



**Written Testimony of Byron V. Garrett
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**House Education and Labor Committee, Subcommittee on Higher Education
and Workforce Investment**

Thank you Chairwoman Wilson, Ranking Member Murphy, and all the members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify today. My name is Byron Garrett and I serve as the President and CEO of the National Job Corps Association. As a lifelong educator and education advocate – including prior stints as a school principal, Education Commissioner for the City of Phoenix, CEO of the National Parent Teacher Association, and Co-Convener of the Helping America’s Youth Initiative led by former First Lady Laura Bush – it is a distinct honor to appear before this Subcommittee and contribute to conversations that will impact the lives of millions of our nation’s youth.

COVID’s Impact on Opportunity Youth

I joined the Job Corps community in the summer of 2019 motivated by the program’s mission: to offer opportunity to our nation’s most marginalized youth. A little more than six months into my tenure, the COVID-19 pandemic made clear the importance of that mission. Millions of Americans lost their sources of income, faced eviction, and turned to food banks to fend off hunger. Last summer, nearly 1 in 3 Americans age 16 to 24 were disconnected from

both education and employment.ⁱ High school dropouts, in particular, have struggled; according to a recent Census Bureau survey, more than 50 percent expect to be evicted within 2 months and more than 20 percent struggle with hunger.ⁱⁱ Even as we emerge from the pandemic, employment rates among young Americans will lag behind other workers because of their relative lack of experience.ⁱⁱⁱ Research has shown that coming of age during an economic downturn may leave young people's careers in a state of arrested development that can impact the rest of their lives.^{iv}

Job Corps' Mission

Congress created Job Corps for these youth. At over 120 campuses, including one in every state, Job Corps has the capacity to annually house, feed, mentor, and provide career and technical education to over 60,000 young Americans. Job Corps offers multiple avenues to earn a high school degree or equivalency, career preparation for over 100 high-demand professions, including nursing, information technology, and advanced manufacturing, offering hundreds of associated industry-recognized credentials, the ability to participate in pre-apprenticeships and work-based learning, and the opportunity to dual enroll with local colleges and earn credit towards a postsecondary degree. At some campuses, such as the Benjamin L. Hooks Job Corps campus in Memphis, Tennessee that Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh and Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff visited last week, Job Corps even offers childcare and Head Start programs to care for and educate children as their parents work to secure a better future for their families.

As an educator, I work from the framework of Dr. Asa Hilliard who said "I have never encountered any children in any group who are not geniuses." It is our responsibility as adults and educators to draw out that genius. And we have seen the proof in Job Corps:

- From homelessness to Harvard;

- From child of an incarcerated father and high school dropout to celebrated tech entrepreneur and investor on Shark Tank;
- From dropout to two-time heavyweight champion of the world; and
- From the homeless child of farm-working immigrants to Chief Judge on the Idaho State Court of Appeals.

These stories are exceptional – in any context. But they share the same beginnings as millions of marginalized and disadvantaged youth across America and their endings would not have been possible without Job Corps.

While most of our students do not go to Harvard or become heavyweight champion of the world, by and large, Job Corps students achieve incredible outcomes under the tutelage and guidance of our dedicated instructors, counselors, and mentors:

- The average Job Corps enrollee enters the program reading below the 8th grade level but advances the equivalent of 2.5 grade levels after less than a year in Job Corps;^v
- In the last complete year before COVID, 82% of Job Corps enrollees earned an industry-recognized credential;^{vi} and
- More than 85% of Job Corps graduates consistently transition into employment, enroll in postsecondary education, or enlist in the military.^{vii}

We are proud of the success our students achieve while in Job Corps and their lives afterward. But there are also opportunities – some highlighted by the COVID pandemic – to better orient our program to meet the needs of marginalized youth and the employers who need skilled workers to grow the American economy and our communities.

Opportunities to Better Meet Student and Employer Needs

In recent years, Job Corps has consistently had empty beds and classroom seats across the country while youth homeless shelters were full and millions of young Americans were out-of-work and out-of-school. Each year, we expel thousands of students for behaviors, such as marijuana use, that could instead be addressed by our staff and enable those students to grow and become productive members of society. We have, at times, failed to be responsive to the needs of our students and local employers in a timely way, particularly during the last year. And our staff, frontline essential workers who housed, fed, educated, and cared for youth who had nowhere else to go during the pandemic, have seen their wages fail to keep pace with local school districts and even decrease in some cases making it increasingly impossible to retain our best teachers, counselors, nurses, and mentors.

On behalf of the community of youth service providers that make up the National Job Corps Association, I would like to offer the following priorities for Job Corps' reauthorization to help more socioeconomically disadvantaged young Americans reach their career goals:

1. Reduce barriers to enrollment, including easing documentation requirements and facilitating a no-wrong-door approach to engaging youth;
2. Allow a system of positive behavioral interventions and supports and a progressive disciplinary system modeled on the workplace that will maintain campus safety while enabling more students to become responsible, employable citizens; and
3. Enable flexibility to take a student- and employer-centered approach to Job Corps campus operations; and

4. Ensure Job Corps teachers, vocational instructors, mental health counselors, residential advisor, nurses and other staff are rewarded for helping students to achieve excellent outcomes and compensated appropriately.

