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# Cook County Hearing Puts Spotlight On Youth Unemployment Problem

By Ellyn Fortino

Youth joblessness was the focus of a Cook County hearing Tuesday afternoon, during which experts called attention to the grim employment landscape faced by many young people in the region, particularly youth of color.

The hearing coincided with the release of a new report on Cook County youth unemployment from the University of Illinois at Chicago Great Cities Institute. Youth in Cook County are less likely to be employed than their counterparts at the state and national levels and in other major U.S. regions, the research suggests.

The employment situation is the worst for Cook County's black youth, according to the report, based on 2014 data.

"[Young] blacks in Cook County do worse than they do compared to Illinois, the United States and the counties that hold that nation's largest cities," UIC Great Cities Director Teresa Cordova told Progress Illinois. "Conversely, whites do better."

The findings, she added, indicate that youth unemployment in Cook County is a "persistent problem" that it "is very concentrated" and will require a "multi-pronged attack from every facet to really tackle."

"We think this is the outcome of 40 years of economic policies," she said. "This didn't just happen overnight. But we also can't continue to let it happen, because the impacts are incredibly severe."

The hearing was held by Cook County's Workforce, Housing and Community Development committee, chaired by Commissioner Bridget Gainer (D-10).

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle spoke briefly at the hearing.

"This report supports what we already know," she said. "Far too many of our young people are cast adrift with little or no hope.



Too many are not only without educational opportunity, but without employment as well."

Preckwinkle said the county has "made strides in helping youth find opportunities," citing youth summer job initiatives at the forest preserve and sheriff's office along with the One Summer Chicago Plus youth employment program.

"But that's not enough," she stressed. "We need federal dollars specifically (allocated) to summer youth employment, and we need

to augment the existing funds that flow to the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership for its youth programming. Equally important, we have to encourage the business community to invest in our youth by providing summer work experiences as well as full-time employment that becomes the foundation for lifelong learning and career development."

Preckwinkle mentioned the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, which formed in 2012 and serves over 4,000 youth aged 16 to 24 in Chicago and the Cook County suburbs. The partnership's nearly \$60 million budget



comes mostly from federal funding and allocates about \$16 million to youth efforts, said Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership CEO Karin Norington-Reaves. "We recognize that there's a crisis in our region with respect to the number of youth and young adults who are neither connected to education or employment," she said, putting the total number of such youths in the region at over 200,000. "We also recognize that while our budget sounds hefty, it allows us to barely make a dent in the true need that exists within our county."

The UIC report compared Cook County with the United States, Illinois, New York City, Los Angeles County and Harris County, Texas.

Cook County had the highest share of 16- to 19-year-olds being both out of school and work, at 8.8 percent.

Fifty-nine percent of blacks aged 20 to 24 in Cook County were unemployed in 2014, compared to 58 percent in Illinois and 49 percent nationwide.

For blacks aged 16 to 19, the 2014 unemployment rate in Cook County was 87 percent, followed by 78 percent among Latinos and 74 percent among whites.

Father Michael Pflieger, pastor of the Faith Community of Saint Sabina, testified at the hearing. He pointed to Chicago's uptick in gun violence as he stressed the need for more youth employment opportunities.

"As of today, 82 days into this year -- 82 days -- 118 people killed by guns, 593 wounded," he said. "It's time we draw the dots and acknowledged that there is a cause and effect. We can't keep just telling our youth don't sell drugs, put down the guns, be nice people and not offer them anything to pick up or do with their lives."

Summer job opportunities helped put David Elam's life on a positive path.

The 25-year-old former gang member from Garfield Park previously "saw fit to be a part of nothing but destruction," he told commissioners. His life has since turned around thanks to youth employment and mentoring programs. Elam is currently a youth mentor on the city's West Side with the group Fathers Who Care.

"Without these (youth jobs and mentor-

ing) programs," Elam said, "I'll just flat-out say it. I'd be dead right now."

Youth jobs, particularly those offered over the summer, are crucial, Elam said. They provide young people with "a sense of urgency and responsibility, to be able to have something positive to do and not be caught up in all the negativity that's been happening in the city of Chicago," he told Progress Illinois.

Just over 20 percent of Cook County's youth aged 16 to 19 were employed in 2014, compared with 29.1 percent in Illinois and 29.4 percent nationwide, according to the UIC report. The 2014 employment rates among Cook County's 16- to 19-year-olds break down to be 12.9 percent for Blacks, 21.6 percent for Hispanic and 26.2 percent for whites.

Over 62 percent of youth in Cook County aged 20 to 24 were employed in 2014, compared with 64.5 percent nationwide and 65.8 percent in Illinois.

Those figures come during the ninth month of the state budget impasse, during which various social services, including youth programs, have gone unfunded.

"The state budget [impasse] has been devastating (for) human services across the board, but it's particularly devastating for young folks and organizations" serving them, Chicago Area Project Executive Director David Whittaker said in an interview.

Whittaker, whose organization works to prevent juvenile delinquency in disadvantaged communities, called for a state budget solution and urged Illinois officials to "reestablish (the state's) commitment to funding youth services."

During his testimony, Pflieger said Illinois has not done enough to help address Cook County's high rate of youth unemployment.

"The state has turned its back on this problem," he claimed.

Cook County Commissioner Jesus "Chuy" Garcia (D-7) suggested that local decision makers should think big in terms of how to tackle the region's youth joblessness problem. Garcia, a supporter of Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, mentioned the \$5.5 billion youth employment proposal, the Employ Young Americans Now Act, being sponsored by Sanders in the U.S. Senate.

"The reason I raise that is because that could change the reality and the pittance of funding that we're relying on today for jobs that our young people desperately need," Garcia said. "Why do I speak with passion? Because I had one of those jobs when I was 13-years-old growing up in Pilsen, because I was the product of the old CETA program, Comprehensive Employment Training Act."

Garcia described the job as one of the best he's had, calling it "a game changer for me in terms of what I've been able to do in my life."

"If we're not fighting hard," Garcia went on to say, "how do we expect to change the status quo?"