

Written Testimony of Jeff Barton, Academy Director of the Earle C. Clements Job Corps Academy in Morganfield, KY

Thank you Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the Committee, for inviting me to testify about the Job Corps program. I am honored to have the opportunity to participate in and contribute to this important discussion about how we can strengthen and improve Job Corps, particularly as it relates to the safety and security of the students entrusted into our care. I cannot sufficiently express how serious student safety is to me and my colleagues across the Job Corps system. We are educators, counselors, disciplinarians, mentors, but the most important role we play is caretaker of someone else's child.

My career in Job Corps, began in 1992 as a counselor at the South Bronx Job Corps Center in New York City. Over my six-year tenure there, I served in many roles – Academic Manager, Vocational Manager, Residential Manager and Manager of Administration. That experience exposed me to the range of Job Corps' responsibilities as well as the varied challenges the program faces with respect to mental health obstacles, educating students who may range from illiterate to high school graduates, and organizing and supervising recreational activities during the other 16 hours outside the students' workday.

In 1998, I left Job Corps to enroll in the Northern Virginia Criminal Justice Academy and served as a Police Officer for the Leesburg Police Department in nearby Loudoun County, Virginia. I saw firsthand the myriad challenges our law enforcement agencies and communities across the nation are facing with respect to drug addiction, violence, gang activity, and mental health. These experiences also exposed me to the resource limitations our law enforcement agencies face and the choices they have to make with respect to policing. In addition to my community policing and general patrol duties, I had the opportunity to serve as a School Resource Officer for the middle school and assisted in a high school in Loudoun County. While serving in the middle school, I taught a weekly course to the students pertaining to interaction with law enforcement as well as the problems associated with drug use.

I took these experiences and lessons with me when I returned to Job Corps. I was drawn back by the program's unique mission to help our nation's most at-risk young adults who would otherwise be left with few or no other options. I know I speak for my management team and many of my colleagues across the nation when I say that Job Corps is not just a job for us – it is a mission and calling to which we are devoted. After returning to the community, I eventually served for four years as the Center Director of the Whitney M. Young Job Corps Center located in Simpsonville, Kentucky and for six years as Center Director of the Potomac Job Corps Center here in Washington, D.C.. I am currently the Academy Director of the Earle C. Clements Job Corps Academy in Morganfield, Kentucky, a role which I have now held for seven years.

The Earle C. Clements Job Corps Academy is the nation's second largest Job Corps Center. Currently, over 700 students from 29 States, including nearly 100 students from the districts of 13 members of this committee, reside at my center. In that way, the Earle C. Clements Academy exemplifies the founding premise of Job Corps – that taking vulnerable youth out of difficult or unsupportive home environments and providing them a safe, secure, and supportive living and learning environment will help them unlock their potential.

Like most centers, the Clements Academy offers our students - the majority of whom dropped out or were kicked out of school - multiple options for completing their high school education. Our center also offers these students training in 19 occupations, including automotive repair, computer technician, nursing and welding, and offers students the opportunity to earn any of over 700 different industry-recognized credentials. As required by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, our offerings and curricula are informed by our Industry Council which includes our local Chamber of Commerce, River View Coal, Morganfield Nursing and Rehab, Ingram Barge, Century Aluminum and others. These employers also work with us to offer work-based learning opportunities, or the opportunity to earn and learn with employers in our community.

Our students are also able to co-enroll in college through partnerships with our local colleges including Henderson Community College and Ivy Tech Community College. These college partnerships leverage our great success with remedial education, with which community colleges generally struggle, to ease the transition to college. The average Job Corps enrollee enters the program with schooling below the 8th grade level but advances the equivalent of 2.5 grade levels after less than a year in Job Corps.ⁱ Nationally, through initiatives by both the National Job Corps Association and the National Office of Job Corps, Job Corps has begun to expand such college partnerships. Our goal is for our students who earn postsecondary certifications in Job Corps to receive the same college credit that they would earn if they completed the certification at a college. By 2020, 65 percent of jobs will require some postsecondary education and we want our students to be prepared for those jobs.ⁱⁱ

I am proud to say that during my tenure as the Academy Director of the Earle C. Clements Job Corps Academy, the center's performance has improved significantly across the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act's primary measures of performance. Today, in the areas of high school completion and credential attainment as well as at placing students in the occupations for which we train them, the Clements Academy is among the highest ranked centers. So far this program year, 95 percent of my vocational students have earned a primary industry-recognized credential.

