

Testimony of Don Gatewood
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Public Roundtable
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Greetings, Chairperson Bonds and members of the Committee. My name is Don Gatewood. I am the Senior Vice-President, Chief Workforce Development Officer at SOME, Inc. (also known as So Others Might Eat). Thank you for the opportunity to testify during this **Public Roundtable on Job Training and Workforce Development** as a proud provider of free, high-quality workforce training programs serving D.C. residents.

Since 1970, SOME has been breaking the cycle of poverty, homelessness, and hunger in the District. We believe that lasting change happens when individuals have access to the resources, training, and opportunities they need to achieve financial independence. That is why our continuum of services includes adult education and workforce development through the SOME Center for Employment Training (SOME CET). Located in Ward 7, SOME CET is a licensed post-secondary vocational school where we provide free, hands-on training, technical instruction, and soft skills development to prepare individuals for in-demand careers. Through our holistic approach, we not only equip students with job-ready skills but also empower them to build sustainable futures.

Today, I will highlight SOME CET's impact, discuss what is working well in workforce development across the District, and share key recommendations to strengthen job training systems for both trainees and providers.

I. SOME's Workforce Development Program and Its Impact

For many D.C. residents who struggle in low-paying jobs, sector-specific accelerated training programs are a proven economic mobility solution. In 2024, SOME enrolled 167 trainees, the highest since 2019, into our Healthcare (Medical Assistant and Medical Administrative Assistant) and Building Trades (HVAC and Building Maintenance) tracks. Of those enrolled, nearly 80% obtained job placements at the completion of the program, and 94% of the graduates earned a certification. Our strong partnerships with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and the Department of Human Services' (DHS) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) Program are essential to effectively serving our trainees.

SOME CET provides Integrated Education and Training (IE&T), a service delivery strategy that enables individuals to gain industry-specific skills while simultaneously developing foundational academic and life skills. Through IE&T, our students learn essential workforce competencies such as math, reading, resume writing, interviewing, and self-management.

Our program is uniquely positioned to serve adults who face the greatest barriers to employment. Many of our students do not qualify for free workforce training programs at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) or the Department of Employment Services (DOES) due to low Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) test scores. Despite these challenges, we provide holistic support, including soft skills training, wraparound services, and externship placements, to ensure our students can successfully enter and sustain employment.

II. Addressing Unemployment Disparities in Wards 7 and 8

SOME CET is strategically located in Ward 7 at the Conway Center, an area that, along with neighboring Ward 8, experiences some of the highest unemployment rates in the District. As of May 2023, Ward 7 had an unemployment rate of 7.2%, and Ward 8 faced a rate of 9.1%, compared to Ward 3's 3.6%.¹ These disparities highlight the urgent need for targeted workforce development initiatives east of the Anacostia River. By situating our program in Ward 7, we aim to provide accessible training opportunities that directly address these employment gaps and foster economic growth within these communities.

III. The Social and Economic Impact of Job Training Programs

Public investments in job training programs have significantly expanded access to employment opportunities, fostering economic growth and social mobility. Research indicates that such programs not only enhance individual earnings but also contribute to overall economic development by creating a more skilled and productive workforce. For instance, sectoral employment programs have been shown to generate consistently large, positive impacts on worker employment and earnings, thereby reducing unemployment rates and alleviating the social and economic pressures associated with joblessness.²

Job training initiatives are also essential in tackling workforce shortages in critical sectors, particularly healthcare. As D.C. and the nation grapple with severe shortages of healthcare professionals, programs like SOME CET are bridging the gap by equipping residents with the skills and certifications needed to enter high-demand careers with strong growth potential. The District urgently needs more qualified professionals in essential roles such as Home Health Aides and Certified Nurse Aides. By providing hands-on training, technical instruction, and career readiness support, SOME CET not only helps individuals secure stable, well-paying jobs but also strengthens the local healthcare system, ensuring that patients receive high-quality care from well-trained professionals.

IV. What is Working Well in D.C. Workforce Development

D.C. has made significant strides in workforce development through public investments that have expanded access to job training opportunities and provided critical support for individuals striving to achieve self-sufficiency. These initiatives have been instrumental in bridging the gap between training and employment. Our collaboration with local businesses has facilitated externship placements and full-time employment for our graduates. These employer relationships ensure that our training aligns with industry needs, increasing job placement and retention rates.

