

JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 302

Joint Committee on Workforce Development

TO: Hon. Delores G. Kelley, Chair, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee
FROM: Caryn York, Chief Executive Officer
DATE: February 7, 2020

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. JOTF supports Senate Bill 302 as a means of promoting collaboration among educational and workforce partners to increase access to information and options for high school students to explore career and technology education while developing a more highly trained workforce.

Studies show that youth who experience prolonged periods of disconnection from work and/or school have far more difficulty building an economic foundation for future independence. In 2016, JOTF released a report in collaboration with a local nonprofit, Baltimore's Promise, that explored the disconnection between youth and employment opportunities¹. Our research focused on the approximately 18,000 "Opportunity Youth" in Baltimore City, ages 16 to 24, who are neither working nor enrolled in school. Disconnected youth remain an untapped opportunity for Baltimore employers looking for skilled workers and connecting youth to middle-skilled careers with a family-supporting wage can generate enormous economic benefits for the region. Yet, this population faces significant barriers to success, including but not limited to low educational attainment, i.e., math and reading skills, homelessness, poverty, structural racism, juvenile and/or criminal justice system involvement, and mental health issues. As such, building viable pathways for this population into many of these middle-skilled careers is challenging.

JOTF addresses this disconnect between low-wage workers and stable employment through our core program, Project JumpStart. Project JumpStart is a 14-week pre-apprenticeship program that works to teach participants skills in math, construction, electrical, plumbing and carpentry but has a heavy emphasis on job readiness. Following a participant's successful completion of the program, Project JumpStart staff works diligently and carefully to secure employment through relevant employer partnerships in the targeted fields individuals are trained in. The skills taught in Project JumpStart are exactly what could be introduced in school systems through expanded CTE grants and we have seen, firsthand, the benefits an apprenticeship structured program can have on Marylanders.

Senate Bill 302 seeks to address this challenge by establishing a Joint Committee on Workforce Development to (1) evaluate the condition of Maryland's public- and private-sector workforces; (2) monitor workforce skills shortages; (3) identify strategies to expand employment opportunities and increase income for Marylanders through workforce skills policies; (4) monitor workforce educational training; and (5) review and evaluate the

¹ http://jotf.org/Portals/0/Connecting%20Baltimore%20Opportunity%20Youth%20to%20Careers_022316.pdf

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effectiveness of relevant programs, policies, and practices, including career and technology education (CTE) programs and apprenticeship programs. The committee has review over (1) CTE programs; (2) workforce programs under the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC); (3) the Maryland Apprenticeship and Training Program; (4) the Governor's Workforce Development Board; and (5) other workforce development programs in the State.

JOTF supports efforts to explore ways to provide school systems across the state with the support and accessibility to help students, and non-traditional adult workers, explore career options that fall outside of the traditional educational model (a four-year degree). For the above-mentioned reasons, JOTF urges a favorable committee report.