



Prepared Testimony of
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Chairwoman Frederica S. Wilson & Ranking Member Gregory F.
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U.S. House of Representatives Education & Labor Committee's
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment

Thursday, May 13, 2021

Testimony in support of:

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Creating
Opportunities for Youth Employment

PYN Written Testimony

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Chairwoman Wilson, Ranking Member Murphy, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Chekemma Fulmore-Townsend. I am the President and CEO of the Philadelphia Youth Network, where I work tirelessly with my colleagues to ensure education and employment opportunities are available to young people in Philadelphia. Our vision is to use those education and employment experiences to interrupt the cycle of poverty by connecting youth the skills and mindsets they need to thrive in their chosen career pathway. Together, with our partners, PYN has provided more than 225,000 education and employment opportunities since our inception in 1999.

Madam Chair, all of us have lived through our share of challenges over the past 15 months but let me begin by offering you some good news. In Philadelphia and across this nation, local workforce boards and youth-serving community organizations are working as hard as we possibly can to bring the best possible mix of education, training, and employment services to our nation's young people. Our partnerships are strong, and our commitment is unyielding.

I know first-hand how important federal workforce development legislation like the Workforce Innovation and Improvement Act can be in creating the next generation of leaders. In fact, I am living proof of the power of early paid internships to transform the lives of young people. I am a social worker today because in my first job as a high school student I learned that I wanted to turn helping people into a career. It was also through that job that I earned much needed money that helped pay for school supplies and school clothes. So, in a very real sense, if it had not been for employment training programs, I would I not be here before you today.

As the first in my family to attend college and earn a graduate degree, I know full well

the emotional burden and courage it takes for a young person to be a cycle breaker in their family. Therefore, I'm particularly grateful for the opportunity to discuss the importance of WIOA reauthorization in serving our most vulnerable young people and the essential role of WIOA-funded programs play in preparing youth to become skilled, educated, and engaged citizens in our future workforce.

Since PYN's inception, we have learned a great deal about what it takes to deliver high-quality youth employment programming, including in this last, most challenging period. Based on those experiences, I want to offer several thoughts and recommendations in three areas:

- Strengthening WIOA programming for out-of-school school and young adults
- Re-establishing a robust national summer jobs program
- Increasing federal investments in all aspects of youth workforce development.

WIOA Programming. WIOA appropriately prioritizes 16-24-year-old youth and young adults who are out-of-school, requiring that at least 75% of funds be dedicated to programming for this population. While serving this population is a key piece of our work, holding to this ratio to meet WIOA requirements means that providers must often wait to serve youth until they are already disconnected, rather than taking preventative measures that could have kept them engaged and on-track to meet their education and employment goals. Utilizing a "Priority Population" framework to determine youth eligibility using a set of risk indicators for disconnection would simplify the enrollment process and allow local providers more flexibility to serve those youth in their communities with the highest need. We recommend that 90% of youth enrolled in WIOA programming meet at least one of the priority population indicators.

As the statute recognizes, we consistently find that this population of young people needs significant amounts of additional preparation in their literacy and numeracy skills, and we know that contextualized learning that is embedded in career skills training reinforces academic and technical skills. We recommend incentivizing training approaches that build literacy and numeracy skills in a career-specific way.

Additionally, significant supportive services are required to address barriers to success.

These barriers include physical and mental health, housing stability, transportation assistance, food insecurity, and childcare, and are fundamental needs as young people prepare to successfully enter and complete a WIOA training program. To better address these challenges, we recommend providing additional flexibility in the criteria to validate the needs as a pre-requisite for the approval of supportive services. Not only is it difficult to navigate the complexities of each system, it is traumatizing and triggering to relive the details of your pain in order to get the help needed to be successful in training. Funding adequate case management and pre-participation readiness activities would be an advanced step in delivering services in a way that meets the expressed needs. Additional consideration should be given to more adequately funding and extending follow up services that are necessary to a young person's continued success after the completion of their program.

Young peoples' needs also require more highly trained staff. But too often adults who are responsible for coaching students into successful career placements do not receive the kind of professional development they need to keep up with industry standards required by employers in a variety of fields and truly prepare young people for the future of work. Strengthening WIOA youth provisions to provide for and require appropriate professional development, coupled with mindfulness and trauma-informed care training, could improve this situation and ensure that qualified staff are retained, which ultimately impacts the scale and consistency of positive outcomes.

