DC KIDS COUNT
POWERED BY DC ACTION

Policy Snapshot | January 2025

Mayor Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program (MBSYEP)

The Mayor Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program is a locally funded program that offers District youth, ages 14 to 24, six weeks of paid summer employment experiences (subsidized by the government) from late June through early August. The program was created by Mayor Barry in 1979 and renamed in his honor in 2015. MBSYEP is administered by the Department of Employment Services (DOES).

Eligibility and Application Requirements

To be eligible for the program, applicants must have a valid email address, proof of age (between 14 and 24) and District residency, a social security number, and eligibility to work in the United States.

Applicants are encouraged to apply online through DOES's youth portal. Youth also have the option to call to arrange an in-person certification session (often held at the DOES office) instead. The application period typically opens in late January and ends in early March.

After applying and demonstrating eligibility, youth must complete a W-4 tax form and an online financial literacy activity. For first-time participants, certification can be completed during the program's mandatory, in-person orientation typically held during spring break. Returning participants can complete certification online. DOES also offers optional online life skills and professional development modules for applicants, including resume building, working in teams, and preparing a job application. Once orientation and certification are complete, DOES supports a matching process for youth and employers through a career expo, searchable job and resume listings, and an online portal where youth and employers can contact each other.

The Impact of MBSYEP

Across generations, many Washingtonians - including DOES employees and DC Council members - credit MBSYEP with providing them with their first job. The program remains popular among District youth, with approximately one-fifth of all residents ages 14 to 24 applying for the program in fiscal year 2023.

Among youth ages 14 to 17, nearly half apply to the program each year. MBSYEP is the largest summer youth employment program per capita in the country. The program offers a strategic opportunity to improve racial equity in the District's early employment outcomes, given that Black youth are more likely to look for but be unable to find a job than their white peers: 20% vs. 4% in 2023. While MBSYEP has huge reach, with 20,213 14- to 24-year-olds applying in fiscal year 2023, only 11,513 actually started an MBSYEP summer experience, equivalent to 12% of the total 14- to 24-year-old population.[1] Another challenge is that, of the youth who started their summer placement, roughly one in five did not complete the six-week program. Taken together with applicant attrition, roughly half (47%) of youth who showed interest in MBSYEP by applying actually completed the program.

Low program completion rates may be related to inconsistent placement experiences, competing demands and interests for participants, or youth discouragement based on differences in pay between participant age bands.[2] No public data is available indicating how MBSYEP performs across standard workforce development outcomes widely used to demonstrate programmatic impact and efficacy.[3] To address this issue, policy advocates have called for rigorous evaluation and oversight of the program, and the District passed a law in 2019 requiring an annual independent evaluation of MBSYEP. To date, MBSYEP annual evaluations have relied on descriptive data of participant demographics and the satisfaction of participants and host employers without delving deeper into available evidence that can demonstrate how well MBSYEP prepares participants for employment, careers, and economic mobility. In addition, evaluators rely heavily on exit surveys but do not account for the portion of participants who do not make it far enough in the program to fill out a survey.

Youth frequently report a desire for year-round workforce development opportunities, including and in addition to MBSYEP. Current MBSYEP reports do not include data on efforts to connect participants to educational, training, or employment opportunities beyond the six-week program.

Funding and Participation

MBSYEP has a budget of $28,164,000 for FY25 and is 97% funded through local District dollars.[4] In FY23, 9,580 completed the program. While MBSYEP is open to nearly all youth ages 14 to 24, participants are disproportionately likely to be younger (nearly half of all participants are ages 14 to 16), Black (90% of survey respondents), female (two-thirds of survey respondents), and live in wards 4, 7, or 8[5] (70% of respondents, even though only 54% of District 14-17 year olds live in those three wards).[6]

Recommendations

1. **Scaffold additional programming supports and add individualized advising for youth experiencing structural barriers to workforce success**. Specifically, thousands[7] of District youth experience barriers like homelessness, balancing work responsibilities as a young parent, and accessing culturally competent work environments as a young person who is nonbinary or transgender. The incredible footprint of MBSYEP participation should be leveraged to help youth identify and connect to additional government and private sector partners and programs offering targeted resources and mentorship as they begin their professional lives.

