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Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee regarding Senate Bill 1000. My name is Kate Lomax and I am the Executive Director of the Community Education Council of Elk & Cameron Counties (CEC) which is located in St. Marys, PA. Our CEC, and the other eight CECs across the rural regions of this Commonwealth broker and facilitate the delivery of education from GED® to a Master's Degree and everything in between.

The CEC's provide access to education, but our residents and students are still at a serious educational disadvantage. When a guidance counselor sits down to have a conversation with an average high school student at St. Marys Area High School about higher education, the term "community college" does not figure in to this dialogue. When a single mother decides to return to the classroom part-time while raising a child, and working full-time, she has no community college to turn to. When a student returns to Elk and Cameron Counties after completing only two semesters of college because he could not afford it, there is no community college system to transfer his credits into.

All of these are real examples of the students we work with each day. Today, my testimony will highlight the need for affordable and accessible higher education which articulates seamlessly to meet the needs of all residents. I will illustrate how the CECs have a well-established delivery system throughout the rural region and how we can help facilitate the successful establishment of a regional community college.

First, I would like to provide you with an introduction to the robust network of the Community Education Councils currently serving rural Pennsylvania.

If you were to look at a map of available education offerings in Pennsylvania's rural areas, you will notice there are very few options. Penn State Dubois, Butler County Community College @ Brockway, Pitt Bradford and Clarion University frame the borders of the proposed eleven county region. Career and technical facilities are few and far between.

More than twenty years ago, the community education councils were established to fill in these gaps and serve their rural communities across the Commonwealth by doing two innovative things: 1) assessing the education and training needs of their community and, 2) partnering with providers to offer those educational programs which can answer that need. These offerings include programs, courses or classes which result in professional, vocational or occupational certificates, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, GED® preparation, skill development for the local workforce and job training for local employers.

In order to accomplish this mission, we work with a wide variety of higher education and continuing education partners including everything from the Penn State, Pitt and PASSHE systems to private colleges to local career and technical schools, and sometimes a community college. We know our communities, we know our employers, and we try to find the best educational options for all of them. In so doing, we have become a primary broker to our local

areas. We are often times the first stop, or the first phone call an employer or a potential student makes to navigate their options.

So what does a community education council look like? You will most likely feel like you have entered a building on a college campus. You will see classrooms, computer labs, conference rooms, distance learning equipment, agencies which have co-located services, and of course, people who advise students and companies on training and education opportunities. On Tuesday evenings, for instance, at the CEC in St. Marys, you would see registered nurses taking a course towards their BSN where the instructor is on Penn State Altoona's campus and classrooms in Dubois and St. Marys are connected via distance learning equipment. In the next room, you will see a GED® evening course. On our second floor, ECUA is offering a Gannon course on Business and Professional Communications as part of the Associates in Business degree program. The instructor is in the room with several students, while classrooms in Coudersport and Kane are connected via distance learning. Next door to the Gannon class, the University of Pitt at Bradford is offering a Microsoft Office class in one of our computer labs. In total, there are eight credit courses occurring in our building on Tuesdays beginning at 3:00pm. And there are at least three non-credit workshops and trainings being conducted as well on Tuesdays.

Does this sound like a typical college campus to you? It does to me, but what is innovative is that there are multiple options and multiple schools. Wouldn't a community college fit nicely into these options? The network of CECs in the rural areas of the Commonwealth provides a natural, innovative delivery system for a regional rural community college. We have determined the areas of need in terms of programming, and have brought that programming to our communities through partnerships with these schools and providers.

We have had more than twenty years of success, but here's where we cannot always help our residents and businesses:

What we cannot always control and determine are these various partners' level and length of commitment to our CECs. Degree and non-degree programs come and go as enrollment and faculty availability fluctuates. The colleges and universities providing services come and go as their outreach budgets expand and contract. The CECs are not designed to create new educational programs. We utilize what is available. And the community college whose mission it is to serve our rural area would always remain committed to expanding – and will never contract and shrink its services. Our residents and businesses should always have the community college option.

We also cannot help our businesses and residents with technical training. Community colleges bring technical training and close the technical skills gaps. Looking at the map of accredited technical college programs in our region shows a physical, geographical gap in technical training. This region is a manufacturing driver for Pennsylvania. And the manufacturers are running out of gas in their pipelines. There are few training programs to prepare machinists, die-setters, and robotics technicians.

We cannot always guarantee that the options we are providing are the most affordable options. Tuition rates across PA and the nation have drastically outpaced inflation. According to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, Pennsylvania has the highest percent of family income needed to pay for a public four-year education – twenty-three percent, compared to the US average of sixteen percent. To exacerbate this situation, our rural areas have a lower average household income than the state average. And still our options are mostly

four-year, public, private or state related institutions. And students must travel a significant distance to access those institutions. Without comprehensive public transit, this requires a car and all the other expenses that go with it.

Meanwhile, the student debt crisis cannot be ignored. Statistics from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and American Student Assistance report that, on average, students owe \$25,000 in student loans. About forty percent owe more than \$28,000. One in eight students owes more than \$50,000. The average student debt has more than doubled in the last twenty years. PA has the second highest average student loan debt at \$29,959. Purchasing homes, cars, starting a family and saving money for retirement is delayed. This creates not only a financial disadvantage for individuals, but an economic disadvantage for our Commonwealth – and especially our distressed rural areas.

College completion rates are alarmingly low among all types of schools. Only fifty-five percent of students in PA complete a four-year degree within eight years. This leaves the other forty-five percent with partial credits, loan debt and no degree. The CECs talk with these students every day. They want to know how easy – and how affordable it is to finish a degree program in their local area. PDE has made leaps and bounds with the PA Transfer and Articulation Center – every community college in PA has made it easier for students to transfer and articulate courses and entire degree programs. Unfortunately, most of those students we see do not have any credits from a community college, and there is no community college for them to transfer into.

Open admissions policy is a must and this is something that only a community college can provide. We've seen students who struggled in the K12 system actually excel in the college environment. But many who struggle in high school will never get that opportunity without a community college.

I will close this afternoon with the same examples that I opened with. In a better world, when a guidance counselor sits down with a student in St. Marys, a local community college will be one of those options. When a single mother who works full-time decides it's time to go back to school, I want to tell her that the community college is good fit for her. When that student walks in our door and tells us he moved back home with less than thirty credits, no degree, and debt, I want to show him how easily – and how affordably – he can transfer his credits to a community college.

Our rural area is facing a serious brain drain and serious population losses. Students must leave the area to participate in higher education. Parents, teachers and other adults advise students to never come back. And they aren't coming back.

We need this community college to remain competitive. We need this to keep our young people here. We need this to keep our businesses healthy. We need this community college whose mission will be to serve our rural area.

Attachment: CECbrochure.pdf