

**Written Testimony of Jack Waldorf, Executive Director  
Western Governors' Association**

**Submitted to the United States Senate  
Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies  
April 22, 2024**

**Fiscal Year 2025 Appropriations**

Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Capito, and Members of the Subcommittee, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) appreciates the opportunity to provide written testimony on the appropriations and activities of the federal agencies under the Subcommittee's jurisdiction, including the Departments of Labor (DOL), Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education (ED). WGA is an independent organization representing the Governors of the 22 westernmost states and territories. The Association is an instrument of the Governors for bipartisan policy development, information sharing, and collective action on issues of critical importance to the western United States.

Western Governors underscore the need for a close and productive working relationship between states, territories, and the federal government and understand that more effective cooperation depends on federal recognition of states as co-sovereigns and partners. The promotion of greater partnership between states and the federal government is central to the mission of WGA and is reflected in the Governors' Policy Resolution 2024-01, Strengthening the State-Federal Relationship.

As we continue to recover from the widespread effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market and the health care system in the United States, we must align policies, performance metrics, regulations, and reporting requirements across federal workforce, human services, housing, and education agencies to achieve the best program outcomes. Given the numerous federal programs, policies, and regulations directly affecting the collective states and territories, Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to direct Congress and federal agencies to improve their internal processes and coordinate with states and territories on federal policies and procedures, as well as integrate state and territorial data into federal programs, including for policymaking purposes.

WGA also commends your attention to other Western Governors' resolutions that articulate policy positions relevant to the Subcommittee's work, including 2022-03, Workforce Development in the Western United States; 2023-06, Rural Development; 2022-07, Physical and Behavioral Health Care in Western States; and 2024-04, Combating the Opioid Crisis.

Federal funding for workforce development through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) continues to support economic growth and job creation in the states and territories. Western Governors appreciate this continued investment and note that flexibility in existing funding streams allows states and territories to maximize funding and support innovation; additional flexibility would further support the transformation of career services and

skills development to meet their unique needs and the evolving demands of the labor market. Short term and competitive funding for innovative programs is inefficient and creates unintended obstacles for small states and territories with limited grant writing resources. Similarly, Western Governors recommend that new federal investments in apprenticeships be provided through line-item formula funding and aligned with existing efforts to foster a coherent system with minimal duplication at the federal, state, territorial, and local levels.

Western Governors emphasize the value of fully funding high-quality career and technical education (CTE) programs through the Career and Technical Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Act (Perkins V). Adequate funding of Perkins State Grants ensures that CTE programs align with statewide visions for education and workforce development; stronger linkages between K-12, higher education, and the workforce system are needed and coordination between DOL and ED should be encouraged. Western Governors also support WIOA funding streams targeted toward youth who are disconnected from school and work, as well as the establishment of a youth employment task force to make further recommendations on effective workforce strategies to address the crisis in youth employment.

Investments in state data infrastructure are needed to better support state education and workforce development, including responding to changing labor market demand and improving the effectiveness of policies and programs and the delivery of services. The Subcommittee should provide adequate funding to support state Labor Market Information centers and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. States and territories should receive a greater share of funds under state-federal cooperative statistics programs.

A lack of child care options is a workforce limitation in many western communities, and particularly in rural communities. Accessible child care is necessary for positive health, development, and educational outcomes for children and to allow families to participate in the labor force and pursue the economic and educational opportunities that help them achieve a more secure future. Western Governors are working to identify and implement solutions in their states and territories and encourage the Subcommittee to support these services.

Despite Western Governors' commitment to addressing the shortage of qualified health care workforce and access needs in our states and territories, significant challenges remain. Governors urge the Subcommittee to adequately fund health care workforce programs to provide primary care, behavioral and oral health, and other in-demand specialties across urban, suburban, and rural communities. Wherever possible, the Subcommittee should maximize flexibility granted to states and territories. Understanding that significant disparities remain in access and treatment for many populations, the Governors also support efforts to increase diversity and representation to improve health outcomes for all. Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to invest in new types of personnel, such as community health workers or *promotores*, and innovation within the behavioral health care workforce to address gaps in the continuum of care professionals. The Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Bureau of Health Workforce is especially critical to these efforts.

Americans are facing record levels of adverse mental health conditions, suicidal ideation, and substance misuse. Western Governors support continued focus on improving the quality and

quantity of behavioral health services across the U.S. and urge the Subcommittee to fully fund behavioral health programs, which are essential to reducing suicide rates and treating a range of behavioral health conditions. In addition, Western Governors are supportive of HHS's medication-assisted treatment and early intervention and law enforcement diversion efforts.

Western Governors recognize the outsized harm caused by the opioid epidemic, which has become one of the nation's most devastating public health and safety crises. Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to allocate appropriate funding to the State and Tribal Opioid Response Programs and include ongoing support for polysubstance programming and initiatives. The Subcommittee should dedicate funding directly to states and territories for targeted and culturally specific opioid awareness and education campaigns that meet the unique needs of our populaces; allocate spending to enhance access to harm reduction strategies at low costs, including opioid antagonists such as naloxone; and provide resources for treatment medications that reflect the challenges raised by fentanyl. Preventing and reducing opioid use and its effects among youth should be a primary focus in these designations.

To address the causes and long-term prevention of substance use disorders (SUDs) more fully, Western Governors advocate for increased federal support of population-level public health strategies at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The Governors are especially interested in assistance for Overdose Data to Action in and Overdose Data to Action: Limiting Overdose through Collaborative Actions in Localities (LOCAL) Grants, supportive housing, and prevention and treatment for other diseases or health issues that may arise from SUDs, such as hepatitis and sexually transmitted infections. Western Governors are also proponents of broader funding for social determinants of health, which play a key role in population health.

Finally, COVID-19 has laid bare the importance of investing in our nation's public health system. Western Governors request further investments in public health infrastructure and health surveillance mechanisms to effectively confront future public health challenges.

Western Governors recognize that it is an enormous challenge to judiciously balance competing funding needs throughout the federal government. The Governors appreciate the difficulty of the decisions you must make and stand ready to work with you in discharging these important responsibilities.