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Testimony - December 2002

Remarks to City Council General Welfare Committee

CUF project director David Fischer gave testimony at a Dec. 5 City Council hearing on the Workforce Investment Act

by David Jason Fischer

I am David Fischer of the Center for an Urban Future, a public policy organization dedicated to improving the overall well being of New York City and serving its long-term interests by targeting problems facing low-income and working-class neighborhoods in all five boroughs. We conduct research and publish reports in different areas of city policy, concentrating on issues of economic development and workforce development.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to testify today on implementation of the Workforce Investment Act, generally referred to as WIA. This federal law is up for reauthorization in 2003, and New York City's tortuous path to implementing it is likely to be used as prime fodder by opponents of giving greater resources to workforce development, possibly including the Bush Administration. New York state waited two years even to begin its formal implementation effort, and in a real sense we have been playing catch-up ever since.

Unlike his predecessor, Mayor Bloomberg has grasped the need for a coherent and effective workforce policy, and has expressed appreciation of its potential as an economic development asset for the city. He has appointed two focused Commissioners to head the most relevant city agencies, Betty Wu at the Department of Employment and Verna Eggleston at the Human Resources Administration. I strongly believe that the concerns about motivation that were relevant a year ago—whether city officials even wanted to improve workforce services—are no longer valid. Any questions of expenditure should be considered matters of process, not philosophy.

With that in mind, I'd like to briefly share a few thoughts as to where the Council can play a key role. First off, improvements in the workforce system cannot happen by virtue of any one agency or institution. They demand true collaboration not only between DOE and HRA, but also with CUNY, the new Department of Education and the Department of Youth and

Community Development. Even more important is that the agencies, most particularly DOE, constantly reach out to the private sector. The Bloomberg administration has made a fine start in this regard with a number of strong appointments to the Workforce Investment Board. But the WIB has no staff, and the experience of other cities with stronger WIBs has shown us that staff is necessary to advance the goals of the WIB between its quarterly meetings, to address bureaucratic minutiae of the type private sector members typically have no patience for, and to brief WIB members on the issues at hand so as to better inform their policy decisions. Without staff, the NYC WIB has no capacity to serve as a full-time incubator and implementer of effective workforce strategies. Overall, we need to see more concrete results and that is where the Council can provide some of the leadership and accountability. Successful workforce development is not rocket science, but it absolutely must be collaborative.

With that in mind, I'd like to add that Brian McLaughlin of the Central Labor Council illustrated in his testimony earlier that city workforce policy has neglected a tremendous resource: the knowledge, industry expertise and institutional power of organized labor. The programs run by or in affiliation with labor, from union apprenticeships to the work of the Consortium for Worker Education, are a cut above most of what's in the publicly run system, and I believe the public system has a lot to learn from how labor pursues its efforts. We at the Center are currently studying how to better integrate the union philosophy into publicly supported job training and employment services.

We want to commend the Council on its lead role in sponsoring the small business summit this past Monday at Baruch College. There was a very productive breakout session on workforce issues in small business that led to several concrete recommendations for city government, which were then presented to the larger group. I would like to list a few of those here as good ideas for the Council to focus on and pursue in the near term.

Best of all… they cost virtually NOTHING.

1. Link existing benefits that businesses receive such as land-use changes or tax incentives to both local hiring practices and local training programs. This worked very well with Bear Stearns when they moved to MetroTech in Brooklyn and could work with companies that are affiliated with the new AOL Time Warner Building on the Upper West Side.

2. As several earlier witnesses alluded to, there's tremendous need for greater sectoral analysis of both growing sectors and those that could benefit with a closer look. We do a lot of this at the Center for an Urban Future, and for example were really surprised at how little economic development groups in the city generally know about arts and culture—-one of the pillars of our economy. This kind of sectoral analysis can provide invaluable information about both where the jobs are and where investment of public funds might prove most beneficial, but we need more of it and it should be coordinated and informed by city government. Right now, rather than have a good clear sense of the various business sectors (including the nonprofit sector) we have a hodge-podge of varying analysis-—some from policy groups, some from CUNY, some from the state and federal Departments of labor. We need to focus these efforts the way many other cities have done.

3. DOE and the Department of Small Business Services (SBS) are putting a lot of effort into one-stop centers. This is a good idea in itself, but Council should maintain a strong oversight role to ensure that we a) connect the two b) make sure they connect to the local intermediaries and good programs that already exist at the borough level c) make sure, at all costs, that we are not creating just more bureaucracy and infrastructure. Close examination of traffic at the one-stops and outcomes data should determine whether these programs are on track.

4. All of the economic programs in this administration are now reporting directly to Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff. Thisis a good thing, but workforce should be included as well. Then and only then will the city begin to integrate workforce services into the current menu of economic development options.



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