These successes are predicated on providing a safe and secure environment for our students to live and learn. Safety and security are the foundation of our program. The most important role I have taken on in my professional life is caretaker to someone else's children and to your constituents. Over the course of my 25 year career, the three days in which I received phone calls that one of my students had passed – all as a result of medical incidents – were among the worst days of my life. Preserving and protecting the lives of these students is not an abstract concept to me. I know them, I know their families, I know their hopes, and I know their dreams. And to see those taken, whether by violence, drugs, depression, an accident, or a medical incident, is heartbreaking.

Unfortunately, we are not immune to violence, substance abuse, depression or other mental health disorders – far from it, given the population that we serve and the communities from which they often come. Our students regularly tell us stories about how they enrolled in Job Corps to escape gangs, an unstable home life, or an unsafe community that made it impossible to pursue their education and career goals. Unlike most schools, Job Corps operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every week of the year except for a short winter break over the holidays, during which students return home. Every single holiday break, I receive calls from students asking if they can return to the Job Corps center early because they are concerned about violence in their community, the temptation or peer pressure to use drugs, or their own safety. For many of our students, our centers are a refuge.

That is why the entire Job Corps community was shocked and horrified by the incidents at the St. Louis and Homestead Job Corps Centers. We were horrified not just because of the tragedy and heinousness of the crimes, but because those were our students – those could have been my students. We were shocked, because we work hard and, for the most part successfully, to prevent such incidents. The national mortality rate for 16-24 year olds between 2012 and 2015 was 70.88 per 100,000, while the comparable rate on Job Corps centers was 4.7.ⁱⁱⁱ That means Job Corps students were 15 times safer on Job Corps campuses than their peers, including their non-disadvantaged peers, nationally.^{iv} While these two tragedies are not representative of Job Corps' overall record with respect to safety, they nonetheless necessitated a reevaluation of whether we are doing everything we can to protect our students.

In the aftermath of these awful incidents everyone in the Job Corps community – from our National Director, our operators, the National Job Corp Association, and, of course, each individual Center Director – resolved to review our policies, our practices, and our campuses to identify any gaps. Fortunately, our center, like most centers, has a very strong relationship with our local law enforcement agency which has assisted us in conducting these assessments. At the Clements Academy, we have had local law enforcement conduct a security assessment, provided active threat training for all staff and students, begun instituting a text alert system

for all staff and students, and conducted more frequent canine sweeps of the dormitories to further deter drug possession. The National Office made clear that this was a priority by conducting announced safety inspections at centers nationwide. On June 1, 2016, in response to feedback from Center Directors, the National Job Corps Association, and the Office of the Inspector General, the National Office of Job Corps introduced a new, stricter zero tolerance policy that removed ambiguities in the previous policy, particularly related to how violent behavior should be classified. Job Corps has also introduced new hotlines for students to anonymously report safety concerns or illegal behavior. Across the board, we have increased our expectations of students and our staff with respect to safety and security.

Having said that, we must not lose sight of the challenges that the population we serve brings to the table. A quarter of our students have a disclosed disability, mostly cognitive disabilities, and many more come to us with undiagnosed disabilities that may lead to behavioral issues.^v Many, if not most, students also come to our centers having previously learned behaviors that are counterproductive for the classroom and the workplace. These maladaptive behaviors are often the reason they did not succeed in traditional classrooms and schools. We see this play out in Job Corps as well. More than 1 in 4 Job Corps students are currently expelled from the program in accordance with our zero tolerance policy – an increase of more than 25 percent compared to historical averages under the previous policy.^{vi}

Maintaining the safety and security of our centers is of paramount importance, so we will remain vigilant in enforcing the zero tolerance policy. We simultaneously strive to minimize the number of students that violate that policy and must be expelled, because we are successful with the students that we keep – of those who are not expelled, 4 in 5 complete their studies and graduate from the program.^{vii} With that goal in mind, the Job Corps community recommended to the National Office that we review our admissions practices. In particular, we recommended returning authority to admissions counselors to implement the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act's requirement to ascertain whether an applicant's needs can be best met through Job Corps or another program. Our understanding is that the National Office of Job Corps is preparing to introduce new standards with respect to those policies and practices.