Reduce Barriers to Enrollment

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the extraordinary need for Job Corps. Since the start of the pandemic, about 20,000 struggling, young Americans have applied to enroll in Job Corps. In notes to our admissions counselors and on public forums like Reddit, these young people are pleading for support. Many are homeless, hungry, or concerned about how to support their child, and Job Corps offers hope to not only escape their current circumstance, but to also invest in their future.

Unfortunately, even before the pandemic, these youth would have faced barriers to quickly enrolling in Job Corps. We require applicants to provide more documentation than is generally necessary to enroll in college, including financial and health information that may be difficult for them to access. Hundreds of thousands of youth who engage with government services in search of both housing and career development are never even made aware that Job Corps is an option.

Instead, imagine if we took a no-wrong-door approach where any young person who took the initiative to walk through the door of a one-stop center or engage with homeless support services is seamlessly referred to a Job Corps admissions counselor who would reach out to them and fully inform them about the program and its services. Application requirements should be streamlined so that the time between a young person expressing a desire to enroll in Job Corps and that young person being housed and starting their career development is measured in days,

not weeks. This could be achieved by relaxing the documentation burdens for certain youth, such as homeless youth and youth who live in congressionally-designated opportunity zones.

More Effective Behavioral and Safety Policies

Survey employers and they will tell you that while technical skills are necessary, employability skills – including responsible behavior, interpersonal skills, and communication skills – are what they struggle to find, particularly in young workers.^{viii} Youth struggling with untreated behavioral health challenges often exhibit such behaviors. Substance abuse is more common with this population as they self-medicate and struggle to cope. In a recent program year, 31% of Job Corps students disclosed a disability – the majority being cognitive such as learning disabilities, attention deficit or hyperactive disorders, or mood disorders.^{ix} An equivalent percentage of students tested positive for drug use on entry, 91% of whom test positive for marijuana use.^x According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, youth with these comorbidities often require support to navigate the transition to adulthood with its potentially stressful changes in education, work, and relationships.^{xi}

Job Corps' statutory zero tolerance policy prevents us from supporting thousands of these youth and helping them to become more employable. The U.S. Department of Education states that there is no evidence that zero tolerance policies improve student behavior or school climate but plenty of evidence that these policies are discriminatory – particularly to students of color and students with disabilities – and result in worse academic outcomes.^{xii} Research also suggests that, as a behavioral policy, such policies are actually counterproductive and increase the likelihood that expelled students will develop worse behavior and become involved with the justice system.^{xiii}

With greater flexibility, Job Corps can successfully address problematic behaviors AND improve student outcomes. Research has shown that multi-tiered behavioral frameworks such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) actually improve school climate and safety while increasing student achievement.^{xiv} By implementing positive behavioral interventions and a progressive disciplinary system modeled on the same policies that we use with our employees, we can better prepare thousands of students for employment. The proof is in our outcomes: 4 out of 5 Job Corps students that test positive for drug use and complete Job Corps' employment-oriented substance abuse counseling, test clean within 45 days.^{xv} Disaggregating incident reporting about health issues, including substance use and behavioral health issues, from incident reporting related to maintaining a safe living and learning environment would facilitate greater accountability with respect to promoting both employability and safe campuses.

Student- and Employer-Centered Campus Operations

The foundation of Job Corps' model and its historical success is a focus on each student's specific needs, talents, and goals: student-centered learning. Some of our students enter the program with a high school diploma, maybe even having tried college, and others enter the program functionally illiterate. Job Corps adapts to each of these students and their goals to help them travel as far as possible along their chosen career pathway.

Nonetheless, the pandemic exposed some of the limitations the program still faces in being nimble enough to meet student needs as they arise. Although we determined that our disadvantaged students would need Chromebooks and hotspots to effectively participate in distance-learning after we sent them home, it took Job Corps months to secure and distribute technology. As mentioned earlier, tens of thousands of young people are waiting to engage with

Job Corps, including some who are homeless or in potentially dangerous situations. Thanks to leaders on this Committee, Congress included language in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 to help us expedite enrolling these vulnerable youth, but we are still awaiting the necessary approvals. And even before the pandemic, our campuses struggled to be responsive to employers in their local communities as they waited months for approvals to change the trade offerings at their campuses. Our most vulnerable applicants and students as well as employers looking to meet an urgent need often do not have months to wait.

To be clear, these delays are not the result of negligence or neglect by the U.S. Department of Labor or Job Corps' youth service providers. The structure of the program and existing regulations have necessitated the Department's detailed involvement in approving campus activities and expenditures. The current transition towards utilizing firm-fixed price contracts in Job Corps offers an opportunity to correspondingly transition to an operating model that gives Job Corps campuses greater flexibility. With greater flexibility to set individualized learning plans for each student, change trades to meet emerging demands, and adjust staffing accordingly, we can work with students and local employers to create the shortest path from enrollment to employment.

