

Alberta Darling

Wisconsin State Senator

Co-Chair, Joint Committee on Finance

Testimony before the Senate Committee on Local Government, Small Business,
Tourism, and Workforce Development

Tuesday, June 18, 2019

Senate Bill 123

Thank you Chair Jacque and committee members for taking the time to hear Senate Bill 123. The bill before you today is part a package of bills crafted from the recommendations of the Interagency Council on Homelessness's report, *A Hand and a Home: Foundations for Success*.

Wisconsin's Skills Enhancement Program was first created in 2010. The program connects low wage workers with Community Action Agencies. The program provides wrap-around services and assists enrollees with tuition, books, and training-related transportation. 92% of its participants are low-income parents.

Senate Bill 123 provides an additional \$250,000 annually to the Skills Enhancement Program to help low-income individuals receive job training and technical skills.

With record low unemployment, it's vital that every able bodied adult in Wisconsin participate in our workforce. Wisconsin doesn't have a shortage of individuals who are willing to work, we have a shortage of trained individuals to serve these open positions. This bill will help more low-income Wisconsinites receive the job training they need to meaningfully participate in our workforce.

I'd like to thank Representative Kurtz, the Interagency Council on Homelessness, and Wisconsin's many advocates for the homeless for their work on this initiative. I hope to count on your support for Senate Bill 123.



TONY KURTZ

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 50th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony on Senate Bill 123

Skills enhancement grants and making an appropriation

Chairman Jacque and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to discuss Senate Bill 123. As you likely know, this bill is one of several included in the "Hand for the Homeless" package that helps to address a number of problems faced by homeless individuals and the numerous agencies, organizations and individuals who aim to assist them on a daily basis.

In keeping with the multifaceted nature of this package of bills, SB 123 focuses on an often forgotten aspect of aiding the homeless – the process of helping them receive the training and skills needed for success in today's workforce.

It's no secret that Wisconsin is working. Today, there are more jobs available in our state than there are unemployed individuals to fill them. That's why it's more important than ever that we find ways to connect those with no job, or with low-paying jobs, to family-sustaining roles.

While there are a number of ways to accomplish this goal, Wisconsin has found success in helping low wage workers obtain better paying jobs through the Skills Enhancement Program (SEP). With funding provided through the Department of Children and Families, SEP provides recipients with the assistance they need for things like tuition expenses, childcare and transportation to attend class. Additionally, this service is strengthened by providing individual career planning, case management, referral and job search support.

Often it is the smallest of hurdles that prevents an individual from finding a better job or obtaining the education they need to find employment. SEP helps individuals overcome those hurdles – more often than not, with great, measured success.

According to SEP enrollment data from 2011-2016, of the 445 participants that completed training, 77% of graduates reported getting new jobs that pay \$3.44 more per hour on average. Further, it's estimated that SEP graduates are more than four times likely to access employer-sponsored health care after participating in this program.

With measureable results shown within this existing program, SB 123 aims to build upon this success.

Currently, Wisconsin has allocated \$250,000 a year to for SEP grants. The legislation we are discussing today increases that commitment to a total of \$500,000 a year to meet the current demand that exists for low-wage worker training.

Safeguards are in place to make sure dollars are responsibly spent and are limited to assist those who are committed to working a minimum of 20 hours per week and whose earned income is at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty rate.

As we look for new and innovative ways to concurrently address our state's worker shortage and homeless populations, we must not forget to overlook what we have that is already working. Wisconsin's skills enhancement program has proven to be a successful model and I fully believe an increased investment will only lead to more positive results for our state.