



**Testimony
before the U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and
Education Appropriations**

**Brigadier General (retired) Billy Cooper, Center Director,
Earle C. Clements Job Corps Center
May 12, 2010**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to talk about a true passion of mine and thousands of other dedicated educators and professionals across the country – Job Corps. My name is Billy Cooper, retired Brigadier General, and currently the center director at the Earle C. Clements Job Corps Center in Morganfield, Kentucky.

Before I get started, I would like to thank Chairman Obey – on behalf of the entire Job Corps community – for your longtime support and advocacy of Job Corps. You have been a champion of Job Corps for many years and you will be sorely missed. It will be very soon that Job Corps welcomes the Milwaukee facility into the family, and it wouldn't have happened without your commitment to Job Corps. We hope that you will join us when we officially open the doors of Job Corps to hundreds of Wisconsin youth!

My journey to Job Corps was not typical. While I do hold a master's degree in education administration, for most of my adult life I was not an educator. I was a soldier first. As a Vietnam veteran, I was called to proudly serve my country and was fortunate to have a lasting military career that sent me around the U.S. and abroad. I served in a wide-range of positions and earned recognition and decorations. I lived the American dream.

However, it was when I first learned about Job Corps that I knew what my true calling was – instilling the courage and confidence today's young people need to begin their own career path. Prior to my retirement from the military in 2001, I served as the Deputy Commanding General of the U.S. Army Recruiting Command. There I was introduced to the dozens of unique and holistic services Job Corps offers to our nation's most economically disadvantaged youth. It was then that I became a believer. I was determined to develop a national partnership between the U.S. Army and Job Corps that I am proud to say still exists today.

Nine years ago it would have been easy for me to transition into a comfortable civilian life; however, I was called to serve my country again. Like you, I saw that so many of today's young people desperately need to believe that the American dream is still possible. I left the military and became a center director. Job Corps, unlike other programs I encountered while in the military, teaches, prepares and helps youth be all they can be with all of the support they need. Why do I say this?

(1) Job Corps is the only viable option for thousands disadvantaged youth. Many of America's most vulnerable youth desperately need a safe living and learning environment. Homeless teens, high school dropouts, young mothers and fathers, youth aging out of the foster care system and countless more youth have no place to go. They enroll in Job Corps because it offers everything they do not have. A young man or woman can't learn if he/she has no place to live. A young man or woman can't learn if he/she is hungry. A young man or woman can't learn if he/she lives in poverty with no end in sight. The promising news is that, with a modest investment in fiscal year 2011, Mr. Chairman, Job Corps can cost-effectively use its existing facilities to serve additional needy students.

(2) Job Corps offers comprehensive services to our nation's most vulnerable youth. At my Job Corps center, and the 123 others located in nearly all 50 states, we provide students an array of services to put them on a path to a career, higher education or the military. I, on average, welcome 40 new Job Corps students to my campus every Tuesday. It is a humbling experience to recognize that these youth are a turning point in their lives. They could have lost all hope because of their circumstances. Instead, they chose to voluntarily enroll in Job Corps. Upon enrollment, these youth are provided housing, three healthy meals day, basic medical and dental services, education and training, mentoring, counseling and job placement. Additionally, Job Corps students participate in extracurricular activities to become well-rounded individuals. They gain leadership and conflict resolution skills, diversity appreciation, community service opportunities, and even Job Corps' version of First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign. Mr. Chairman and other members of the Subcommittee, Job Corps' comprehensive services are essential to not only prepare these youth for a job or whatever path they choose, but also to give them the courage and confidence to do anything they set their minds to.

(3) Job Corps works and is worth the investment. Over 45 years the Department of Labor has honed Job Corps' comprehensive model for preparing out-of-school, out-of-work youth for jobs, higher education or a military career. Studies have shown this model to be among the most effective. A federal study undertaken to evaluate various federal interventions for disconnected youth found that Job Corps had the most significant impacts on participants' education achievement and earnings. This is because Job Corps comprehensively addresses what America's impoverished youth face. In 9 – 10 short months, Job Corps' staff work with students to help them achieve goals they once through were out of their reach. Consider this:

- 75% of our students are high school dropouts, and because of Job Corps the majority leave with a high school diploma or GED.
- 30% come from families on public assistance, and because of Job Corps the majority embark upon a career leading to independent lives.
- Most have never held a full-time job, and because of Job Corps 75% secure employment or enter the military.
- On average, Job Corps enrollees read slightly before the 8th grade level, and because of Job Corps graduates improve their literacy levels by more than 2 grade levels.