The WIC's Healthcare Workforce Partnership exemplifies a highly effective model that supports workforce providers, employers, and, most importantly, the trainees. Through this initiative, SOME was able to provide twenty students enrolled in our Medical Assistant program with stipends totaling \$1,500. Of these students, only one did not complete the program. These stipends provided financial aid to our trainees interested in healthcare, increasing program completion rates and enhancing economic growth and career sustainability.

¹ Schnur, Caitlin C., and Erica Williams. "DC's Extreme Black-White Unemployment Gap is Worst in the Nation." *DC Fiscal Policy Institute* (July 2023), <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/dcs-extreme-black-white-unemployment-gap-is-worst-in-the-nation/#:~:text=In%20May%202023%2C%20the%20unemployment%20rate%20in,Ward%203%20was%20lowest%20at%203.6%20percent>.

² Katz, Lawrence F., Jonathan Roth, Richard Hendra, and Kelsey Schaberg. "Sectoral Employment Programs as a Path to Quality Jobs: Lessons from Randomized Evaluations." *Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)*, (February 2022), https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publication/Evidence-Review_Sectoral-Employment_222022_0.pdf.

V. Opportunities for Improvement

To truly expand opportunity and meet the workforce needs of our city, we must urgently do the following four things to eliminate the persistent barriers that prevent too many D.C. residents from accessing and completing job training programs:

1. **Invest in Stipends:** Many of our students struggle with financial insecurity, making it difficult to focus on training without income support. Providing stipends has been shown to increase enrollment, improve retention, and support student success. For example, in a 2021 pilot program run by a national workforce provider, trainees who received a \$1,000 stipend during a three-month course had an 18% increase in graduation rates, an 11% increase in professional skills certification rates, and a 10% faster transition into employment. These stipends primarily helped students cover basic needs such as household expenses, food, utilities, and transportation.³ SOME's experience with stipend funding through the Healthcare Workforce Partnership mirrored these results. Without stipends, too many aspiring workers must forgo training in favor of low wage work to survive.
2. **Expand Childcare Support:** Parents pursuing workforce training often lack access to affordable childcare. In D.C., while over 8,000 families receive childcare subsidies, more than 10,000 infants and toddlers are income-eligible, meaning less than half benefit from the program. Investing in childcare support for trainees would remove a significant barrier and enable more individuals to participate and complete training programs.⁴
3. **Support Second-Chance Hiring:** Many job seekers with prior justice system involvement continue to face employment discrimination, even after completing workforce training programs. Expanding record-sealing opportunities and strengthening employer incentives for second-chance hiring are critical to improving job access for returning citizens. We commend the Council for passing recent legislation to address this issue and strongly urge its full and effective implementation to ensure that our trainees—and other returning citizens—have a fair chance at securing meaningful employment.
4. **Provide Economic Support for Trainees:** Life needs such as food insecurity, lack of professional clothing, and unreliable transportation prevent enrollment and completion of job training. Providing economic supports to address these needs—similar to the wraparound services SOME provides to its students—would reduce barriers to success. Including coverage for these costs in public contracts and grants will better support providers in meeting trainees' needs and investing in their wellness, ensuring that individuals are more likely to stay in and complete their programs.

SOME is committed to empowering individuals through education and workforce development, and we appreciate the District's continued investment in job training programs. However, to truly create an integrated, comprehensive workforce development system that meets job seeker and business needs, we must embed the comprehensive needs of trainees into program planning. By addressing these critical gaps, we can ensure that all District residents—especially those facing the greatest challenges—can build stable, self-sufficient futures. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

³ Per Scholas. "Stipends and Skills Training: A Winning Combination." *Per Scholas*, (December 2022), <https://perscholas.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/POLICY-BRIEF-Stipends-and-Skills-Training-A-Winning-Combination-12.6.22.pdf>.

⁴ Gunderson, Anne. "Funding Early Childhood Education is Vital to DC's Future." *DC Fiscal Policy Institute*, (March 2025), <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/funding-early-childhood-education-is-vital-to-dcs-future/>.