

REP. DANNY K. DAVIS (D-ILL.)

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE OF THE FORMERLY INCARCERATED

Reentry. It's a concept well known to those seeking to reintegrate into society after incarceration. However, it's a transition that's not so easily accomplished, with chronic unemployability and lack of housing emerging as persistent hurdles.

By Arnesa A. Howell

Continued on page 2

MAKING STRIDES: JOBS COALITION ACCOMPLISHMENTS



While raising awareness of workforce challenges and potential barriers to employment, the JOBS Coalition and its members have combined their resources and industry expertise to achieve the following results:

- Built the Bellevue Resource Center, a program facility serving the hard-to-reach, hard-to-employ, and returning ex-offender populations. The Center was completed on September 30, 2003.
- Guided the creation of the Construction & Design Academy at Cardozo, providing District students access, training, and preparation for careers in the construction industry and trades after graduation. The Academy officially opened in September 2005. □



CIRCLE AROUND Miller & Long's HR assistant Kenneth Glover (center) gives straight talk to students hired into the company's pre-apprenticeship program.

PRE-APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM ENCOURAGES GRADUATES TO PUSH THROUGH CHALLENGES, GRAB RING OF OPPORTUNITY

Miller & Long Concrete Construction has a long-standing commitment to workforce development and training through its existing pre-apprenticeship programs. It recently added to its efforts to expand the pool of qualified laborers in the construction industry through a program supported by the Department of Employment Services. In Part 2 of a two-part series, *JOBS Coalition Pathways* highlights the classroom training component of this 12-week pre-apprenticeship program and how it helps prepare those new to the construction field for future career success.

By Arnesa A. Howell

It's just after noon on a Friday, and eight guys are scattered across the room — seated along three long rows of tables in the basement of Miller & Long's Training Center in Bethesda, Maryland, where instructor Karen Brioso discusses the ins and outs of worksite safety.

"Pay attention. Here and there, look up and see where the crane is moving," Brioso, a safety manager at Miller & Long Concrete Construction, tells the group of pre-apprentices.

"Every time I walk, I look up first," one young man responds.

"Listen for the whistles. Foremen have whistles they will start blowing and the crane has

a horn. Don't ignore those sounds. Those sounds are alerting you of a danger," she continues while flipping through a series of projected images with titles like "Struck by Flying Objects" and "Cranes and Heavy Equipment."

This mandatory class is one of a string of safety and professional development trainings held as part of the 12-week pre-apprenticeship program supported by the Department of Employment Services. And the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's OSHA10 construction training — a 10-and-a-half-hour, three-day course — is a critical component for the pre-apprentices.

Continued on page 2

CBC 2018 *Continued from page 1*

“The biggest challenge is having a place to live,” said Rep. Danny K. Davis (D-Ill.), who hosted a session on reentry during the 48th Annual Congressional Black Caucus Legislative Conference (CBC). A longtime advocate for ex-offender rights, Davis explained that support systems from family or smaller communities can be pivotal in improving the lives of those in need by providing transitional housing and other resources.

If the average person comes home from prison and gets help, according to Davis, the chances of recidivism go down proportionately with the value of the program. “If it’s a good program and they get a job, the chances are they will never see the inside of a prison again,” he noted during the September event.

As part of the latest CBC conference, Davis presented a series of panels looking at workforce development efforts in Chicago, Illinois to integrate returning citizens back into their communities. Here, *JOBS Coalition Pathways* highlights two innovative approaches to finding gainful employment for the formerly incarcerated.

Sweet Beginnings LLC

Jobs creation takes many forms, and for Sweet Beginnings that translates into hiring former inmates to make products “utilizing the beauty of nature through a simple honey bee,” said Brenda Palms Barber, president and CEO of the social enterprise Sweet Beginnings, which creates honey-infused products from its collection of beehives.

