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Youth and lawmakers aim for solutions to growing unemployment crisis

By Sonya Eldridge

Growing up in Humboldt Park, Allan Peña had big dreams of becoming the next Roberto Clemente.

Raised by a single mother, Peña trained and practiced nonstop until his team suffered a huge loss, one he said that shattered his dreams of ever becoming a professional baseball player.

Peña realized he needed a backup plan, but struggled to visualize himself doing anything else for a living.

“As black and brown kids, all we look up to is either music artists or sports athletes,” Peña said. “Ain’t nobody want to grow up and be like: ‘You know what, I want to be a chemist. I want to be a mathematician. I want to be a mechanical engineer. You would never hear a kid say that.’”

Peña was one of several youth panelists in attendance with elected officials, youth advocates and nonprofit leaders at the first Illinois state task force meeting on youth unemployment held Friday, March 2 at Malcolm X College.

Co-chaired by Illinois State Sen. Mattie Hunter (D-3) and State Rep. Sonya Harper (D-6), the task force will host a series of statewide public hearings to drive dialogue among youth, legislators and employers on how to develop solutions to reduce youth unemployment in Chicago, Cook County and across the state of Illinois.

Moderated by former Fox News anchor Robin Robinson, Chicago and suburban youth shared their experiences and the struggle to not only find a job but hold one down.



Davonte Avery (left) talks to State Rep. Sonya Harper after the youth unemployment task force hearing held March 2, 2018, at Malcolm X College. (The Gate/Sonya Eldridge)

In Chicago, 30.7 percent of youth ages 16 to 19 and 23.5 percent of young adults ages 20 to 24 are out-of-school and unemployed without high school diplomas. At the county level, the numbers are alarmingly similar—33.5 percent of youth ages 16 to 19 and 21.2 percent of youth ages 20 to 24 are out-of-school and unemployed without high school diplomas. These findings are a part of a report by UIC Great Cities Institute (GCI), commissioned by Alternative Schools Network entitled: High Costs for Out of School and Jobless Youth in Chicago.

The study also found the trend will continue upward, with Illinois youth ages 16 to 24 facing unemployment rates of 70 percent if nothing is done to increase

employment.

So the question is, what should be done to get more youth in the workforce?

As cliché as it may sound, Pena made an insightful point— seeing truly is believing when it comes to the importance of role models of color for underrepresented and underserved youth.

If young people of color aren’t imagining themselves in lucrative, upwardly mobile fields like STEM, Robinson asked, what might plant that seed in a child’s mind?

“The way we don’t recognize black and brown people in different job opportunities, like somebody who is a mechanical engineer,” Pena said. “There’s no media

[about] that person, like on a LeBron James' level."

It is essential for youth of color to see and connect with mentors who resemble them, argues Dr. Danielle N. Lee, an African-American scientist who wrote about the topic at length in *Scientific American* magazine.

Lee said if she had waited for an exact mentor prototype—Black, female, from a working-class family and interested in animals, she wouldn't be where she is today—all the while acknowledging one major point: having access to such a role model would have certainly smoothed the way.

Lee raised another key point that was a topic of discussion at the hearing—the importance of publicizing STEM career paths in disadvantaged communities.

"How such opportunities are marketed to members of under-represented audiences matters just as much—and I have found—for some people, it matters more. Put simply, members of underrepresented communities want to see themselves in these roles. They want to know who the achievers are."

This obstacle is among the amalgam of barriers unemployed young people of color face as they enter the workforce.

In the New City community area (Back of the Yards) nearly 79 percent of 16 to 19-year-olds and close to half of youth ages 20 to 24 are jobless, according to GCI data.

As the questions posed to youth and elected officials yielded candid responses, key insights and potential strategies emerged throughout the course of the hearing.

One of the more interesting exchanges was between elected officials and youth. Ald. Walter Burnett (27) mentioned low turnout at his employment events and asked youth panelists what can be done to motivate youth to attend job fairs.

In response, youth had a number of viable solutions to the alderman's ques-

tion. Elected officials ought to consider working directly with youth to promote job fairs and employment services on social media, they said.

Rep. Harper echoed the sentiments of the youth in a phone interview after the hearing.

"As a former journalist and organizer, I find the biggest barrier to making the connection is the advertising and the outreach in the communication of those opportunities. I'm really interested in which ways we can better communicate with our youth and young adults especially when it comes to educational, career or employment opportunities."

Still, others urged task force members to meet students in the middle by bringing employment events and services directly to their schools, especially since transportation is a barrier to jobs for many young people.

"I'm currently a high school student, so I think it does help us if we bring [job fairs] into the schools more," said Alexis Delgado, 16, who currently works part-time in retail. "A lot of people don't really have a way to get there and if you go to them, it might really motivate them and it could really help them out, you know?"

Jobs connected to transit are sparse in neighborhoods outside the Loop and North Side, according to GCI. In the New City community area, only 60,079 jobs are accessible within a 30-minute CTA ride compared to 696,284 jobs in the Near North Side.

Youth panelist Davonte Avery made a similar point that shed light on the issue of access but in regards to job readiness programs and discount retail stores.

"People [who] come from other areas aren't exposed to interview training, or even to a store like Ross where you can go and get less expensive stuff that still looks good," Davonte Avery said. We're not exposed to those types of things."

When asked if the youth felt confident their schools prepared them for work,

Alexis Delgado responded:

"I think high schools don't really prepare us to be confident and have jobs. We have our counselors that help us with our schedule, but they don't really help us with what happens after high school. Once you graduate, you're on your own and you figure out what you want to do from there. Some people don't have the parent figures to motivate them to continue on with their school career."

As the task force continues to convene meetings statewide, there's a number of ways constituents can get involved to support lawmakers' efforts, Rep. Harper said.

"Organizations can help to advocate by becoming involved in the policy-making process themselves," Rep. Harper said. "Even if that's just teaching folks how to do that more often. When we're down in Springfield trying to pass those bills, it will help a lot, if we could hear the voices of our communities through those different advocacy or youth organizations by either writing letters to other legislators or filing witness slips and coming down to testify. Even if they can't—just doing it electronically to help build awareness around the actual bills that we are passing—that will help to bring more of these types of programs or would help to sustain current programming.

For more information contact Rep. Sonya Harper's office at 4926 S. Ashland Avenue, (773) 925-6580. Youth and residents interested in getting involved in youth unemployment advocacy should contact the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, 773-523-4416.

Gloria Talamantes and Mauricio Hernandez contributed to this report.