



Job Corps: Immediate Challenges for the Obama Administration

Background

Over its 45 year history, Job Corps has consistently proved itself to be the most productive intervention for the marginalized, at-risk youth population, succeeding where few other programs could. Congress recognized this success by continually expanding the program, most recently in five new communities in Florida, Iowa, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. As a result of an act of Congress in 2005, intended to raise the program's profile and celebrate its success on its 40th anniversary, the program is currently managed by the National Office of Job Corps located in the Office of the Secretary at the U.S. Department of Labor.

Job Corps' record of success with this most difficult to serve population; its ability to quickly adapt to emerging workforce and economic needs; and its consistent bi-partisan political support is attributable to the unique, truly collaborative, public/private partnership that has governed the program since its inception. While Department of Labor staff retain ultimate responsibility and authority for the program, contractors and other federal agencies (U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Reclamation), who actually operate the campuses (called Job Corps centers) have always been full partners in developing the policies and practices they will implement to advance Job Corps' mission and to improve the lives of their students.

We regret that the current administration abandoned that spirit of collaboration and unilaterally mandated significant changes in operating practices despite concerns from the boots on the ground who work with our students day to day and even from seasoned federal managers. Many have interpreted these changes to be a deliberate effort to undermine the program as a political response to the congressionally mandated transfer of Job Corps into the Office of the Secretary. The results have been disastrous: for the first time in decades Job Corps has experienced a decline in performance, underutilization of capacity, and significant budget overruns.

We have prepared an analysis of the specific policies and practices that have compromised Job Corps' ability to successfully carry out its mission, together with recommended solutions to each of those problems. We would be happy to provide these program and administrative recommendations at such time as they may be useful.

There is an urgency, however, in addressing several broad, yet critical, issues immediately in order to restore Job Corps to its previous levels of effectiveness and to enable Job Corps to adapt and respond to the new administration's priorities. Those issues are Job Corps' administration, Job Corps' leadership, and Job Corps' mission/congressional intent.

Job Corps' Administration

When Congress directed that Job Corps be moved out of the Employment and Training Administration in 2005 and placed in the Office of the Secretary of Labor, in recognition of Job Corps' 40th Anniversary and in an effort to give the program greater visibility and independence, it clearly directed the Secretary of Labor "to transfer current Job Corps functions and staff from the Employment and Training Administration to the Job Corps office established in the Office of the Secretary."¹ Job Corps was to be moved in its entirety, with all of its functions and staff intact.

¹ U.S. House. Committee on Appropriations. *Making appropriations for the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and related agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2006, and for other purposes* (H. Rept. 109-337).



The administration disregarded the directions from Congress and, instead, attempted to dismantle the program by reassigning essential program functions, including procurement, budget and finance, and communications, to other offices throughout the Department of Labor. This has had a debilitating effect on the administration of Job Corps. House Appropriations Chairman David Obey confronted Secretary Elaine Chao regarding her deliberate dismantling of the agency during her fiscal year 2009 budget testimony saying “I find it interesting that when the Congress expressed a very strong concern about keeping that agency [Job Corps] together, that your Department did just the opposite.”²

DOL’s fracturing of the Office of Job Corps has compounded the bureaucracy within Job Corps’ management and denied Job Corps’ federal managers the tools they need to effectively administer the program. Job Corps officials must rely on approval from individuals in various offices throughout DOL who are unfamiliar with Job Corps, are driven by priorities unrelated to Job Corps, and lack an understanding of how their decisions will impact Job Corps operations on the ground. This is most evident in the abdication of procurement authority over a program that is 100 percent administered by contract. Routine decisions regarding safety repairs and service modifications have been needlessly delayed because Job Corps’ federal administrators no longer have the authority to make these decisions.

In order for Job Corps to regain its organizational effectiveness and utilize the independence Congress wanted it to have to grow and improve the program, all of the essential functions that have been reassigned to other offices within the Department of Labor, functions that Job Corps has performed effectively and efficiently throughout its history, must be brought back together under the Office of Job Corps.

