

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 2360

As Reported by House Committee On:
Postsecondary Education & Workforce

Title: An act relating to creating the Washington digital empowerment and workforce inclusion act.

Brief Description: Creating the Washington digital empowerment and workforce inclusion act.

Sponsors: Representatives Slatter, Gregerson, Morgan, Leavitt, Berry, Davis, Nance, Reed, Ramel, Simmons, Paul, Ormsby and Pollet.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Postsecondary Education & Workforce: 1/17/24, 1/19/24, 1/24/24 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates the Washington Digital Empowerment and Workforce Inclusion Act to support Washingtonians in achieving verifiable levels of digital literacy and accessing information technology and information technology-enabled careers.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION & WORKFORCE

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 12 members: Representatives Slatter, Chair; Reed, Vice Chair; Ybarra, Ranking Minority Member; Waters, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Chandler, Jacobsen, Leavitt, Nance, Paul, Pollet, Schmidt and Timmons.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 2 members: Representatives Klicker and McEntire.

Staff: Saranda Ross (786-7068).

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Background:

The Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board (Workforce Board) was created in 1991 to provide planning, coordination, evaluation, monitoring, and policy analysis for the state workforce training system as a whole, and to advise the Governor and the Legislature concerning the training system. It is a tripartite partnership of business, labor, and government with a Governor-appointed board of nine voting members.

Summary of Bill:

The Washington Digital Empowerment and Workforce Inclusion (DEWI) Act is established to support historically marginalized people and communities in achieving meaningful and verifiable levels of digital literacy and to access and progress in information technology and information technology-enabled careers.

Digital Empowerment and Workforce Inclusion Office.

The DEWI Office (Digital Office) is created within the Workforce Board and has the following duties:

- support DEWI Act partners and contractors;
- develop and maintain a performance accountability dashboard to track the state's progress in closing the disparities in technology-based employment; and
- develop an interactive navigation portal for jobseekers, workers, and students. The portal must: (a) be easily and regularly updated by industry and educational organizations; (b) provide actionable information on knowledge, skills, and abilities required for high-demand information technology and information technology-enabled jobs; (c) make information on relevant education and training programs for information technology and information technology-enabled jobs available, including on-the-job training and apprenticeship programs; and (d) explain how education and training programs and credentials on the portal can link or stack towards higher level credentials and employment.

Digital Empowerment and Workforce Inclusion Workforce Advisory Committee.

The Workforce Board must establish a DEWI Workforce Advisory Committee (Advisory Committee) for the purpose of:

- advising the Washington State University Global Campus (WSU) on the curriculum and assessments for the workplace digital literacy credential;
- advising policymakers on the impact of digitization and technological advancements on the state's critical industry sectors, businesses, and current and future workers; and
- providing recommendations for education and training investments and support services prioritizing marginalized and underrepresented people and communities, and workers being displaced or whose jobs are degraded by technology.

Technology Access Devices for Job Seekers Fund.

Subject to appropriations, the Technology Access Devices for Job Seekers Fund (Job Seekers Fund) is created to provide access to devices, such as laptops, to job seekers to facilitate job training and employment access. In administering the Job Seekers Fund, the Workforce Board must:

- establish a transparent application process and system for establishing priorities and selection criteria for local workforce development boards to receive devices under the fund;
- distribute devices and funds to purchase devices to local workforce development councils; and
- monitor the rules, guidelines, and effectiveness of each local workforce development council in use of the devices.

Washington Digital Literacy Credential Program and Workplace Digital Literacy Credential

Subject to appropriations, the WSU must create the Washington Digital Literacy Credential Program (Credential Program), which culminates in the Workplace Digital Literacy Credential (Digital Literacy Credential). The WSU must work with DEWI Act partners and other stakeholders, including community-based and tribal organizations, community and technical college adult basic programs, local workforce development boards, and public libraries to identify and assess existing digital literacy programs, curricula, assessments, and credentials, and establish a free-access repository of information for any provider organization serving marginalized and underrepresented communities across the state.

The WSU must also:

- provide evaluative information about the learning objectives, cultural appropriateness for targeted populations, accessibility, usefulness and portability of credentials, and cost;
- identify and fill gaps in the curricula and available materials for digital literacy;
- collaborate with institutions of higher education and industry organizations to gather recommendations on the development of the Credential Program and the Digital Literacy Credential; and
- build on its existing credential infrastructure to include a learner employer record or digital credential wallet that can be made available to program participants and credential holders.

Advance Equity in Information Technology Careers Mentorship Program

Subject to appropriations, the Advance Equity in Information Technology Careers Mentorship Program (Mentorship Program) is established. The Workforce Board must contract with a not-for-profit organization with a program connecting industry mentors to community and technical college computer science students to administer the Mentorship Program. The Mentorship Program must serve up to 60 participants per year in small cohorts or individually, all of whom must receive information technology industry navigational awareness and support. Mentor assignments must be prioritized to support historically marginalized and underrepresented participants. The Mentorship Program must

also include a research and evaluation component to help understand and develop supports for overcoming barriers to access for individuals historically marginalized and underrepresented in information technology careers, and the hiring parameters in companies that appear to exclude these individuals.

Reentry and Targeted Community Workforce Development Program.

Subject to appropriations, the Reentry and Targeted Community Workforce Development Program (Reentry Program) is established. The Department of Corrections must contract with a not-for-profit organization representing the interests of and providing programs and services for underrepresented and marginalized populations in the state to administer the Reentry Program. The Reentry Program must provide participants:

- digital and financial literacy training;
- support identifying and overcoming digital barriers;
- employment services such as job searching and interviewing skills;
- case management services;
- placement services including post-placement support;
- job skills training to include, at a minimum, community broadband and infrastructure technician, and help desk technician; and
- a living allowance.

Report to the Legislature.

The Workforce Board must submit a biannual report to the Legislature that includes recommendations on how the state can support job seeker and employer needs in response to the changing information technology workforce and recommendations from the Advisory Committee.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Preliminary fiscal note available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) While artificial intelligence poses a significant workplace upheaval, there are a lot of people in our communities who do not even have broadband or the basic digital skills to navigate the current work environment, which makes them economically disadvantaged. This bill gives people skills and tools needed to be a part of the current work economy and have access to information technology (IT) jobs, which everyone deserves access to. We want diverse people to access these jobs and need to face the fact that employers are facing a serious lack of IT-trained employees.

The Workforce Board has identified digital literacy and IT-career equity as a top priority for the past several years. Washington has invested millions of state and federal dollars to expand postsecondary degree options in computer science, including allowing community and technical colleges to confer Bachelor of Science degrees in Computer Science.

Even before the pandemic, digital equity, including access to reliable internet and electronic devices, has been a barrier to obtaining and keeping employment. Digital equity is a basic need, as it is an unavoidable part of navigating life today. The IT industry in the state is projected to have over 80,000 open positions in the next five years. This bill is essential to ensuring our communities have the pipeline they need to launch into these high-wage positions while also offering our employers a qualified pool of top, local talent.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Vandana Slatter, prime sponsor; Larry Brown, Workforce Board; Will Durden, State Board for Community and Technical Colleges; RT Tomilin and Eileen Aparis, Evergreen Goodwill; Emily Wittman, Association of Washington Business; and Eleni Papadakis, Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.