



TESTIMONY

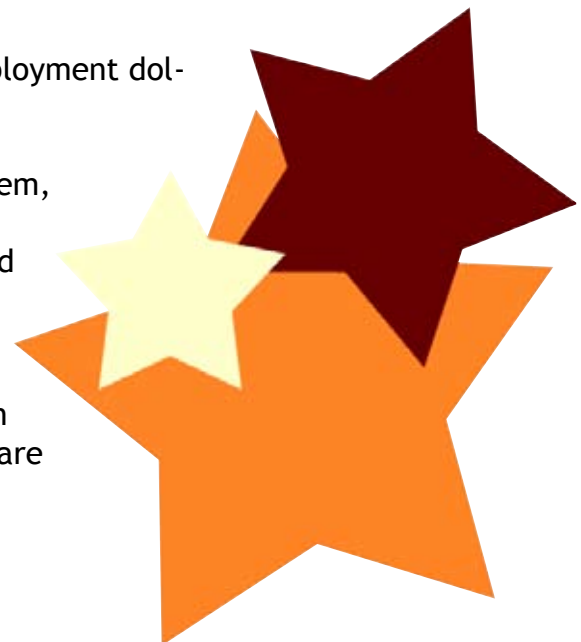
Testimony of Martha Ross, Brookings Greater Washington
before the Committee on Workforce Development and Government Operations
Councilmember Carol Schwartz, Chair
Fiscal Year 2009 Proposed Budget, Department of Employment Services
April 22, 2008

Good afternoon Councilmember Schwartz and other members of the Committee on Workforce Development and Government Operations. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. My name is Martha Ross and I am with the Brookings Greater Washington program. I am also speaking today as a partner of the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates, a coalition of youth-engaged organizations, youth, and concerned residents formed to ensure that all District of Columbia youth have access to high-quality and affordable developmental opportunities.

Youth employment programs have tremendous potential to connect young people to education, training, and labor market opportunities. They can make a real difference, especially in the lives of low-income and at-risk youth. As you know, the proposed Fiscal Year 2009 budget for the Department of Employment Services includes strong support for youth programs. At \$35 million, the youth budget is about a quarter of the total DOES budget. Madam Chair, you also directed more funds to youth services in the 2008 budget, so I'd like to acknowledge your commitment as well. Most of the youth budget in DOES is in local dollars, which means the city has great flexibility in the programs it designs and funds.

I'd like to talk about ensuring that the city spends its youth employment dollars well. I see a number of issues at play:

First, do we have a collection of programs, or do we have a system, specifically, a well-functioning system? Here are some qualities of a well-functioning system. There are different programs - and enough program slots - appropriate for young people with different needs and in different circumstances, and information about these programs is clearly communicated so that youth and parents can make informed choices, organizations can make appropriate referrals, and the result is that young people are matched up to the right programs.



Another quality of a high-functioning system is that different partners, such as nonprofit organizations, DOES, and employers all have clearly articulated roles based on their mission and their organizational strengths. For instance, nonprofits excel at recruitment, providing supportive services such as counseling and case management, and working with young people to develop the soft skills and interpersonal skills to succeed in the workplace. They are generally better positioned than either government or employers to carry out these functions, and their skills need to be drawn upon and supported. I don't see that happening in a systematic way.

The city is home to some highly-regarded programs, but we don't have a well-functioning system, in part because we don't have the necessary levels of coordination and trust among all of the various players, and in part because we don't have sufficient capacity, especially for young people not working and not in school. We need to assess the landscape of current programs and the needs of young people and develop a set of priorities and recommendations for improvement. This is a natural role for the Youth Investment Council, working in partnership with all of the relevant stakeholders.

Second, a focus on quality and building stronger relationships with nonprofit partners and employers would go a long way to building a stronger system. DOES should ensure that the programs it funds or runs directly adhere to basic quality standards. For example, programs should include not only training and career counseling, but also mentoring and case management. The National Youth Employment Coalition has developed guidelines, grounded in youth development principles, which could be useful. Some programs in the city do in fact incorporate these standards, but it is not required.

However, the development of quality standards needs to be a collaborative process with nonprofit service providers. We need to ensure that service providers are not held accountable for achieving unrealistic outcomes in a short time period with limited resources.

Third, the Summer Youth Employment Program is clearly a showcase for the administration, which deserves credit for making summer jobs a priority. In the past, however, the program has had problems that have reduced its quality and effectiveness. Last May, Madam Chair, you held a special hearing on youth employment, at which the summer jobs program was a major topic of discussion. Witnesses made some concrete suggestions for improvement and Director Summer Spencer made a number of commitments:

- Provide more staff to answer telephone calls from youth participants and employment sites, and ensure that staff have the training and the authority to answer questions and handle problems,
- Provide a 24-hour recorded hotline to answer frequently asked questions,
- Increase job development staff, recruit more private-sector employers to participate, and help job sites develop summer experiences for youth,
- Assign more staff to visit and monitor job sites to ensure that youth are engaged in meaningful employment activities, and
- Provide a more intensive orientation to the work world before youth go to job sites.

We urge this Committee to remain diligent in ensuring that these improvements are implemented.

In closing, I think there is a strong team at the helm of DOES, and there is great potential to make real improvements. Thank you for your attention and the opportunity to speak today. I'd be happy to answer any questions.