

Testimony of Joslyn N. Williams, President  
at the Public Oversight Roundtable on

*Strengthening Youth Employment Programs in the  
District*

Before the Committee on Workforce Development and  
Government Operations  
Honorable Carol Schwartz, Chairperson

Saturday, May 5, 2007

Madame Chair and Members of the Committee, I am Joslyn N. Williams, President of the Metropolitan Washington Council, AFL-CIO, a labor federation with 175 local union affiliates representing 150,000 area union members- 45,000 of whom reside in the District.

Thank you for holding this hearing on a Saturday so that working people can attend and make their voices heard. Thank you also for focusing on this most important issue of youth employment. We all support the goals of helping employers find qualified DC residents to hire, of ensuring that young people graduate from high school or GED programs with the skills needed to become productive and self-sufficient members of the community, and of stopping the addition of more people to the already large pool of adults with serious barriers to employment. Effective youth employment programs are one way of meeting all these goals.

You will be hearing from organizations with more detailed suggestions of how to improve existing programs and we would like to associate ourselves with those comments- specifically we are in support of the testimony of the Youth Action Research Group and their 5-Point Plan for a Stronger Summer Youth Program.

I want to focus my remarks on the role that the union construction apprenticeship programs can play in helping youth to build a family-sustaining career, and the hope that labor can be part of the move to return quality career and technical education, especially in the building trades, to the public school system.

As you may know, there are 16 registered union apprenticeship programs in DC covering all trades and crafts in the construction industry. These programs are gold mines for both young people and adults. They are open to anyone 18 years of age or older, and are “earn while you learn”, meaning the individual accepted into the program immediately starts earning wages above \$10 per hour with benefits while learning the trade and ultimately earning a portable credential which will allow them to work anywhere. The training is free to the individual, ranges from 2-5 years depending on the trade and allows an individual a range of possible employment in the construction industry which can make them financially independent for the rest of their lives.

These apprenticeship programs have been working to assist DC youth and adults in several ways:

- The Washington Building and Construction Trades Council, and all its affiliated trades conducted last year a 6-week career exploration and summer youth program for 12 young people recruited through DOES. This year the program will be repeated with more young people but the program has been strengthened through the development of a more rigorous core trades curriculum which will give a boost to those youth who are serious about pursuing construction apprenticeship
- The Joint Carpentry Apprenticeship program, in conjunction with DCPS and DCHA, ran a 6-week program last summer which will be repeated this summer for 40 youth. Last summer, four participants went directly into the carpenters apprenticeship program upon completion.
- Labor is participating on the DCPS Construction Industry Advisory Committee which is overseeing the development of Phelps High School as the Construction Academy for the school system. We hope these efforts result in a state-of-the-art career pipeline to recruit and prepare young people for work in the construction industry, including entry into union apprenticeship programs.

- The apprenticeship programs are regular participants in job fairs across the city and work with non-profits to recruit their clients into apprenticeship.

Having worked with the youth and adult populations, we have identified some barriers to success for both these populations. The city, and its partners, must come up with unique ways of helping young people overcome these barriers which include drugs, lack of transportation (a must in construction), and lack of basic work ethics and soft skills needed to succeed in any workplace. Specifically in the construction industry, you can only enter an apprenticeship program, step onto a job site, or succeed in the industry if you are drug free from Day One. Likewise, you have to be able to get to job sites, no matter where they are located, by 6 or 7 in the morning. Additionally, you must show up for work every day, and on time or you will not be hired. We must prepare young people for the culture and realities of the workplace and the accepted expectations of employers or they will not succeed.

Helping youth succeed means making drug and alcohol treatment programs more widely available to any DC resident who wants to get clean. It means providing resources to the public and private sectors for job readiness training. It means earmarking significantly more DC appropriated dollars to longer term training to bring young people up to, at a minimum, 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading comprehension and math skills levels- something that cannot be accomplished in the normal 8-12 week training program . It means ensuring that literacy levels are brought up across the City. It means finding more money for wrap-around services to keep young people alive while they are in training, ensure their children are taken care of and that they have the wherewithal to get to and from training, and ultimately, to and from work. It means making sure their parents are prepared and ready to be productive members of the working world, so as to be the best role models for their children.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Committee, with government agencies and with our non-profit partners to improve the employment outlook for our young people here in DC. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.