GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Department of Employment Services

Public Oversight Roundtable On

“A Review of The Department of Employment Services’ Workforce Development Programs: Project Empowerment and DC Career Connections”

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee on Labor & Workforce Development
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Elissa Silverman, Chairperson

November 21, 2019
11:00 AM
Room 500
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004
Good morning, Chairperson Silverman, councilmembers, and staff of the Committee on Labor and Workforce Development. I am Dr. Unique Morris-Hughes, Director of the Department of Employment Services (DOES), and this morning I will provide an update on the continued success of the Project Empowerment and DC Career Connections workforce development programs.

Under Mayor Muriel Bowser’s leadership, DOES is committed to creating pathways to the middle class and creating equity and access for Washington, DC's residents. As I discussed in our April Budget Oversight hearing, both Project Empowerment and DC Career Connections, with their “earn and learn” models, are key to not only enabling equitable access to the job market, but also to helping make the District safer and stronger.

The Project Empowerment and DC Career Connections programs are specifically designed to serve District residents who face significant barriers to employment. Many participants in these programs have had prior interaction with the criminal justice system, limited secondary education, and social challenges. The vast majority of Project Empowerment participants have either been out of the workforce for years or had little to no job experience prior to entering the program. In 2017, the average length of incarceration for Project Empowerment participants before entering the program was seven years. Similarly, many DC Career Connections participants are referred to the program through court diversion programs or from other District agencies, such as the Department of Corrections, the Mayor’s Office on Returning Citizens Affairs, the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, or the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement.

Many of our participants, who have weathered incarceration, homelessness, and substance abuse, come to Project Empowerment or DC Career Connections knowing that they may face an
up-hill battle to get and keep a job. Participants who join these programs receive assistance that helps reduce recidivism rates and find that it is possible for them to achieve employment.

As the District’s longest running transitional job program, Project Empowerment helps to overcome employment obstacles by providing participants with temporary, subsidized, wage paying jobs, while also helping them with skills development and supportive services. Since its establishment in April 2001, Project Empowerment has provided over 10,000 District residents who face the greatest employment difficulty with necessary supportive services, adult basic education, job coaching, employability training, life skills and limited vocational training, and job search assistance. The program works to alleviate barriers by giving men and women the tools they need to succeed. Upon enrollment, every participant is assigned a Case Manager who evaluates their needs and recommends services ranging from substance abuse treatment to transportation assistance and child care. Along with this connection to wrap around support, every Project Empowerment participant has access to an on-site behavioral health specialist who will help talk through any issues they are having as they work through the program.

After enrollment, the Project Empowerment program begins with a three-week life skills class. During the class, participants receive a wage and learn the necessary soft skills to function in the workforce. These participants arrive at 8:30 a.m. dressed for work, because for the three weeks of this class it is their job. They earn a wage for their time and they discuss what has been holding them back and, more importantly, what they can do to move forward. Given that Project Empowerment is only available to residents who can demonstrate a substantial need, our life skills classes—one of which is taught by a Project Empowerment graduate—begin the process of filling that need. Through focused discussion and education, participants are empowered and given a self-esteem boost through conflict resolution tactics and communications skills.
After completing these life skills classes, participants are ready to move on to a work experience site and get on-the-job training. At these work sites, participants get a taste of how it feels to have a job, work under a manager, and interact with coworkers. Through this subsidized employment, their confidence grows, and they obtain the tools they need to achieve full-time employment on their own.

These impacts of Project Empowerment can be seen in the success story of Mr. Robinson. In December 2016, Mr. Robinson started Project Empowerment after serving almost two decades in prison. He had been released early and was looking for a chance to move forward when a friend and former participant recommended the program. After working hard to complete Project Empowerment’s job readiness and life skills training, Mr. Robinson started work with the Mayor’s Office of Returning Citizens Affairs and the United Planning Organization. With the help of the Project Empowerment team, he began taking technology classes with Community College Preparatory Academy’s Hope Project. In August 2017, Mr. Robinson completed his IT training, achieving a CompTIA A+ certification. In January 2019, Mr. Robinson was hired by Promantus Inc. as a full-time IT Help Desk Technician.

In order to better the work of Project Empowerment and ensure more success stories like Mr. Robinson’s, we expanded the computer literacy portion of the life skills class in fiscal year 2019 by procuring laptop computers for participant use. These laptops have allowed us to offer participants twice as many hours of basic computer instruction and to introduce Microsoft Suite instruction earlier. DOES is also working with public and private partners on two new initiatives to reach at-risk District residents: Georgetown University’s Pivot Program and the Department of Corrections’ READY Center. The Pivot Program was developed by faculty in Georgetown’s McDonough School of Business in partnership with DOES and the U.S. Department of
Commerce’s Minority Business Development Agency. The full-time, ten-month program for District returning citizens combines class room instruction and internships with a focus on entrepreneurship, business development, and liberal arts classes. All 15 fellows from the inaugural Pivot cohort graduated in June 2019 and continue to work with the Georgetown Venture Lab to launch their business ideas and/or pursue employment. One of the fellows, Mr. Bell, was even featured in an Atlantic article on employment of former inmates. Mr. Bell, who opened a vegan halal catering business, is just one of the many success stories from the program. Of the 15 graduates, 80 percent are employed in fields like catering, project development, technology, reentry programming, and custom clothing design. Of the other fellows, two have branched out into other areas, home inspection and criminal justice reform. The second cohort of 17 fellows began training in September and we are confident that they will have similar success.

