

**Testimony to the Committee on Business, Consumer, and Regulatory Affairs  
For Performance Oversight Hearing  
Department of Employment Services**

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Good Morning Chairman Orange and members of the Committee on Business, Consumer, and Regulatory Affairs. My name is Marcia Huff. I am the Director of Youth Poverty Programs at the Young Women's Project (YWP). I am also a DC resident. YWP is a DC based multicultural organization that builds the leadership and power of youth and young adults to shape DC policies and institutions to expand rights and opportunities for DC youth. YWP is a nationally recognized leader in youth development with a twenty-year track record of rigorous, successful, outcomes-based programming and training, teen leadership development, and institutional change successes.

YWP was founded in 1994 as organization by and for young women but now involves a growing number of young men. YWP utilizes issue campaigns as the vehicle for youth development, where youth use their leadership to challenge and improve youth-serving institutions. YWP programs guide youth through a process of personal transformation to support their growth as leaders in their peer groups, schools, families, and communities who are able to analyze problems, identify solutions, and advocate for change. YWP works through two youth-directed campaigns: Foster Care Campaign (FCC) and Peer Health and Sexuality Education (PHASE).

The Young Women's Project (YWP) is a youth employer, with more than 150 part time youth workers on the ground. We are a national expert in youth development and adult-youth partnership. Locally, have spearheaded successful advocacy and policy initiatives in health, education, and child welfare. We understand the challenges they face in preparing for and entering the workforce, the failure of the education system in preparing them with basic reading and math literacy, and the poverty that they face. We also work closely with the youth serving agencies charged with preparing youth for adult life – DOES, DCPS, CFSA, and OSSE and have experienced firsthand the lack of program effectiveness, poor outcomes, and excessive spending.

YWP has been employing youth for 20 years -- working side by side to develop them as trainers, educators, and advocates. Teaching them problem solving, communication and decision making skills and at the same time writing, reading, research, team work, how to show up on time, and skills that should have been mastered in school but were not. We work with youth on three levels. First -- we develop them as workers, educators, trainers, advocates who

have specific skill sets and issue expertise. Next -- they use these skills and expertise out in the community to solve problems.

**Large numbers of youth and young adults ages 14-24 are living in poverty.** According to the Kids Count Data Center, in 2013, there were 21,000 youth ages 18 to 24 and 7,000 youth 14-17 living in poverty. DCPS estimates that there are 4,000 homeless youth and children in the public school system (a number that has grown 37 percent in two years). There are upward of 28,000 youth 14-24 who need intensive educational interventions, workforce preparation, and other kinds of support (food, transportation, clothing). There are about 2,000 each year who turn 18 and leave the school system without graduating.

Youth are facing exploding housing costs and increasing metro train and bus fares. Lack of access to transportation is a major barrier to youth seeking employment and job training opportunities. Many job training programs such as the UDC Workforce Development & Lifelong Learning program where youth have the opportunity to receive vocational training and certifications do not offer any transportation assistance for participants. Youth need to be able to access these training programs so that they can get living wage jobs. The majority of youth who are employed are making minimum wage. There is no way to maintain an apartment, pay for transportation and other life needs in DC making minimum wage; even if a youth is getting forty hours a week.

**Youth are unemployed in large numbers.** Although the Washington Area economy has remained strong and regional unemployment is low, youth unemployment is at an all-time high at 50 percent for 16 - 19 years olds - twice the national average. Further, 32 percent of low-income youth without college degrees are not working compared to 22 percent nationally (according to a report by the Brookings Institution). Unemployment is so dire in some areas such as the Ward 7 communities of Eastland Gardens and Kenilworth -- only 13.2 percent of youth 16-24 are even employed.

**Youth are not ready to be employed.** Many DC youth need help getting to the starting line. Many are facing significant barriers that prevent them from succeeding in the workplace. Some lack a high school degree or GED and others struggle with low literacy and numeracy. Others are homeless or experiencing stressful and unstable housing situations. This is not an issue of resumes or professional dress or polishing up the rough edges. This is an issue of major reeducation. Youth spend all of their time in youth spaces. Many don't even go to school much and so they are on their own with their peers in a very peer-based culture. Youth need the essential skills such as email writing, interacting with colleagues, communicating work absences, and maintaining a professional deportment. Youth need to learn how to communicate assertively, advocate for themselves, and effectively resolve conflicts.

**Over the past year there has been a great deal of talk about “Pathways to the Middle Class.” This pathway must be well crafted and solidly built. It takes strategic planning, hard work, oversight, and accountability. The time to start is now.**

**My testimony will focus on the need for planning and oversight within the DOES- Office of Youth Programs and the importance of WIC and Council leadership over DOES youth workforce operations.**

### **Strategic & Operational Plan for the Office of Youth Programs**

The Office of Youth Programs need to create a strategic and operational plan that guides programming. OYP cannot effectively serve youth without establishing benchmarks, target outcomes and developing strategies for engaging the business community, recruiting youth, and responsibly allocating funds.