Summer Youth Employment. Although WIOA allows funds to support summer youth employment, with the exceptions of the youth provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Obama Administration's Summer Jobs Plus initiative in 2016, there has been no direct federal support for summer jobs since 1998. Of course, we applaud Congressman Scott's Opening Doors for Youth Act that would have authorized support for summer youth employment opportunities and urge that these or similar provisions be enacted.

Research has shown that early work experience, including during the summer months, can have a range of benefits for young participants, including improved academics, avoidance of negative behaviors, and better jobs and earnings later in life. And, in fact, many cities like Philadelphia have stepped up to offer these

experiences for our young people. But renewed federal legislation authorizing summer youth employment programs could mean that tens of thousands more young people have access to these important developmental opportunities. These opportunities also enhance the local talent pool by exposing the next generation to the evolving world of work. Summer jobs offer a way for local employers to actively contribute to solutions that train new workers for their future talent needs. There are benefits for the youth and the economy that should no longer be ignored.

Investments. Federal investments in youth employment programming through the Workforce Investment Act and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act have declined 40% since 2001. As a result, only a small fraction of eligible youth can be served. This limited investment is particularly challenging now given the significant needs of vulnerable young people who were hardest hit in the last year. Since WIOA was reauthorized in 2014, we know the world and the outlook for our young people has shifted dramatically. Reports from the field indicate that we have lost a decade of progress in the last year in terms of youth education and employment. Despite the odds, we know that the young people we serve are powerful, full of potential, and deserving of every positive opportunity that keeps them engaged productively in school, in their community, and in the workforce.

We urge that these investments and enhancements be included in the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

Local communities are doing their part, providing support for opportunity youth training programs, summer youth employment, employer-linked sector approaches, and others. In Philadelphia, our city regularly provides more than \$7 million for summer and year-round jobs and has also prioritized providing an additional 2,000 employment opportunities for opportunity youth.

A particularly innovative funding approach came in the summer of 2020, when PYN established its first ever Opportunity Youth Fund, where young people could receive funds in a variety of payment forms for assistance with exactly what they needed to survive- electric bills, food, internet bills, and more. The funder for this new initiative saw the need for flexible funding and met it, but not without many roadblocks. At

every turn we met resistance, from the accounting regulations to the banking requirements, but we persisted with nearly 1,000 youth benefiting from this approach. PYN has chosen to continue this initiative as we have seen its positive effects, despite the significant challenges. This kind of flexibility and real-time responsiveness to youth need should be considered in any legislation supporting youth employment programs.

All over our country, youth workforce professionals are helping young people succeed. In Philadelphia Youth Network's two dozen years of serving youth, we have developed some best practices that have been seen and replicated in other cities across the youth workforce system. We have built deep partnerships with our local workforce investment board and employers that have allowed us to braid funding streams and inform our preparation of youth for their future careers. We have also published a Career Development Framework (CDF) that was designed to translate the expectations of employers into attainable skills and traits that can be taught by youth program providers. The framework is intentionally industry-agnostic and outlines career skills that youth need to attain for any industry as they progress developmentally- skills like teamwork and communication, learning from failure and growth from feedback, and leadership. PYN worked with city departments, educational leaders, and employers to develop the framework that unites the actions and services of different systems that serve youth. Because of this, it was embedded into the Mayor's citywide workforce strategy (*Fueling Philadelphia's Talent Engine*) and the Office of Children and Families adopted the CDF in their RFP (Request for Proposals) requirements for youth out of school time programs. This city-wide collaboration has transformed the language and actions of funders and programs alike to be unified in our approach to youth workforce development.

We also work to be accountable by continually improve our efforts collect the kind of data that many programs cannot obtain on their own as they work with limited resources and serve a small subset of the youth population. We have documented the benefits of youth employment and training programs for our city, including lowering rates of criminal justice involvement, and the fact that paying youth not only puts money directly back into the local economy but also, in many cases, provides

additional income for families living in poverty.

Because of this, and the privilege I have to witness young people in Philadelphia changing their outcomes firsthand, I deeply believe in the need for WIOA reauthorization, renewed federal attention to summer jobs, and further investment in the education and employment programs that make such a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable young people.

Thank you to the Committee for your interest and leadership in this work. I look forward to working with you to ensure that all our young people have access to the high-quality opportunities that they need, and more importantly, deserve.

¹ A Decade Undone: Youth Disconnection in the Age of the Coronavirus. Kristen Lewis, Measure of America, 2020.

² Fueling Philadelphia's Talent Engine, 2018.