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Subcommittee on Human Resources
Committee on Ways and Means
U.S. House of Representatives

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Chairman Boustany, Ranking Member Doggett and members of the House Ways and Means Committee, on behalf of the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), we are pleased to submit the following testimony for your consideration and the record regarding the “Improving Opportunity in America Welfare Reauthorization Act of 2015,” a discussion draft that would reauthorize the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. This marks a critical step toward improving our nation’s public assistance infrastructure and modernizing a program that serves millions of low-income individuals with opportunities to improve their lives and those of their family members.

ACTE’s priorities for reauthorization of the TANF program are concentrated on those areas that directly affect career and technical education (CTE) students and institutions, and it is those specific provisions that we will focus on in these comments. We applaud the work that has been done thus far on the important issue of access to education and training, and respectfully encourage the committee to consider additional measures to strengthen the legislation by reinforcing CTE’s role in preparing individuals for sustained employment in positions with family-supporting wages, which will increase the TANF’s effectiveness in reducing poverty nationwide.

In order for TANF recipients to become economically independent and self-sufficient, it is crucial that these individuals are equipped with the skills they need to obtain long-term employment with high earnings potential. CTE programs provide participants with the academic, technical and employability skills that will allow them access to available career opportunities in the United States, many of which are in fields experiencing critical skills gaps and that offer family sustaining wages. These opportunities increase participants' career prospects by empowering them with the skills, experiences and degrees or credentials that prepare them for positions employers are struggling to fill today.

We respectfully offer the following comments on the draft legislation with regard to strengthening the role of education and training, including CTE, in the TANF program:

- We strongly approve of the discussion draft's extension of the lifetime limit on "vocation educational training" under Section 6, which will allow TANF recipients to invest their time and effort into longer-term CTE programs that will increase their eligibility for careers in higher wage, in-demand sectors. Many careers in growing fields require education and training leading to a long-term certificate or associate degree, and expanding the time limit on training reflects the increase in technical aptitude necessary for success in the 21st century economy. By extending the time limit on counting vocation educational training as work, the likelihood that TANF participants will obtain valuable credentials is increased, and thus their reliance on low-paying job activities that are unlikely to contribute to longer-term success in the labor market is decreased.
- We also applaud the committee's decision to eliminate the distinction between "core" and "non-core" work activities under section six in the draft, as it eliminates another onerous burden placed on TANF participants seeking to build their skills and long-term earnings potential by requiring that some forms of education and skills training be coupled with an additional 20 hours of core work activities. Under current law, participants must balance certain job skills training and education with an alternate core activity, such as part-time employment, as well as the immense challenges of raising a family in poverty. The elimination of this provision will ensure that TANF recipients are able to apply themselves fully to the work of building their skills and employment prospects for long-term success, while also building a competent workforce for states.
- We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the committee's open question regarding the elimination of the statutory cap on the share of states' work participation rates that can be satisfied by participation in education activities, referenced under Sec. 6. The existing federal cap on the share of TANF recipients pursuing valid educational opportunities creates an arbitrary block for individual recipients seeking to advance their long-term employment prospects and earnings potential, and stands in contrast to TANF's broader goal of reducing poverty by increasing employment entry, retention and advancement. We

believe it should be eliminated. States should not be penalized or disincentivized from providing education and training opportunities to TANF recipients by the federal government, and should have the flexibility to design TANF programs that reflect the needs of today's labor market and their local economies. The removal of this cap would allow states greater latitude in working with TANF recipients to access CTE and other educational options while preserving their ability to fulfill required work participation rates.

- In addition, more broadly, we encourage the committee to carefully consider reporting requirements and measures related to work and education, and to the extent possible, to align such requirements with other federally administered programs such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). In addition, as much flexibility as possible should be maintained for states to design creative approaches to ensuring individuals have access to education and career training programs.

We appreciate the recent increase in Congressional emphasis and action on preparing a skilled workforce that will drive the American economy in the 21st century, including in last year's passage of WIOA, which modernized our national system of postsecondary and adult job training. In addition, the House Career and Technical Education and Congressional Investment in America's Skilled Workforce Caucuses have taken steps to raise awareness of the skills gap affecting our nation's employers across sectors as well as the importance of CTE in overcoming this challenge. ACTE strongly supports these efforts to draw attention to CTE's potential, and are hopeful that the committee will take steps to strengthen its role in TANF as an effective strategy to increase participants' potential for entering, retaining and advancing in employment.

Thank you for your continued leadership and for your thoughtful consideration during the TANF reauthorization process. We look forward to working with the committee in a bipartisan fashion to strengthen education and training opportunities for all Americans.