

### B-1.3 Testimony Statement to Senate Committee (College President)

#### Background Information for Tool

*Part of the strategy for getting the law changed was to support a bill that was focused on CCBs beyond applied degrees in order to meet an in-demand workforce need. As mentioned earlier, legislators need to hear about the critical need for change, and providing testimony from the College President as to how CCs and in particular our College can do just that. I worked with the lobbyist to craft the message in a manner that would address both what CCs are positioned to do, how they can meet this workforce need, and what our institution was able to provide.*

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#### Testimony before the Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee

Wednesday, May 19, 2021

Members of the Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony for Senate Bill 135, specifically in support of its proposal to remove obstacles currently in place that prevent otherwise-qualified Community Colleges from offering a Bachelor's Degree in Nursing.

I am Dr. Cynthia Spiers, President of Rhodes State College in Lima, Ohio, located in Allen County. Let me start by saying that Rhodes State serves a ten-County region, (Allen, Auglaize, Mercer, Putnam, Logan, Van Wert, Hardin, Hancock, Paulding and Shelby Counties). We provide over seventy degree programs and certificates to the people of these counties with a mission to change lives, build futures, and improve communities through life-long learning. I greatly appreciate the continued support and investment in all sectors of higher education, and in the strong support, advocacy and the recognition of the value of the twenty-three community colleges in Ohio which maintain quality programming that is accessible and affordable to those living within our communities.

As a community technical college we play a critical role in workforce development and meeting workforce demand. We have a broad mission to provide academic programming and skills training to prepare individuals for jobs that provide a livable wage and meet the workforce demand, as well as to provide the coursework necessary for students to transfer to four-year institutions.

But, more importantly, the vast majority of our students—91%—come to Rhodes State from our ten-county region. What's more, 87% of Rhodes State students, upon graduation, make the choice to remain in our region to work and raise a family. In truth, we are the one college whose mission is to serve the educational and workforce needs of the people of this region. Our regional employers have called us the "cornerstone of education" in the area because of the quality of our graduates, and because of our ability to serve their needs as employers.

The primary reason for my testimony today is because of the alarming nursing shortage within our region, and in particular, at the two largest hospitals in the area (Lima Memorial Hospital and Mercy-Health St. Rita's). According to both hospitals, these shortages will only continue to grow and they need many additional Bachelor's in Nursing graduates to fulfill their current and future critical workforce need.

According to Lima Memorial's letter of support for our program, they need 80% of the nurses to hold BSN degrees, but only 40% of frontline/direct care staff do so, and only 54% overall. In addition, Mercy Health identified the need for 40-80 nurses annually for the next three to five years, and due to

retirements, the need will be at the top end of that range. Data reported by *Labor Insights - Burning Glass Technologies* indicated that for the month of April 2021 there were job openings for 127 nurses in the ten-county region, and 41 openings in Allen County alone. This is reflective of only one month. Other hospitals in our region have similar shortages. That's why we have seen an overwhelming interest and support from our area health providers for Rhodes State to offer the pre-licensure bachelor's degree in nursing (BSN), as well as a program to enable those nurses with Associate Degrees in Nursing (ADN) to complete their BSN. Our region—indeed the entire State—needs both more nurses who graduate with a BSN and more nurses, who currently have only an Associate degree in nursing, to complete their BSN.

The nursing shortage is not just a local problem. It's true throughout the State. It's a chronic shortage that Ohio institutions of higher education have not been able to solve.

Current Ohio law is part of the problem. Today, the Chancellor of Higher Education can only approve community college BSN programs where there is no bachelor's degree program available from a state university or private college, and is only permitted to authorize *applied bachelor's* degrees at community colleges. The bachelor's in nursing is not an applied degree. Proposed programs are routinely objected to as duplicative, sometimes even by universities that are located far outside the community college's region. The current law discourages community colleges who want to help meet their region's local nursing shortage from even trying to offer programs. As a consequence, the shortage continues.

And it's not just that the shortage is chronic. It's also becoming more acute. In our region and around the State, COVID-fatigue is causing an alarming number of frontline nurses to speed up retirement plans. The need is greater than ever.

But, for Rhodes State to be able to offer programs to address and shrink this nursing shortage, we need your help. Senate Bill 135, sponsored by Senator Cirino, offers a viable solution. Under the bill, the existence of other nursing programs in the region would not constitute grounds to reject a community college BSN program. We need every existing program, and many more, to meet Ohio's critical nursing shortage.

Having more community college BSN degrees has another advantage that should not be overlooked: Community colleges by law charge one rate for tuition per credit hour—that means the tuition is the same for general education credits, credits leading to an accounting degree, a medical coding and billing certificate, and coursework for a BSN. If a student and their family wants to get the best value for their money, they should look no further than the Rhodes State BSN degree.

We estimate that a four-year nursing degree would cost a Rhodes State student \$21,648 in tuition over four years. Doing that at a State university will cost double or more, and at a private college, five times or more.

SB 135 will lead to more affordable BSN degrees on tuition alone, but that's not all: those who choose a community college for their BSN will also likely save on housing and living expenses. Community colleges don't have expensive student housing or required meal plans. Since most students come from the local area, many if not most students remain at home while attending college. Nursing students at community colleges will graduate with at best a small fraction of the debt that they would incur for the same degree anywhere else. Quite a few will have no debt at all, unheard of with professional degrees.

Contrary to the impression some opponents want to create, we are not trying to undercut the competition or be the only provider. Some students want the experience of attending a State or private university. Others want a more diverse academic curriculum rather than to concentrate only on a nursing degree. But what we do know is that we desperately need more nursing programs in order to meet our workforce

needs. Even if all currently approved educational providers continue to offer a nursing degree, and Rhodes State were approved to offer the degree as well, it would only reduce rather than end the nursing shortage at Ohio's hospitals.

It's also important to note that students who attend four-year private and public institutions in our region are less likely to stay in the area after they graduate. It's hard to blame them when they often come from somewhere else or when their tuition is so much higher and other areas can offer higher salaries. But, to meet the nursing shortage in our ten-county region of Northwest Ohio, and other rural and small-town areas of the State, it is imperative that Rhodes State and other community colleges be allowed to help meet this critical workforce shortage.

Thank you, Chairman and members of the committee, for your time and attention today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.