

State Task Force on Developing Opportunities for Youth and Young Adults Who Are Jobless and Out-of-School

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:
CONTACT: LAURIE R GLENN
PHONE: 773.704.7246
EMAIL: lrglenn@thinkincstrategy.com

NEWS RELEASE **NEW STATE TASK FORCE: TAP JOBLESS YOUTH TO MITIGATE WORKER SHORTAGE** ***Young People, Legislators, Business Leaders See Opportunities*** ***for Matching Hard-to-Fill Jobs with Jobless Youths***

CHICAGO – The headlines tell the story: *American Businesses Can't Find Workers* (CNN), *Worker Shortage Could Dampen Economy* (NPR), *The Great Worker Shortage* (Forbes). But at the first in a statewide series of hearings by Illinois' new **State Task Force on Developing Opportunities for Youth and Young Adults Who Are Jobless and Out-of-School**, legislators, youth advocates, business leaders and young people discussed a solution they believe will work: Invest in teens and young adults who are out of school and out of work.

The task force structured the Chicago hearing, ***Help Build the Economy: Help Strengthen Our Youth & Communities Prepare, Educate & Employ Out-of-School and Jobless Youth***, as a dialogue about the barriers and potential pathways for young people in finding employment.

"Joblessness disproportionately affects youth from communities of color," said **task force co-chair, state Sen. Mattie Hunter**, who represents a predominantly African-American 3rd Senate District in Chicago. "This task force is designed to put an end to the unfair cycle that treats our youth as if they're less than. This is about creating opportunities for youth and providing them with a strong foundation for future careers during their formative years."

The finding that 190,901 Illinois youth and young adults (16 to 24 years old) were out-of-school and jobless in 2015, spurred the Illinois General Assembly to bi-partisan action. In June 2017 the Illinois House and Senate passed a resolution to create the statewide task force in collaboration with the state Department of Human Services.

The figures back up Hunter when she says joblessness disproportionately affects youth from communities of color. In 2015 a troubling 65 percent of white youths 16-19 were out of work. But that figure was 71.5 percent for Hispanic youths and 81.2 percent for blacks in that age range. For Illinois' young adults 20-24, some 29 percent of whites and Hispanics were out of work in 2015, but 51 percent of blacks.

"With labor shortages threatening to slow or stop growth in the U.S. economy, we must see programs that prepare young people for employment as a golden opportunity for a win-win-win solution that takes idle young people off the street, injects life into troubled communities and helps businesses find the workers they need to grow and flourish," said **state Rep. Sonya Harper, D-6, task force co-chair**. "It's an investment we can't afford to sell short."

With these grim statistics in mind, the hearing focused on identifying solutions for the tens of thousands of idle young people who are instrumental for future economic stimulus and growth.

"Illinois is the first state that has taken this step, setting up a legislative task force that shines a bright light on the persistent problem of youth unemployment and shows our determination to find real, long-term

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solutions,” said Jack Wuest, executive director, Alternative Schools Network, who worked with Hunter and Harper along with other community organizations for the creation of the task force and which co-sponsored the Chicago hearing.

Two youths who spoke at the hearing are about to graduate from Youth Connection Leadership Academy, where both are honor roll students. They talked about the struggles they faced that kept them out of the mainstream public schools and landed them in an alternative school.

Julius Smith is 19 and has been accepted to Roosevelt University where he plans to major in psychology. His goal is to be a motivational speaker.

“It becomes frustrating to me because I have the tools as well as the intelligence to work but I don’t have the support of the companies,” he said. “There is also a huge criminal justice concern with our student’s criminal backgrounds and not getting the support and awareness to get their records expunged. Another issue is students not having the proper professional attire to conduct a proper interview. ... It’s time for companies to understand that teenagers are just as important and loyal to companies as adults and we would like to be treated as such!”

Colleen Conners is planning to attend Malcom X College to get a Certified Nursing Assistant credential. She has a two-year-old son.

“There is also no daycare providers connected to these companies and often time the women are on their own trying to raise a child, if not multiple children, so it becomes very frustrating for a teenager seeking employment while attending high school,” she said. “Companies need to understand that we are teenagers but we want the same things they have, it’s just they need to be patient and more supportive of the issues that we face every day.”

She said those issues include drugs, “because a lot of the in-patient drug treatment programs are either closed or have a 1 to 2 year waiting list”; homelessness; a lack of daycare options; and depression, “How can you not be depressed when you see vacant lots, abandoned buildings, and homeless people with some probably being our family members or close friends.

“We need companies to believe in us and not look at us as who we are now but look at us as who we will become under their guidance and how we will change the world.”

The hearing included Hunter and Harper; Wuest; Sheila Venson, executive director, Youth Connection Charter School; Shari Runner, CEO, The Chicago Urban League; Reyahd Kazmi, director, business and government strategies, National Youth Advocate Program; Quiwana Bell, COO, Westside Health Authority; Kenneth Martin Ocasio, executive vice president community wellness, Aunt Martha’s Health & Wellness; David Whittaker, executive director, Chicago Area Project.

For more information on the task force go to www.ILTFYouth.org.

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