

ECONOMIC REPORT

THE TRAGIC LOSS OF THE SUMMER JOBS PROGRAM: WHY IT IS TIME TO REINSTATE!

By Linda Harris

Over 30 years ago, I was involved in two federally funded summer jobs programs. I didn't get to wear a shirt and tie to work, I was working at our National Park in my hometown doing basic maintenance and clearing work. And then I worked in a summer camp for disadvantaged young people, where I was a counselor, after my first year in college. I loved that work and I loved those kids. And I was very grateful that my country gave me an opportunity to do something productive, to learn something, and to make a little money. I hope when the history books are written, it will look like a pretty good investment that was made in a young man from a modest family in a small town a long time ago.

- President Bill Clinton, remarks at a summer jobs event at Prince George's Community Hospital, Cheverly, MD, August 3, 1998.

For more than three decades, the federal summer jobs program served as the portal to early work exposure for youth who had limited access to the labor market, limited horizons, and limited knowledge about the vast range of career opportunities. The federal summer jobs program provided that exposure for over a half million low-income youth each year in the late 1990s until it came to an end almost seven years ago with the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. In light of the peril facing so many of our youth in high-poverty communities, as well as the disparities in education and labor market outcomes for youth from these communities, there are compelling reasons for re-instituting the federal investment in summer jobs.

The Importance of Summer Employment for Youth

Why do we need summer jobs programs? First, we are embarking on yet another summer of historically high youth unemployment, with minority youth and those in poor urban and rural communities suffering the greatest disconnect from the labor market. An April 2007 analysis conducted by

the Center for Labor Market Studies (CLMS) estimated that the overall teen employment rate of 36.6 percent for the three-year period from 2004 to 2006 was the lowest in 60 years, and the outlook for the summer of 2007 was even gloomier. A similar CLMS report on teen summer employment in 2006 showed substantial disparities in employment rates by income and race. Low-income black teens had employment rates of only 17 percent, compared to 52 percent for white youth from more affluent households. In years past, the infusion of federal summer jobs helped to close that gap.

Secondly, in our high-poverty urban and rural communities, and in our school districts with large minority and immigrant populations, our youth are not faring well in terms of labor market and education outcomes. Half of minority youth—almost one-third of young people—who enter our public high schools do not graduate four years later. Traditionally, the summer jobs program served as an important time to introduce youth to higher aspirations, assist in their academic remediation, and reduce the learning loss that occurs over the summer. Findings from a 1994 Brandeis University study confirmed that youth engaged in the federal summer

jobs program made significant gains in reading and math levels and that these programs did stem summer learning loss.

Third, early work exposure correlates with greater labor market attachment and higher earnings in early adulthood. The federal summer jobs program served a large number of 14- and 15-year-old youth, providing their first exposure to work. With the heightened concern on the part of state and local officials about gang activity and youth violence, keeping adolescents and youth attached to employment and constructive youth development activities is one of the best ways to keep young people out of harm's way and on more constructive paths to productive futures.

The Federal Summer Jobs Program

The Federal Summer Youth Employment Program, which began over three decades ago as a response to urban unrest, evolved into a well-developed infrastructure connecting youth, community service, learning, and earning in a symbiotic way that helped develop the workplace and personal skills of our young people and added value in the community. The program had a broad bipartisan constituency and served as the vehicle for youth with limited labor market access to experience the workplace, explore careers, learn workplace etiquette and work ethic, learn about college options, gain valuable skills, earn a wage, and give back through meaningful community projects.

The changes to the federal summer program put in place in the mid-1990s required all communities to augment their offerings with individual assessments; opportunities for contextual learning; structured academic support with pre- and post-testing to document learning gains; activities and workshops tied to the development of SCANS

competencies for workplace success—as recommended by the Secretary’s Commission in Achieving Necessary Skills; and case management systems to ensure that young people were, in fact, learning and developing skills.

