

## Helping Younger Adults Break Free From Poverty

By Connor D. Wolf

Youth employment experts shared their viewpoints and concerns Wednesday on the current economic state of younger adults during a congressional hearing.

Younger adults have faced economic obstacles in the decade since the last recession. The youth unemployment rate, encompassing those 16 to 24 years old, is nearly twice the national average at 11.5 percent. The House Ways and Means Human Resources Subcommittee held a hearing to explore ways to decrease youth poverty and unemployment.

The situation young adults find themselves in is particularly concerning considering the economy has made significant gains over the past year. Younger adults are doing better, but at a rate that lags behind the rest of the country. The hearing highlighted a number of solutions to help address the problem.

“Across the country, there are over five million youth who are out of school and out of work, 16 to 24 years old,” Martrice Manuel, an associate direct for the Alternative Schools Network, said during the hearing. “This situation affects youth and young adults of all races and across the inner city, suburban, and rural areas of our country.”

Many younger adults do not possess the skills needed to find a stable career. The issue is only getting worse with how much technology has radically changed the labor market. Year Up, a non-profit, has been working to solve the problem by helping younger adults find opportunities that provide needed skills and experience.

“I would like to begin today by describing the talent crisis currently facing our country,” Year Up founder Gerald Chertavian said. “Our education and training systems are increasingly both out of touch with employers’ needs and out of reach for young adults. Correcting this failure is both a moral imperative and an economic necessity.”

Chertavian adds there are millions of unfilled jobs younger adults are having trouble getting. Employers simply are having trouble



finding people with the skills and talents they need. Chertavian notes the issue stems from how the country educates and trains people.

“To be clear, our American education and workforce systems are not adequately preparing young adults for success in the labor market or to meet the human capital needs of business,” Chertavian said. “These education and workforce market failures threaten not only the dignity of America’s youth but also our nation’s economic prosperity.”

Year Up has partnered with a number of private-sector companies to find ways for younger workers to gain needed skills and experience. JPMorgan Chase, Salesforce, LinkedIn, Bank of America, and Microsoft are among the companies involved in the program.

Manuel notes federally-funded programs have also been a useful way to help younger adults. There are numerous federal and local programs aimed at helping high school dropouts, younger adults in poverty, and those struggling to find work or experience. Manuel points to Chicago where federal programs have been deployed and removed.

“The situation of youth joblessness continues to increase in Chicago, particularly since 2000 when the federal government ended its commitment to a summer youth employment program for low-income youth,” Manuel said. “This left over 600,000 low-income youth and young adults across the country and over 30,000 youth and young adults in

Chicago with no opportunity for employment.”

Martrice adds the problem was improved when similar federal programs were redeployed in 2009. The Alternative Schools Network does similar work by providing training and opportunities to younger adults, especially those in the inner-city.

“There are many federal, state and local programs designed to help families living in poverty meet basic needs, but addressing the long-term cycle of poverty takes much more than these programs are often able to provide,” Cheryl Oldham, vice president of education policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, testified. “While youth in poverty often face many barriers, a good education and job skills are imperative to moving up the economic ladder. A quarter of Americans with no high school diploma live in poverty.”

Oldham suggests approaching the problem with multiple solutions. Some of the ways in which younger adults can find opportunities don’t even require federal funding. Employers provide a range of programs that help them find and train potential employees.

“Many youths, particularly those who are at-risk, are simply not aware of the many opportunities that exist in the labor market because they have not been exposed to professional careers,” Oldham said. “There is no better way to tear down this barrier than by engaging youth and bringing them into the workplace. Internships, apprenticeships, work-study, and job shadowing are all examples of ways to provide these opportunities, which often have an academic component.”

The U.S. Census Bureau found in a report last year that 43 million Americans were living below the federal poverty line as of 2015. The report also found 14.5 million of those living below the poverty line were under the age of 18. The poverty rate overall has been trending in a generally positive direction.