

**Statement of Dorothy Stoneman
President and Founder of YouthBuild USA**

**Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Education and Labor Committee
Hearing on *Ensuring Economic Opportunity for Young Americans*
October 1, 2009**

**The YouthBuild Program as an Example of What Works for
Out-of-School Unemployed Low Income Youth**

Introduction

Chairman Miller, and Senior Republican Member Kline, thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Dorothy Stoneman. I am the president and founder of YouthBuild USA, a national non-profit organization which has guided the development of the YouthBuild network of more than 225 local programs that act in collaboration to improve their outcomes and impact. I started the first YouthBuild program in East Harlem 30 years ago, and have since participated in its evolution to a federal DOL program enabling tens of thousands of young people to rebuild their communities and their own lives.

Since 1992, when the first federal YouthBuild authorization was passed, 84,000 YouthBuild students have produced 18,000 units of affordable housing in over 225 of America's poorest urban and rural communities, while pursuing a high school diploma or GED, and preparing for college or for careers in construction, and internalizing the values and skills to serve as good citizens.

A Unique Program

DOL's YouthBuild program is the only federal program that provides disconnected young adults an immediately productive role in the community while also providing equal measures of basic education toward a diploma or GED, skills training toward a decent paying job, leadership development toward civic engagement, adult mentorship toward overcoming personal problems, and participation in a supportive mini-community

with a positive set of values. It attracts the most disadvantaged youth, and produces a reliable shift in their values, attitudes, skills and personal identity.

The YouthBuild network is also adapting rapidly to meet the needs of the changing labor market and economy, teaching green construction skills while building energy-efficient homes and positioning its graduates as a workforce prepared to weatherize and retrofit public and private housing. We were very proud in March when First Lady Michelle Obama joined us on the Mall to celebrate YouthBuild's 30th Anniversary and witness our Green Training Academy.

Some YouthBuild programs are also innovating by multiplying career tracks beyond construction to add health care and technology, developing systems to support graduates through to the acquisition of post-secondary credentials, and under the guidance of the Department of Labor and the AFL-CIO developing a formal course that will enable graduates to step fully prepared into union apprenticeships.

Background Data:

YouthBuild programs welcome the most disadvantaged youth: 93% without a diploma; 40% adjudicated; 73% young men; 78% Black, Latino, or Native American. All are poor; many have been gang affiliated; most have almost no healthy family support. Yet just about half of those who enroll in YouthBuild radically change their lives.

A Brandeis University study of 800 YouthBuild graduates up to seven years after graduation found that 75% were either in college or employed at jobs averaging \$10/hour. 65% said they expected to live longer as a result of YouthBuild – an average of 32 years longer. In fact, most disconnected young men do not expect to live beyond age 25. Graduates often say, “Without YouthBuild I would probably be dead or in jail. Instead I am working, going to college, taking care of my children, aiming to own my own home. I love YouthBuild. It changed my life.”

How and Why YouthBuild Works

In YouthBuild programs low-income 16 to 24 year olds enroll full-time for about a year. They split their time evenly between the YouthBuild alternative school where they work toward their GED or diploma in a highly individualized and supportive classroom, and the construction site where they build affordable housing for homeless and low-income people under skilled supervisors, often union journeymen, who teach them the skills they need to succeed at work. They generally alternate a week in the classroom with a week on the construction site. They are paid minimum wage for their work building homes. Increasingly these homes are built green and the students are obtaining industry-recognized certifications and learning the skills to be employed in the new green economy.

At the same time, students are offered personal counseling to help solve all manner of personal problems. They are members of a supportive community of peers and adults dedicated to each other's success. They internalize the ethic of service and are given leadership roles. They recite a daily pledge to become responsible caring leaders who respect others as they would like to be respected. For most, it is the first time they have experienced a safe, healthy, supportive, goal-oriented community that respects their inherent value and draws out their talents. There are many very talented young people who have lost their way, and who can become a real resource to their communities if offered the right opportunities to take charge of their lives.

