



## JOTF Works

### 2010 GENERAL ASSEMBLY SESSION – JOTF LEGISLATIVE WRAP-UP

By Melissa Chalmers Broome

During the 2010 session of the Maryland General Assembly, the Job Opportunities Task Force supported legislation to improve the economic opportunities of Maryland's low-skill, low-income workers and their families. The state's fiscal crisis – coupled with the fact that it was an election year – made the 2010 session particularly challenging. Nevertheless, significant progress was made on a variety of JOTF's legislative priorities.

Photo: Jay Baker



Supporters joined Governor O'Malley as he signed emergency legislation to modernize Maryland's unemployment insurance system into law on March 25, 2010.

#### Unemployment Insurance Modernization

The Unemployment Insurance Modernization legislation that passed will expand UI benefits in a number of critical areas. It creates an Alternative Base Period (ABP), which provides coverage to workers who are currently denied benefits due to an outdated data collection system that ignores recent work. ABP is estimated to provide \$16.5 million per year in benefits to workers who would otherwise be denied.

The new law also provides extended benefits to workforce training participants. Under the new law, individuals participating in an approved training program for high-demand careers will be eligible to receive benefits for an additional 26 weeks.

In addition, by enacting these benefit modernizations, Maryland will become eligible for \$126.8 million in federal incentive funds through the Unemployment Insurance Modernization Act, passed in 2009 as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

#### Re-Entry - Parole Fees

Persons on parole in Maryland are billed \$40 per month for their supervision. The fee is largely uncollectible since most parolees are in dire financial situations. In addition, research suggests that some parolees end up returning to prison as a result of failure to meet with their parole agent when they can't pay the fee. JOTF supported legislation to ensure that the state's law concerning parole fees works as intended.

When the legislature enacted the fee in 1991, they acknowledged that many parolees would be unable to pay and therefore created a series of broad categorical exemptions. Unfortunately, authority to grant the exemptions was given to the Parole Commission, a body that has little ongoing contact with parolees.

Legislation to move authority from the Parole Commission to the Department of Parole Probation – whose agents are best suited to determine whether a parolee qualifies for an exemption – failed on the final day of the session. JOTF thanks Senator Jamie Raskin and Delegate Victor Ramirez for their sponsorship of this legislation.

#### Credit Checks

About 60% of employers use credit history checks as a tool in their pre-employment screening, even if the information has no relation to the job. In

these trying economic times, many Marylanders are experiencing financial hardship, which negatively impacts their credit. It's a vicious cycle that begins when individuals lose their jobs, fall behind on their bills, and have their credit damaged. They are then denied new employment opportunities because of their tarnished credit.

JOTF helped lead the effort to limit employers' use of credit checks in hiring. The Maryland legislation was featured nationally on C-SPAN as well as on WYPR's Middy with Dan Rodricks. It was highlighted by publications such as the Baltimore Sun, the New York Times, AOL News, and news stations such as WBAL Baltimore and WBFF Fox 45.

Despite the fact that there is no data to show a correlation between bad credit and one's likelihood to commit fraud on the job, the legislation failed after receiving unfavorable committee reports from Senate Finance and House Economic Matters. JOTF thanks bill sponsors Delegate Kirill Reznik and Senator Mike Lenett for their leadership on this important issue.

#### Ex-Offender Employment - Ban the Box

Numerous jurisdictions throughout the country – including Baltimore City – have removed the question from city job applications that asks applicants to check a box indicating if they have ever been convicted of a crime. By removing this question, qualified applicants are able to get a foot in the door and have a chance to explain their conviction, rather than be automatically disqualified at the outset of the process.

JOTF supported legislation to "ban the box" at the state level. It failed after receiving an unfavorable report from the House Appropriations Committee. JOTF thanks bill sponsors Senator Catherine Pugh and Delegate Joseline Pena-Melnyk.

#### Auto Insurance

JOTF opposed legislation that will raise auto insurance premiums for low-income Marylanders by increasing the minimum amount of coverage that vehicle owners must carry. Particularly in this difficult economy, low-wage workers and job-seekers are already struggling to maintain the costs associated with vehicle ownership.