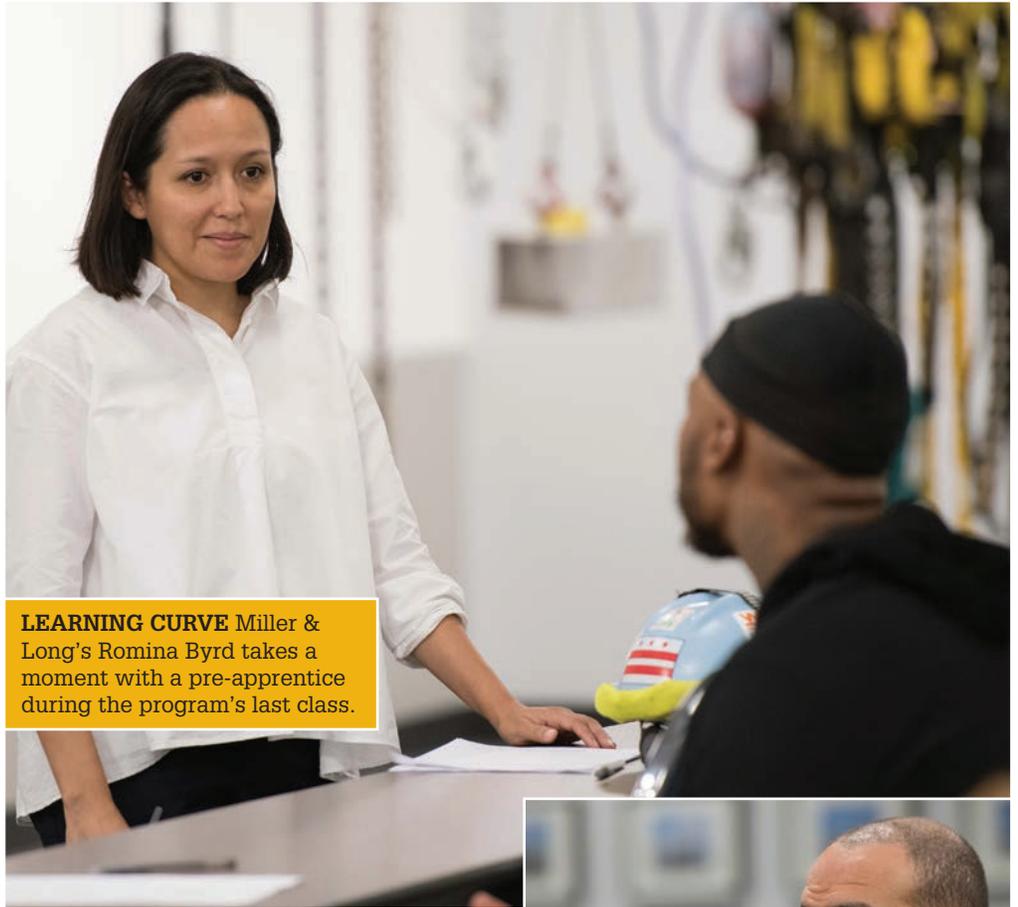
Tucked away in the Chicago community of North Lawndale, the business was started to help men and women successfully reintegrate — which extends beyond the organic process of reentry. “Reintegration is how do we wrap our arms around individuals, provide them with comprehensive services that not only help them stabilize their lives through housing and comprehensive support services, but for me it’s also about how to restore their sense of self worth,” Barber said.

It’s a challenging endeavor for a country that holds millions behind bars, according to Barber, and releases nearly 90 percent of its incarcerated to return to their communities. “When folks come out, they are really behind the gun,” she stated.

Sweet Beginnings, for one, is fighting the chronic unemployment facing the formerly incarcerated by training individuals to work as beekeepers. Plus, it is providing these individuals with an opportunity to cultivate business savvy skills. For example, they are learning about inventory, shipping and receiving, and customer service, Barber said.

“So they have an inside understanding of

Continued on page 4



LEARNING CURVE Miller & Long’s Romina Byrd takes a moment with a pre-apprentice during the program’s last class.

Pre-Apprenticeship Pt. II *Continued from page 1*

“The type of industry in which they work is very dangerous, so it’s to teach these guys how to recognize hazards and prevent them from getting hurt on the job site,” says Brioso of the training, which is a primer for construction newcomers. “This is to add to their knowledge. The more knowledge your people have, the safer they are going to be.”