For these compelling reasons, Mr. Chairman, I respectively seek your consideration of the National Job Corps Association's (NJCA) fiscal year 2011 funding request of \$1.764 billion. This funding will ensure the continuation of Job Corps services to the very young people who are too often hit the hardest by socio-economic conditions beyond their control.

NJCA Fiscal Year 2011 Request

The NJCA requests a total of \$1.764 billion in the fiscal year 2011 budget: \$1.644 billion in operating expenses, \$110 million in capital expenses, and \$10 million in incremental expansion.

In these turbulent economic times when youth unemployment remains as high as 28 percent, it is essential to invest in successful programs that prepare young people with the skills they need to find jobs and lead productive lives. The \$1.764 billion fiscal year (FY) 2011 budget request for Job Corps would:

- Educate and train more than 60,000 out-of-school, out-of work youth.
- Create hundreds of new jobs for Job Corps special needs instructors, reading specialists, mentors and tutors at the 124 Job Corps centers located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.
- Create 14.5 jobs directly and 9.5 local jobs indirectly for every million dollars a Job Corps center spends.
- Stimulate approximately \$2 of local activity for every \$1 spent by Job Corps.

In order to serve the growing numbers of unemployed and at-risk youth choosing Job Corps' unique and holistic residential services and support, the program requires additional funding to:

- 1) maintain student services at 124 Job Corps centers.
- 2) serve the growing number of students with special needs.
- 3) retain Job Corps students by enhancing the program's residential after school training.
- 4) optimize the use of Job Corps facilities for non-residential students.

Maintain Student Services at 124 Job Corps Centers

The NJCA's request includes a 2.5 percent increase in Job Corps' operations account to: (1) close the Office of Job Corps' operational shortfall estimated at \$40 million; allow the opening of the Ottumwa, Iowa Job Corps Center once construction is complete; (3) support the enhancement of student services; (4) cover the rising costs of goods and services, including heating fuels, prescription drugs, foods and transportation; (5) fund the Department of Labor/Office of Job Corps' initiative to transition the program to a standards-based system; and (6) address Job Corps' staff salary gap in order to reach parity with local public school teachers and instructors.

Serve the Growing Number of Students with Special Needs

The average Job Corps student reads below the 8th grade level upon enrollment, and it is estimated that 60 percent of Job Corps students have some type of learning disability. The NJCA's fiscal year 2011 budget request includes a \$10 million request to acquire full-time special needs instructors to conduct diagnostic testing on students presenting signs of a learning disability, develop individualized lesson plans and provide hands-on academic remediation. The \$10 million request also includes the ability for Job Corps centers to hire part-time reading specialists, as well as critical training tools to strengthen reading programs and to serve students with moderate to serious learning disabilities, including dyslexia, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders and speech impediments.

Retain Job Corps Students by Enhancing the Program's Residential After School Training

As a residential program, Job Corps provides additional learning opportunities in the evening. Students work with volunteers, retired senior citizens and professional staff to practice job interview techniques, learn how to manage their personal finances, participate in healthy nutrition and physical fitness programs, and contribute to their local communities through community and service learning projects, all of which contributes to building a more well-rounded graduate and citizen. With an additional investment of \$5 million in fiscal year 2011, Job Corps could hire new instructors and obtain new equipment to enhance these critical after-hours programs.

Optimize the Use of Job Corps Facilities for Non-Residential Students

As I am sure you are aware, there is a growing number of youth who leave our high schools, whether with a diploma or not, who don't have the skills to begin a career. Job Corps' national infrastructure could lend itself well to serving the growing numbers of out-of-school, out-of-work youth in the evening in our empty classrooms. Through Congress' support and a modest investment in fiscal year 2011, Job Corps could pilot an evening health care training program for eligible, non-residential Job Corps students. Health care training would be an ideal for a pilot given the continued growth in the demand for health care workers. This evening program could include vocational offerings in clinical medical assistant, medical administration, dental assistants, optician, pharmacy technicians, home health aides, and licensed practical nurses.