YouthBuild creates small manageable communities of 30 to 200 students, with a high staff to student ratio. If you ask the students why YouthBuild worked for them, they always say, "It's the staff and the teachers. They care about us. They teach us how to act. They give us structure and help us set our own goals, and they show us that they really care that we succeed. Nobody ever cared about me like this before. I came to YouthBuild looking for a job and a GED, but I found a family and a future."

We encourage the staff to show they care by doing things that will surprise the students. For example, when a student doesn't show up, someone will call him, or go knock on his

door. When a student is found through random drug testing to be using drugs he will be taken off the construction site and required to get counseling. When a student has to go to court for an offense committed prior to enrollment, a staff member will go with him, and maybe take a group of students dressed in suits to demonstrate social attachment to a respectable group. When he is applying for college, someone will drive him there and if necessary pay the application fee. When he is going for a job interview, someone will make sure he has the proper attire.

As a result, YouthBuild students develop a deep desire to give back. They want to help others as they have been helped. They become a positive force. As YouthBuild graduate Antoine Bennett once said, "I used to be a menace to my community; now I am a minister to it." Sure enough, Antoine is now the executive director of a local job training program in Sandtown, Baltimore; ten years ago he was in prison for a violent crime.

The act of building homes for people who need them, being seen in the community as a hero instead of a hoodlum, changes their identity and relationship to society. They love making a difference. They love being the ones who are doing something good instead of something bad. They are on the streets with tool belts instead of drugs. For the first time in their lives their grandparents are proud of them and their neighbors admire them.

Other young people ask, "How can I do what you are doing? How can I get into YouthBuild?" It's contagious. The result is that in every community 2 to 10 times as many young people apply as can be accepted, purely through word of mouth. In North Philadelphia 1,000 young people apply annually for just 200 openings. Where will the other 800 go? There are precious few options. I have watched them leave the waiting room, crying.

The Formula for Success:

What attracts disconnected young people to YouthBuild is the comprehensiveness of the program coupled with the philosophy of profound respect for their intelligence and inherent value. The necessary program components are as follows:

- 1) a way to resume their education toward a high school diploma and college;

- 2) skills training toward decent-paying, family supporting jobs;
- 3) an immediate, visible role contributing to the community that gains them respect from family, neighbors and adults generally;
- 4) stipends or wages to sustain themselves and their children;
- 5) personal counseling from admired and deeply caring adult role models, some of whom have the same background as the young people, who are committed to the young people's success, who also firmly challenge self-defeating behavior and attitudes;
- 6) positive peer support with an explicit value system strong enough to compete with the streets;
- 7) a mini-community to belong to that stands for something they can believe in and in which everyone is committed to everyone else's success;
- 8) a role in governance, participating in making important decisions regarding staff and policies in their own program;
- 9) leadership development and civic education that provide a vision of how they can play an important role in the neighborhood and society by changing the conditions that have harmed themselves and the people they love, and that gives them the skills to do so;
- 10) assistance in managing money and building assets, as in scholarships, and personal budgeting;
- 11) linkages and placements with colleges and employers; and
- 12) support after graduation that goes on, sometimes for years, as a member of a supportive community.

These program elements need to be implemented with profound respect for the intelligence and value of the young people, as well as for their culture. This comprehensive set could be adopted by many other programs for youth beyond YouthBuild.

YouthBuild as an Example of a Public-Private Partnership for Social Innovation

Each YouthBuild program is run by a non-profit community-based organization or local public agency with deeply rooted leadership and commitment to community development in America's poorest communities. Some of them are autonomous agencies and some are local affiliates of large national non-profits like Goodwill, YMCA, Urban League, or the United Way. The entire system operates as a dynamic public-private partnership, with national direction from DOL and YouthBuild USA and local roots, linking the power of government with the creativity of social entrepreneurs to create solutions to social

problems. The non-profit entities bring private funds into the system to generate innovation and flexibility. Most of the major private foundations have supported innovation in the YouthBuild network. The YouthBuild network is a well developed model of what will be created by the Fund for Social Innovations authorized in the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act.

