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I'm Cara Flannery, the Outreach & Pre-apprenticeship Coordinator for the Augusta Electrical JATC. I'm also the mother of a daughter in a rural community and am a former high school teacher and ELO Coordinator. Last year, I spoke about my concerns—as a mother and former educator—regarding the number of career exploration and training opportunities available in rural communities. Nearly 3 years after leaving my 11-year career as a high school educator to dedicate my time to workforce development and apprenticeship, my confidence and support for pre-apprenticeship programs has not waned.

Today, with a potential recession looming, I will speak in favor of pre-apprenticeship by highlighting the positive impacts it has on not only employers and career seekers, but the local economy as well.

Pre-apprenticeship programs are a cheat code for employers, and here's why: They help employers save time and money.

Pre-apprenticeships are pipelines for ready-to-work employees who have the foundational skills and industry-specific knowledge employers are looking for. Less investment is needed for recruitment strategies, because pre-apprenticeship is a recruitment strategy. Employers can tailor their programs to the specific needs of their company, the jobs they need to fill, and their specific industry. Fulfilling positions with pre-apprentices can help to increase productivity since less time will be needed for orientation and foundational understanding, as pre-apprentices will have had exposure to the career. Pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships lead to higher retention rates, reducing the turnover and lowering recruitment costs. They also result in stronger employer-employee relationships, which results in employees staying longer.

Even if an individual participates in a pre-apprenticeship program and realizes the career is not the best fit and moves to a totally different career path, pre-apprenticeship programs teach transferable skills, such as soft skills, which help to bridge the readiness gaps employers have been reporting. Statistics from the Society for Human Resource Management show a significant soft skills gap in the workforce, with nearly 3 in 4 employers reporting difficulty in finding candidates with the soft skills their companies need. According to a research study conducted by Harvard University, 85% of job success comes from well-developed soft skills and interpersonal (people) skills. This statistic is supported by the Society of Human Resources, which reports that 46% of new employees fail within 18 months—89% of which are due to a lack of soft skills.

I haven't mentioned the career seeker yet, and this is because all the employer benefits mutually benefit career seekers. Pre-apprenticeships are debt-free opportunities to test drive careers and the apprenticeship model while developing transferable skills. These programs prepare individuals for ALL types of work—not just the specific industry of the program they participate in.

Pre-apprenticeship programs can positively impact the local economy through reducing labor shortages by fulfilling positions with a skilled workforce and providing job stability. With the money saved on recruitment and training costs, employers will be in a better position to increase wages. Participation in a training program encourages and establishes lifelong learning, helping Maine residents to become more adaptable in the ever-changing needs of work as well as the economy.

Thank you for listening to my testimony, and let's continue to build a stronger Maine workforce and economy through pre-apprenticeship programs.