We are also continuously working to strengthen our behavioral management systems in order to mitigate violent behavior once students are enrolled. At the Clements Academy, we utilize positive behavior interventions and support (PBIS) that emphasize preventing problem behaviors before they happen. Research has shown that utilizing PBIS significantly reduces the number of students involved in major or minor disciplinary events.^{viii} I also understand that the National Job Corps Association, in conjunction with the Arnold Foundation and researchers from Harvard University, Princeton University, and the University of Pennsylvania are working

to test the use of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) strategies to address maladaptive behaviors and reduce disciplinary infractions at Job Corps centers. These CBT strategies previously proved successful at reducing arrests for violent crimes by 44 percent, overall arrests by 36 percent, and improving graduation rates by 7-22 percent among at-risk young males, when implemented by the Becoming a Man program in Chicago.^{ix}

Nationally, there are 4.9 million young Americans age 16-24 who are neither employed nor enrolled in school.^x If not for Job Corps, many of these young people would have no other effective options in their communities. The costs of ignoring this population are enormous; according to some estimates, they could cost the American economy and taxpayers as much as \$5 trillion over the course of their lifetimes.^{xi} A long-term evaluation of Job Corps found it to be the first program to demonstrate long-term impacts on earnings for this population.^{xii} In the 20 years since that study was conducted, the program has continued to improve.

The President has said that “We want to make sure that we have the workforce development programs we need to ensure these jobs are being filled by American workers.”^{xiii} Last year, more than 70 percent of Job Corps students left with an industry-recognized credential.^{xiv} 86 percent of Job Corps graduates secured jobs, enlisted in the military, or enrolled in higher education.^{xv} Job Corps is one of the workforce development programs the United States and these youth need. For that reason, the Job Corps community will always strive to do better for our students, our employers, our communities, and taxpayers.

Hearings like this one are important to that cycle of continuous improvement. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute the study of this essential workforce development program and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

ⁱ Outcome Measurement System Center Report Card (OMS-10); Report Period: 7/1/2015 – 6/30/2016. U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved February 13, 2017 from http://www.jobcorps.gov/Libraries/Annual%20Reports/OMS10_2016.sflb

ⁱⁱ Carnevale, Anthony, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl (2014). *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved on June 19, 2017 from https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.ES_Web.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on comparison of Job Corps on-center mortality rates to national mortality rates for 16- to 24-year-old youth nationally, 2012 to 2015. Job Corps enrollment and student mortality data provided by the National Office of Job Corps. National 16- to 24-year-old youth mortality data taken from CDC WONDER Online Database.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v National Office of Job Corps. (November, 2015). Job Corps Health and Wellness Report: Review of Selected Health Indicators Program Year 2014. U.S. Department of Labor.

^{vi} Job Corps Executive Information System. Separations by Type, Program Year 2016.

^{vii} Data taken from Job Corps Executive Information System. [Calculation: (PY 2015 graduates)/(PY 2015 separations – PY 2015 disciplinary separations)].

^{viii} Flannery, K.B., P. Fenning, M. McGrath Kato and K. McIntosh (2013). "Effects of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and Fidelity of Implementation on Problem Behavior in High Schools." *School Psychology Quarterly*. 2014, Vol. 29, No. 2, 111-124. Retrieved June 19, 2017 from:

https://www.pbis.org/common/cms/files/pbisresources/HighSchools_Effects%20of%20Fidelity%20on%20Prob%20Behavior_Article.pdf

^{ix} Heller, Sara B. Anuj K. Shah, Jonathan Guryan, Jens Ludwig, Sendhil Mullainathan, and Harold A. Pollack (2015). "Thinking, Fast and Slow? Some Field Experiments to Reduce Crime and Dropout in Chicago." NBER Working Paper No. 21178. Retrieved June 19, 2017 from: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w21178>

^x Burd-Sharps, Sarah and Kristen Lewis (2017). *Promising Gains, Persistent Gaps: Youth Disconnection in America*. Measure of America. Retrieved June 19, 2017 from <http://www.measureofamerica.org/disconnected-youth/>.

^{xi} Belfield, C., Levin, H., and Rosen, R (2012). *The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth*. Civic Enterprises. Retrieved February 21, 2017 from: https://www.serve.gov/new-images/council/pdf/econ_value_opportunity_youth.pdf

^{xii} Schochet, P.Z.; Burghardt, J.; and McConnell, S. (2008). *Does Job Corps Work? Impact Findings from the National Job Corps Study*. *American Economic Review* 2008, 98:5, 1864-1886.

^{xiii} The White House (2017). "President Trump Leads on Workforce Development." June 15, 2017. Retrieved June 19, 2017 from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/15/president-trump-leads-workforce-development>.

^{xiv} *Outcome Measurement System Center Report Card (OMS-10); Report Period: 7/1/2015 – 6/30/2016*. U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved February 13, 2017 from http://www.jobcorps.gov/Libraries/Annual%20Reports/OMS10_2016.sflb

^{xv} Ibid