Goals:

YouthBuild USA's goal is to open the doors of YouthBuild to every youth that is knocking and provide the resources to every community-based agency competent to sponsor a YouthBuild program. Over 1,800 communities have applied for YouthBuild funds and thousands of young people are turned away each year. The Obama Administration and our champions in Congress have proposed a steady expansion of YouthBuild to 50,000 young adults per year. I ask your help in making that possible through a steady increase in the YouthBuild appropriation. DOL's YouthBuild program received \$120M in FY'09; to reach 50,000 youth/year it will need \$1B. It does cost about \$20,000 per full year per student, but this includes wages for the housing they produce, and is still less than the other full-time options for out-of-school youth: less than the military, college, Job Corps, or prison. The return on investment is enormous. One recent study by Professor Mark Cohen documented that every dollar spent on a court-involved youth in YouthBuild provided a return on investment of at least \$10.90. This is an investment worth making.

Attached are statements from YouthBuild graduates that will give you the full picture.

Thank you very much for your support over the years.

Dorothy Stoneman
President and Founder
YouthBuild USA

Youth Testimonies

From Violent to Activist

By Ely Flores

As a child, I was abandoned by my father and I grew up in both south Hollywood and South Central L.A. -- in a under resourced, oppressed community where more youth are sent to prisons rather than rehabilitation programs. Our mothers were so overwhelmed they could do little to prevent us young men from searching for meaning on streets that led straight to prison or death. Violence was my learned resolution for all the challenges I faced. Like many young people who grow up in poor, disenfranchised communities with few opportunities, I lived by the law of “dog eat dog” and “survival of the fittest”.

I raised my fists in violence over nothing. Maybe someone made fun of my shoes or clothes. Perhaps someone talked negatively about my mother, brother, or sister. Perhaps someone challenged my so called “man hood.” A fight was always the conclusion. Where I’m from, being scarred and bruised was like wearing military stripes or medals won on a battlefield. Whenever the pain was too much to bear, a dose of Marijuana relieved me. The older gangsters found it fun to pit a kid against another kid by instigating little disagreements that devolved into a fight. Violence was normal. It was entertainment and to us kids, it seemed normal.

Violence plus the lack of resources made it easy for me and other kids to pursue fantasy lives – to emulate gangster lifestyles and drug dealing. My brother and I slipped into that, too. I’ve been in situations where I was forced to fight individuals for “claiming” (stating) their membership to another gang that we did not get along with. My anger and violence led me to use weapons; to hurt people. I conditioned myself not to care whether or not my victim ended up in the hospital or dead. The same rules my homies and I lived by, also ruled the people I thought of as my enemy.

One of the experiences that changed my life was when one of my homies was shot dead at the age of 14. He used to be a skate boarder. He always promised that he'd never join a gang. But one day peer pressure -- and a lack of other options -- got the best of him. He joined the local gang. A month later he was shot and killed next to my Grandmother's house. The cycle continued with years of retaliation.

Life stories alike mine are common amongst poor and disenfranchised youth everywhere in the U.S. First we begin to hang out with gangs and eventually this road takes us to places like prison, drug addiction, and homelessness and for some death.

As I began developing my consciousness about social issues, I asked myself, "Why are there so many poor people in prisons and especially black and brown people? And why do they keep going back? Is it the people's fault, the community's fault, or the parents?" Then I realized that I was trying to come up with answers from an oppressed and deficit perspective. Of course there has to be some accountability for the people but accountability also must lie with institutions that contribute to the issue and don't help solve this issue.

South Central LA is already a poor community but continuously prisons and police continue the criminalization of many colored communities. I agree that there needs to be law enforcement and incarceration for the extreme but I also believe that there needs to be an equal amount of resources, programs, jobs and rehabilitation coming to the community as police, incarceration, and the building of more prisons.

As my life turned into a gang life style, incarceration followed. For four years I was going in and out of prison. Some people say I was just a knuckle head but I say that the mission statements of jails that claim to rehabilitate people skipped me. I was never given any resources to better my life or those of my community. I had to go hunt and find resources out of my community because there weren't any in mine. I was hungry for a change but jail and probation officers never believed me. I found organizations like the

Youth Justice Coalition and LA CAUSA YouthBuild that believe in the empowerment of young people to better their lives and their communities.

