

**Testimony of Courtenay Eichhorst
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**Hearing on Growing the Economy of the Future:
Job Training for the Clean Energy Transition**

Before the United States Joint Economic Committee

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Good Morning Chairman Heinrich, Vice Chairman Schweikert, and Members of the Joint Economic Committee. My name is Courtenay Eichhorst, and I am the Business Manager of United Association of Union Plumbers and Pipefitters Local Union 412, which represents just over 2,000 plumbers, pipefitters, and HVAC workers in New Mexico and El Paso. I also serve as the President of the New Mexico Building Trades. I want to thank the Committee for giving me the opportunity today to share my thoughts on how the best-in-class apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs offered by the United Association of Union Plumbers and Pipefitters (UA) and the Building Trades are empowering our unions to meet the workforce demands driven by the clean energy transition. I will also discuss the power these programs have to transform lives for the better by putting workers who may not have a four-year college degree, or who come from an underrepresented background, on a path to a family-sustaining career.

The high-tech manufacturing plants and emerging clean energy technologies that are targeted for support by the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law require sophisticated workers with specialized trade knowledge to construct and maintain. To meet this rising demand for a highly-skilled construction workforce, North America's Building Trades Unions, known as NABTU, and their signatory contractors collectively invest nearly \$2 billion each year in apprenticeship and journey-level training programs. Of this amount, the United Association, or the UA as we commonly refer to our union, alone invests about \$280 million annually. These training investments consist entirely of private, non-taxpayer dollars. The UA is committed to making these investments because we recognize that skills training is the lifeblood of our industry, and because we firmly believe that the quality of our training is what sets a UA craftsman apart from others in the plumbing and pipefitting industry.

Unlike the traditional, four-year college program, the apprenticeships developed by the UA and other Building Trades' unions provide individuals with the unique opportunity to earn while they learn. Apprentices in these programs are paid an increasing scale of wages as they progress, receive health care coverage, and become participants in retirement plans. In addition to receiving on-the-job instruction, they also attend classes at state-of-the-art training centers. Completion of the five-year apprenticeship program leads to journeyman status and the

opportunity to continue working in an ever-growing industry with skills that last for a lifetime and are in high demand. Apprentices also typically incur little to no cost for this education and emerge from their apprenticeship program debt free.

In addition to our “gold standard” apprenticeship programs, the UA and other Building Trades’ unions are also increasingly investing in pre-apprenticeship programs that can be designed to help prepare high school students or individuals from underrepresented communities for a career in the trades. These programs help fill the role that used to be filled by the “shop classes” that were found in high schools but have become increasingly rare. Pre-apprenticeship programs also focus on the “soft skills” that are necessary for success in any industry, such as showing up on time and other work etiquette.

Local 412 has numerous apprenticeship initiatives that have proven to be highly successful in creating a pipeline between the communities we serve and family-supporting careers in our industry. I’ll provide you with just a few examples.

Recognizing that welding is among the most in-demand skills for clean energy and other projects, Local 412 offers a 12-week accelerated welding program that enables an average of 12 pre-apprentices per session to obtain UA welding certifications, advanced placement into our registered apprenticeship program, and

immediate work opportunities at zero cost to them. Over the past two years, 60 pre-apprentices with a total of 180 weld certifications graduated from this program.

We also offer an apprenticeship readiness program in 14 different high schools in remote areas throughout the State of New Mexico, along with “Boot Camps” in our more urban areas. As part of the program, students receive instruction specific to the UA trades as well as the NABTU Multicraft Core Curriculum, or MC3, which is a standardized, comprehensive, 120-hour construction course designed to help young people and transitioning adults choose and succeed in apprenticeship programs that are appropriate for them. Like graduates of our accelerated welding program, students who complete the readiness program receive advanced placement into our registered apprenticeship program. We have also worked with the New Mexico Public Education Department to add the MC3 to the state’s supplemental curriculum so that students who graduate from the program also receive high school credit for their work.

At Local 412, we take great pride in partnering with New Mexico’s vibrant Native American communities. Working with the International Association of Plumbing and Mechanical Officials (IAPMO), an expert group which develops model plumbing codes, we launched a plumbing program at Navajo Tech in Northern New Mexico which gives students the opportunity to learn about the

plumbing industry and complete a program that leads to direct entry with advanced placement credit into our apprenticeship program.

In addition to these initiatives, Local 412 partners with a number of other organizations to provide apprenticeship readiness training and access, including: the Barrett House, which serves homeless women and children; Crossroads for Women, which serves women re-entering society after incarceration; the New Mexico Re-Entry Center, which works with formerly incarcerated minorities and people of color; and the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions' TANF Support Division, with whom we work to support highly impoverished families and at-risk youth between the ages of 18 and 24.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention that these partnerships would not be possible without the support of our signatory contractors and customers, who recognize the ability of our craftspeople to not only deliver top-flight projects for the best cost and value possible, but also leverage each and every project to continue training tomorrow's workforce and uplift the communities in which the project is located.