Ensure the Safety of Students in Federal Facilities

Job Corps continues to struggle to repair, renovate and replace deteriorating structures and mechanical systems that threaten the health and safety of Job Corps students. The NJCA's fiscal year 2011 request includes \$110 million to address critical repairs and renovations at existing Job Corps facilities.

Provide Funding for Two New Job Corps Sites

Pursuant to language included in the final fiscal year 2010 Omnibus Appropriations conference agreement, directing the U.S. Department of Labor to announce the competition in 2010 for additional Job Corps sites in both rural and urban areas, the NJCA's fiscal year 2011 request includes funding required to acquire property, conduct environmental safeguards and prepare preliminary architecture and engineering studies. It is estimated that a newly built Job Corps facility generates an average of 430 jobs – 258 directly employed workers and 170 positions supported through additional local economic activity.

But, don't just take it from me that Job Corps works. I am joined here today by one of those students, a remarkable young man, Dionte Brooks. Dionte as a teenager assumed responsibilities that most of us only take on as adults, being forced by circumstance to provide for his family. He made some tough choices along the road, including dropping out of high school. However, Dionte enrolled at the Earle C. Clements Job Corps Center and is now becoming a role model to others.

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**Dionte Brooks, Job Corps Student,
Earle C. Clements Job Corps Center
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Good morning. My name is Dionte Brooks. First of all, I would like to say thank you for your very valuable time. I also want to say thank you to the Committee for the money that pays for Job Corps. I am here to tell you how Job Corps has impacted my life.

I am the oldest of two with a loving, dedicated and tough single mother standing behind us. But, she didn't have it easy. I grew up on the streets of Oakland, California – gangs, drugs, drive bys, funerals – those were the things I witnessed every day. It just came with the territory.

My mom desperately wanted to change our circumstances, but nothing was easy. She raised two boys in one of the toughest areas with little to no support. She held down a full-time job while attempting to earn a degree in counseling. She was only 22 at the time. Yet, for all of her hard work it seemed as if only bad fortune came her way. She really needed help.

Growing up, I felt I had few options. I was the oldest. I felt obligated to help my mom in any way possible. So, I decided to turn to the streets and to a gang. While living on the streets, I did what I was asked to do so that I could provide for my family. That was how I lived.

When mom came home one day saying we were moving to Florida, I remember thinking "here's my chance for something better." I enrolled in Dillard High School, a performing arts school, where I was introduced to the saxophone. I couldn't read music, but could listen to what was being played and play it back. I was finally in place a where there were resources available to assist me in becoming successful and learning something I cared about. Unfortunately, I was forced to focus on helping my family, not on school. We continued to struggle to live each and every day. So, I dropped out of high school.

My mother always told me that school came first but, it was only after seeing my mother struggle even with her credentials and work experience that I started to realize how hard it would be without all of those things myself. When, through her determination, she started to get her life back on track, I saw that education and hard work really paid off. I knew I had to do something with my life.

My mom had some experience with Workforce One, a workforce development agency, and its relationship with Job Corps. She told me to go sign up for Job Corps so that I could complete my education and earn a certification that would help me get a job.

All of my life I've heard people say that they made it "in spite of" this or that. I feel very few people, if any, make it "in spite of" something. Most make it "because of" something. I made it because of Job Corps. I made it because of the Job Corps staff who trained, counseled, mentored, pushed, and sometimes punished me during my stay. Because of them, I learned the skills to succeed.

Today, because of Job Corps, I am finishing up my high school diploma. I have taken advantage of all the opportunities Job Corps throws my way. I have completed the electrician trade, learned the importance of giving back through community service activities, served as a student ambassador and on the Student Government Association and participated in the Earle C. Clements Job Corps jazz band as the lead instrumentalist.

Because of Job Corps, I stand before you as a confident young man who can't wait to see what lies ahead. Thanks to Mr. Cooper, I may have the opportunity to audition for a spot studying music at Western Kentucky State. I want to improve my skills as an alto saxophonist, earn a college degree and prove I can do something "because of" the belief Job Corps had in me. Job Corps has helped me change my life. I have become a better man and can now do for others as well as myself.