



Testimony of

Jason Juffras

Office of the District of Columbia Auditor

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Council of the District of Columbia

Committee on Labor and Workforce Development

Public Hearing on

Bill 22-617, the “Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program
Enhancement Amendment Act of 2017”

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Good morning, Councilmember Silverman and members of the Committee on Labor and Workforce Development. I am Jason Juffras, director of program evaluation for the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor (ODCA). I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss Bill 22-617, the “Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program Enhancement Amendment Act of 2017,” and offer comments based on ODCA evaluation work over the past two years.

In line with the Council’s mandate that ODCA “conduct an evaluation of multiple years of the summer youth jobs program to assess whether the program has met and is meeting program objectives,” we produced four reports that, respectively, examined program data and activities, management and operations, implementation, and similar programs in eight other large cities. I have attached one-page summaries of our reports to the end of this statement.

Based on this work, we are encouraged by Bill 22-617’s intent to strengthen advance planning, tailor placements to youths’ developmental needs, and give priority to young people who are in greatest need of assistance – all of which were important themes in our reports on the summer youth program. I will now discuss each of the four main parts of the bill as well as additional topics for committee consideration.

MBSYEP Certification

The requirement for DOES to use administrative records to certify youth eligibility for the summer program, whenever possible, seems like a worthwhile step. In a report on the 2015 program,¹ we noted that almost 8,000 youths who applied to MBSYEP never completed the eligibility certification process. DOES attributed this large dropoff, which continued in following years, mostly to the youths’ failure to submit required documents on time.

Using existing administrative records to simplify the eligibility process could reduce the number of youths who are eligible for MBSYEP but do not participate because they cannot locate the required documents (a problem that may disproportionately affect youths with less adult guidance). At the same time, policymakers must recognize that streamlining the application process may increase the number of participants who qualify and need summer placements, while also increasing costs.

MBSYEP Placements and Management

The deadlines for identifying host employers and host sites, and for notifying participants of their placements, seem like particularly valuable provisions of Bill 22-617. As required in the legislation, these deadlines will reserve time for pre-program communication between employers and youths, and allow them to work on the development of soft skills by discussing work activities, behavioral expectations, and logistics such as transportation, thereby helping to ensure that youths arrive on time and ready to work.

¹ See Office of the District of Columbia Auditor, “Review of Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program Data and Activities,” June 2, 2016, pp. 27-28.

Similarly, the extra supports required for participants with disabilities seem like important, positive steps. The 2016 independent evaluation of MBSYEP noted the need to strengthen services for youths with disabilities, stating that, “Current efforts (to support youths with disabilities) are geared toward addressing individual needs as they are identified and often after placement ... disabled youth often begin their summer employment with their host unaware that they are disabled, or unaware of what the disability is or how to deal with it.”²

The requirement for DOES to prioritize its host employer recruitment and retention efforts on high-demand industry sectors is well-justified – one of MBSYEP’s primary goals is to help young people succeed in the workforce – but I will also discuss some ways to advance this goal later in this testimony. The bill’s provisions to ensure age-appropriate placements by limiting work readiness positions to 14- and 15-year-olds (with several exceptions stated in the bill) also would help youths prepare for careers by gaining direct work experience, but might require considerable effort by DOES to change its mix of positions. During our study of the 2016 program, many youths aged 16 and older were in work readiness positions.

We would suggest several other exceptions to the placement rules set by Bill 22-617. First, recent immigrants or other English language learners (ELLs) over the age of 15 might need or benefit from work readiness positions. Second, it might be beneficial for a youth to remain with the same employer for three or more consecutive summers *if* he or she is assuming more responsibility, such as helping to supervise younger youths.

Bill 22-617 sets a priority order for DOES in admitting 22- to 24-year-olds to the summer youth program. Although the focus on “Opportunity Youth” – young people who are not regularly employed or in school – is important, the Committee might also want to consider including some high-risk groups of *in-school* youth in the priority order. Examples include ELLs, youths who aged out of foster care, youths involved in the juvenile justice system, homeless youths, and youths with disabilities. This is a complex issue where youth advocates and academics could provide insight.

A final point on this section concerns the requirement for DOES to assess all Opportunity Youth for education, training, and support services, and to use the assessments to refer youths to appropriate services. Elaborating on the nature and process of assessment (such as who conducts the assessment and what expertise the assessors have), perhaps in report language, could help ensure the success of this endeavor. Although MBSYEP’s large enrollment provides a prime opportunity to identify and assist high-risk youth, policymakers must also consider the limits on what can be accomplished in a six-week program. Moreover, it is possible that the same youths are already being assessed and referred through programs administered by the Department of Human Services, Child and Family Services Agency, Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, or other agencies. Other witnesses who work directly with youths might have ideas on how to prevent possible redundancies.

² Department of Employment Services, “2016 Program Evaluation: Marion Barry Summer Youth Employment Program,” prepared by BDA Global, p. 17.

Soft Skills Training

We offer a similar observation on the part of the bill dealing with soft skills training. The challenge would be to devise an assessment process that employers can administer easily but is also valid and reliable. During week 1, for example, it might be difficult for employers to assess the time management or conflict resolution skills of young people whom they have just met.

The bill requires DOES to compare the results of the soft skills assessments for youths at the beginning and end of the summer program to measure their progress. Because many youths participate in multiple years, it might also be valuable to compare the results from year to year to see if any skill gains have persisted.

Reporting Requirements

The reporting requirements outlined in Bill 22-617 touch on important aspects of the summer youth program, but might be streamlined in order to ensure that the Council gets the most critical information. In a wide range of work, we have found that agencies are more likely to report accurately and timely on smaller sets of key measures; paradoxically, less can be more in terms of performance measures.