On this day, Brioso starts with in-class exercises to identify safety hazards, like those related to crane swing radius and excavations. The students are attentive, writing in their workbooks and engaging in class discussions call-and-response style. The curriculum for this training started with an introduction to OSHA, and continued with discussions on how to file an OSHA complaint, fall protection, and electric and health hazards in construction and inspection tools. “If you’re not trained, then the only way for you to find out is if you get hurt,” adds Brioso. “That is what we’re trying to prevent.”

Grabbing the Golden Ring

But the pre-apprenticeship program extends beyond working to ensure one’s well-being on the job. Just ask Matthew Aguilar, who learned about the opportunity months after landing a laborer position with Miller & Long. “It helps out people,” assures Aguilar, a carpenter’s helper.

Through the program, he continues, “I’ve learned that I can push past my limits.” So, he has set his sights on becoming an engineer and is



IN THE ZONE Student Matthew Aguilar is focused on leveraging his training to become an engineer.



TOUGH LOVE Glover urges each pre-apprentice to get his priorities in order.

optimistic about getting help along the way.

“I’m just trusting the powers that be and the people who are in charge,” says Aguilar of those overseeing the training program. “They say they are going to give me an opportunity, so I’m just gonna wait to grab that opportunity.”

Aguilar is not alone. Others hired into the program are also looking ahead, and Miller & Long

Continued on page 3



SPEAK ON IT New Grad Dontrell Deaner (right) chats with DOES workforce development specialist Randall Shannon.



GOOD TIMES A student celebrates receiving his tool belt.

Pre-Apprenticeship Pt. II *Continued from page 2* is providing the resources to help them succeed. “Everyone is showing extreme effort and willingness to go forward,” says Romina Byrd, the company’s director of education and training.

When Kenneth Glover doles out advice and life lessons to the pre-apprentices of this class — the majority of whom are formerly incarcerated — he is speaking from experience. That’s because he too is a returning citizen. “I know what it takes to get to another level,” says Glover, a human

resources assistant for Miller & Long, who vividly remembers his days as a laborer. He started with the company in 2003 as a carpenter helper.

For many of these men passing through the doors of the Training Center, Glover has become an unofficial mentor, regularly devoting time to help keep each one on track. He calls them after work and invites them to call him — all in an effort to help address a patchwork of issues outside of the workplace that can derail their progress. Those challenges include housing, family issues and a lack of support, according to Glover.

The program provides additional classroom trainings covering areas such as anger management, budgeting and financial literacy

aimed at addressing these and other challenges. “Some probably haven’t worked on their issues before coming home,” he adds.

While the company is giving the opportunity, the responsibility ultimately falls on each pre-apprentice. And that means eliminating the excuses, Glover says.

Setting Priorities

It’s the final day of class in September, and there’s a steady stream of pre-apprentices anxious to officially become graduates. Glover steps to the front of the room and asks the guys about their tools. One retorts that he’s lost his hammer. Glover goes all in: “Time out ... come on, come on, what? This is our profession. Listen, when I was a carpenter, you know how many tools I actually lost? But I had to go buy me new ones. This is y’all’s trade. You have to be invested in yourself.”

Glover is never hesitant to take a “tough love” approach, and throughout the class it’s easy to catch him pulling a pre-apprentice aside for a talk or holding court with a small group — always giving it to them straight. “I just try to walk my walk, be consistent on what I preach and teach, and live it. And I show it to them,” he says. “I was once in their seat ... so I know what it’s gonna take for them to make it through this program.”

According to Byrd, about 90 percent of the students want to pursue apprenticeship training, and endeavor Miller & Long is supporting by hosting an on-site signup for those interested on graduation day. It’s something Dontrell Deaner is looking forward to as he has his sights set on a carpentry apprenticeship.

“I feel like I should take advantage of the opportunity that’s been presented to me. I’m just going to put my all into it and hopefully come out successful,” says Deaner, 28, who learned about the pre-apprenticeship program through DOES.

“We supported this program helping to get D.C. residents into apprenticeships. We are very proud of these guys having completed this and pursuing their careers in construction,” says Randall Shannon, a workforce development specialist at DOES’ Office of Apprenticeship, in attendance for the last session.

