



# VIEWS & VISIONS

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## Unions Fuel the Workforce

Kenneth M. Perdue, President  
West Virginia AFL-CIO

Kenneth M. Perdue is president of the West Virginia AFL-CIO and chairman of the AFL-CIO Appalachian Council.

Mr. Perdue followed in his father's footsteps to become a union sheet metal worker. He began his sheet metal apprenticeship in Parkersburg, West Virginia, with Sheet Metal Workers LU 299 and has worked throughout the state and country. Mr. Perdue has been a member of the Sheet Metal Workers International Association since 1973 and served on the executive board of Sheet Metal Workers LU 299 from 1980 to 1989.

In 1989, he was elected to the West Virginia AFL-CIO's executive board, following the retirement of his father from the board. In 1991, he was elected as the business representative for Sheet Metal Workers LU 33. In 1997, Mr. Perdue became the secretary-treasurer of the West Virginia AFL-CIO and served in that position for seven years. He was elected president of the West Virginia AFL-CIO in 2004.

Mr. Perdue serves on numerous commissions and executive boards, including Reconnecting McDowell, West Virginia Blue Ribbon Commission on Highways, Judicial Vacancy Advisory Commission, Vision Shared Board, Governor's Work Force Investment Council, WVU Visiting Committee for Extension Services, Imagine WV, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Jobs Cabinet and Discover the Real West Virginia Foundation.

I have been a union sheet metal worker and a laborer for nearly 40 years and have never regretted my decision. I worked with my father, a master sheet metal worker, and we both learned the trade from a Belgian immigrant, a true master with his hands. I have had the opportunity to work in many parts of this great country with other union construction workers. Training was provided to me through a labor management committee and paid for by my union, and for that I am proud to be union.

I have a true sense of pride when I think about the labor movement's contributions to West Virginia. Unions provide West Virginia workers and their families with health care, pension, training, dignity and a community desire to help the less fortunate of us.

An aspect of the union movement that most people are not aware of exists in most cities, counties, municipalities and households. The West Virginia AFL-CIO has two affiliated organizations that assist our youth and our seniors, the Human Resource Development and Employment, Inc. (HRDE) and the Human Resource Development Foundation, Inc. (HRDF). These organizations train workers

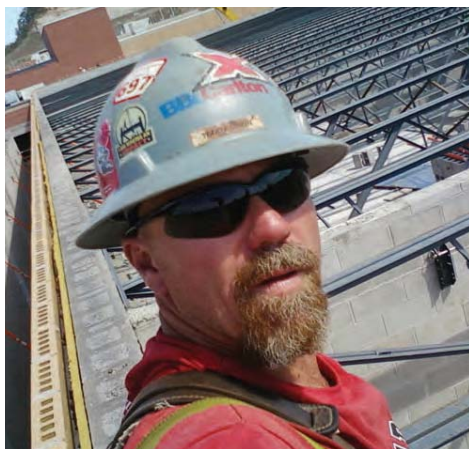
who are school drop-outs, have family problems or just have trouble communicating with others. These individuals are given confidence and a skill that will make them productive citizens and not a problem to society. The programs that afford these opportunities also provide housing for the disabled and seniors who need a roof over their heads.

Some of our most successful programs date back many years. In 1964, the AFL-CIO formed the Appalachia Council, Inc., a nonprofit corporation whose board of directors consists of representatives of 13 Appalachian states. This organization has been an unquestionable success, but I believe its best work is happening now. The Appalachian Council manages Head Start programs in 11 West Virginia counties, instilling confidence and influencing the lives of hundreds of three- to four-year-old children. There is no greater pleasure than providing a child with a meal, clothes, an education, some confidence and, all along, giving the parent an opportunity to prosper.

In 1982, United Food Operation (UFO) was started by unions in the Kanawha Valley to help provide food to the less fortunate. The UFO







collects food from January to April of each year for distribution to various pantries when shelves are bare.

A recently initiated project, Reconnecting McDowell, may prove to be our toughest, but most rewarding program yet. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and former West Virginia First Lady Gayle Manchin have joined together with AFT West Virginia, West Virginia School Service Personnel Association, many other unions and more than 120 partners in giving the children and families of McDowell County, West Virginia an opportunity to learn, grow and prosper. The children, parents and families of McDowell County are not asking for a hand-out, but an opportunity.

There comes a time when all of us should unite for the greater good of West Virginia. That time is now, and the problems are drugs, poverty, children and the family. I know there are many children and adults that want a better life, but drugs have an unbelievable hold on them.

Unions are very proud of their highly trained workforce and, most of all, they work drug free. The apprenticeship programs and journeyman upgrade are, without question, the best example of success for workers. They are trained completely from within the movement through a labor management committee, and with funds negotiated from a collective bargaining agreement.

Industrial sector union workers in steel, aluminum, chemical, plastic and paper are trained to produce a quality product, with safety as an obligation to completing a hard day's work. And, in no industry is safety emphasized more than coal mining. All of these workers are trained by union management to respect and maintain a safe and drug-free workplace through education, counseling and assistance programs, as well as mandatory drug testing.

I will continue to say that city, county, state or federal sector workers are the best natural resource in West Virginia. When elected officials change, this resource of workers keeps the government working, and then educates the incoming officials. These workers protect our children by educating them, preparing their food and transporting each child with care. Our service workers master the communication lines, the phones or Internet, rescue those in danger and protect individuals in time of peril.

Union workers are well-trained and drug free, seeking opportunities for their children and family. Sounds like your next-door neighbor, doesn't it? 