While I am exceptionally proud of the work we have done in Local 412, there are similar stories to be told throughout the United Association. For example, this past June, the UA and CapturePoint Solutions announced a new pre-apprenticeship

program that is specifically designed to meet the workforce demands driven by the clean energy transition in Vernon Parish, Louisiana. CapturePoint is currently developing the Central Louisiana Regional Carbon Storage Hub, which will safely store and sequester millions of tons of carbon dioxide each year. The UA signed an agreement with CapturePoint and the Vernon Parish School Board to establish a career and technical education program for high school juniors and seniors in Vernon Parish with training in the pipeline and plumbing industries. These are trades that will be required to successfully construct and operate this carbon capture hub.

The UA and CapturePoint have already committed \$310,000 in private funding for this initiative, which will be used to provide training classrooms and workshops, instructors, and transportation for students. These investments will help ensure that the next generation of Louisiana workers receive the training they need to take advantage of the enormous economic opportunities presented by this and future carbon capture projects. It is also significant to note that according to the federal government's Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool, at least five Census tracts in Vernon Parish, Louisiana are "disadvantaged." This initiative therefore shows how pre-apprenticeship programs can be specifically designed and targeted to support individuals from traditionally underserved communities.

The UA has also led the way in partnering with the U.S. Military to train and place veterans into our apprenticeship programs through our award-winning

“Veterans in Piping” Program, or V.I.P. for short. Under its V.I.P. Program, the UA offers departing service men and women from all branches of the military the opportunity to participate in an intensive eighteen-week training program on base which they receive at no cost to either the government or the student. When this training is successfully completed, the graduates are guaranteed a job and placed in a Local apprenticeship program with advanced credit towards the completion of their apprenticeship. This program currently operates on 7 different military bases, and since its inception has provided apprenticeship opportunities to over 3,170 military veterans, a number of which I am proud to say are Local 412 members.

As the many examples I have discussed illustrate, I have the privilege, as Business Manager of Local 412, of seeing firsthand the power that apprenticeship programs have to change lives for the better. When I was first elected by the membership as Business Manager in 2014, we had 88 apprentices at our Local. We now have 440 apprentices, including 25 veterans, 32 women, and 52 individuals from the Navajo Nation. The large jump in the number of apprentices working out of our Local speaks for itself as to the success of the initiatives I have described.

We invest over \$2.7 million each year at Local 412 in these local training programs, which, again, consists entirely of private dollars. These investments, together with our increased focus on outreach to underrepresented communities in New Mexico and El Paso, will enable us to provide the necessary manpower for the

tremendous amount of clean energy work that is coming to our territory in the coming years. These clean energy projects will include carbon capture systems and a hydrogen hub that will be used to retrofit airplanes with clean hydrogen technology for use around the world.

At the UA, we see every clean energy job as an opportunity to train workers for the next clean energy job. This is exactly why attaching labor standards that include apprentice utilization to federal investments in clean energy is so important. A failure to attach apprenticeship standards to these programs and other federal procurements contributes to a “race-to-the-bottom” among the contractors bidding for the work, which discourages those contractors from making the needed investments in skills training. Simply put, market dynamics and price competition alone will not result in enough training of the highly-skilled construction workers the clean energy transition requires. Instead, proper incentives—such as labor standards that include apprenticeship utilization—are required.

I would like to end my prepared testimony by sharing my personal experience of coming up through the Local 412 apprenticeship program, which I think illustrates the immense value of the “earn as you learn” model used by the Building Trades. Unlike many of my fellow UA brothers and sisters, I went through a four-year college program and obtained a bachelor’s degree in Marketing & Sales before beginning my union apprenticeship. I was excited to start a career in finance after

receiving this degree, but when I applied to Merrill Lynch for a job straight out of college, I was told that I needed to get experience first. After hearing this, I thought to myself, what was the point of my four-year college program if it didn't provide me with the experience I needed to start a career? I simply could not find a job in New Mexico after getting this bachelor's degree that paid well and would provide me with this training that I apparently still needed.

This impasse I reached after receiving my bachelor's degree caused me to step back and reassess the path I was on. Ultimately, I decided to follow in the footsteps of my father and many other family members who had been UA members and joined the Local 412 apprenticeship program as a first-year apprentice. This decision allowed me to earn good wages and benefits while learning the skills I needed to become a journeyman member of Local 412. The journey that decision put me on, including being elected as Business Manager of Local 412 and now having the privilege of sharing these experiences with this Committee, has been immensely satisfying. My personal experience, as well as hearing similar stories from other UA members, is what motivates me to focus intensely on expanding our apprenticeship training and programs at Local 412, and I know this is a sentiment that is widely held across the UA—and the Building Trades as a whole.

In conclusion, the UA and other Building Trades' unions are prepared to meet the ever-growing workforce demands caused by the clean energy transition, because

we know that we have the best training programs and the best model for delivering that training through our “earn as you learn” approach. When these programs are linked to federal funding and procurements through labor standards that require apprentice utilization, the sky is the limit as to what we can build together during this pivotal moment in the clean energy transition. Thank you.