Despite opposition from numerous low-income advocates, the legislation passed and was signed into law by Governor O'Malley. The result will be higher premiums for 200,000 Marylanders who currently carry the minimum liability insurance required by law. Baltimore city residents are expected to see increases of more than \$300.

For more information on JOTF's advocacy work, visit [www.jotf.org](http://www.jotf.org) or contact Melissa Broome at [melissa@jotf.org](mailto:melissa@jotf.org) or (410) 234-8046.

# TOWARDS A THRIVING BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS; TOWARDS A THRIVING BALTIMORE

By Andrea Payne Roethke

Working one's way into the middle class is at the core of the American Dream. Yet for many families – particularly those of color – this dream remains out of reach.

In Baltimore City, half of all African-American households earn less than \$35,000 per year, and unemployment rates hover in the double digits. In a city where nearly two-thirds of residents are African-American, this has a major impact on the health of the broader community.

For many, the key barrier standing in the way of economic advancement is the inability to find and keep a good job. In a forthcoming joint report, the Job Opportunities Task Force and Associated Black Charities (ABC) explore this critical challenge and lay out a workforce-based strategy for expanding Baltimore's black middle class. The report builds on the work of ABC's More in the Middle campaign – an initiative that aims to close racial wealth gaps and strengthen the region's economic competitiveness.

The report describes the challenges and opportunities facing Baltimore's African-American workforce, and discusses three key avenues for action: expanding access to good jobs, creating pathways to help residents move up the career ladder, and working to combat racial discrimination.

## Expanding Access to High-Quality Jobs

The first step to expanding pathways into the middle class is to ensure that city residents have access to good jobs. The report highlights the need to expand opportunities for minority and disadvantaged workers on projects using public funds. Baltimore can maximize the impact of public spending by spurring human capital development alongside infrastructure development. In the long run, effective local hiring policies can increase prosperity, expand the city's tax base, and ease the burden on public assistance systems.

The report also explores the serious transportation gaps facing Baltimore residents. Without efficient, affordable personal and public transportation options, too many residents – especially those living in neighborhoods that are largely African-American, but severely economically depressed – will continue to face limited options, low-wages, and bleak prospects for advancement. Better regional mass transit options should be the long-term goal, but we must also recognize the critical role of car ownership for some families. Tackling the high barriers to getting a driver's license and the high cost of car insurance are an essential piece of the puzzle.

## Building Pathways to Careers

To access the high-quality jobs that can launch a family into the middle class, many local workers need further education and training. A top priority for local leaders should be advancing the skills of underemployed workers. The first place to start is with those who lack a high school diploma or GED. To gain traction in the workforce, these residents need a range of services, starting with Adult Basic Education and GED preparation. Capacity must be increased, and service delivery models must be improved. The report discusses bridge programs, which can be an effective model for integrating classroom learning and vocational skill training.

Workers who already have a high school credential still face barriers to success at the college level. As a result, retention and graduation rates are low, particularly for African-American students. Many first-time college students are placed into developmental education and must complete at least some remedial coursework before moving on to credit-bearing curriculum. This can be demoralizing, expensive and time-consuming, since students must pay tuition and enroll in semester-long courses that earn them no credit. The report recommends the exploration of innovative delivery models for developmental education, and the expansion of need-based financial aid for low-income students.

Many of Baltimore's low-income African-American communities are held back by a revolving door of residents moving in and out of the criminal justice system. The report discusses the need to engage and educate employers on best practices in screening and hiring employees with criminal backgrounds, and highlights the importance of government agencies taking the lead in helping people with criminal records make a positive transition into the workforce.

## Tackling Discrimination

While federal, state and local laws help protect workers against discrimination, race still plays a role in the workplace – sometimes in overt, but often in subtle ways. Race can play a role in the types of jobs a worker chooses to apply for, how a candidate's resume is received, the dynamics of the interview process, and who is groomed for internal advancement. These differences result in income gaps that increase during the years of employment and cause significant racial disparities in total household wealth. The report discusses the need to work with employers to address racial gaps and tensions within the workforce, and the ongoing need for strong enforcement of equal opportunity laws.

