



Testimony Supporting Funding of Michigan Reconnect and Futures for Frontliners Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor and Economic Opportunity

Peter Ruark
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Good afternoon, Chairman Horn and members of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor and Economic Opportunity. I am Peter Ruark, Senior Policy Analyst for the Michigan League for Public Policy. The League is a nonprofit, nonpartisan statewide advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that Michigan's low-income residents achieve economic security. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I am here today to ask you to provide full funding for the Michigan Reconnect program for students age 25 and older, and for the Futures for Frontliners program for those working on the front lines of the pandemic, to assist those populations in attaining a degree or certificate.

The decision by workers to get trained in new skills is often made more than 10 years after graduation from high school. However, Michigan's financial aid targets "traditional" college students (age 18-24 who go to college full-time), despite the fact that a significant and growing percentage of students are older. Two of the three existing grant programs in Michigan exclude individuals who have been out of high school for more than 10 years, and the third is available only to those attending private, not-for-profit institutions.

In Budget Year 2010, the Michigan Legislature eliminated all grant programs that were available to older learners going to a public community college or university. The eliminations were not due to a perceived decrease in need, but in order to meet budget targets. Among the eliminated programs was the Part-Time Independent Student Grant that specifically targeted older students ineligible for the other three grant programs. A newer program, No Worker Left Behind, had been in place at that time and provided workers with up to two years of training or community college, but was phased out beginning in Budget Year 2011. In other words, it has been 10 years since Michigan has provided financial aid for older students to go to a public university or community college.

Michigan Reconnect fills much of this need by providing two years' worth of in-district tuition for older students to receive an occupational credential, and Futures for Frontliners similarly assists those who are working in specific frontline professions. In addition, the governor's budget provides \$12 million in wraparound services for students going to college under both programs in order to help them succeed.

To see how great the need is, we can look at the response to the recent launch of the Michigan Reconnect Program. According to the Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, within six weeks of launching the program, there were over 62,000 applications from across the state, from every county.

Why does this matter?

- Many low-paid workers have a difficult time finding employment providing higher pay and more job security. Often, this is due to lack of a postsecondary credential (degree, certificate or license). Financial aid would help workers in low-wage jobs acquire new marketable skills leading to better employment.
- Increasing the skill levels of workers is good for Michigan's economy. When workers earn more, they pay more in taxes, spend more money in their local communities and are less likely to need public assistance. Providing grants that enable working parents to get skilled jobs is good workforce development.
- Providing generous financial aid with wraparound services can help reduce economic, employment and educational disparities for people who live in low-income communities and communities of color, who often have less access to postsecondary education and more challenges in completing it.

Due to the pandemic, there is only partial funding for Michigan Reconnect in the current year's budget. We urge this committee to support the governor's funding increase to \$120 million for Michigan Reconnect and \$60.4 million for Futures for Frontliners, and to also support the additional \$12 million for wraparound services that will help students in both programs succeed.

Thank you.