

March 18, 2013

WORKFORCE: Bill passes on worker training



KURT MILLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A job hunter fills out an application at the San Bernardino County job fair inside the old Ontario Airport terminal in 2012.

0 | 1 | 0

A Text Size  

BY JACK KATZANEK

STAFF WRITER

March 18, 2013; 04:44 PM

[Comments \(0\)](#)

***CORRECTION:** An earlier version of this report contained an error. The correction version is below.*

A bill that would be a first step toward revamping how local job training and placement operations receive federal funding was ratified by the House of Representatives on Friday, but local leaders are concerned that it would dilute local input and control of these programs.

HR 803, dubbed the Supporting Knowledge and Investing in Lifelong Skills, or SKILLS Act, passed the House in a close vote during which more than a dozen Republicans crossed party lines. It would fund local job training efforts with block grants given to states and also give governors control over how — and how many — local workforce investment boards operate.

It would also freeze funding for workforce development until the 2021 fiscal year and reduce current funding levels by as much 20 percent when added to the losses that fell when the sequestration process began March. 1.

Workforce development professionals in San Bernardino and Riverside counties are concerned that the governor of a state as large as California is unlikely to know what kind of program works best in a remote area of the state.

“We are very concerned that it’s being interpreted in a way that it would really hurt local control,” said Sandy Harmsen, director of San Bernardino County’s Workforce Development Department.

Harmsen said her county was a good example of one where local people have a better idea about what is needed. For example, a grant that trains unemployed people for medical occupations is a good idea in the San Bernardino area, close to Loma Linda Medical Center and other major hospitals. But such a program would benefit few people in Needles, and Harmsen questioned whether officials in Sacramento would make that distinction.

Harmsen said another example was when Molycorp opened a rare earth mine near the Nevada state line. Her office initiated a training program specifically for those to dig this substance but she said that’s the kind of program that would probably fall through the cracks for San Bernardino County residents if Sacramento called all the shots.

Jamil Dada, chairman of Riverside County’s Workforce Investment Board, said that he was concerned that HR 803 gives the governor the authority to eliminate local boards. One or both of the Inland counties could be combined with either Los Angeles or Orange counties or both, and Dada fears the Inland area could be forced to settle for leftovers, rather than be able to develop its own programs.

It might make sense to centralize these operations in small states, Dada said, but not a populous state such as California.

“It’s silly to give governors that kind of power,” Dada said. “Sacramento does not have any idea what happens down here.”

The bill is the first step in reauthorizing the Workforce Investment Act, which set up the process for funding at the local level in 1997. It expired in 2003 and was never reauthorized, and it has been funded by congressional appropriations every year since. The new law, if passed by the

Senate and signed by President Barack Obama, would sharply trim the number of federal agencies involved in this process.

Dada, who has served as president of the National Association of Workforce Boards, agrees that there is a lot of duplication, with more than a half-dozen Cabinet-level agencies playing a role in the funding process. But he pointed out that local boards are dominated by business executives, along with educators, labor leaders and others, who understand communities' needs.

The bill passed by a 215-202 margin. Rep. Paul Cook, R-Yucca Valley, and Gary Miller, R-Rancho Cucamonga, were among 14 Republicans to cross party lines and oppose the measure, joining Inland Democrats Mark Takano and Raul Ruiz. Other area Republicans, including Ken Calvert and Duncan Hunter, voted in favor.

Dada said such a large number of Republicans to vote against the party's majority might influence the vote when it comes up in the Senate. Allison Preiss, a spokesperson for Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, who chairs the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions committee, said in an email that the House vote was largely a partisan one.

"By arbitrarily eliminating or consolidating dozens of programs in favor of a block grant, the bill fails to safeguard the interests of those most in need, including Americans with disabilities, low-income Americans, disconnected youth, and dislocated workers," Preiss said in the email. "It mutes the voice of workers in the nation's public workforce development system."