Public Hearing Testimony of Danté Bartolomeo
Commissioner
Department of Labor
Appropriations Committee
February 23, 2024

Good morning Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Representative Nuccio, Senator Berthel, Subcommittee Co-Chairs Senator Hartley and Representative Gibson, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Danté Bartolomeo and I am the Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Labor (CTDOL).

I am pleased to be here today in support of Governor Ned Lamont’s proposed FY 2025 budget adjustments. These adjustments represent the Governor’s continued dedication to a strong, active workforce development strategy that prepares job seekers for high-demand fields like healthcare and education; supports Connecticut’s globally competitive manufacturing, aerospace, and defense industries; and leans into highly successful career training initiatives like Registered Apprenticeships.

The budget adjustments add $282,500 for two Office of Apprenticeship Training staff who are now funded through a federal grant set to expire. These positions support Connecticut’s only federally authorized state apprenticeship unit currently serving the approximately 6,600 Registered Apprentices who are on the job for 1,700 employers. Registered Apprenticeships build careers across nearly every sector of our economy and are expanding into high demand fields—including early childhood education and teaching; state government employment; and health and patient care—while continuing to provide opportunities in the traditional trades such as construction and manufacturing.

The Governor’s budget also maintains $1 million provided in FY 2025 for the Connecticut State Building Trades Training Institute (BTTI). Established in 2022 under the oversight of the Connecticut State Building Trades Council, the BTTI provides pre-employment preparation services to Connecticut residents interested in unionized registered apprenticeship training programs. Outreach and recruitment efforts target underserved populations including young adults ages 18 to 24, women,
citizens returning after incarceration, veterans, and communities of color. This funding is moved out of Other Expenses to its own budget line.

The Governor maintains support for the following:

(1) $10.26 million in FY 2025 for CT’s Youth Employment Program to support job opportunities and work experiences for disadvantaged youth;
(2) $4.62 million in FY 2025 for the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative which provides no-cost training to address the hiring needs of Electric Boat, members of the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance, and other manufacturers;
(3) $750,000 in FY 2025 for the New Haven Jobs Funnel to connect New Haven resident job applicants with employers, including for employment in construction; and
(4) $738,708 in FY 2025 in the Banking Fund for Opportunity Industrial Centers to coordinate programs and deliver services to individuals with significant barriers to employment.

The budget also transfers the $245,047 Veterans' Opportunity Pilot from the Department of Labor to the Department of Veterans' Affairs to better align programmatic requirements.

In addition, we strongly support and appreciate the Governor’s budget recommendation for $1.1 million and 20 positions across CTDOL’s unemployment insurance units. This allocation will provide critical support in the Consumer Contact Center, which is experiencing staffing pressures that were expected due to the end of federal pandemic funds. Since it was established in July 2020, the Consumer Contact Center has handled 3.1 million calls and cases and continues to be in high demand. Over the last month, the Consumer Contact Center has seen very high call volume with an average of more than 27,000 customers attempting to connect online, on the phone, and through our website scheduler. With 105 staff in the Consumer Contact Center, this volume has led to weeks-long wait times for unemployment filers. During the pandemic, the Consumer Contact Center had more than 450 customer service representatives including CTDOL employees and vendors. In January 2023, there were 154 staff, and in July 2023 there were 137 staff.
The Governor's budget will also support the Benefit Payment Control and Integrity Units, both engaged in fraud prevention; the Appeals Division; and other services that were being funded by one-time funding sources. This builds on $15 million in ARPA funding in FY 2022; $25 million in carryforward funding and $2.3 million General Fund in FY 2023; $3.3 million in carryforward funding in FY 2024; and $2.5 million in ARPA funding in FY 2024.

Currently, CTDOL is operating with 727 employees, 10 are Temporary Worker Retirees, 35 are Employment Security Intermittent Interviewers, and 13 are Durational. Of these 727 employees, 261 are paid by General Fund Continuing Services and the remaining are paid by federal grants and/or a combination of federal and state appropriations (ARPA, UI Above Base, Carryforward, CARES Act SBRs, etc.). Of those, there are currently 61 vacancies; 21 of those are paid out of State Appropriated Funds and 40 of those are paid out of federal funds.

In closing, I want to express my gratitude to all of you for your support over the past few years. Just last month, Labor Secretary Julie Su held up CTDOL as an example of what’s going right in the country’s efforts to modernize the unemployment system. Despite the pandemic, Connecticut replaced our aging unemployment systems and successfully launched ReEmployCT in July 2022. Since that launch, more than 257,000 unemployment filers and approximately 50,000 businesses have used the system.

At the panel of business leaders and community advocates convened at our offices in Wethersfield, the Labor Secretary remarked that Connecticut’s Trust Fund Solvency law, Public Act 21-200, is a national model for bringing stability into the system. The law reduces employer financial liability and ensures that unemployment benefits remain a steady bridge to employment for those who need it.

We deeply appreciate that you have taken the time to understand the complexities of the state and federal laws that guide our work and that you support CTDOL’s life-changing programs that train, protect, and lift up Connecticut workers.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am here with CTDOL subject matter experts and am happy to take your questions.