the FY2021 budget, we are aware that you will face very difficult choices as expected revenues fall and our labor market is fundamentally reshaped. However, during this time of unmatched economic uncertainty, the need for workforce funding is paramount.

The MassHire system will play a critical role as the state emerges from this crisis, a public face for local businesses and people out of work, helping guide them through the challenging transitions ahead. Therefore, we respectfully request the following investments in our Commonwealth's workforce system:

- Local MassHire Career Centers: Career Centers are on the front line of employment and training service delivery. Although our state has made significant investments in the workforce system over the past several years, current funding levels are insufficient to cover baseline core facility and staffing needs. State investment, particularly until the federal funding formula adjusts or Congress increases investment in workforce training, will be critical for the system to respond adequately and quickly to emerging business and job seeker needs in this new virtual climate. Additionally, while DUA bears the responsibility for the unemployment insurance system, career centers are often the first place where individuals go when they become unemployed for assistance with their UI claims, short and long term job search, and connection to other public resources to support them and their families while out of work.
- Youth Funding: While summer jobs are uncertain given the pandemic limitations, YouthWorks and Connecting Activities programs are working to continue offering young people career development opportunities virtually, with accountability measures built in to ensure learning and soft skill development occurs.

- Manufacturing Funding: Manufacturers in our state are responding and adapting production lines to support frontline workers and residents during this crisis, producing PPE, hand sanitizer, and other needed items. These businesses tell our members that now more than ever they need skilled workers. Training dollars will be vital to keeping these businesses successful and competitive.
- Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund: Continued investment in upskilling, sector-based and cross-sector retraining programs as hundreds of dislocated workers will need to switch careers and retrain for jobs in sectors that are hiring.
- Unemployment Insurance System: Ensure the UI system has the resources, the trained personnel, and capacity to operate remotely and service increased needs. While we understand DUA is expanding and trying to keep up with the unprecedented volume of UI applications, those who lose their jobs during this pandemic cannot wait weeks for UI financial assistance or a call to respond to their questions. In addition, we must ensure that applications, information, and call support is available in multiple languages.
- Supportive Services: Fund supportive services available at MassHire career centers to help those who lose their jobs and need support to successfully re-enter the job market including social and mental health assistance, transportation, childcare, etc. Currently, supportive services funds are only available through WIOA (federal funding) and limited in scope.
- Spending Flexibility: Allow for maximum spending flexibility for state workforce related line items so that important programs don't lose critical funds because training programs are currently on hold. Since many partnerships were forced to cease operations due to the pandemic, it is important to ensure that grantees don't have to remit unspent funds at the end of FY2020. These workforce line items include:
 - Training Resources and Internship Networks (TRAIN) Grant Program
 - EOHED Manufacturing line item (7002-0020)
 - Young Adults with Disabilities Program (7003-0607)
 - Re Entry Workforce Demonstration Project (7003-0150)

As the economy recovers, businesses will need funding to adapt their current workers' skills, as well as address skills gaps in new and existing employees, and workers will need to address education and training gaps to get back to work. Many will not be able to return to the jobs they had before the COVID-19 crisis and will need ongoing support and training as they transition to new jobs and careers. We believe strongly that much of this investment must be provided by significant federal investments in workforce training and we will continue to work with the



Massachusetts delegation to secure this funding. In the interim, our system will need increased state funding to help the tens of thousands of job seekers and employers from across the state who will need assistance.

The Commonwealth's ability to retain and re-hire a skilled workforce will be critical as we recover. We thank you for your continued leadership. If you have any questions or if we can provide any additional information please don't hesitate to reach out to Tonja Mettlach at tmettlach@massworkforce.com or 781-249-6032.

Sincerely,

Tonja Mettlach
Executive Director
Massachusetts Workforce Association