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Michigan Laborers District Council

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Testimony from Jonathan Byrd: Michigan Laborers Union

RE: HB 4040

Let me first start by thanking Chairwoman Griffin and the new House Workforce, Trades, and Talent Committee for allowing me to discuss proposed legislation to further define State Proprietary Schools in the construction industry.

My name is Jonathan Byrd, and I am the Director of External Affairs for the Michigan Laborers District Council, which includes seven local unions that represent all 83 counties in Michigan.

In principle, and substantially by detail, the Michigan Laborers District Council, and the 13,000 Union Construction Laborers we represent, supports in concept House Bill 4040, which adds to the definition of a state proprietary school an exemption for Federally-certified Department of Labor Apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs.

As a general principle, the Michigan Laborers believe that this proposed legislation takes proactive steps to ensure training and apprenticeship programs, like ours, have full access to State of Michigan programs and websites that highlight opportunities in the skilled trades.

Our Union takes great pride in being a trade that provides state-of-the-art training to all our Members. Our Training Fund spends millions of dollars every year, collected from our members, to ensure that a highly-skilled workforce is available to our signatory contractors.

I'd like to take a moment to highlight several aspects of our training and apprenticeship program which is administered by the Michigan Laborers Training and Apprenticeship Institute or MLTAI for short. Over the past five years, our Union has registered an average of 600 apprentices per year, more than any other apprenticeship program statewide.

We are the only skilled trade that allows for direct entry for all who apply. We do not use an application or selection procedure. We pair interested candidates with employers who are hiring. Once hired, candidates are automatically registered in our apprenticeship program.

The Laborers are constantly looking for ways to assist so-called "under-served" populations in the construction industry. Our Union partners with the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) and Women in Skilled Trades (WIST) to recruit and prepare woman for a career in the trades and are heavily involved with Detroit Workforce of the Future (DWF) and Access for All, both of which serve to recruit and train inner-city youth for careers in the skilled trades.

Our Union does not shy away from providing opportunities to citizens re-entering society from the criminal justice system and we are the only trade that will allow a person that does not possess a high school diploma or GED to enter our trade.

In addition, we strongly encourage them to get their GED so that upon completion of the apprenticeship program they can take advantage of the college credit that comes with our program.

Supporting veterans is a top priority for our Union. Veterans who are eligible for G.I. Bill Benefits can collect those benefits for successful participation in our program. The Laborers are constantly looking to partner with organizations that can help us recruit more vets.

Volunteerism is built into the culture of apprenticeship. No apprentice can be named "Apprentice of the Year" without proof of volunteering in some way. For decades, apprentices, apprenticeship school staff, local union staff and general members have volunteered on literally hundreds of projects benefiting local communities, schools, non-profits and individuals in need.

We have multiple success stories whereby apprentices who joined our trade went from homeless, or even incarcerated to gainfully employed and successful by most people's definition. Interestingly, our 2019 apprentice of the year was in fact, both incarcerated THEN homeless before joining our trade and starting her career.

Finally, our apprentices not only enjoy cost free classroom training, they receive a "stipend" to help cover travel and other training related expenses they may accrue during time spent at our school. Thus, our members are truly able to "earn while they learn".

As you can see, the Michigan Laborers Union and our training arm MLTAI are consistently ready and willing to meet the needs of the industry and provide our apprentices with the highest level of training in construction.

To summarize, the Michigan Laborers believe that House Bill 4040 is a positive step toward ensuring that jobseekers have the best opportunities to enter the skilled trades.

I would like to again thank the committee for allowing me to address this legislation. On behalf of the Michigan Laborers, I thank you all for your interest and look forward to providing our expertise on this issue and any others that the committee will examine over this session.

Thank you again and I am happy to answer any questions that the committee may have.