In February 2019, the Department of Corrections officially launched their Resources to Empower and Develop You or “READY” Center in partnership with DOES, the Mayor’s Office on Returning Citizen Affairs, the Department of Behavioral Health, the Department of Human Services, and the Department of Motor Vehicles. The READY center serves as a one-stop shop to provide returning citizens with the critical post-release services they need as they transition back into society. As part of the READY Center team, DOES provides case management, referral services, and post release support to ensure seamless access to employment development services. Additionally, we are currently working in partnership with the Interagency Council on Homelessness to develop more strategies for engaging residents struggling with homelessness and housing instability.

DC Career Connections, like Project Empowerment, increases equity and access to out-of-school and unemployed young adults through transitional job opportunities that help them gain
valuable work experience, skills training, and individualized coaching and support to obtain employment. The program is focused on serving residents in particularly high-risk areas across the District. Through DC Career Connections, residents participate in the same “earn and learn” model training as Project Empowerment for up to nine months, working up to 40 hours per week at a training wage of $10.00 per hour. Like Project Empowerment, the goal of DC Career Connections is ultimately to make young adults more employable, but with a greater focus on developing specific occupational skills. Since program participants are younger, they have the ability to participate in longer term training programs that get them further down their career path.

Since its launch in September 2015, DC Career Connections has served 1,330 District residents. In fiscal year 2018, 72 percent of participants who enrolled in the GED® or occupational training programs received either their GED or an industry credential, such as hospitality, information technology, or nursing assistant. DC Career Connections serves as a key connector between Washington, DC residents and long-term employment, as evidenced by the experience of Mr. Beuzard IV. Mr. Beuzard, a 22-year-old native Washingtonian, enrolled in the program as a requirement under the D.C. Superior Court’s Diversion program. DC Career Connections offered him a chance to avoid prosecution and, instead, learn important skills for a future career. After completing the job readiness training component, Mr. Beuzard enrolled in an information technology training with the Latin American Youth Center. Through hard work and a dedication to the DC Career Connections program, Mr. Beuzard earned 13 technology certifications including CompTIA A+ and Microsoft Office Specialist Masters. Mr. Beuzard continued to excel in the IT field, winning the DC competition for Microsoft Office Masters in 2016 and, later, becoming the National Excel 2016 Champion. DC Career Connections helped give Mr. Beuzard confidence and
career skills, taking him from a court appearance to, as of September, work as a Data Technician at Amazon.

In the past year, we have made several enhancements to the DC Career Connections to expand services. The program grew from a three-week model to a four-week model with expanded services, including specialized life skill training for at-risk participants, technology training, and additional curriculum development.

Project Empowerment and DC Career Connections provide real benefits to both our resident participants and the District as a whole. According to the Department of Corrections, in fiscal year 2019, the cost of incarceration was $78,913 per year per inmate. In contrast, the annual cost per participant for Project Empowerment was $9,976.74 and the annual cost for DC Career Connections was $11,748.93. Quarterly wage data from before and after Project Empowerment indicates that, on average, participants’ annual salaries increase from $7,308 to $18,011. Since 2012, graduates have experienced an average increase of 688 percent in annual wages.

The ultimate measure of success for Project Empowerment and DC Career Connections is for program participants to obtain and remain in unsubsidized employment—which is consistently over 50 percent. In addition to these employment statistics, the other milestones that District residents in Project Empowerment and DC Career Connections achieve are important and validate the need for us to continue these services and supports for the city’s most vulnerable populations. These milestones include:

- Mastering new skills;
- Obtaining support for transportation, building a work-ready wardrobe, and becoming familiar with resources that support career success;
- Finding safe and stable housing;
• Access to behavioral health services; and

• Building confidence while working with a job coach who can help them create a resume, conduct a job search, and prepare for an interview.

Each of these milestones prepare and empower our residents to participate in the ever-changing workforce, reduce risk factors and barriers to employment, and give participants a fair shot at obtaining employment where they can earn a family-sustainable wage.

In closing, I would like to take a moment to thank our Project Empowerment and DC Career Connections teams for the crucial work that they do every day. I am privileged to lead a staff that is truly committed to connecting all District residents to the life skills and employment opportunities they need on their pathway to the middle class. Under Mayor Bowser’s leadership, these programs welcome those District residents with the greatest employment barriers and give them the tools they need to succeed.

Chairperson Silverman and councilmembers, I look forward to continuing this discussion of the District’s Project Empowerment and DC Career Connections programs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I am available to address any questions you may have.