



PHOTO CREDIT: ARNESA A. HOWELL

## THE ROAD TO REENTRY

Reentry. The word is both a source of hope and trepidation for those returning to society after incarceration. The odds are stacked against these men and women, and they need someone championing their cause, according to Rodney Mitchell, chief operating officer of the District nonprofit Reentry Legal Services.

By Arnesa A. Howell

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## MAKING STRIDES: JOBS COALITION ACCOMPLISHMENTS



While raising awareness of workforce challenges and potential barriers to employment, the JOBS Coalition and its members have combined their resources and industry expertise to achieve the following results:

- Built the Bellevue Resource Center, a program facility serving the hard-to-reach, hard-to-employ, and returning ex-offender populations. The Center was completed on September 30, 2003.
- Guided the creation of the Construction & Design Academy at Cardozo, providing District students access, training, and preparation for careers in the construction industry and trades after graduation. The Academy officially opened in September 2005. □



**IN THE HUDDLE** Miller & Long's Kenny Glover schools students in the opportunities within construction and skilled trades.

## A DOOR OF OPPORTUNITY ACAD Hosts National Apprenticeship Week Open House To Introduce Youth, Adults to Skilled Trades Training

The road from apprenticeship offers many possibilities, from licensed trade professional to college student, and beyond. That's the message gleaned from the banner displayed on the wall outside the Academy of Construction and Design (ACAD). It's the first hint to the opportunities awaiting youth and adults attending the National Apprenticeship Week Open House and Industry Networking event at IDEA Public Charter School in Northeast Washington, DC.

By Arnesa A. Howell

Sponsored by the D.C. Students Construction Trades Foundation, the Nov. 15 event included exhibitors from Miller & Long, Catholic Charities—Archdiocese of Washington, the D.C. Apprenticeship Academy, M.C. Dean Inc., and United Planning Organization. Also in attendance, members of the Department of Employment Services' Youth Apprenticeship Advisory Committee, among others.

A group of students huddled around one exhibitor table in the ACAD classroom as Liz DeBarros walked past the banner and into the room. "I really like the road to apprenticeship map because it really gets you to see why

[students] are learning math, science and English in school," said DeBarros. Plus, she acknowledged that it gets to the heart of what many young people are interested in: "It can show you where you can get a career, where it can go, and how much money you can make."

As senior adviser for the D.C. Building Industry Association, DeBarros attended the open house to tour the Academy's facilities, which support classes for both the adult apprentice trainees participating in the D.C. Apprenticeship Academy and technical education courses for high school students enrolled in ACAD. Also an appointed member for the Youth

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**Davis CBC Recap** *Continued from page 1*

“A criminal history is like an evil twin that you can never get rid of,” said Mitchell during a panel hosted by Rep. Danny K. Davis (D-Ill.) during the 2017 Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s Annual Legislative Conference. No matter how many programs there are to help, he continued, an individual still must take ownership of his or her actions.

“The first step for me was to make a conscious decision: that’s not me, that’s not my life,” said Mitchell, a self-proclaimed survivor of the streets in the 1980s. With a criminal background, he today holds a juris doctor of law. Despite having a clean record for 26 years, he ruminates, that “evil twin” is still there.

Before a packed room in the Washington Convention Center, Mitchell and fellow panelists addressed the struggles and opportunities facing the formerly incarcerated while also making a call to action for second chances. As part of the panel, “Convicted. Out of jail. Out of work. Out of prison. What’s next? Reentry,” advocacy and nonprofit leaders, District officials and lawmakers advocated for helping this population gain a foothold in the community through workforce development, an avenue to filling the skills gap.

As part of his outreach, Mitchell works with federal courts to engage with a men’s support group. When talking to these men fresh out of prison, he doesn’t play games: “If you’re a career criminal or a self-proclaimed gangster, you’re in the wrong classroom. This is for men who are trying to come home and be real, because it’s hard work.”

**Advocating Solutions**

For the audience, Mitchell outlined the pathways to success. Self-commitment is the first step, followed by opportunity, he said. Mitchell urged business owners and managers to open that door of opportunity by giving those returning home after incarceration their first break. “They need to have someone in their corner that’s behind the scenes championing the cause for reintegration and employment,” he said. “Because the reality is that the stigma and the discrimination that we face ... compounds the issue.”

