



Amy Dudas, DC Alliance of Youth Advocates
Testimony to the Committee on Labor & Workforce Development
Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program Enhancement Act
January 10, 2018

Thank you, Chairperson Silverman, for the opportunity to provide input as the Committee on Labor and Workforce Development solicits feedback on the Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program Enhancement Amendment Act of 2017. My name is Amy Dudas and I am testifying today as a Ward 6 resident and Director of Re-engagement and Workforce Initiatives with the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates (DCAYA), a coalition of over 130 youth-serving organizations operating here in the District.

We know that jobs that pay a livable wage require workers that have educational credentials, a mix of hard and soft skills, and work experience. Yet, current indicators of future employability underscore a challenging road ahead for many District youth.¹ Serving over 12,500 residents ages 14-24, the Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program (MBSYEP) reflects the District's strong, historic commitment to reducing youth unemployment and encouraging equitable access to meaningful work experiences.

Both the Bowser Administration and this Committee have worked to strengthen and leverage the MBSYEP to serve the District's most vulnerable young people. Specifically, we appreciate efforts to ensure opportunity youth, or those 16-24 who are not in school or regularly employed, are identified and flooded with the supports necessary to sustain re-engagement in education and employment. The legislation before us today seeks to bolster the MBSYEP as the focal point of the District's youth workforce development system.

We would like to thank Councilmember Silverman and her dedicated staff for engaging with MBSYEP participants, DCAYA, our membership, and many MBSYEP host sites as this legislation was developed. While the MBSYEP Enhancement Act addresses many community concerns, we do hope the Council continues to be receptive to the following recommendations and feedback.

Add flexibility to age-appropriate program placements

The MBSYEP Enhancement Act reaffirms DOES's designations of work readiness versus work experience placements. Traditionally reserved for youth ages 14 and 15, programs predominantly focused on work readiness or training are made inaccessible to youth 16 and older in all but a few circumstances through this legislation. Thus, youth 16 and older are barred from summer enrichment opportunities under the legislation's definition of work experience as "hands on experience in a traditional work environment and (that) does not include arts, camps, or academic programs". We take issue with this provision on two counts.

- 1. Lacks Needed Flexibility:** This language leaves no flexibility for youth working in true employment roles, such as program coordinators, camp counselors, or those preparing for a

¹ Last year, only 73% of District students graduated high school within four years. Unemployment rates for District youth 20-24 remain high at 12.4%, and starker still at 20.6% for African American youth. Recent estimates put the number of disconnected youth—those who are neither in school nor working—at an alarming 8,300 16-24 year olds.

career in the arts economy. It is also important to note that for many youth, academic skills are a significant barrier to long-term success in the workforce, and, in fact, educational gains are a required activity under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). A more appropriate work experience definition might be: *hands-on experience in an industry-appropriate work environment not to include participation or attendance in an arts, camp, or academic program that lacks an explicit focus on employment skill-building*².

- 2. Reduces Overall Summer Enrichment Opportunities:** This legislation may inadvertently reduce the overall availability of summer enrichment opportunities for youth 16-24. While we agree that as a youth workforce development program, the MBSYEP should focus on building the employability skills and on-the-job experience of District youth, we also acknowledge the importance of diverse summer program offerings that marry their developmental needs with their interests and passions. For this reason, we urge the Council to ensure investments in the Out-of-School-Time (OST) system and/or within the DC Commission of Arts and Humanities (DCCAH) are made to offset any cuts and maintain high-quality enrichment programming that may be outside the purview of this Committee.

Furthermore, this section of the legislation prohibits a participant who has served 3 or more consecutive summers with the same host employer from being placed there again. DCAYA disagrees with this provision first on the basis that DOES has developed a matching system where youth and host employers must select each other to guarantee a consecutive placement. Young people should be able to determine whether they value a new opportunity with a different host employer, or whether they would like to continue building relationships at a longstanding placement. From a youth development perspective, we know that relationships with trusted adults can be pivotal in a young person's ability to reach milestones of adolescence and adulthood. Disrupting these relationships in the name of diverse work experiences could do more harm than good for young people.

However, in an effort to curb employers from over-utilizing the MBSYEP as a short-term, inexpensive labor force, the Committee could consider changing this language. Instead, the legislation could require host sites that want to work with youth for 4 or more consecutive summers to pay half of that participant's summer earnings³. This would encourage the employer to value the participant's commitment, nudge the employer towards considering hiring that participant with unsubsidized wages in the future, and would reduce the overall cost of the program.

Phase in soft skills training

DCAYA recognizes the importance of the MBSYEP in building the soft skills of its participants, and supports the Committee's efforts to codify this function. Assessing MBSYEP participants at the start and conclusion of the six-week program will help demonstrate the program's impact on their communication, time management, and conflict resolution skills. Yet, the implementation of this soft skill training across all MBSYEP participants by program year 2019 is a heavy lift for DOES and host employers alike. Even with promising models of soft skill assessment available, we encourage DOES to develop a concise, accurate assessment that is vetted and tested by the host employers. Before the assessment process is implemented across the whole program, we propose prioritizing a roll-out to

² Examples of such programs: [Sitar Emerging Arts Leader Interns](#), [The Atlas Stagecraft Training and Apprenticeship Program \(ASTAP\)](#), [Dance Place's Energizers Junior Staff Program](#)

³ About \$600 for youth 16-21 and \$1000 for youth 22-24, based on wage x hours per week x 6 weeks for these groups.

opportunity youth in program years 2019 and 2020 to fine-tune the assessment tool and ensure ease of administration for host employers. This way, the program will provide a baseline of data for the hardest to serve participants without having to make major adjustments to the assessment year over year. From there, the assessment can be scaled to solicit valuable data for all MBSYEP participants.

In conclusion, I would like to again express DCAYA's support for the general direction and intent of the legislation, including the provisions which streamline the certification process⁴, prioritize opportunity youth in program placements for 22-24 year olds, and those that provide comprehensive reporting requirements for the program. We ask the Committee to support this legislation with careful consideration of the recommendations offered above. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.

Contact Information:

1220 L St NW
Suite 605
Washington, DC 20005
202-587-0616
www.dc-aya.org

⁴ **Streamlined certification process**

The MBSYEP stands apart from comparable programs across the country for its large size and acceptance of all youth who apply and certify as eligible. The program currently works to certify the age and District residency of over 20,000 youth applicants⁴ through in-person eligibility fairs. Yet through this process, the program loses roughly 30% of its applicants every year. DCAYA's membership has raised concerns that a significant onus falls on their staff to assist youth in obtaining the necessary documentation to certify for the program. It is often the most vulnerable youth—those who are experiencing housing instability, homelessness or aging out of foster care—who experience this barrier most acutely.

For these reasons, we fully support this legislation's provisions that encourage the streamlining of the MBSYEP certification process through the utilization of existing administrative records within DOES, DCPS and/or other District agencies. Minimizing in-person certification events by verifying eligibility automatically will save valuable time and resources for youth, host employers, and DC government agencies alike.