



# OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

## Opening Statement of Chair Frederica Wilson (FL-24)

Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment Hearing

*Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Reauthorization: Creating Opportunities for Youth Employment*

Via Zoom

Thursday, May 13, 2021 | 10:15 a.m.

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Today, we meet for the first of three bipartisan hearings focusing on reauthorizing the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*. It was last reauthorized in 2014 and is commonly referred to as WIOA, which is the foundation for our nation's workforce development system.

This hearing will focus on three youth programs: Youth workforce investment activities, YouthBuild, and Job Corps. These programs provide low-income, in-school and out-of-school young people – ages 14 to 24 – with job opportunities, pathways to further their education or training, and basic support services that help them find good-paying jobs.

This is a timely and important moment to invest in our youth-focused initiatives because millions of young people – in communities across the country – are struggling to cope with the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Anywhere from 6 to 10 million young people were estimated to be disconnected from school and work at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to roughly 4 million in 2019.

WIOA-funded programs are a critical tool to create opportunities for these young people. This bipartisan reauthorization effort is a chance to make important improvements to help ensure they can reach their full potential.

One area for improvement is better allocation of youth workforce investments, which received just over \$920 million in fiscal year 2021. Under current law, no less than 75 percent of WIOA funds must be used to serve out-of-school youth. This effort to target funding to the most vulnerable group of young people has unfortunately had an unintended consequence. Programs are often forced to wait until a struggling student is fully disconnected from school to offer their services. Such a delay creates unnecessary barriers that result in missed opportunities to intervene earlier and keep students in school.

Another area for improvement is expanding paid work-based learning opportunities. Connecting young people with jobs where they can build skills is vital to their long-term success. Studies show that teenagers who have a job between the ages of 16 and 18 are more likely to earn higher wages as adults. Increasing the funding for these programs and expanding forms of work-based learning to include job shadowing, job preparation, and youth apprenticeship programs could make a meaningful difference in our communities.

Today, we will also explore improvements to Job Corps, which provides tens of thousands of young people across all 50 states with residential education, vocational training, and job placement services.

I have heard from countless community leaders and residents who credit Job Corps with transforming their lives, which is why I have championed this program throughout my career in public service. I am extremely proud of the Jobs Corps Center in my district—and I have bragging rights—because it was ranked number one in the country in program year 2019 based on performance indicators.

Job Corps enjoys widespread bipartisan support, and I hope we can find bipartisan agreement to make it even more effective. This includes changing the counterproductive “zero tolerance” language enacted during the Clinton administration, which requires automatic dismissal of young people for alcohol abuse, minor drug offenses, and other infractions that, should instead be met with more reasonable and helpful interventions like counseling and treatment.

Blanket drug testing, with follow up tests being required even before the chemicals may have fully left a student’s body, have led to roughly 12,500 expulsions, 91 percent of which were for marijuana use. Today, recreational marijuana use is either legal or has been decriminalized in nearly half of our states.

As with any organization, Job Corps’ success relies on the quality and stability of the staff. Job Corps has struggled to retain its best teachers, counselors, nurses, and managers because it cannot pay competitive wages in the locality. For that reason, we should consider whether to remove the exemption for Job Corps contractors from the *Service Contract Act*, which would set a wage floor for Job Corps center employees that is pegged to comparable local wages. Without that protection, Job Corps centers cannot compete for instructional talent with local public school districts, which is needed to reduce staff turnover—which undermines the performance of the program.

Of course, the most important improvement we can make to all WIOA programs is to increase their funding. Job Corps has been underfunded relative to its authorization level by at least \$129 million each year for the past five years—and more than \$239 million in the last year, alone. Youth workforce activities have been underfunded relative to its authorization level by an aggregate \$150 million since 2016.

We get what we pay for. No program can be expected to meet the needs of our communities while we consistently underfund it every year.

Today’s hearing kicks off a vital effort to give at-risk young people the support they need to lead fulfilling lives that will make our communities much, much stronger.

I look forward to working with my colleagues to reauthorize WIOA, and I now recognize the distinguished ranking member for the purpose of making an opening statement.