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## Stop false W.Va. worker s' comp campaign

Steve White - Guest Column

I'm writing in regard to a recent study of West Virginia Workers' Compensation done by Marshall University. First, I want to thank Marshall for doing important research on workers' compensation rates in our state.

Recent letters and guest columns printed here have taken exception to the Marshall report, which showed West Virginia's workers' comp rates were not the highest in the nation, as our West Virginia Chamber of Commerce is so fond of saying.

In a guest column printed here July 13, Paul LaBarr wrote that his Virginia company must pay "eight times" more for workers' comp in West Virginia than in Virginia.

I believe it is true the rate LaBarr would pay here is more expensive.

However, the difference is so minimal -- about 3 cents per hour per employee -- that I fail to see how this is a significant barrier to business expansion.

In a July 27 column, Nick Carter, chairman of the West Virginia Chamber of Commerce, complained that an Oregon study cited in the Marshall report may not tell the whole West Virginia story. Good point. But Carter neglects to mention that the Oregon study is the best available and infinitely better than a study misused by the Chamber to claim our rates are highest.

The chamber has manipulated data from a report published by the National Academy of Social Insurance to imply our workers' compensation rates are the highest in the nation. However, a letter sent by NASI to myself and others flatly states, "This interpretation of our report is wrong."

In fact, the NASI letter goes on to suggest a good source of data to compare rates between states is an Oregon study -- the same study cited by Marshall.

Carter also took exception to the Marshall findings that workers' comp rates are only a small factor in most business location determinations.

He claims businesses are frustrated and damaged by the high cost of workers' comp in West Virginia.

Why wouldn't local businesses be frustrated? They believe their leaders who say our rates are higher than every other state. Nevertheless, reports from Marshall, Oregon and NASI all show that the chamber's claims are false.

Carter is right in stating our state has been damaged, but not by its workers' comp rates. The damage has come from the chamber's negative and false message that our workers' comp rates are the highest, when they are not.

It is understandable that businesses want to lower costs, and I agree we should make sure that our West Virginia companies are competitive. Our workers' comp system could stand a number of improvements. Collecting \$400 million from deadbeat coal companies would be a great start. While spreading misinformation about worker's comp rates, our chamber is silent about collecting this huge debt.

It's time for the West Virginia Chamber of Chamber to start serving the businesses who faithfully pay their workers' comp premiums and stop protecting those who do not. And, too, the Chamber should stop the untruthful "highest rate in the nation" campaign which is hurting our state's image.

**Steve White is director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, a division of the West Virginia State Building Trades Council.**

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