Mitchell added that there must be legal remedies in place across the public and private sectors. As examples, he gave nods to the “Second Chance Act,” aimed at reducing recidivism and improving reentry services, and the “ban the box” law, prohibiting employers from asking about criminal histories ahead of a conditional job offer. “Is that the end-all-be all? Not at all, but it’s a start,” he explained.

Finally, he urged mobilization and legislation, which he called the “perfect storm” to ensuring that “our people” have the

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**A SPARK FOR CTE** At the National Apprenticeship Week open house, Dajour McDowney (seated) and a fellow student listen as M.C. Dean’s Erin May gives the rundown for the electrical apprenticeship program.

**Apprenticeship Week** *Continued from page 1*

Apprenticeship Advisory Committee alongside Foundation board member Bill Dean, DeBarros is enthusiastic about young people gaining exposure early to the various career pathways ahead.

“A lot of people in the construction and trade industry don’t have to go the four-year college route,” said DeBarros, giving a nod to the mix of academics and trades skills emphasized in the Academy program. She hopes that by attending and networking with company and organization representatives, students will be inspired by the “depth and breadth of the construction industry”—and gain valuable mentorship in the process.

**A Fresh, New Look**

For senior Dajour McDowney, 17, the spark for construction was lit when she was younger, helping her uncle on projects like rebuilding porches and painting houses. “I was so excited, it was so fun,” McDowney remembers. Now, she has checked off Construction I and II courses at the Academy—with sights on becoming a psychologist after graduation. Still, skilled trades are on her radar, as she made a stop at the M.C. Dean table during the open house.

As a young woman, McDowney is confident about the contributions she and other women can make in this industry. “I’m capable of doing the same things that men are doing in the construction business, too,” said McDowney, currently with an internship working on the Academy’s latest tiny house project, the Minim House. “Of course they have more strength, but it’s all about the ability and the mindset for doing the work.”

Meanwhile, Mehki McClam, 18, aspires after high school to enroll in an apprenticeship program, with a focus on electrical. “Once I get my certification, I plan to go to college for two years



**NETWORK READY** Mehki McClam, 18, works the room, talking with Bill Dean of M.C. Dean, before later (below) checking out the United Planning Organization table.



and get my associates degree in entrepreneurship,” he said. “The best boss is yourself.”

**Career Building Blocks**

With the estimated 20-plus students visiting the M.C. Dean table, Erin May shared insights about the Tysons, Virginia-based engineering and integration firm. May, who is with human resources and runs the company’s four-year

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**FROM THE INSIDE, OUT** An Academy of Construction and Design tour starts in the classroom, (below) continues on the school's back lot and ends inside the latest build project—a tiny house.



**AN ALTERNATE TRACK** Bridget Maley with Catholic Charities introduces students to the Green Construction Program.



**Apprenticeship Week** *Continued from page 2* electrical apprenticeship program, explained the program's ins-and-outs: "Students go to school in the evening one or two nights a week. In four years, they complete 8,000 on-the-job training hours. Once they graduate, they get their

completion certificates in the state they attended or in turn they can get their journeyman's license in the electrical field."

She noted that apprentices are working alongside journeyman electricians and learning the day-to-day operations of their future careers. That knowledge—combined with classroom learning—transfers to the job site. They are starting their lives, working hard and making money to take care of themselves and their families, said May. Ultimately, she said, the apprenticeship program lays the building blocks of these individuals' future careers. "They become crew leaders, superintendents, project leaders and some who have gone through the apprenticeship program work in our modeling group, working on computers and 3-D modeling for projects," May said.

Bridget Maley is program manager at the Spanish Catholic Center in the District of

Columbia, part of Catholic Charities that offers green construction and hospitality programs in the District and Maryland. At the open house, Maley and her colleague Celia Sterling specifically highlighted the opportunities provided through the Green Pre-Apprenticeship Construction Program, which include safety and flagger training, for those directing traffic during highway construction. "It's a great way to show you can have stability, a great job and a great career outside of the four-year college track," Maley said.

