

Testimony before the D.C. City Council Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs
Councilmember Marion Barry, Chair

Public Oversight Roundtable on Eliminating Poverty Among District Residents

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Good morning Councilmember Barry and members of the Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs. Thank you for holding this roundtable today on the important challenge of reducing poverty in the District of Columbia. I appreciate the opportunity to testify about ways to improve the economic status of District residents.

Despite a vibrant economy in the Washington region and a resurgence of jobs in the District itself, far too many District residents are mired in poverty. Research from the DC Fiscal Policy Institute shows that at nearly 20 percent, D.C.'s poverty rate is now at the highest level in a decade.¹ The wage gap between the bottom one-fifth and top one-fifth of earners is at its widest since 1979.² Despite job growth, the employment rate among those with no more than a high school diploma has declined in recent years.³ In 1999, 23 percent of the city's neighborhoods were high-poverty, with poverty rates of 30 percent or more.⁴ Over half of those high-poverty neighborhoods were extremely poor, with poverty rates of 40 percent or more.

The Brookings Greater Washington Program last year completed a major study on reducing poverty and rebuilding the middle class in Washington, D.C. We focused on practical ways of increasing the incomes of low-income residents quickly. We estimate there are between 51,000 – 61,000 low-income residents aged 16 to 64 in the District with less than a college degree who could benefit from education, training, and work-readiness services. The majority are less-skilled, with a high school degree or less. While many of these individuals are employed full time and could move up the career ladder with additional skill-building opportunities, many others work sporadically or are seriously disconnected from the labor market. Yet the city has limited programs, policies, and resources to help these residents. The city should rapidly enhance its ability to help less-skilled, low-income residents increase their skills, work-readiness, earnings, and employment.

I'll start with recommendations for the FY 2009 budget, most of which build on existing programs, and then move to some longer-term recommendations.

¹ Ed Lazere, "DC's Two Economies: Many Residents Are Falling Behind Despite the City's Revitalization" (Washington: DC Fiscal Policy Institute, 2007).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Census 2000.

For the FY 2009 budget

The District needs to create some new kinds of programs and expand existing programs for youth and adults who have low basic reading and math skills and are unprepared for the expectations and norms of the workplace. Again and again we hear from employers, city officials and nonprofit organizations that low reading and math skills prevent residents from qualifying for training programs or from succeeding in the workplace. And we also hear about residents whose behavior, dress, and attitudes are inappropriate for the workplace.

These are not insolvable problems, although they do stem from complex social causes. Strong programs with the right kinds of educational approaches and additional elements like mentoring, tutoring, counseling, and other supportive services can make a big difference. By necessity, these programs are intensive and as a result, expensive. Quick-fix and cheap programs are inadequate for residents with low skill levels and sometimes profound disconnections from the world of traditional education and employment. Additionally, we need to be thoughtful about expanding capacity and increasing program slots. While the need is urgent, we must ensure we are building high-quality programs to serve residents, which takes some time. Existing programs should be evaluated and those that show measurable results should be expanded. I would urge the Council to fund the following types of programs in the FY 2009 budget:

- YouthBuild and service corps programs for unemployed, out-of-school youth. Young people who are not working and not enrolled in school are at a higher risk for a number of bad outcomes like substance abuse, homelessness, and involvement with the criminal justice system. But programs that connect such young people to educational and employment opportunities can have an incredibly positive impact on their lives. Young people who have found their way to such programs have described their alternatives as the street, prison, or funerals.

The District is home to several programs with proven models of working with unemployed, out-of-school youth. One is the YouthBuild program, in which participants learn construction skills by rehabilitating housing in exchange for a stipend while improving their academic skills and working towards a GED. Several nonprofits in the city operate YouthBuild programs, including Sasha Bruce, the Latin American Youth Center, the National Association of Former Foster Care Children of America, and ARCH. Another is the service and conservation corps program, a descendent of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s. Participants in corps programs carry out community service projects, receive a stipend, improve their academic skills, work towards a GED, and are mentored. Locally, the Earth Conservation Corps focuses on environmental rehabilitation around the Anacostia River.

- Contextual skills training programs leading to employment. Older youth and adults with low basic skills, whether or not they have a GED or high-school diploma, can benefit from programs that integrate basic reading and math skills with occupational skills training and a focus on work readiness. The goal is to prepare students for employment in a specific field or occupation, and to improve academic skills within an occupational context. Programs also typically offer

counseling and case management to help students address other issues in their lives that could interfere with their education or employment.