Several options for streamlining the reporting requirements are as follows:

- regarding applications and certifications (lines 193-201, pp. 8-9), focus on the key indicators of total applicants, total certified applicants, and applicants certified through automatic means.
- regarding demographic information, combine line 188 of p. 8 and lines 223-226 of p. 10 into a single provision.
- regarding data disaggregated by age, group the data into several clusters such as 14- to 15-year-olds, 16- to 21-year-olds, and 22- to 24-year-olds.

At the risk of contradicting the emphasis on streamlining, we would also suggest adding one measure: average attendance by week. This measure provides a good overall gauge of youth persistence and engagement, and steady attendance is an important work habit – a soft skill – that youths must master.

Other Considerations

I want to return to an important topic that I touched on earlier – namely, the bill's requirement that DOES prioritize its employer recruitment and retention efforts on high-demand industry sectors identified by the Workforce Investment Council. To attain this goal, DOES will need to expand private-sector involvement in the summer youth program – and specifically, the private, for-profit sector – a point we emphasized in our report on summer youth programs in other cities. Although we are a government town, we also have a thriving professional and business services sector that offers considerable opportunity.

We found that other programs work more closely with private-sector employers than does the District’s summer program in terms of job training, job placement, and corporate funding. A particularly notable example was Boston, where the city’s Private Industry Council placed 3,310 youths in *unsubsidized* jobs in 2015—more than a third of the participants in Boston’s summer youth program. These private-sector placements give young people access to high-growth and high-demand sectors, such as technology, health care, hospitality, and finance.

By contrast, only 10 percent of D.C.’s summer youth employment positions in the summer of 2015 were in the private, for-profit sector – and we know that the underrepresentation of this sector persists. The 2017 independent evaluation of the summer youth program reported that 70 percent of the placements were in career exploration, child care, theater, or sports and fitness, which “are not usually direct pathways to jobs in the District.”³ Without a much more intensive effort to recruit participants from the private, for-profit sector (as well as national associations which are a major employer in the District), MBSYEP is unlikely to meet the goal of providing youths with pathways to employment in high-demand sectors. Private, for-profit employers in other cities such as Baltimore, Los Angeles, and New York City have also emphasized soft skills development in pre-employment training sessions for summer youth.

D.C. policymakers could seek to re-establish a program similar to one operated by the D.C. Chamber of Commerce from 2006 to 2009 in order to help youths find private-sector positions with prospects for career growth. The Chamber screened youth and provided a week of work readiness training before placing youths in as many as 250 summer youth positions. Officials in other cities who spoke with us emphasized that private-sector employers will be reluctant to grant opportunities to youths without the screening and training that a private-sector partner can provide. The 2017 evaluation by Blue Path Labs LLC also includes a number of useful recommendations about how to increase the participation of the commercial sector.⁴

D.C. policymakers should also review innovative summer youth programs or policies implemented in other cities, particularly those initiatives that target at-risk youths. A prime example is the One Summer Chicago Plus program, which connects youths who are identified to be at risk for involvement in violence with a 20-hour per week summer job, a mentor, and training in civic leadership, decision making, and job readiness. This program targets youths aged 16 to 19 enrolled in public high schools located in high-crime areas who missed six to eight weeks of school or have been involved in the juvenile justice system.

One Summer Chicago Plus expanded to serve more than 3,000 youths each summer due to a two-year, \$10 million private grant. A randomized, controlled study by the University of Chicago’s Crime Lab and the University of Pennsylvania found that youths who participated in the program experienced a 43 percent reduction in violent-crime arrests over a 16-month

³ Blue Path Labs LLC, “2017 Independent Evaluation: Marion Barry Summer Youth Employment Program,” p. 12.

⁴ Blue Path Labs LLC, “2017 Independent Evaluation: Marion Barry Summer Youth Employment Program,” pp. 3, 12-14, 38.

period. The study also found “suggestive evidence” that arrests fell by a larger percentage among youths at a higher risk of violence.

Technical Considerations

Attached to the end of this testimony are some technical amendments for the Committee’s consideration. That concludes my prepared testimony, Madam Chair, and I would be happy to answer any questions.

Suggested Technical Amendments to Bill 22-617, the
“Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program Enhancement Amendment Act of 2017”

- The “Office of the State Superintendent of Education” could be added to the definition of “District of Columbia-funded education program” (lines 50-52, p. 2 of the bill as introduced) because OSSE administers adult education programs.
- The definition of “employer types” (lines 54-56, p. 2) could be clarified. “Private sector organizations” and “non-profit organizations” are treated as separate categories, but non-profit organizations are a form of private-sector organization. Similarly, “public schools” and “public charter schools” are treated as separate categories, but public charter schools are a form of public school (as recognized in the definition of “public school” on lines 76-77, p. 3). An alternative would be to use the terms “private, for-profit organizations” and “private, non-profit organizations,” as well as “D.C. Public Schools” and “public charter schools.”
- The phrase “education on employers’ right to conduct drug tests” could be deleted from the definition of “soft skills training” (lines 78-81, p. 3) because “soft skills” typically refers to behavioral and social skills rather than specific knowledge.
- The phrase “3 consecutive absences” (lines 170-171, p. 7) could be changed to “3 consecutive unexcused absences.”
- The reference to “modules of the District of Columbia Public Schools’ Tenacity curriculum (lines 180-181, p. 8) could be made more general because the Tenacity curriculum could be discarded, replaced, or renamed. The phrase could be rewritten to refer to “soft-skills training materials or curricula used by the District of Columbia Public Schools.”