As the newly minted grads accepted their fully-equipped, leather tool belts, signaling their graduation, Glover urges them to stay focused on the big picture. “This program is giving you a chance to learn a trade that no one can take away,” he says, and, instilling “a sense of pride and showing someone cares.” At the same time, Miller & Long is advancing its future, as “hopefully these young men will become carpenters and foremen,” Glover adds.

Deaner, for one, says he is feeling good about what he’s already accomplished and the journey ahead: “This is just my first round of the fight, and there’s a plenty more to come. I just want to conquer them all.” □

JOBS Coalition Pathways

Managing Editor: Arnesa A. Howell

Executive Editor: Carol Randolph

Copy Editor: Pam Ellison

Contributors: Arnesa A. Howell

Graphic Design: Jenn French Designs, LLC

Photographer: Imagine Photography

Board of Directors: Robert Braunohler, Bill Dean, Balchander Jayaraman, Eric Jones, John McMahon, Rev. Stephen E. Tucker

JOBS Coalition Legal Adviser: Roderic Woodson

The *JOBS Coalition Pathways* is the exclusive property of the JOBS Coalition, 702 Otis Place, NW, Washington, D.C. 20010; 301-262-0560. *JOBS Coalition Pathways* is dedicated to disseminating information that will help strengthen the city’s apprenticeship training and job placement programs, broadening the scope to reach the young, the underserved, the unemployed and the returning ex-offender. *JOBS Coalition Pathways* is published by the JOBS Coalition.

CBC 2018 *Continued from page 2*

how to run a business and what makes a good employee,” she continued, noting that to date 471 men and women have been hired through Sweet Beginnings. It’s a declaration that drew applause from the audience.

And based on tracked data, she said for the last 10 years less than 4 percent of those hired by the business have returned to incarceration. “When you can align a little bit of who you are with a product that is distributed nationally and people know that you have something to do with that product, it’s one more thing that says, ‘You’re important, you’re producing something good and to be proud of that,’ ” Barber said.

The business produces a variety of feel-good products, from jars of raw natural honey to honey-infused natural skincare products like lip balms. “As long as there are too many people being released from prison, we have to have meaningful ways for them to reintegrate back into society,” she noted. “And Sweet Beginnings,” Barber stated, “is a viable way to do that.”

Nichelle Benford’s Dream Chef Kitchen

For Nichelle Benford, the journey to entrepreneurship was not an easy one. Reared in the values of “be educated and find a good job” for stability and “marry well,” Benford admitted that as a woman there was no emphasis on entrepreneurship.

In turn, she deterred her passion to support

her then-husband and help him start his own business. Benford said that willingness to sacrifice herself continued when committing perjury and obstruction of justice by being an alibi. “I was sentenced to 37 months in federal prison. I ended up doing 15 months and six months in a halfway house,” she shared.

Prison proved a life-changing experience, with Benford losing everything. “I thought my life was over,” she said, reflecting on the designer clothes, nice home and cars, and history of modeling pre-incarceration. Then, came the ultimate realization.

“I wasn’t special and I was like most women that were in prison for someone else,” Benford said. It would be her trajectory.

Looking at other women in similar situations gave Benford the strength to be a leader after release while encouraging other women to follow their dreams and become entrepreneurs. Enter her business: Dream Chef Kitchen. What started as a food truck has evolved into a self-sustaining restaurant and catering company. There, she hires ex-offenders and also conducts job training.

Benford readily admits that she had something many don’t upon release: a support system of family. “I came home to people that loved me; the average person doesn’t have that,” she said, propelling her to give to those without such encouragement in their lives.

Concluded Benford: “You can fail and get back up.” □

JOBS COALITION PROMISES

- Provide opportunities for District residents to secure gainful employment.
- Remove barriers that prevent meaningful employment.
- Provide educational and training opportunities for all District residents interested in pursuing careers in various industries and trades.
- Work toward the creation of a comprehensive, fair, and more open system of training and hiring the underserved, unemployed and returning ex-offenders.
- Ensure that the training and educational skills being taught are relevant to the job market of today and tomorrow.
- Engage elected and appointed officials to support legislation and maintain appropriate oversight to ensure gainful employment for District residents, including the underserved, unemployed and returning ex-offenders.



JOBS COALITION
702 Otis Place, NW
Washington, D.C. 20010