The program also had an important impact on the quality of community life during the summer months. The young workers provided valuable community service, serving as counselors and helpers in the numerous community-based summer camps and recreation programs, as well as participating in important community conservation and beautification projects. They planted gardens, painted murals, assisted in nursing homes, provided extra pairs of hands in many public agencies, and served as tutors, peer counselors, and youth leaders on community initiatives. The dollars spent by these youth were most often spent in the community, thus having an important economic impact.

This type of summer activity at scale is invaluable not only for the development of youth as individuals, but also for molding behavior and setting higher expectations for young people as a group as contributing members of the community. At the time of the elimination of the federal summer jobs program, it was a well-designed, well-managed, fully integrated component of youth programming in most communities.

What Happened?

All this begs the questions—why was the summer program eliminated and what would it take to get it reinstated?

In some ways, the loss of the summer jobs program was an unintended consequence of well-intended reforms built into the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. WIA very intentionally eliminated the “stand alone” summer jobs program in favor of a more comprehensive year-round approach to supporting youth development. Summer jobs would be only one of ten mandated activities and youth were required to be engaged in year-round activities. That requirement—coupled with very prescriptive provisions

governing procurement of youth services, performance standards that favored longer interventions, requirements for increased targeting of out-of-school youth, and reductions in funding—made it difficult for local areas to use federal WIA funds to support programming in the summer.

The WIA legislation also introduced Youth Opportunity Grants, which would provide substantial funding to distressed communities to implement summer and year-round programming for both in-school and out-of-school youth. Those who crafted and advocated for the legislation posited that once the reforms were adapted, there would be a greater constituency in Congress and appropriations would increase substantially. However, that was not the case. The new structure of workforce delivery under WIA weakened the on-the-ground alliances that had historically provided the greatest advocacy for youth programming. The role of mayors, who were traditionally the biggest advocates for federal funding for youth programming, was substantially reduced with the formation of more regional workforce alliances. Since only 36 communities received Youth Opportunity Grants, there was not a large constituency for its continued funding. The grants were a vestige of the federal administration and never gained favor within the new department of labor administration.

Had the appropriations materialized, there probably would be very robust summer programming occurring in distressed communities across the country. However, such was not the case. Youth Opportunity funding was short lived, and total youth appropriations fell from \$1.1 billion in 2000 to \$941 million in 2006. Youth service levels dropped from the 1998 level of 530,000 youth served in the summer program alone to 273,000 youth served year-round in 2005.

Communities across the country have mounted aggressive private sector efforts to make up for the loss, turning to foundations and general revenues to keep some vestige of summer jobs program in place. Mayors across the country

have used their leverage with their local business leadership to create thousands of summer job opportunities for youth. Despite these efforts, most communities report falling far short of the pre-WIA participation levels. Local communities have not been able to raise the resources needed to make up for the lost federal investment.

It is Time to Act

Both houses of Congress are taking up the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act this year. This is an opportunity to re-visit the legislative factors that contributed to the loss of the summer jobs program and to renew advocacy for its reinstatement as an essential component of a local youth delivery system. It is important for summer jobs, year-round comprehensive programming, and the targeted funding of the Youth Opportunity Grants to be viewed as essential components of the community strategy to deliver youth to labor market success. The funding must be commensurate with that challenge. This is more than a matter of legislative change. There is an urgent need to build the constituency in Congress for substantially increased funding for youth programming—such that these critical components do not continue to compete with each other for such limited dollars.

At a time when our economy demands workers at a much higher skill level, when our competitive edge requires that those skills be transferable and that workers be nimble, the country can ill afford to have so many youth reach adulthood without the benefit of wholesome exposure to work and to those job skills and soft skills that equip them for success in the workplace.

In communities of high poverty and youth distress, the solutions lie in what we do with our young people year-round in school, after school, and at scale during the summer. It is time to make the case for renewed federal investment in summer jobs. □

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