

District's Summer Jobs Program: A Wellspring of Experience or Money Down the Drain?

BY ELISSA SILVERMAN AND ED LAZERE

It sounds like a test question for teenagers taking the SAT:

Mayor Adrian Fenty wants a big summer jobs program for youth. More than 20,000 kids signed up to work nine weeks at an estimated cost of \$45 million. He has \$21 million for the program in this year's budget. How will he pay for it?

- Hope half the kids don't show up and worry about the cost overruns later in the summer.
- Raid a pot of money from another city fund.
- Shorten the program and cap the number of participants.
- None of the above.

So what is the "correct" answer? It's not clear yet. Even as this year's program started on June 17, the \$24 million funding gap hadn't been filled.

The recent story of DC's Summer Youth Employment Program offers a lot of lessons – on mistakes that should not be repeated. The popular program was expanded massively last year, ultimately running \$34 million over budget and facing all sorts of administrative foul-ups. Many participants complained the jobs involved little work or mentoring and lots of sitting around, not exactly the formative experience you want to give young people.

This year's program may have fewer technical glitches, but experts and advocates still think it is too big to provide all participants with a high-quality experience. Moreover, the summer jobs program now consumes the vast majority of DC's local workforce development resources, overwhelming the budget for adult training and other youth programs. And allowing the program to run over its budget two years in a row is simply irresponsible.

Even Marion Barry, the original champion of the summer jobs program, thinks it is out of control. That should tell you something.

The DC Council already has taken steps to scale the summer jobs program back next year. That's a

good start, but even more will be needed to turn it into a quality program at an affordable cost.

The Summer Jobs Program: A DC Institution

Along with heat, humidity and the Palisades July Fourth parade, the District's Summer Youth Employment Program is a local rite of season. It is the legacy of Marion Barry, who, in 1979 during his first term as mayor, championed a law guaranteeing summer work to every District youth regardless of need. It's not uncommon to hear 30- and 40-something Washingtonians thanking Barry for giving them their first job – and sometimes their second, third and fourth!

DC's summer jobs program chugged along for years, facing some ups and downs as federal funding fluctuated. Things changed last year when Fenty decided to extend the program's length from six weeks to nine, opening enrollment to all youth, and using the program in new ways – such as paying some students in summer school (so they wouldn't skip school to take a job). But he didn't adjust the program's funding to meet the higher costs until it was too late. The city had to tap its rainy day fund to cover much of the overrun.

This year's price tag is likely to be around \$45 million, but the District budgeted only \$21 million as of mid-June.

Lesson One: Quality over Quantity Is Not a Good Approach

With the recent expansion, DC's summer jobs program is second only to New York City, according to Joseph Walsh, director of the city's Department of Employment Services. Baltimore, for example, employs approximately 7,000 youth at a cost of \$10 million. Philadelphia, a city of roughly three times the population of the District, had about 8,000 participants last year at a cost of \$8.2 million.

Even before last year's debacle, the program had been criticized for a lack of accountability: Kids were paid – even if it took a while to get paychecks – regardless of whether they showed up on time and performed work adequately, that is if there was any work at all.

The sprawling program has made some question its purpose.

Is DC's summer jobs program a meaningful introduction to the world of work, an income boost for teens, or simply a way to keep youngsters off the streets during the hottest part of the day? Ideally it would serve all three purposes, but some say this is asking too much because you cannot have both quantity and quality.

"The goal of providing income and something to do during the summer months for as many youth as possible appears to have supplanted the goal of developing a meaningful, high-quality youth employment program," wrote three youth advocates and experts in a letter this spring to the Fenty administration and the DC Council.

Then there's the fact that the Summer Jobs Program effectively has become DC's primary workforce development program. The \$45 million planned for this summer is three times the local budget for adult training and apprenticeship programs (about \$14 million) – and far more than the roughly \$10 million budgeted for school-year youth programs.

Given the summer jobs program's track record, these don't seem like the wisest budget priorities.

Lesson Two: Budget to Live Within Your Means

There was no rocket science needed to predict that the summer jobs program would run over budget this year. With 20,000 youth expected and an average pay of \$1,700 – plus administrative costs – the \$21 million budget clearly was insufficient (especially when the program spent \$55 million last

year). Yet Fenty did not try to scale the program back, and he didn't ask the council for more funding until the program was filled. In a Budgeting 101 class, this plan would receive an F.

Fenty has proposed filling the \$24 million funding gap in this year's summer jobs program by draining the Community Benefit Fund, a neighborhood trust created out of the legislation to build and finance Nationals Park. Some DC councilmembers, including Chairman Vincent Gray, have expressed reservations, saying that the fund was conceived as a way for the community to have input into what it thought was most important.

The council should stick to this and reject the effort to use the community benefit fund as a way to get out of bad budget decisions.

Lesson Three: Learn from Your Mistakes

Perhaps the biggest sign that DC's Summer Jobs Program has gone astray comes from Marion Barry, who led an effort in this spring's budget deliberations to scale back next year's program. Under the fiscal year 2010 budget, the program will go back to six weeks, and enrollment will be capped.

That's good, but may not be enough. More effort will be needed to ensure a focus on quality. And our elected leaders need to think about the size of the summer jobs program in the context of the massive training needs of unemployed adults.

Fenty and the council would be wise in using this summer's experience as a teachable moment to reshape the program and its budget. Getting the most bang for the buck and budgeting within our means are two important lessons every student – and city leader – needs to learn well.

Silverman and Lazere are staff of the DC Fiscal Policy Institute (www.dcfpi.org), which conducts research on tax and budget issues that affect low- and moderate-income DC residents. ★

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