



**Public Hearing Testimony of Danté Bartolomeo
Commissioner
Department of Labor
Appropriations Committee
February 27, 2023**

Good afternoon, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Representative Nuccio, Senator Berthel, Subcommittee Co-Chairs Senator Hartley and Representative Gibson and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Danté Bartolomeo, and I am the Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Labor (CTDOL).

It is my pleasure to be here with you today in support of Governor Ned Lamont's proposed FY 24/25 budget. This budget clearly prioritizes workforce development and talent pipeline initiatives. It supports the programs that help young people build careers. It supports our business community in their efforts to develop talent for their specific needs. It focuses on high-demand fields like healthcare and manufacturing to ensure future workers are prepared for jobs in technology and defense.

I want to call your attention to three significant components of the Governor's budget.

One major highlight is the fully funded CTDOL Registered Apprenticeship program. While the term "apprentice" is used frequently, the mark of a Registered Apprenticeship goes far beyond 'earn-while-you-learn' and provides workers with fully portable, nationally recognized credentials that identify them as masters of their craft. Registered Apprenticeships are immensely valuable to employers across more than 50 occupations including high-demand fields like healthcare, manufacturing, and all of the trades required to meet state and federal infrastructure and housing goals.

Currently, CTDOL has more than 6,400 Registered Apprentices working with 1,700 employers including our newest partners, Genesis HealthCare, 1199, and the Yale New Haven Health System—all major employers in health and long-term care industries.

Furthermore, the Governor's budget adds an additional, one-time \$10 million to the annual \$5 million already appropriated for the Connecticut's Youth Employment Program, a workforce initiative for young people ages 14-24. There is so much potential for this investment—it could help our partners double the number of young people served and bring that number up to 5,000; it could help us expand services to young people who are engaged with supportive programs in other state agencies or organizations; it could help further outreach efforts to disconnected youth. It provides meaningful opportunities for young people to gain experience, build confidence, and strengthen their resume.



Lastly, the Governor's Budget provides ongoing personnel funding for the newly-established Office of the Unemployed Workers' Advocate—a unit designed to help claimants navigate the unemployment system and overcome barriers to receiving unemployment benefits. With over 1,000 cases since launching last August, it's a vital component of frontline customer service and we applaud the legislature for creating.

On behalf of the staff and leadership team at CTDOL, I also want to thank you all for standing by us, investing in the agency and our programs, and helping us get critical assistance out to residents. In the first year of the COVID pandemic, CTDOL received 1.5 million Unemployment Insurance (UI) applications. What CTDOL normally receives in 10 years, we received in one year. The agency itself was 35% smaller due to years of budget cuts, and the pandemic was impacting our own staff—people who were dealing with the impact of the pandemic in their own lives and families and simultaneously working days, nights, weekends, and holidays to meet extraordinary demand.

With your support and funding, we have been able to hire staff in units experiencing the highest demand—the Consumer Contact Center, Benefit Payment Control, Adjudications, and Appeals. We re-opened the American Job Centers with dedicated Consumer Contact Center agents and a revamped service delivery model. We continue to bring in staff for our Benefit Payment Control and Adjudications Units and the Appeals Division—two areas still burdened by pandemic backlogs. The Consumer Contact Center, CTDOL's one-stop call center, turned two in July and has handled 2.7 million calls and cases.

For your reference, also attached are the current CTDOL agency headcount and vacancies. I'm joined here today by CTDOL agency subject matter experts, and we are happy to take your questions.

Thank you.