

Durbin, Duckworth introduce legislation to address youth unemployment in high poverty areas

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) today introduced two pieces of legislation to expand and increase access to employment opportunities for at-risk youth. The *Helping to Encourage Real Opportunity (HERO) for At-Risk Youth Act* and the *Creating Pathways for Youth Employment Act* will increase federal resources for communities seeking to create or grow employment

programs and provide tax incentives to businesses and employers to hire and retain youth from economically distressed areas. U.S. Representative Robin Kelly (D-IL-02) introduced the House companion today.

“The best anti-poverty, anti-crime, anti-violence program is a job. That is why Senator Duckworth and I are introducing two bills that will help provide our nation’s youth with increased opportunities for employment,” said Durbin. “Our underserved communities need the federal government to be an engaged partner when it comes to expanding economic opportunity; Senator Duckworth and I are working hard to achieve this goal.”

“Far too many young Americans live in poverty while struggling to find jobs or economic opportunity, often in communities across the country already struggling with dishearteningly commonplace violence and danger. It doesn’t have to be that way, but it’s not going to get better unless we work together to do something about it. That’s why I’m so proud to join Senator Durbin to introduce these bills to help open up new economic opportunities for every American, no matter where they live,” said Duckworth.

In 2015, nearly five million low-income 16 to 24 year-olds in the United States who were both out of school and out of work. In Illinois, the number of unemployed and out of school youth ages 20 to 24 was nearly 17 percent in 2015, and in Chicago, the rate was nearly 22 percent. This issue affects communities nationwide – in rural areas, 20.3 percent of youth were out of school and unemployed in 2015. For youth of color, joblessness is even more chronic and concentrated: 18.9 percent of Black youth and 14.3 percent of Hispanic youth between the ages of 16-24 were out of school and out of work nationally in 2015.

These statistics reflect a long-term trend in communities nationwide that was exacerbated by the recent recession. Many of the youth living in neighborhoods with highly concentrated poverty and unemployment are stuck in a vicious cycle that finds them lacking the necessary job experiences that prevent them from getting hired by potential employers. These barriers to employment at a young age can have devastating consequences on the long-term employment prospects of at-risk youth, including lower lifetime earnings, higher rates of incarceration, and opioid addiction. These factors also make at-risk youth significantly more likely to become victims of violent crime.

The *HERO for At-Risk Youth Act* would encourage the business community to become a partner in addressing this crisis by hiring at-risk youth that reside in communities with high rates of poverty. Specifically, the bill would provide a tax credit of up to \$2,400 for businesses that hire and train youth ages 16-24 who are out of school and out of work and youth ages 16-21 that are currently in foster care or have aged out of the system. The legislation would also expand the summer youth program under the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), which provides a tax credit to businesses that hire for

summer employment youth ages 16-17 who are enrolled in school and live in highly distressed urban communities known as Empowerment Zones, by doubling the amount of the credit to \$2,400 and expanding the program to include year-round employment.

Durbin and Duckworth are also introducing the *Creating Pathways for Youth Employment Act*, which will make it easier for local governments and community organizations to apply directly for federal funding to create and expand summer and year-round employment programs for young people. The legislation would establish a five-year, \$1.5 billion competitive grant program for youth summer employment and a five-year, \$2 billion competitive grant program for youth year-round employment that will provide financial support for communities seeking to create, improve, or grow summer and year-round employment opportunities for youth ages 14-24. Fifty percent of funds would be reserved for programs serving in-school youth, and fifty percent would be reserved for programs serving out-of-school youth. Both grant programs would provide planning grants of up to \$200,000 for 12 months or implementation grants of up to \$5 million over 3 years.

These two pieces of legislation are endorsed by: Heartland Alliance; Alternative Schools Network; National Youth Advocate Program, Inc.; Chicago Urban League; Chicago Area Project; Center for Social Innovation; and Fathers Who Care. The *HERO for At-Risk Youth Act* is also endorsed by the National Employment Opportunity Network.