The DC State Plan provides a light scaffolding for operations but it does not provide anything close to a guide for actually programming and department operations. There are no action steps, details or timelines. Two plans need to be created. One that will guide the next year of operations and another that will cover 3-5 years of OYP operations. This process requires various representatives and stakeholders at the table. Government, CBO, data experts, policy experts and mostly importantly youth. The plan should include the following items:

- 1.) **Tiered Youth Service System:** The plan should cover DOES plans to serve youth through a multi-tiered system and how federal and local dollars (and eventually private) will use utilized. Specific targets should be set for how to reach various populations of youth. The plan should answer the questions of how youth will enter the system. There should be many doors through which youth can enter. The plan will also answer how youth will they move through the pipeline of programming as they build skills and progress.
- 2.) **Open and targeted recruitment.** Included should be a plan for recruitment methods, approval and enrollment processes, coordinated enrollment dates, engaging youth serving organizations, and a method for connecting with and capturing youth who call or email the agency requesting services or who apply for programming.
- 3.) **Key Partnerships.** In order to develop, fund, and implement effective and far reaching programming, DOES needs to be working closely with community partners who successfully employ youth, sister agencies (like DDS-RSA, CFSA and DYRS) with large budgets who can contribute to employment programming for their youth and DCPS and OSSE who are charged with preparing youth with basic skills, and business.

- 4.) **MBSYEP Revamp:** In FY2015, SYEP employed nearly 15,000 youth at a cost of \$17 million. We would like to see a tiered system that provides a range of participation options for youth and employers and built on year-round programming similar to what exists in NYC and Philadelphia, which offer a range of programs based on youth needs and barriers--court involved, in foster care, academic skill levels and whether they have secondary diplomas. Currently there is only a tiered system based on age.

#### **Establishment a WIC Youth Subcommittee:**

The WIC should immediately establish a Youth Subcommittee that will serve multiple functions. The Subcommittee will create a vision for the youth workforce system, oversee OYP, and serve as a standing work group that would oversee contractor performance, troubleshoot issues and provide technical assistance. The WIC and the District as a whole needs a body that creates a vision for a city-wide youth workforce system. This vision extends well beyond the federal funding sources. It would cover local, federal and private funding sources. This vision would stretch beyond DOES-OYP and encompass multiple agencies such as CFSA, DCPS, OSSE, DYRS and others. It would also include CBO employment resources. The goal would be the coordination and creation of a true system of youth workforce, career development, education, and vocational training resources and programming.

One of the first tasks for the Subcommittee would be to assess youth employment needs, assets, and resources and develop recommendations for increasing OYP effectiveness. The group would be composed of various youth employment stakeholders (government, nonprofit, business) engaged in youth employment and willing to roll up their sleeves. A thorough assessment is the first essential step in any good program design or strategic plan on youth employment. A youth assessment would look at employment numbers and outcomes, resource allocation, youth employment readiness, needs, challenges, employment trends, experience of employers and CBOS who work closely with youth, and model programs. The recommendations would be used to set targets, develop needs-based programming, cultivate employer relationships, and develop strategic relationships with nonprofits and businesses and sister agencies and other stakeholders needed to recruit and prepare youth and engage them in employment training and placement programs.

The Subcommittee should be jointly lead by a government agency leader and one from the CBO community. The group would also develop recommendations and collaborate with the DOES-OYP and WIC in the creation of the youth workforce 3-5 year strategic and operational plan for the DC youth workforce system that was referred to the section above. The Subcommittee would also stay abreast of national and international workforce trends, engage experts and convene focus groups with various stakeholders and constituents (non-profits-including contractors, youth, private businesses, chambers of commerce, etc.).

### **DOES-OYP Oversight**

This committee should immediately institute a body that will oversee DOES youth workforce operations. Outcomes are poor, participant numbers are low and money is left unspent. There is also a remarkable lack of transparency. No one is able to get clear numbers about spending and program participation. Various justifications have been given for poor performance such as unrealistic programmatic stipulations from the WIC, lack of communication, and poor quality contractors. The victims of the failure are the youth and young adults who desperately need the opportunities yet are not being engaged or served.

I understand allowing the District workforce leaders-DOES leadership, Deputy Mayor of Greater Economic Opportunity and the WIC time and space to correct issues and improve programming but we have lost too much time to allow this to happen without oversight and guidance. We cannot afford to have yet another year pass with poorly planned programs, under spending and poor performance.

DOES has done a terrible job providing programming for youth and young adults in the District. This has not been a one year problem but one that has lasted for years. The poor performance is well documented in Department of Labor program deficiency reports, the District's placement on the "high risk list," Washington Post articles and DOES Performance Oversight Responses and numbers.

In FY15 OYP served 26 youth in the Out-Of-School Program, 115 youth in the In-School-Program, 150 youth in the Pathways for Young Adults Program and 183 youth in the Marion Barry Youth Leadership Institute (MBLI). WIA and WIOA federal dollars were significantly underspent during the years between 2013 and 2016. In three years only \$1,601,689 was spent out of the \$6,071,330 that was awarded. This means that \$4,469,641 was left unspent.

