

At-Risk Youths Lose Connection to New Lives as Job Corps Idles

By Ian Kullgren and Ben Penn
Bloomberg Law

Sept. 3, 2020

The U.S. Labor Department's Job Corps program remains a pillar of President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1960s War on Poverty, giving young adults a path to escape unstable home situations and learn an occupation that will make them self-sufficient.

But with the coronavirus keeping the program's 121 residential campuses largely closed since March, the Labor Department is increasingly struggling to keep the 30,000 students from drifting into the unknown.

At least 1,600 have left the program. Thousands more haven't been provided computers they need to meaningfully participate remotely—to the extent online education is possible in fields such as construction or culinary arts. Contractors who run the centers say they've received no clarity from DOL on how and when to safely reopen.

Dor Puok, a 24-year-old culinary student at a Job Corps center in St. Paul, Minn., said he was supposed to graduate in April but can't complete his curriculum remotely. Puok is now working at a McDonald's and helping to support his mother, who is out of work. He said he's 50/50 on whether he'll quit Job Corps.

"After we were out of the campus, we're kind of screwed," Puok said.

Interviews with more than two dozen students, staffers, and others involved in Job Corps show how the pandemic has imperiled a program built around a holistic, hands-on experience. Most sources spoke on the condition they not be named, citing fear of harming their relationship with DOL or the Job Corps operators.

The \$1.7 billion program combines classroom education, mental-health counseling, career training, and job placement within the structure of dormitory-style, year-round housing—all at no

cost to students. Youths ages 16-24 often turn to Job Corps when they're desperate to escape domestic abuse or neighborhood violence. Nearly three quarters are people of color.

When the pandemic forced Job Corps centers to close in March, students had to hurriedly find jobs and temporary housing—assuming they had somewhere to go. DOL said they helped find alternate housing for students, and 520 participants who otherwise would have been homeless were eventually moved back to Job Corps campuses.

"Converting a program with nearly 30,000 students to the virtual environment within a matter of six weeks was something never done before by Job Corps," a DOL spokeswoman said in an email. "There are unique lessons the Office of Job Corps continues to face and learn from every day in order to improve the remote education being provided to students."

Device Distribution

To be sure, school districts and other workforce programs across the country have struggled to manage the constantly evolving economic and health crisis. Laptop computers, masks, and cleaning materials are all in short supply as school years start.

But a common critique of Job Corps is that DOL has struggled to implement distance learning, making it harder for students to re-engage after being relocated. In some cases, laptops and hot spots needed to connect students with curriculum were not distributed promptly after being delivered to centers last month because DOL had not provided operators with user-agreement forms, two sources with knowledge of the matter said.

Jillian Berk, an employment researcher at Mathematica who led a government-funded review of

Job Corps in 2018, said the Labor Department's challenges are real, "but it's very painful to think of the lost opportunity for these youth."

"Job Corps was really providing a pretty essential set of services—the residential support, the nutritional support, the educational and occupational training—and to have all of those supports removed from a very vulnerable population, I think it's fairly heartbreaking."

Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia visited a Job Corps center in Pittsburgh Aug. 20 as part of an effort to highlight the nation's economic recovery from the pandemic. He talked with staff—some of whom have resumed working on site—and students about virtual learning, according to a Twitter message from Odle Management, the company that runs the center.

But the technology students need for virtual learning still hadn't been delivered to the Pittsburgh center at that point, the two sources said.

The Labor Department has told contractors it could take until November for laptops and wireless hotspots for thousands of students to arrive, the two sources said. A DOL spokeswoman, in a prepared statement July 31, said supply chain disruptions experienced by its vendor delayed deliveries.

While some centers started to receive the devices last month, managers were told not to distribute them due to the Labor Department's delay in providing the user-agreement forms for students to sign, the two sources said.

A DOL spokesperson said in a statement Sept. 2 that the forms had been distributed Aug. 31—after Bloomberg Law had first asked about the delay—and that devices will continue to be shipped to centers "throughout September and into October."

The National Job Corps Association, a trade group that lobbies for the contractors, declined to comment for this article.

Covid-19 Testing

Four students said that without computers provided by Job Corps, the only access to technology they and most of their peers have is through data connections on mobile phones or public WiFi. Those who can't connect digitally have the option of learning through paper-based materials mailed to their home.

A student at an Arizona center said his coursework has consisted of basic math lessons and YouTube videos. He has watched in frustration as a nearby state university opens for in-person instruction. "Am I doing it? Yeah," he said. "Do I want to? No."

The DOL's Sept. 2 statement said "approximately" 80% of students "have logged into" virtual classrooms to participate in distance learning. But the statement didn't distinguish between students who routinely engage with coursework and those who log in sporadically or only have a smartphone.

"If you can't connect with a student or graduate, you're going to lose track with that individual and they're going to end up in the same circumstances they were in, meaning they'll lose touch with Job Corps completely," said Danielle Chiaraluce, a former official at two Job Corps centers who now consults for Job Corps contractors across the country.

Contractors say they've repeatedly sought guidance on how to maintain social distancing and sanitize living quarters, cafeterias, and classrooms; on who will pay for personal protective equipment; and on what the protocols will be for administering Covid-19 tests to everyone on campus.

DOL said it has provided multiple forms of guidance throughout the pandemic, and is "actively working" on reopening plans by consulting with federal agencies and experts. The department said Aug. 26—after receiving a request for comment from Bloomberg Law—that it had cleared center operators to make initial purchases of items such as Plexiglas shields, face coverings, cleaning supplies, and handwashing stations.

The department declined to say whether it will pay for Covid-19 testing for students and staff, other than to state that “center staff would not be required to personally fund testing.”

“The safety and health of our Job Corps students is our top priority, and we are committed to taking a thoughtful, deliberative, and educated approach to reopening our Job Corps centers,” John Pallasch, who heads the DOL’s Employment and Training Administration, said in a prepared statement. “While everyone would like to get back to school as quickly as possible, we want to be sure that our approach reflects the unique circumstances of each center and our students.”

Fading Hope

Some students may face a choice between giving up a steady, if low-wage, job in the midst of a recession or reporting to their Job Corps center when the pandemic ends.

A 20-year-old student, who asked not to be named for fear of expulsion, said he was supposed to start at a Midwest center in June but had to move in with a relative in a dangerous neighborhood and take a fast-food job. With no internet access beyond his phone’s data plan, he’s been unable to start online courses.

An admissions officer calls to check in from time to time, he said, but isn’t able to offer much information on the program’s future.

“Although it’s not entirely their fault, they’re not really helping the situation,” he said, adding: “If there’s any progress at all, even if it’s minor, say something in order to give us hope.”