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Fed Plan Bolsters Trucking Apprenticeships to Narrow Driver, Tech Skills Gap

By Eric Miller
Staff Reporter

The Department of Labor is taking steps that would meet the objectives of a presidential executive order and encourage motor carriers and other trucking organizations to create apprenticeships for new employees to receive federal funding while they train to become drivers or maintenance technicians.

Shortages have been identified in both trades.

While many carriers offer new drivers finishing programs or refresher courses before they are permitted to hit the road alone, few offer more structured, certified apprenticeships that allow drivers to “earn while they learn.”

Take Werner Enterprises. It is one of the few carriers already offering an apprenticeship program approved by the Department of Labor.

First approved in 2006, Werner’s Truck Driver Apprenticeship Program has enrolled more than 38,000 drivers, many of them eligible to receive up to \$23,000 in tax-free education benefits in addition to their company pay. In 2013, the Omaha, Neb.-based company extended the program to reimburse first-time military veterans training to become drivers.

Martin Garsee, executive director of the National Association of Publicly Funded Truck Driving Schools, said carriers now offer-



Werner Enterprises via Vimeo

A Werner trainer points out an engine component to a student in the company’s Labor Department-approved apprenticeship program.



U.S. Department of Justice

Acosta

ing post-CDL truck driver training could convert programs into apprenticeships to tap into a new funding stream.

Garsee said he’s attempting to position his organization, composed of 120 community colleges and technical colleges that train truck drivers nationwide, to be eligible for apprenticeship funds. “Apprenticeships have been around a long time but mostly for



Gary Kicinski — Transport Topics

Lefevé

the union space,” Garsee said.

Last month, U.S. Labor Secretary Alexander Acosta announced the appointment of a broad-based apprenticeship expansion task force to come up with strategies to encourage more apprenticeships that would help workers find jobs requiring additional training or special skills, such as diesel technicians.

He touted the initiative at Amer-

ican Trucking Associations’ Management Conference & Exhibition in Orlando, Fla., on Oct. 23.

“You are in the best position to define what your industry needs, and react to those needs,” Acosta said.

“Previous administrations have promoted apprenticeships, but here’s a critical difference under President Trump’s initiative: We will not micromanage the apprenticeships from Washington,” he said. “The bureaucratic barriers that stood between the trucking industry and effective apprenticeship programs are ready to come down.”

Unfortunately, the process has been moving slowly, and although there are friends of ATA on the task force, there are no trucking trade association leaders on the 20-member panel, said Jay Lim, ATA’s vice president of legislative affairs.

A spokesman for the Labor Department did not return messages seeking comment.

Lim said that Congress approved \$95 million for fiscal 2017 specifically for apprenticeship grants. The continuing resolution approved in September maintained the funding level through Dec. 8, when Congress must approve the fiscal 2018 funding bill.

The Trump administration is attempting to persuade Congress to

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double that amount in the 2018 funding appropriation, Lim said.

If the administration's plans materialize, Lim said that trade organizations such as ATA would be allowed to create and certify apprenticeship programs that would draw on federal workforce funds to award to drivers and mainte-

nance techs.

"We're looking at this right now to see if it makes sense for us," said Don Lefevé, president of the Commercial Vehicle Training Association. "What is interesting is that apprenticeships have been an underutilized form of training in the trucking industry. But CVTA is looking right now at providing an apprenticeship for our trucking companies as a way to move

folks from school where they get their CDL to a more formal apprenticeship that could last from one to four years. But there's got to be funding attached to this."

Lim said that 25 states work with the Labor Department to offer federally certified and funded apprenticeships, while 25 other states offer their own programs with differing rules and procedures.

"The red tape is overwhelming for the typical motor carrier," Lim said.

That could change if the administration is successful in issuing a new set of regulations that would simplify the process.

"There's an opportunity here for ATA and other trade associations to really take a leadership role and carve out what the future of our workforce will look like," Lim said.