

**Testimony from Alaska Labor and Workforce Development Commissioner Clark Bishop
To Be Presented by Greg Cashen, Executive Director, Alaska Workforce Investment Board
Saturday, November 15, 2008
Anchorage, Alaska**

Senator Murkowski, thank you for allowing the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development to testify before this committee today.

The programs we are adopting to engage high school students and young adults in career training, and to assist them in persisting until they earn a diploma, certificate, or degree are illustrated by the experiences of Zach.

Early in his high school career, Zach was bored with his traditional classes and considering dropping out. But a brush with vocational education in his Juneau high school intervened.

Instead of hitting the streets, Zach found a metal class where he learned to weld. He learned to build a tool box and soon went on to other projects. He took other “shop” classes and, with the guidance of an Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development staffer, Zach discovered apprenticeship. After graduating last May, Zach is now on his way to becoming a certified plumber and pipefitter. Through a school-to-apprentice program he earned 500 hours credit – about three months of work – for his high school shop classes.

The Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development is working to provide alternatives to the thousands of students like Zach who reach a crossroad and decide to leave school.

One of the reasons the U.S. emerged as the economic superpower of the 20th century was a quality workforce. As a state and as a nation, we have veered from that course. But the tide is turning and our success will depend on all of us working together – in Alaska that means building strong partnerships between the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, industry, labor and education – to build a future with a trained workforce.

Although the partnerships vary in scope, and the objectives and goals vary based on who is involved, the outcomes benefit all of Alaska.

Alaska is focusing on training to replace an aging workforce and provide skilled workers to build a gasline and other significant development projects on the horizon.

We are taking a vision of creating a broad-based registered apprenticeship program that helps produce an Alaska workforce consistently trained at the highest levels – and beginning to make it a reality. Apprenticeship, as a pathway to a career or higher education, is one of the most effective methods of delivering a trained workforce. If we as a state embrace this model of partnership with business and industry, we will be on

the pathway to improving Alaska Hire and giving hope to our most valuable asset – our youth.

In school-to-apprentice programs, high school students receive up to 500 hours (about three months) of credit when they are enrolled in a registered apprentice program. Apprentices can also earn up to 38 credits through the University of Alaska System toward a degree.

The department is reaching out to other high demand industries in Alaska – ranging from healthcare to mining, transportation to forestry, and manufacturing to oil and gas. These industries are well-suited to the apprenticeship movement.

Registered apprenticeship programs will develop a skilled, competitive, diverse and sought-after workforce – and help provide a world class, industry driven, post secondary education system.

The department now has 25 newly trained Apprenticeship Specialists, located statewide in our Alaska Job Centers, who link with career guides in Alaska secondary schools. They are helping provide a full line of resources such as the Alaska Career Ready program, employer incentives and assessments for apprentices.

The Alaska Youth First Initiative, operated by Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development with State General Funds, is a strategic effort to prepare youth and young adults up to age 24 to be job ready. This is a great example of how we can put people to work when government, industry and education create unique partnerships to accomplish our mutual goal – achieving workforce excellence.

Youth First provides career guides across the state, including eight that travel to rural communities and schools throughout their regions. Career Guides work with youth and young adults to create interest and provide support in learning about the job market, researching occupations, and applying for jobs and training programs in high demand industries.

The guides are successful because they establish a working relationship with the schools, Native organizations, community service agencies and employers in their communities. Career Guides help youth register for the online systems AKCIS and ALEXsys. They also assist with the application process for apprenticeship programs, employment, job shadows, internships, vocational training programs and more.

Career guides at the Alaska Department of Labor's Youth Hiring Center in Anchorage invited 71 seniors in good standing to a late spring hiring event that is part of the Job Club. The Club is a partnership with the department's career guides, members of the construction industry, the Anchorage Home Builders Association and the Associated Builders and Contractors Inc. To be in good standing, seniors have to sign up to join the club and they are required to attend two employability workshops that includes resume

writing and other job-seeker skills, and register in Labor's ALEXsys – Alaska's Job Bank online.

Of the 71 students, 47 are now working in construction-related positions, seven are going into the military in construction related fields such as combat engineer and welder, three are in registered apprenticeship programs, three are continuing their education at university and AVTEC, and four are working in other fields. Career guides worked with the remaining students to place them in construction industry jobs when they turned 18.

Another Youth First program provides teacher externships – a program in which our teachers are finding there's a lot to learn about what skills our students will need to be a successful part of Alaska's workforce. Overall, 49 teachers completed externships in three target industries including healthcare, construction and resource development – with an impact on more than 2,000 students.

A partnership with industry created the Alaska Construction Academy. More than 2,300 middle and high school students, along with 320 adults, are learning how to build new skills – such as carpentry, plumbing, electrical, welding and drywall finishing. Begun as a pilot program in Anchorage to attract and train young people and adults to first jobs in the Alaska construction industry, the academies are now in the Kenai Peninsula, Fairbanks, Juneau, Ketchikan and Mat-Su. Additional academies will be created throughout the rest of the state. Graduates will help fill the 1,000 construction jobs that are needed annually.

Significantly, the Denali Commission has become a vital partner in extending the Denali Training Fund to youth workforce preparation programs in rural Alaska. Last summer, 32 high-school students attended the Galena and Kotzebue Summer Health Career Academy. Through the joint program with the department's Denali Training Fund Youth Program, they earned six credits at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and received an Emergency Trauma Technician Training Certificate. Additional partners in this program were the U.S. Department of Labor, the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development and the Tanana Chiefs Conference.

We are partnering with other state agencies, for example creating the Alaska Career Ready program with the Department of Education and Early Development. The program is available to employers, students and workers to help assess and prepare them for jobs. Employers can send current or prospective employees to any Alaska Job Center to take an assessment that provides a snapshot of current skills. After taking the assessment, students and workers can attain certification.

The department is beginning to coordinate the efforts of the Regional Training Centers in Alaska, including the department's Alaska Vocational Technical Center (AVTEC) so they can deliver services more efficiently, helping to address the highest rates of unemployment that exist in rural Alaska, where many of the centers are located.

Beginning January 1, education tax credits, which cover contributions up to \$150,000, will be extended to include secondary school vocational programs and state-operated vocational and technical schools in Alaska. The credit had been only for contributions to two- and four-year colleges and universities. The credit can now be used against additional taxes: insurance, corporate income, oil and producer, oil and gas property, mining license, fisheries business or fishery resource landing. However, not all vocational and technical schools in Alaska are state operated, thus they are not eligible to benefit from this program.

Our Workforce Investment Board is the primary policy making board for workforce development in Alaska. Citizens from all across Alaska serve on the board, representing many different organizations and industries. AWIB is leading a state initiative to create career pathways in vocational education programs, working with business and education consortia to establish and implement standards for Alaska training programs.

The department will continue to work toward increasing awareness of job and training opportunities – creating tomorrow’s workforce. That includes paying attention to today’s students by expanding career and technical education – which is part of our AGIA training plan – in partnership with the Department of Education and Early Development.

Much of the successes the department has achieved would not have occurred without the support of the federal government and the active engagement of our Congressional delegation to secure funds for workforce development targeting our youth. Many of our new state-funded initiatives were initiated thanks to the U.S. Department of Labor’s federal workforce innovation grants.

Much work remains to be done and we hope to continue our dialogue with you and the rest of our congressional delegation as the department seeks continued support for Alaska’s workforce development initiatives.