

Opening Statement: Joint Economic Committee Hearing
“Connecting More People to Work”
Senator Maggie Hassan
November 20, 2019

Thank you Chairman Lee for focusing this committee’s attention on the important issue of getting more Americans to participate in our workforce.

And thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Members of both parties agree that we must increase labor force participation.

While low unemployment rates in my home state of New Hampshire and across the country are welcome news, we know that a low unemployment rate can also present real challenges – from businesses not being able to find workers, to additional pressure being put on the productivity of our current workforce.

For a variety of reasons, too many Americans are falling out of the workforce. And a smaller percentage of Americans participating in the workforce can drag on economic growth.

It is critical that we address the root causes that result in people not seeking employment. And today’s hearing presents an opportunity to address those factors and look toward bipartisan solutions.

To start, as our economy changes rapidly, individuals may not have the skills and supports that they need to enter – and remain – in the workforce. And I have heard from businesses throughout New Hampshire that one of their top challenges is finding more qualified workers, even at entry level jobs.

Addressing this challenge requires us to both strengthen job training efforts and remove the barriers that prevent too many people from participating or remaining in the workforce.

I have introduced bipartisan legislation – the Gateway to Careers Act – that would do just that.

This bill would provide grants to support partnerships between community or technical colleges and workforce development partners such as state workforce development boards, industry associations, and community-based organizations.

These partnerships would help remove many of the barriers that prevent too many people from completing a 2-year degree or credential by connecting them to support services, including housing, mental health and substance use disorder treatment, assistance in obtaining health insurance coverage, offering career counseling, transportation, and other services.

By strengthening job training and support services we can connect more people with the tools that they need to enter and succeed in our changing economy.

Another systemic barrier that many Americans face is a lack of access to paid leave and child care.

Frequently, those who want to work are held back by pressing family responsibilities that make it impossible. A recent report by the Hamilton Project showed that 9.6 million women who are not participating in our workforce list family and home responsibilities as their primary reason.

Mr. Chair, I request that the Hamilton Project Report: “Labor Force Nonparticipation. Trends, Causes and Policy Solutions” be entered in the record.

By enacting more family-friendly policies that enable people to balance their work and family responsibilities we can help more people join or rejoin the labor market.

We also must break down employment barriers facing traditionally disadvantaged communities.

In 2018, Brookings found that only four out of ten working-age adults who experience disabilities are employed. So we also need to address the challenges that those who experience disabilities encounter in entering our workforce.

As Governor, I signed legislation banning employers from paying workers with disabilities at a lower rate than the minimum wage, making New Hampshire the first state in the nation to ban sub-minimum wages. We must make this a federal priority – which is why I have cosponsored the Transformation to Competitive Employment Act, which would phase out the practice of paying a sub-minimum wage to workers with disabilities nationwide.

We should also make sure that workers who experience disabilities receive the support they need to succeed in the workplace and are less likely to fall out of the labor market.

Finally, no conversation about increasing participation in our workforce can exclude addressing the costs of higher education.

Right now, students face far too many obstacles in getting the education that they need – particularly when it comes to affordability.

No one who is pursuing higher education so that they can build a better future for themselves – and in turn our economy – should have to put that goal on hold because they can’t afford it. And they should not have to take on substantial debt to do so either.

I’ll continue working on strategies to increase college affordability and to lower the burden of student debt, so that more workers can get the education that they need to thrive.

We can all agree that tackling our workforce challenges requires a multi-faceted and comprehensive approach.

There’s not a single solution. And we have multiple opportunities to connect more people to work.

I look forward to hearing more from our witnesses today.

And now, I'll turn it back over to Chairman Lee.