Speaker Beth Harwell Speaks up about Tennessee's Workforce

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In her remarks at the September lunch gathering on workforce development and expansion, Tennessee Speaker of the House Beth Harwell offered a wide-ranging assessment of the state of the workforce in the state. Overall, Harwell suggested, while Tennessee has been far from immune to the challenges that many other states are facing, workforce development efforts here are making positive strides — and have been a focus for Tennessee state government.

Here are the highlights:

- In her travels across the state, Harwell said, she regularly hears the same comment over and over from manufacturers: "Our workforce doesn't have the skills we need." While that's a complaint often shared by employers across the country, not just in this state, Harwell also pointed out that "Tennessee leads the nation in investments in workforce development." As an example, she cited the state's Re-Connect program, which focuses on helping adults 25 and older go back to a technical school or community college to complete a degree that had started or to gain new skills for the changing workforce. "We're looking to partner more effectively with our community colleges," Harwell said.
- Strengthening education at all levels remains the cornerstone of Tennessee's workforce development efforts. In fact, according to Harwell, whether a bill will improve educational quality in the state is part of a litmus test by which she says she evaluates every piece of proposed legislation. As a state, Harwell said, "We have turned a corner on education. We have some of the highest standards in the nation, and we are also one of the fastest improving states in education."
- Increasingly, said Harwell, businesses are getting more involved in efforts to improve education because they understand how much they have a stake in the outcome. As a reflection of this positive trend, she noted that the business

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community is now prominently represented among the audience at meetings of the House Education Committee — something that did not occur regularly in previous years.

- Drugs remain the other workforce concern that Harwell hears about most often from Tennessee manufacturers. Specifically, Harwell said that employers tell her: "I can't get enough people who can pass a drug test."

There is no simple solution, Harwell said, but "we're working on it."

The Speaker noted that one promising approach involves adjudicating more drug-related cases in special drug courts that emphasize rehabilitation. "We won't incarcerate our way out of the problem," Harwell said. "Incarceration doesn't rehabilitate people, and it costs $120,000 per year. Rehabilitation costs $40,000. It's a good investment for our state." Because she believes that pharmaceutical companies have played a role in the over-prescription of opioid pain medications, Harwell said that she will ask them to contribute financially to help the state pay for rehabilitation. "We have to address this issue," she said, "because [the current situation] is economically unsustainable."

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