The District is home to at least two programs of this type (there may be others we don't know about): the Center for Employment Training (CET) at So Others Might Eat (SOME) and the Excel Institute. CET offers training in building maintenance and administrative positions in customer service and the health care field. The Excel Institute offers training in automotive repair.

- "Bridge" programs designed to prepare students for post-secondary education in specific occupational fields. Too many residents are locked out of education and training programs because they don't have adequate reading and math skills. A bridge program is for students close to the required skill levels (for example, at an eighth grade reading level, not a fourth grade level). The program prepares students both for further education and career advancement, and is designed to feed into specific post-secondary certificate or degree programs with a particular occupational focus. In addition to academics, programs also focus on time management, study skills, stress management, career counseling, and applying for school and financial aid. They also offer case management and counseling.

As far as we know, there are no programs like this in the District, although some pre-apprenticeship programs might be similar. We recommend that the city fund a pilot bridge program that prepares students to enter into certificate and two-year degree programs in the health care field, with a focus on feeding students into local postsecondary institutions, such as the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) and Southeastern University. The city could release an RFP for organizations or collaboratives to operate such a program.

All of these recommendations should involve a close collaboration with private-sector employers. For example, employers can provide input on in-demand occupations and skills, help with curriculum development, offer internships and job shadowing opportunities, donate equipment and supplies, conduct mock interviews, and contribute financially.

Longer-term workforce development issues

I also want to talk about longer-run changes that would greatly strengthen the District's capacity to help residents to move out of poverty and into the middle class.

Develop a strategy to provide the full array of community college programs to District residents. I know that the City Council and UDC leadership have discussed this issue, which is a complex one. I am not sure what the right answer is, but I do know that no other state asks one institution to act as both a community college and a university. It is a tall order since the two traditionally have different missions, priorities, and faculty. We need to think strategically about how to enhance the city's community college offerings, such as certificates and two-year degrees. My program is working on a short paper on the topic, and we look forward to discussing it further with you.

Focus on ex-offenders. We should rethink how we approach workforce development with previously incarcerated people. The Transitional Employment Program, also known as Project Empowerment, provides short-term, subsidized employment for ex-offenders and other residents, with the goal of assisting them in finding an unsubsidized job. We applaud the District's commitment to this program, and urge it to continue. However, we do suggest that the city restructure the program so that previously incarcerated people are enrolled immediately upon their release instead of requiring people to find their own way to the program. This will require close coordination and cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA). The city should also consider adopting a model like the one used by the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) in New York City, in which participants work together in closely-supervised work crews and the program is reimbursed for the services work crews provide.

Focus on the quality and capacity of government operated and contracted programs. City agencies, including the Department of Employment Services (DOES), the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), and the Workforce Investment Council (WIC) should have candid discussions with nonprofit service providers about how to measure program quality, what kinds of performance measures and timelines are realistic, and how best to structure performance-based contracts that hold vendors accountable and provide enough support for high-quality services.

Develop a sector-specific workforce development plan. The WIC needs to complete its industry sector analysis as soon as possible, and work with DOES and other partners to develop an implementation plan. The goal is to work closely with employers to identify in-demand jobs and career ladders in specific industries and then work with training providers to develop appropriate programs. Programs should have a "dual customer" focus — i.e., they meet the needs of both employers and less-skilled residents.

Improve career and technical education (CTE) in the public schools. The District of Columbia Public Schools should carry out its plans to implement Career Academies in high schools, which give graduates strong options for employment, postsecondary education, or apprenticeships. Chartered public schools should also be included in the plan. Career Academies are smaller "schools within a school," with a class of 50-75 students, a career theme for academic and technical curricula, and strong employer partnerships.

Start building a training pipeline now for upcoming construction jobs associated with the development of the Anacostia Waterfront and school modernization. The District's ability to meet First Source and other hiring requirements hinges on whether employers and training providers are organized and have the necessary capacity in their programs to produce employment-ready job candidates. The city needs to work with employers and training organizations to build and support this capacity. The program models we suggest above – youth programs, contextual education, and bridge programs – would all help with this goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to discussing these issues with you further.