2. **Rigorously evaluate what goals and outcomes program participation is helping youth meet so the District can build on successes and identify opportunities for improvement**. To fully achieve the promise and legacy of the program to "provide the opportunity for young people to gain meaningful work experience," the District should evaluate the long-term impact of the program on career development outcomes like educational engagement, high school graduation, employment rates, median earnings, credential attainment, postsecondary access and completion, skill gains, and connections to other career-asset building programs like dual enrollment and Career and Technical Education (CTE). The District should also examine why so many more youth apply than complete the program to prioritize solutions (e.g. if youth simply find summer opportunities they prefer after applying for MBSYEP in March no change may be needed, but if placement matching or experience is an issue that may call for shifts in practice).

3. **Create clear programmatic pathways anchored in MBSYEP to make it a gateway to long-term success**. Too often, conversations about youth workforce development in the District start and end with MBSYEP, but it's clear that a six-week summer program cannot meet the entirety of its participants' needs for career development and individualized support. Youth consistently request year-round workforce development

opportunities. Across District agencies, year-round, paid opportunities exist, such as Career and Technical Education (CTE) in high schools, the Department of Human Services' (DHS) workforce program for Transgender, Nonbinary, and Gender-Nonconforming (TGNC) Youth, and internship and apprenticeship opportunities offered by DOES. Additionally, many private sector workforce development partners are able to support District youth. It's unclear, however, whether the approximate 20,000 annual MBSYEP applicants are made aware of these various opportunities. Measuring and reporting on programmatic connection points and referrals beyond MBSYEP would help spur an effective, coordinated workforce development system. MBSYEP already serves as a rite of passage for thousands of District youth, but pairing the program with a menu of supportive and year-round opportunities will further solidify the program as an inflection point for all youth in learning, earning, and thriving in the District.

4. The executive and DC Council should consider raising revenue in the District's budget to guarantee **pay at DC's minimum wage for MBSYEP participants ages 16 to 21** and increase the subminimum wage received by 14- and 15-year-olds to at least $10/hr as called for in the Pay Our Youth a Fair Summer Wage Amendment Act of 2024. Youth should be compensated fairly for their time and positive contributions to the District's economy. Wage increases would also positively impact program retention and completion, helping more youth to earn wages to sustain their participation in a developmental program that can lay groundwork for long-term earning potential.

Endnotes

1 Pg. 56 of Department of Employment Services Responses to Fiscal Year 2023-2024 Performance Oversight Questions as part of the February 27, 2024 hearing

2 In the last pay period of program year 2024, 14-15 year olds took home $6.25/hr, 16-21 year olds took home $8.25/hr and 22-24 year olds received the DC minimum wage of $17.50/hr.

3 I.e grade promotion, high school graduation, employment rates, median earnings, postsecondary credential attainment, or skill gains.

4 Pg. D-5 of FY2025 Approved Budget and Financial Plan - Volume 3 available at https://app.box.com/s/n6o4l99ablmb96lvxl134alfs5ii0zos

5 Pgs. 9-10 of the MBSYEP 2022 Evaluation

6 Participation data are from pg. 11 of the 2022 evaluation. Ward demographics are the population ages 15-24 from table S0101 of American Community Survey 2019-2023 5-year-averages

7 Urban Institute estimates 9,726 18-24 year olds experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness (which doesn't cover those 14-17 year olds who experience homelessness), we estimate at least 2,300 transgender youth because 2.5% of high school students identify as transgender per the 2023 Youth Risk Behavioral Survey and we applied that percentage to the number of 14-24 year olds, and approximately 2,000 18-24 year olds are parenting.