This money was left unspent while youth in DC continued to lack opportunities for workforce training and subsidized employment. Money was left unspent while 21,000 youth ages 18 to 24 and 7,000 youth 14-17 living in the district toiled in poverty. We would like to say that we were encouraged to hear that DOES is taking steps to get off DOL's "high risk list" but we are concerned that none of the steps included the creation of an overall strategic and operational plan for OYP.

### **DOES-OYP/ WIC Youth Subcommittee Oversight Recommendations**

- **Quarterly Reporting:** DOES should be required to submit to the committee quarterly reports on local and federal spending. They would also report participation numbers for all programs regardless of funding source.

- **Oversight Body:** The Committee on Business, Consumer and Regulatory affairs should appoint a body that will provide oversight not only over the DOES-OYP but also the WIC youth subcommittee. We recommend that a body similar to the CFSA Citizens Review Panel be created. This group would have the authority to request reports on program operations and spending from OYP and the WIC Youth Subcommittee. They would also address issues within OYP and the WIC Youth Subcommittee. This group would provide a safeguard in the event that OYP and WIC dysfunction persist.

### Career Connections

Thankfully during the years of dysfunction the MBSYEP program continued to flourish and expand. Youth participant numbers continue to increase and last year Mayor Bowser added young adults 22-24 as eligible participants. Under the leadership of former OYP Director Gerren Price the administration of SYEP was overall seamless and youth need focused. Providing transportation assistance to youth was a major improvement and made it possible for many youth to participate. Unfortunately our flagship summer program is not enough to make-up for the fact that our year round program (locally and federally funded) is basically nonexistent and poorly run. In FY15 the MBSYEP employed 13,230 youth and young adults--during the rest of the year only 305 youth were served.

Our organization has five youth who are participating in the new DOES locally funded Career Connections Program. When it was announced in the fall we were excited to hear that the program would hire 402 young adults 20-24 who would undergo intense work readiness training, be assigned a Success Coach, supported with wrap-around services, given a transportation subsidy and placed with local employers for up to 9 months. We were especially pleased that the program was a "career pathway" program rather than a "job placement" program. We have been able to experience this program from the vantage point of a potential employer and a youth participant.

While we are still thankful that youth are able to have the support and 9 months of employment we are extremely concerned about the administration of the program. It appears to be more of a job placement program than career focused. Youth are being placed in positions that are not connected to their expressed career interests. One young woman who is 23 years old and seeks a career within the federal government office doing administrative work was sent to interview with a hospitality employer and a position where she would be picking up trash and dead animals in the Anacostia river. Both of these are possible career positions but not for her. We understand the idea that "any experience can be valuable" but this participant is 23 years old and a mother and has passed the time to take a position where she is just exploring things. She desired experiences that clearly supported her career goals and/or would lead to a job offer post-Career Connections.

We are also concerned that the program is not designed in a way that supports young adults who are disconnected and face significant barriers to employment. The program was billed as one for this population but in its current form the program is for young adults who are highly motivated and ready for employment. Last month the program was changed to allow participants to work up to 40 hours a week. A majority of youth are not ready to work 40 hours a week. It is nearly impossible for a young person who has been disconnected from work and school to jump right into a full time work schedule. Also, most employers cannot adequately support youth for this significant amount of time. This leads to warehousing youth and we have witnessed this already. Youth report that they are working long hours but doing very little work. They are sitting and given organizational material to read for hours and not being engaged. While I know many appreciate the 40 hours of pay this does a disservice to youth participants. Youth are not being engaged or gaining valuable work experience and unfortunately they are learning that one can do nothing and still receive pay.

Other issues that we have observed are: youth who are placed with employers who attempt to enroll them in pyramid schemes, youth not being adequately supported during the interview process (no assistance finding locations, struggling to obtain professional interview attire, etc.), and resumes that have not been reviewed or edited.

We recommend that OYP staff take immediate steps to address issues within Career Connections. Examples of possible steps:

- **Create a tiered system for participants** where youth receive support and services based on barriers to employment. Youth with more barriers receive additional support and scheduled weekly training.
- **Create a tiered system of employers.** Staff should assess employers to determine whether they are capable and prepared to take on a participant 40 hours a week. Some employers will take participants full time and others will have less time. Employers should have to submit a plan for how youth will be engaged and what work they will be doing. Employers should also be adequately vetted and screened.
- **Participants should undergo a deep assessment so that placement sites are strategically assigned.** All efforts should be made to place participants in positions that are connected to their expressed career path. The focus is on the participant needs not only on the available pool of employers. There should be staff who are actively recruiting employers at all times.
- **Improve communication between Career Connections staff and participants.** Participants should understand when they receive their direct deposit, transportation support and other program benefits.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions and serve as a resource for the committee.