

**Written Testimony of Jack Waldorf, Executive Director
Western Governors' Association**

**Submitted to the United States Senate
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies
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Fiscal Year 2027 Appropriations

Chair Capito, Ranking Member Baldwin, and Members of the Subcommittee, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) appreciates the opportunity to provide written testimony on the appropriations and activities of the federal agencies under the Subcommittee's jurisdiction, including the Departments of Labor (DOL), Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education (ED). WGA is an independent organization representing the Governors of the 22 westernmost states and territories. The Association is an instrument of the Governors for bipartisan policy development, information sharing, and collective action on issues of critical importance to the western United States.

Western Governors underscore the need for a close and productive working relationship between states, territories, and the federal government and understand that more effective cooperation depends on federal recognition of states as co-sovereigns and partners. The promotion of greater partnership between states and the federal government is central to the mission of WGA.

Given the numerous federal programs, policies, and regulations directly affecting the collective states and territories, Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to direct federal agencies to improve their internal processes, better coordinate with states and territories on federal policies and procedures, and integrate state and territorial data into federal programs, including for policymaking purposes.

Effective workforce development systems provide people with the opportunity to achieve economic security and ensure that businesses have access to the workforce they need to grow. Federal funding for workforce development activities administered by DOL through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) support Western Governors' efforts to meet the evolving needs of employers and jobseekers in their states and territories. Western Governors request that the Subcommittee appropriate adequate funding for states and territories to implement and administer WIOA programs.

Workforce development needs vary across western states and territories based on population, geography, industry, and other factors. Many Western Governors also face the distinct challenge of serving populations across large rural areas. Flexibility in the use of WIOA funds, including the 15 percent reserve for statewide activities, allows Governors to address their unique needs and support innovation. Additional flexibility in existing funding streams would allow states to better anticipate coming labor market disruptions and help workers who are not traditionally eligible for assistance prepare for displacement. Western Governors note that short-

term and competitive funding for innovative programs is inefficient and creates unintended obstacles for small states and territories with limited grant writing resources. Western Governors recommend that new federal investments in apprenticeships be provided through line-item formula funding and aligned with existing efforts to foster a coherent system with minimal duplication at the federal, state, territorial, and local levels.

Western Governors emphasize the value of fully funding high-quality career and technical education (CTE) programs through the Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V; Pub. L. 115-224). Adequate funding of Perkins State Grants ensures that CTE programs align with statewide visions for education and workforce development.

Western Governors encourage federal agencies, including DOL and ED, to coordinate their efforts to better align federal workforce development, CTE, and higher education programs. Funding under both Perkins and WIOA is intended to help young people access education and training needed to obtain good jobs, but WIOA funding is very restrictive and limited in its capacity to affect students earlier on in their learning process. Coordination between DOL and ED should be encouraged to help states strengthen linkages between K-12, higher education, and the workforce system and deliver better outcomes for youth.

Investments in state data infrastructure are needed to better support state education and workforce development, including responding to changing labor market demand and improving the effectiveness of policies and programs and the delivery of services. The Subcommittee should provide adequate funding to support state Labor Market Information centers and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. States and territories should receive a greater share of funds under state-federal cooperative statistics programs.

A lack of child care options is a workforce limitation in many western communities, particularly in rural communities. Accessible child care is necessary for positive health, development, and educational outcomes for children, and allows families to participate in the labor force and pursue the economic and educational opportunities that help them achieve a more secure future. Western Governors are working to identify and implement solutions in their states and territories and encourage the Subcommittee to allocate adequate funding for these services.

Despite Western Governors' commitment to addressing the shortage of qualified health care workforce and access needs in our states and territories, significant challenges remain. Governors urge the Subcommittee to adequately fund health care workforce programs to provide primary care, behavioral and oral health, and other in-demand specialties across urban, suburban, and rural communities and to increase funding for programs that incentivize health care workers to practice in high-need areas. Wherever possible, the Subcommittee should maximize flexibility granted to states and territories. Understanding that significant disparities exist in access and treatment for many populations, the Governors also support efforts to increase workforce representation to improve health outcomes for all. Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to invest in new types of personnel – such as community health workers – and innovation within the behavioral health care workforce to address gaps in the continuum of care.

Americans are facing record levels of adverse mental health conditions, suicidal ideation, and substance misuse. These rates are especially pronounced in western states. From the most recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data, the ten states with the highest suicide-related death rates were all located in the West. Western Governors support improving the quality and quantity of behavioral health services across the U.S., including crisis care and school-based mental health care services. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is essential to a comprehensive crisis care system that can address the full continuum of care, from crisis planning to early stages of support and respite, crisis stabilization and intervention, and post-crisis follow-up and support for individuals and their families. Western Governors request sustained funding from Congress for 988 and crisis care as states continue strengthening these systems. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services have provided federal guidance on ways in which states can elevate and encourage the expansion of school-based mental health care services; however, many schools, particularly those in rural and frontier areas, are challenged to implement these practices due to a lack of resources to invest in workforce, behavioral health, and telehealth infrastructure. Western Governors urge the Subcommittee to furnish additional funding to support these efforts.

Western Governors recognize the outsized harm caused by the opioid epidemic and encourage the Subcommittee to allocate needed funding to the State and Tribal Opioid Response Programs, including support for polysubstance programming and initiatives. The Subcommittee should dedicate funding directly to states and territories for targeted and culturally specific opioid awareness and education campaigns that meet the unique needs of western populaces; appropriate funds to enhance access to harm reduction strategies at low costs, including opioid antagonists such as naloxone; and provide resources for treatment medications that reflect the challenges raised by fentanyl. Preventing and reducing opioid use and its effects among youth should be a primary focus in these designations.

To help address the causes and long-term prevention of substance use disorders (SUDs), Western Governors advocate for increased federal support of population-level public health strategies at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The Governors are especially interested in assistance for Overdose Data to Action in States and Overdose Data to Action: Limiting Overdose through Collaborative Actions in Localities (LOCAL) Grants, supportive housing, and prevention and treatment for other diseases or health issues that may arise from SUDs, such as hepatitis and sexually transmitted infections. Western Governors are proponents of implementing innovative health care interventions through Medicaid waivers offered under Section 1115 of the Social Security Act to solve systemic behavioral health care challenges and urge the Subcommittee to provide the resources needed to support the prompt approval of state plans.

Continued investment in the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology and CDC's data modernization efforts will allow western states and territories to update and maintain their data systems, leading to a better understanding of health concerns affecting communities. The Subcommittee should include sustainable, ongoing, and flexible funding to states for these programs.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the significance of properly investing in our nation's public health system. Western Governors request further investments in public health infrastructure and health surveillance mechanisms to effectively confront future public health challenges.

WGA policy resolutions 2025-03, Workforce Development in the Western United States; 2023-06, Rural Development; 2025-05, Physical and Behavioral Health Care in Western States; 2024-04, Combating the Opioid Crisis, and 2024-01, Strengthening the State-Federal Relationship, provide additional detail on the Governors' collective perspectives on these and other issues within the purview of the Subcommittee.

Western Governors recognize that it is an enormous challenge to judiciously balance competing funding needs throughout the federal government. The Governors appreciate the difficulty of the decisions you must make and stand ready to work with you in discharging these important responsibilities.