Uplifting a Multilingual Workforce: Promoting Job Training for Non-English Speakers in D.C.

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THESIS
The District of Columbia should make job training programs more accessible to immigrant communities by subsidizing programs that offer education in languages other than English. Expanding education to other languages will increase immigrants’ ability to find employment and reach economic stability.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS
The District of Columbia established a State Apprenticeship Council on May 21, 1946 after the National Apprenticeship Act took effect on July 1, 1937. The Department of Labor ensures that apprenticeship programs have equal access and provide integrated employment and training information to the local community. Immigrants are crucial to the District of Columbia’s labor force in various industries. Immigrants work in an array of industries, a major example of which is construction, which comprises of 28.3 percent of the immigrant share of labor in D.C. In 2015, 70,657 immigrant workers comprised 17.9 percent of the labor force in 2015. In the workforce, especially in blue-collar industries such as construction, apprenticeship skills have been in high demand. Since 20.5 percent of adult immigrants in 2015 had less than a high school diploma, apprenticeships are vital for the entry of this population into the workforce. These programs integrate training and instruction for skilled occupations and include a requirement to have a minimum of 10th grade high school education with a commitment to enroll in a GED program. Many in the immigrant population have chosen apprenticeships as an option for job training, because over 1,000 occupations can be certified through an apprenticeship.

TALKING POINTS
• This policy directs existing offices to focus on an underserved issue using existing grant programs. No laws would need to be altered.
• The number of immigrants in the U.S. workforce is increasing, and addressing their specific needs is important to keep the economy flowing.
• Apprenticeship training programs are mainly taught in English. Non-English programs could help uplift those with limited English proficiency.

POLICY IDEA
The D.C. State Apprenticeship Council should incentivize apprenticeships offered in languages spoken by D.C. workers. To do this, the Office of Apprenticeship, Information and Training should maintain a list of opportunities for which employers offer apprenticeships in different languages. Furthermore, the office should incentivize providers to expand to other languages by subsidizing resources through the existing Adult Education and Family Literacy Act Grant program. This subsidy should be offered to both providers currently on the Eligible Training Provider list as well as any providers who apply to be added. This will allow for an increase in job training amongst underserved linguistic minorities by increasing access to and awareness of opportunities in prevalent minority languages.
POLICY ANALYSIS

The importance of immigrant participation in the U.S. workforce is growing with each new generation, corresponding with the increase of overall immigrants. California, the state with the largest immigrant population in the country, and the state with the highest percentage of limited English proficient immigrants, has laws and initiatives to assist workforce development. The California Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which took effect in 2007, created job training centers for unemployed California residents using the Employment Development Department (EDD). California used the federal framework described in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to provide recipients who are language and labor skill deficient priority for training and career services. However, access to these services cannot be fully utilized if individuals cannot understand the material due to a lack of English comprehension. Language proficiency is a substantial barrier for many immigrants entering the job market. Immigrants not proficient in English are nearly three times less likely to get a job in business, management, or the sciences than those who are. By that same token, those not proficient are overwhelmingly funneled into low paying and low career advancing service occupations. California eliminated this language barrier in workforce development by mandating that all resources provided by the EDD be interpreted to another language upon request. The underlying policy directives issued by the state of California have created a resilient base of immigrant workers that have a high likelihood of gaining employment. In 2009, 10 percent of immigrants in California reported being unemployed and seeking work, compared to 11 percent of American-born workers. The overall unemployment rate has decreased from the 2009 average of 10.9 percent to 4.8 percent as of July 2017.

The D.C. unemployment rate amongst Hispanics is around 4 percent, while the non-Hispanic white unemployment rate in D.C. is below 2 percent. By not only expanding state-run workforce services, but also providing bilingual training within those services or a facet thereof, the District of Columbia will be positioned to develop a similar workbase of immigrants of all backgrounds to participate in the local economy.

NEXT STEPS

Working with The Keystone Mountain Lakes Regional Council of Carpenters union, we would lobby the D.C. State Apprenticeship Council to encourage multilingual apprenticeship opportunities and create a framework for the Office of Apprenticeship, Information and Training to compile a list of options that can be delivered in other languages, while also developing strategies to promote them. On another front, we would propose to the Department of Employment Services to work with their Eligible Training Provider List partners to create job training programs in other languages. We would encourage the Department to incentivize partners by subsidizing new non-English programs under the Office of the State Superintendent of Education’s Adult Education and Family Literacy Act Grant program.

KEY FACTS

- 30 percent of D.C.’s non-native English speakers do not have a firm grasp of the language, including 36 percent of the District’s 44,457 Spanish speakers.
- 23 percent of D.C. metropolitan area residents are immigrants, of which El Salvador is the most common place of birth, while 26 percent of the total workforce in D.C. are immigrants.
- 70,657 immigrant workers comprised 17.9 percent of the labor force in 2015.
ENDNOTES