



Chairman Johnson, Vice Chairman Cirino, Ranking Member Williams and members of the Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee, my name is Dr. Vicky Wood and I am the president of Washington State Community College (WSCC) located in Marietta. I come before you today imploring your support of Senate Bill 135. This legislation will give community colleges the opportunity to answer the calls of our local employers and finally allow us to address the state-wide nursing shortage, which is reaching near crisis levels in rural areas.

The nursing shortage has impacted our employers and economy for decades. The demand was further intensified when in 2010 the Institute of Medicine released a report that called for increasing the number of baccalaureate-prepared nurses in the workforce to 80% by 2020. Despite the heightened push across the nation, the benchmark fell short. In fact, only 57% of Ohio nurses have a baccalaureate or higher level of nursing education.

For as long as anyone in Southeast Ohio can remember, there has existed a shortage within our region. As we stand here today, the two largest hospitals in the area (Memorial Health System and Camden Clark Medical Center) currently have more than 120 job postings for nurses that require them to hold a bachelor's degree. While that shortage is alarming enough, both hospitals project that the number of openings will only continue to grow as a new wave of retirements is expected as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The southeast region of Ohio in particular is feeling the impact of insufficient baccalaureate nurses. For instance, the nursing shortage has cost Memorial Health System millions of dollars over the last four decades. In January of this year alone, they spent \$3.1 million in traveling and International nurses to fill their nursing gap. This isn't only an egregious use of their budget, it increases the state of Ohio's Medicaid spending, and it's detrimental to our local economy because it removes the local workforce from the equation.





While they rely on Washington State as a primary resource for their nurses, as a community college, we are only able to fill their Associate Degree Nursing (ADN) needs. In fact, of their more than 425 ADNs, the majority are our alumni. For many years they have conveyed their desperate need for additional BSNs and have worked with us to facilitate partnerships. While we have made several attempts, what we keep hearing from prospective students is that they are looking for options that are local, flexible, and affordable. Currently, such an option simply does not exist in our area.

In the past decade, Washington State Community College has graduated 282 Associate Degree Nurses, yet only approximately 17% have opted to pursue a bachelor's degree because of the limited opportunities in southeast Ohio. This disproportionately affects adult graduates. They do not pursue a BSN because they have family, children, and work responsibilities that keep them in this region. To reach these students, higher education has to become more flexible and diverse in its offerings, instead of asking the student to become more flexible. The later strategy simply has not proven to work with most adult students.

From an equity perspective, our data indicates that the traditional option to transfer to a university tends to be most attractive to the traditional age college student. However, to the detriment of our local economy, once they leave, they often never return. Instead, they increasingly choose to seek employment where they had their clinical experience. Our adult learners, a demographic whom we have found to have family obligations and strong ties to the community, are only left with the online option. While this seemingly is an acceptable alternative, we repeatedly find that our local hospitals' employees are resistant to pursue this pathway, citing preference for a local, in-person option.

Current Ohio law is part of the problem. Despite the fact that the state has invested public resources into Washington State's nursing program by helping us build our facilities, purchase





our equipment, and hire qualified faculty, the Chancellor of Higher Education is only permitted to authorize *applied bachelor's* degrees at community colleges, and the bachelor's degree in nursing is not an applied bachelor's degree. This is an inefficient use of state resources, which keeps those institutions best suited to help address this workforce shortage sitting on the sideline.

Senate Bill 135, sponsored by Senator Cirino, offers a long-awaited solution. Under the bill, the arbitrary term "applied" is removed and community colleges throughout the state are given a clear path forward on how we can finally help our local employers. The truth is that we need every existing nursing program in the state in the game in order to meet the challenge of Ohio's critical nursing shortage. The existing programs at universities need to do better, and the programs at community colleges need to be allowed to expand.

Finally, we believe that employers need to be in the driver's seat on these decisions. If employers are willing to both support a college's efforts to offer the BSN and demonstrate their willingness to hire our graduates, then many of the arguments of those who are in opposition to Senate Bill 135 will be proven to be without merit. Luckily, current law does allow for employers to have the ultimate say on these issues, and Senate Bill 135 actually strengthens the role they will play as the ultimate arbiter of any suggestion that opponents of Senate Bill 135 may raise.

With your support of SB 135, WSCC is poised to meet the needs of our local hospitals. We have collaborative models already in place that can be replicated in innovative ways to move students from LPN to ADN to BSN. We have established a plan that, after just one semester at Washington State, students will be able to transition into the workforce. This step will result in a trifecta: our hospital will save millions and have the workforce they need, our students will earn a living wage while advancing their education and earning potential, and ultimately our overall local economy will be strengthened.





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Thank you, Chairman Johnson and members of the committee, for your time and attention today. Southeast Ohio, our citizens, our healthcare facilities, and our economy is in your hands with this bill, and I would ask you to pass this legislation without delay. I would be happy to answer any questions that the committee may have.

