

Rep. Kelly, Senators Duckworth, Durbin Introduce Two Bills To Increase Youth Employment Opportunities

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WASHINGTON, D.C – Today, U.S. Representative Robin Kelly (D-IL-02), along with U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL) and U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), reintroduced two bills to expand and increase access to employment opportunities for underserved youth. The *Helping to Encourage Real Opportunity (HERO) for Youth Act* and the *Assisting in Developing (AID) Youth Employment Act*, which was previously titled 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.



“Lack of investment in our communities perpetuates a cycle of poverty, and unfortunately violence, that leaves too many young people without opportunities to reach their full potential,” said Kelly. “The *HERO for Youth Act* and the *Assisting in Developing Youth Employment Act* will help break this vicious cycle and spur investment in historically underserved communities that will prepare our young people to thrive in a modern economy. I’m proud to join Senators Durbin and Duckworth to provide more opportunities to young Americans, no matter where they live or what their background is.”

“Increasing youth employment opportunities can address poverty and crime across Illinois, and set up our state’s youngest residents for a brighter future,” said Durbin. “Rep. Kelly, Senator Duckworth, and I are reintroducing these bills to boost federal resources for youth employment programs and incentivize businesses to hire, retain, and mentor disconnected youth. This generation is our future, and we must ensure that we are providing them a fair shot at employment that will help them build successful lives.”

“We know that job opportunities for young Americans are crucial to interrupting the cycle of poverty,” said Duckworth. “But far too many young Americans live in neighborhoods that lack these opportunities, while experiencing violence and danger. It doesn’t have to be this way, and we must work together to do something about it. That’s

why I'm so proud to join Senator Durbin and Congresswoman Kelly to introduce these bills to help open up new economic opportunities for every young American, no matter where they live or the community they grow up in."

Because of the pandemic in 2020, more than 4.8 million youth between 16 and 24 nationwide were disconnected from both work and school. By July 2022, the national unemployment rate for White youth decreased to seven percent, while the rate for Black youth remained high at 15.9 percent. As of March 2023, the youth unemployment rate was 7.9 percent, yet, for youth of color in Chicago and across Illinois, disconnection from job and educational opportunities remained chronic and concentrated.

These statistics reflect a long-term trend in communities nationwide, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. For many young people, lack of job experience is a prohibitive disadvantage for potential employers, which perpetuates vicious cycles of unemployment and poverty in their communities, further limiting potential for further economic growth. Barriers to employment at a young age have devastating consequences on the long-term employment prospects of opportunity youth, including lower lifetime earnings, higher rates of incarceration, and opioid addiction.

There is clear evidence of a correlation in communities where high rates of poverty, gun violence, and chronic unemployment among youth are prevalent. A 2017 study found that among youth participating in Chicago's youth summer employment program, violent crime arrests decreased by nearly 33 percent. Providing employment opportunity to youth can have a considerable impact in lowering recidivism and violent crime among youth while improving their long-term health, and economic and educational outcomes.

The *HERO for Youth Act* would encourage the business community to become a partner in addressing this crisis by hiring underserved youth who reside in communities with high rates of poverty. Specifically, the bill would provide a Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) 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 expand the summer youth program under 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 rural and 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.

The *Creating Pathways for Youth Employment Act* 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 competitive grant program for youth summer

employment that also incorporate access to trauma-informed mentorship as well as job coaches. The program would provide planning grants of up to \$250,000 for 12 months or implementation grants of up to \$6 million over 3 years.