By re-building Baltimore's middle class – and by focusing on the African-American families who make up the core of the city's population – the city can be revitalized and firmly establish itself as a place of economic opportunity. Visit JOTF's website at [jotf.org](http://jotf.org) for updates on the release of the full report.

# JUMPSTART IN THE COMMUNITY

By Rodney Foxworth

The Job Opportunities Task Force strives to move low-income Marylanders into good jobs. In Baltimore City, this can be especially difficult, as many residents must overcome inconsistent work histories, barriers to transportation, criminal records, and low math and literacy skills.

JOTF developed a training initiative to help some residents overcome these barriers and pursue a high wage career. Launched in 2006, the JumpStart pre-apprenticeship program in the building trades has graduated well over 200 participants. The job training program largely serves Baltimore's most challenged working population— African American males ages 18 to 40, many of whom have significant criminal records. JumpStart actively recruits from disadvantaged neighborhoods in order to begin the process of effectively enacting economic stability in needy communities.

The JumpStart program is modeled after the Apprenticeship program to allow for a seamless transition for program participants into apprenticeship. Throughout the thirteen-week program, students experience vocational training such as carpentry and plumbing, while also receiving math, literacy and job readiness skills. Students also receive intensive case management support both during and after completing the class to alleviate any issues that might prove detrimental to students as they actively work to seek steady employment in the building trades. Further, the JumpStart program provides services such as Transport to Success that helps program participants obtain a drivers license and/or car. Barriers to transportation were identified by JOTF as a significant impediment to Baltimore's low-income, low-skill workers and by local construction employers as a necessity to enter the field.

Despite all of these efforts, placing graduates into employment and helping them retain and improve their vocational skills still proves to be a daunting task. While JumpStart has achieved a 70% placement rate, a high figure considering the barriers that often stand between JumpStart graduates and employment, we recognize that more graduates need assistance so we have developed a model that will create employment opportunities, if only temporarily.

JOTF's first attempt, or pilot project, has been a resounding success. Utilizing federal funding providing by the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) with additional support provided by the Abell Foundation, JOTF has generated transitional employment for several JumpStart graduates by rehabilitating a housing unit located at 812 N. Rose Street. The property is owned and maintained by the Rose Street Community Center, and needed extensive rehabilitation to become hospitable. The center offers transitional housing to ex-offenders, offering them a wide array of services that allows them to develop into productive citizens. The center has served hundreds of residents, assisting them in overcoming drug and alcohol addictions, guiding them through a range of educational and training opportunities, as well as helping them to find permanent housing. JOTF sought to create transitional



Jumpstart graduates Anthony Hill and Omar Livingston

employment opportunities for its JumpStart graduates, while simultaneously providing additional housing for the local ex-offenders.

JOTF subcontracted with General Contractor, C.L. McCoy Framing Co., Inc. to lead the renovation and rehabilitation of the 812 N. Rose Street property. The project has been an overwhelming success. Several JumpStart graduates have staffed the project, including one, Wayne Jernigan, who was hired by the plumbing contractor T&D plumbing because of the work he demonstrated on the 812 N. Rose Street property. Additionally, the Rose Street Community Center gained another transitional house, to be occupied by three recently released ex-offenders looking to re-integrate into their community.

Chris McCoy, the lead subcontractor of the project, is eager to begin more projects. He views it as a prime opportunity to "give back to the community," and found the JumpStart laborers to be "hard-working, and ready to learn."

The Rose Street rehabilitation project is an example of creative workforce development, and further proves the importance of active collaboration between nonprofit agencies, government, private funders and the business community. While we are excited about the new home and the permanent jobs for the four JumpStart grads, much more needs to be done.

If you are in the construction industry and looking for a great, hardworking employee, please call Kate McShane at 443.324.4026.

If you want to participate in JumpStart, call [Rodney Foxworth](mailto:Rodney.Foxworth@jotf.org) at [410.234.8931](tel:410.234.8931) for details.

*Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes*



## SAVE-THE-DATE

*Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF)*

# 10 Year Anniversary Celebration

**Thursday, October 7, 2010**

**5:00 pm – 7:00 pm**

The Glass Pavilion, John Hopkins University, Homewood Campus – 3400 N. Charles Street

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