Testimony of Kurt Westby
Commissioner, Connecticut Department of Labor
Before the Appropriations Committee
February 27, 2019

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Representative Lavielle, Senator Formica and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Kurt Westby and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Labor. It is my pleasure to be here with you today to discuss Governor Ned Lamont’s proposed FY 2020-2021 Biennial Budget.

The mission of the Connecticut Department of Labor (DOL) is to provide the state’s jobseekers and business community with services to strengthen our workforce, communities and the state’s economy. For workers, this is accomplished through income support between jobs, assistance in searching for jobs, protection and fairness on the job, training programs, and information about the economy, wages and the workplace. Services offered to businesses include workplace data, labor market information, recruitment assistance, regional job fairs, and programs to help maintain and upgrade employee skills, such as registered apprenticeship and incumbent worker training. In addition, our Wage and Workplace Standards Division, CONN-OSHA and Legal Division all assist employers by providing educational programs to keep them informed and up to date with CT laws and regulations to ensure that employees and employers are treated fairly in our state.

Demonstrating his commitment to Connecticut’s workers, Governor Lamont’s budget provides approximately $5.2 million to implement a Paid Family and Medical Leave program. DOL supports this important initiative, which will create a program for Connecticut workers to receive compensation for a leave of absence from work due to their own illness or to care for a family member. I support the Governor’s belief that working families are essential to the state’s success and it is crucial to support their long-term financial stability.
Another important program funded in this budget proposal that I would like to highlight is Connecticut’s Registered Apprenticeship Program. A proven way to effectively train and develop loyal, long-term employees is the apprenticeship model. DOL’s Office of Apprenticeship Training (OAT) has been successful in its efforts to increase the number of apprentices. In fact, the OAT aggressively seeks out new partnership opportunities for registered apprenticeships and has been successful in their efforts to grow and recruit the number of registered apprentices. Connecticut leads the way with more registered apprentices than all but three states, having over 6,000 registered apprentices and over 1,600 active registered apprenticeship employer sponsors. In addition to registered apprenticeship programs in manufacturing, we are facilitating programs in healthcare, insurance, banking, barbering, and others have others on the horizon.

I would like to highlight one such program that provides a proven model for success. DOL has partnered with the Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative, which provides a training pipeline pre-apprenticeship program that develops skilled workers for Electric Boat (EB), the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance (EAMA), and other regional manufacturers. This program began with a federal grant and quickly became is a national model for employer-driven training and placement of workers in high-skilled, high-paying careers. As we continue to provide funding support this pipeline in Eastern CT, we are branching out to support similarly innovative approaches to the design/delivery of employment and training services that show potential to generate long-term improvements in the workforce system statewide.

Another important program that continues to be funded under the proposed budget is the Jobs First Employment Services (JFES). The JFES program serves families receiving state cash assistance, Temporary Family Assistance (TFA), through the agency’s partnership with the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Workforce Development Boards. During fiscal year 2017-2018, a total of 7,700 JFES participants received employment services from American Job Center staff or through contracted
service providers. Services included job search assistance, vocational education, adult basic education, subsidized employment, case management and other support services such as transportation benefits.

I have learned much during my brief tenure as Labor Commissioner, but one lesson that stands above the rest is that good partnerships are necessary for the Department to achieve its core mission. I include the Legislature in that list of partners critical to the success of both the Agency and its customers. My team and I stand prepared to answer any questions you may have, and I thank you for your time and consideration.