Retain and Reward High Performing Staff

The transition to firm-fixed price contracts, while potentially enabling Job Corps to be nimbler with respect to meeting student and employer needs, has not been without its risks. The tendency to award firm-fixed price contracts based principally on costs has created instability in Job Corps operations and downward pressures on campus budgets and, as a result, staff compensation which comprises 65-70% of campus budgets. The fact that Job Corps operations

contracts are not subject to the Service Contract Act further compounds the challenges of ensuring our staff are adequately compensated. Nothing is more tied to the success of our students than the quality and stability of our staff. However, in recent years, Job Corps has struggled to retain its best teachers, counselors, nurses, and managers.

Clarifying that Job Corps contracts should be subject to the Service Contract Act will help ensure that Job Corps instructors and other staff are paid competitive wages. Congress included report language in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 expressing the expectation that Job Corps operators should be selected based first and foremost on past performance delivering successful student outcomes. Codifying this in statute will ensure that staff who excel in helping students reach their career goals are rewarded with job stability.

Conclusion

Over the course of the last year, Job Corps campus staff, youth service providers, and leaders at the U.S. Department of Labor have worked collaboratively to adapt to an unprecedented situation and meet the needs of our students. We collectively stood up a distance learning program in a matter of weeks, distributed food, learning technology, and emotional support to thousands of youth in communities across the country, and have safely begun resuming operations, including vaccinating students and staff. The herculean efforts from the U.S. Department of Labor to Job Corps' youth service providers to our campus staff have been a lifeline for many students.

As we continue to safely return students to Job Corps campuses, the recommendations I outlined today will enable us to build back a system that better meets the needs of our applicants, our students, staff, and local employers. There are also other workforce development policies

that would benefit not just Job Corps youth, but opportunity youth more broadly, such as disaggregating performance data to promote more equitable services to the most marginalized populations and encouraging colleges to establish articulation agreements, credit for prior learning, and credit transferability, which I would be happy to discuss.

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this conversation on how to better serve our nation's marginalized youth as they make the transition into adulthood and the workplace. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

ⁱ Fry, Richard and Barroso, Amanda (July, 2020). "Amid coronavirus outbreak, nearly three-in-ten U.S. youth were neither in school nor working." Pew Research Center. July 29, 2020. Retrieved May 8, 2021 from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/29/amid-coronavirus-outbreak-nearly-three-in-ten-young-people-are-neither-working-nor-in-school/>

ⁱⁱ U.S. Census Bureau (May, 2021). Week 28 Household Pulse Survey: April 14 – April 26. Retrieved May 8, 2021 from: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2021/demo/hhp/hhp28.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Greenstone, Michael and Looney, Adam (September, 2010). "The Long-term Effects of the Great Recession for America's Youth." The Brookings Institution. Retrieved May 8, 2021 from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/jobs/2010/09/03/the-long-term-effects-of-the-great-recession-for-americas-youth/>

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Outcome Measurement System Center Report Card (OMS-10); Report Period: 7/1/2015 – 6/30/2016. U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved February 13, 2017 from http://www.jobcorps.gov/Libraries/Annual%20Reports/OMS10_2016.sflb

^{vi} Office of Job Corps (July, 2019). Outcome Measurement System Center Report Card (OMS-10) Report Period: 7/1/2018 – 6/30/2019. U.S. Department of Labor. July 5, 2019.

^{vii} Office of Job Corps (July, 2018). Outcome Measurement System Center Report Card (OMS-10) Report Period: 7/1/2017 – 6/30/2018. U.S. Department of Labor. July 5, 2018.

^{viii} Youth.gov. Qualifications and Attributes Critical to Employers. Retrieved May 8, 2021 from: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-employment/qualifications-and-attributes-employers-believe-are-critical>

^{ix} Office of Job Corps (November, 2019). Job Corps Health and Wellness Report: Review of Selected Health Indicators Program Year 2018. U.S. Department of Labor. Job Corps Information Notice No. 19-02.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} National Institute on Drug Abuse (April, 2020). Common Comorbidities with Substance Use Disorders Research Report. National Institute on Drug Abuse Research Report. April 2020. Retrieved May 8, 2021 from: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/common-comorbidities-substance-use-disorders/part-1-connection-between-substance-use-disorders-mental-illness>

^{xii} U.S. Department of Education (January, 2017). Rethinking Discipline. Retrieved on May 8, 2021 from: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html>

^{xiii} Fabelo, T., Thompson, M.D., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D. Marchbanks III, M.P., & Booth, E.A. (2011). Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement. Justice Center: The Council of State Governments. Retrieved on May 8, 2021 from: https://knowledgecenter.csg.org/kc/system/files/Breaking_School_Rules.pdf

^{xiv} U.S. Department of Education (January, 2017).

^{xv} Office of Job Corps (November, 2019).