Ultimately, the green construction program can serve as a pipeline program for Academy graduates, according to Sterling, supervisor of the Green Pre-Apprenticeship Construction Program.

Nearby, the United Planning Organization provided information on its spectrum of classes, free to District residents ages 18 and over, according to Darnita Lawrence. Lawrence, an outreach specialist with UPO, said course offerings include professional building maintenance, telecommunications, electrical technician, culinary arts and hospitality. Among program benefits? Students receive tokens for transportation and job placement assistance, from resume development to mock interviews coaching.

Throughout the afternoon, each organization echoed to young people the importance of realizing that college isn't the only pathway to success. Embracing the trades with a solid foundation of academics is an alternative avenue towards career growth—no matter the final destination.

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## JOBS Coalition Pathways

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**Davis CBC Recap** *Continued from page 2*

opportunity to get ahead. “There is no room for apathy,” he said. “We are in the fight of our lives.”

Meanwhile, Davis ticked off a list of barriers: The war on drugs. Selective prosecution. Unfair judicial processes. Together, he said they disproportionately impact African Americans, contributing to higher imprisonment rates. But despite the hurdles, Davis noted that there is progress. He praised the outcomes from the Second Chance Act, saying its grant program has benefited more than 700 groups, organizations and agencies.

**On the Front Lines**

As executive director of the District grassroots organization Voices for a Second Chance (VSC), Paula Thompson serves men and women returning home from the D.C. correctional jails and Bureau of Prisons facilities scattered across the United States. “We are unique in that we look at reentry at the point of arrest,” said Thompson, noting that the nonprofit goes directly inside the jails, marking the beginning of case management for those incarcerated. But VSC has a reach that extends beyond the “clients” it helps directly. “Men and women call on us, and their families call on us to meet with them and see where they are,” she said.

Thompson presented various scenarios in which VSC comes to serve its clients, more than 4,000 each year. “They can be taking their chil-

dren to school and be arrested, they can be going to work and be arrested, they can be violated in their homes and be arrested,” she explained. “We are oftentimes the first phone call.”

These are crucial moments when the family connection is at stake. With no federal prison in the District, residents can be housed as far away as California, according to Thompson. “Oftentimes, we are their voice and we work very closely with other agencies in the city to make sure [families] stay connected,” she said.

And release can be the beginning of new struggles, especially for those who’ve spent decades behind bars. Getting a home, job and housing is a tall order for someone with a felony record, according to Thompson. “The system is not set up to welcome them when they come home,” she said.

Factors increasing the risk of re-incarceration include lack of job-seeking and other soft skills, illiteracy and mental health issues like post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from experiences while incarcerated.

As the discussion of solutions continues, so must a dialogue on the shortfall facing many grassroots organizations: funding. “Agencies doing effective work—need funding at every stream of the appropriations cycle,” Thompson stressed, alongside funding for a continuum of care that includes social, behavioral and emotional transitional supports.

From housing and employment hurdles to harsh sentencing laws, panelists detailed a series

of barriers to successful reentry. With no single resolution, the complex issues surrounding life after prison persist. Still, the panel appeared hopeful about the supports that do exist—in some cases family, community and advocates for change. “We need to recognize the work of community organizations that exist in our cities. In Washington, D.C., the community organizations are the heart and soul of our efforts to combat the barriers of recidivism,” said Brian Ferguson, director of the Mayor’s Office of Returning Citizen Affairs in the District. With this office, he said returning citizens know one thing: “They will always have a seat at the table.” □

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“Not every student is college bound,” reiterated Myrtle Alexander, an economist who has studied dual education in Switzerland. “Offering something hands-on where you can actually obtain a high school diploma and credentials to take you straight to industry is a win-win.”

In the end, it’s the students who are the winners. For McClam, an apprenticeship in electrical just might open the door to reaching the dreams of his youth. He recalls sitting in his bedroom and staring at the world globe—imagining all the places he wished to travel one day. After talking with M.C. Dean about its program, McClam felt even more confident about those aspirations becoming reality: “It’s about opportunity.” □



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