Job Corps’ Leadership

The most important immediate decision the Obama Administration will have to make related to Job Corps is regarding the program’s leadership team. In addition to dissipating the authority of Job Corps’ experienced federal managers, this administration also introduced a new top-down management culture that does not value the input of Job Corps operators or even of seasoned federal managers. The result has often been politically motivated policy directives and initiatives that are incongruent with realities on the ground, and Job Corps students have suffered as a result.

Job Corps is a very large, complex program that provides comprehensive services to a difficult to serve population in a 24 hours a day, 365 days a year residential setting. It has 127 training campuses and numerous recruitment and career transition/job placement offices throughout the country. DOL must rely on the private corporations, other government agencies, non-profits, and unions that operate these centers and offices to implement Job Corps’ mission. Without input from these operators DOL cannot fully anticipate the impact of policy changes on center operations and our students nor the challenges those changes may face in implementation.

Acknowledging this reality, Job Corps has always been operated as an intensely collaborative public/private partnership. The current administration’s drastic shift away from this culture of partnership to a culture of skepticism about Job Corps operators and Job Corps federal administrators as well, has severely damaged morale throughout the program and led to policies that hurt our

² U.S. House. Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education and Related Agencies. *Labor Budget*, Hearing, March 6, 2008.



students. One of the primary management priorities for Job Corps should be reestablishing the culture of partnership and collaboration.

Job Corps' Mission and Congressional Intent

Job Corps is principally defined by the population it was intended to serve: youth who are left behind by the public education system. These youth are unemployable but need more than just the vocational training opportunities that the public workforce investment system and community colleges offer. Job Corps is a bridge from a past of desperation and helplessness, to a future of opportunity and hope. Each student approaches the bridge from a different starting point and brings a different set of abilities, experiences and challenges to the journey. This journey is difficult, precarious, and easy to abandon particularly for these youth, the majority of whom have already dropped out of school once. Job Corps succeeds because it employs an individualized competency based approach to teaching and learning that addresses the academic, vocational and social (non-cognitive) skills required for productive employment, successful careers and responsible citizenship.

The current administration has, acting unilaterally, attempted to realign Job Corps to standards that ignore the individual challenges our students bring to the table and are unrealistic for too many of our students. In its efforts to create an employer-driven workforce investment system this administration swung the pendulum too far towards employers needs to the detriment of our students. Job Corps' almost singular focus on the needs of high-growth employers has undermined Job Corps' core individualized model that addresses the complex needs of our student population. For Job Corps to be successful in its mission a balance must be achieved. Though many of our students will fly, most must first learn to walk. If flying is the only achievement we acknowledge as having value we will continue to leave far too many youth behind.

Job Corps is not a community college nor should it be a competitor with community colleges. Job Corps plays a unique role by filling a gap for millions of marginalized youth between the public education system and the workforce development system led by community colleges. We urge that Job Corps' original mission be reconfirmed and that preparing the undereducated, unemployable young people for employment, the military and/or post-secondary educational opportunities be recognized and celebrated for the incredible achievement it is.

Summary

The Job Corps family appreciates the enormous challenges facing the new administration. Our understanding of the consequences facing our great nation if we fail to meet these challenges is both intellectual and visceral. While our leaders are in Washington, DC and in Regional Offices in major cities around the country, most of the 15,000 people who work for Job Corps and the 60,000 students we serve each year are on the front lines. We work in urban, suburban and rural communities in every state, far from the struggles of the middle class on Main Street, in the ghettos and barrios on the "other side of the tracks", where survival is a daily challenge and Job Corps is often the only hope of a future and the first step on the path to the American Dream.

We want to be part of the solution, as we have been in the past, and toward this end, we urge the Transition Team to consider our recommendations. Untie our hands and allow us to do what Congress intended for us to do, what we know how to do, and what we are committed to doing - serving the needs of our most difficult to serve youth.