U.S. Secretary of Labor Connects with Foreign-Trained Healthcare Workers

Thomas E. Perez visited the San Diego Welcome Back Center at Grossmont College

EL CAJON, CA (Thursday, June 26, 2014) – U.S. Secretary of Labor Thomas E. Perez visited the San Diego Welcome Back Center located at Grossmont College on June 26. The San Diego Welcome Back Center assists foreign-trained health professionals obtain licensure to work in California.

During his afternoon visit, Perez visited a classroom of English learners who recently immigrated to the United States. After that, he participated in a roundtable discussion that included students and graduates of the Welcome Back Center, and officials from Grossmont College, Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District, the Health Workforce Initiative California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, and regional partners.

Ann Durham, Director of the Health Workforce Initiative and the San Diego Welcome Back Center, welcomed the group by highlighting the purpose of the program. “As recipient of the 2011 E Pluribus Unum Prize for exceptional immigrant integration initiatives, the Welcome Back Center takes pride in helping foreign-trained health professionals go from being unemployed or underemployed to practicing in their fields of education and expertise. Every successful WBC participant increases the diversity of the healthcare workforce, helping to achieve the goal of reflecting the rich diversity in our community.”

Linda L. Zorn, Sector Navigator for the Health Workforce Initiative, represented the Workforce and Economic Development Program of the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office at the event. Other partners included Marlene Ruiz, Director of Education & Consulting Services Kaiser Permanente.

After the nine Welcome Back participants related their professional background and journey to the United States, Perez shared his family’s story and their work in the healthcare field. Perez’s father was a doctor and his four siblings are also physicians.

“My parents came here from the Dominican Republic,” Perez said. “Political upheaval in my parents’ family has certainly had an impact on my life...My family was a generation ahead of where you find yourself and I’m confident your children – should you have them – will say mom and dad changed our lives.”

Welcome Back Center program participants include legal immigrants and refugees who were trained in the healthcare field in their countries of origin, including Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Serbia, among others. Helping these professionals obtain California licensure meets the need for cultural and linguistic diversity in the workplace.
“My mother wanted to be a pharmacist, but couldn’t do it and she passed away,” said Noor Khaiat, a pharmacist from Iraq. “My dream is to achieve that for her.” Both of Khaiat’s brothers are doctors in Iraq and they plan to immigrate to California. She arrived in the United States two months ago with her father.

Grossmont College President Sunita V. Cooke, whose family emigrated from India after her mother was recruited to work as a nurse in the United States, noted that the Welcome Back Center has a larger impact than simply helping international health care workers obtain California licensure. “This program makes a difference in the lives of individuals,” Cooke said. “But more than that, it makes a difference in our community, our nation and for generations to come.”

During his visit, one of several stops in San Diego that day, Perez also spoke about his expectation of success for program participants. “I look at the determination in all of your eyes and I know that you will all succeed,” Perez said. “The best measure of how someone will succeed in the future is whether they have succeeded in the past. You have all succeeded in the past in your various fields and your various countries. I am confident that you will all succeed in the future as a result.”

About the Welcome Back Center

The San Diego Welcome Back Center, a program of the Health Workforce Initiative California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, is a one-stop resource center for internationally-trained health professionals. Since its inception in 2001, more than 3,600 foreign-trained health professionals have received assistance through the San Diego Welcome Back Center. Nearly 700 active participants are currently working with the Center. For more information, visit www.welcomebackcenter.org.

About Grossmont College

Grossmont College is “Changing Lives Through Education” and has served the diverse educational needs of San Diego’s East County since 1962. With a wide variety of certificate and associate’s degree programs, Grossmont College provides workforce training, career development and transferable college-level coursework to its more than 18,000 students. For more information, visit Grossmont.edu.

For more information about the San Diego Welcome Back Center, please contact:

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