LA CAUSA YouthBuild, an affiliate of YouthBuild USA, and a grantee of the US Department of Labor's YouthBuild program, introduced me to a life of positive transformation, self accountability, and leadership. They offered me resources with the only cost of bettering myself. I participated full-time and earned my GED, while I learned job skills by building affordable housing for homeless and low income people while they offered me personal counseling, positive role models, a safe environment, and leadership skills. I even earned an AmeriCorps education award. They offered me resources that jails and probation officers never did. They offered me a key to open a door to a new road. A road that would forever change my life.

Because of that key they offered me, I became an activist. Because of that key, I have developed a passion for community work and helped numerous people in diverse and challenging communities. That opportunity that is rarely given to people was given to me and has enabled me to become an expert in the field of Youth Development, Leadership development, and Community Organizing and has allowed me to train others across this nation. That opportunity and handing of resources has given me congressional recognition by Hilda Solis and recognition from the city of Los Angeles. That recognition has even given me the opportunity to fly to Israel and devote my time to try and build peace amongst Israeli and Palestinian Youth. Imagine that; an ex gang member, drug addict and ex criminal that now offers his life and time to serve for the cause of peace and the people.

I want you to imagine for a minute that me, Ely Flores of Los Angeles, CA, the person that stands in front of you today, was never given that key for transformation. What would have I become? A long term prisoner, a wanted felon or just another city and national statistic of incarcerated people of color. Your guess is as good as mine. But that key was given to me by a group of colored people that looked like me, that created an organization that offered me resources and empowerment in East Los Angeles and

deterred my direction of destruction towards a direction of productivity. The resources to give me that key came from the federal government, thanks to decisions of legislators like you, who decided to fund the federal YouthBuild program. The problem is, that the 226 YouthBuild programs that have been created with federal funds and serve just 8,000 youth a year are turning away many thousands of young people like me every year for lack of funds, and 1,000 organizations have applied to the federal government for YouthBuild funding and most have been turned away for lack of funds. This is a sin and a tragedy, as I think of the young people coming behind me who will not have the opportunity I have had.

I urge you all to offer keys of transformation to the thousands of youth and adults with a potential like mine. With the potential to become agents for change to their communities and the future of this nation. Think about my story and use it as proof that change is possible in communities dominated by the gang culture if you just provide and offer well-designed and well-managed resources and opportunities to communities in poverty. Equalize resources and opportunities to those of the rising prison systems. Be the producers of those keys that will open thousands of doors of hope, doors of transformation, and doors of change to people like me.

I thank you for your time and always keep in mind that it is possible for a gang member to become a productive member of society and it is possible for a gang member to become an agent for positive change. Thank you.

Alischa Ann Singleton
Hope Center, Inc.
Gretna, LA

Hi, my name is Alischa Ann Singleton and I'm a 20-year-old proud participant of the YouthBuild program of Hope Center, Inc.

My future was so promising. I was a senior in high school with some of the best opportunities awaiting me. Hurricane Katrina came and I lost sight of what was most important. Katrina totally destroyed my home and made me feel hopeless. After the storm things were really tough so I decided to take on a job to help out with my circumstances. The job I took on was during school hours and I really needed this job to help out with my siblings. So I decided to drop out of school. At that time I felt I was making the best choice for my family.

Before enrolling in the program at Hope Center, my life was headed for destruction. I was working a dead end job that was paying me minimum wage. I felt like I could work my way up to the position I wanted at work but my spirit would not let me settle for just a job. Something inside of me said that I needed to go back to school, so that I could fulfill my dreams. I did not want to be the person who could have made it, but didn't. So I made up my mind that no one was going to stop me from achieving my goal.

One day I was at home thinking about how I can make a change in my life and then I heard the Hope Center being broadcast on the radio. They were saying that they were giving young teens a second chance to finish their high school education. At that very moment something inside of me said that this was my second chance to make myself and my community proud.

So because of Hope Center's YouthBuild Program I have completed my high school education. I'm becoming a positive leader in my community, and I'm on my way to college. This program has given me so much. Hope Center's YouthBuild has helped me

realize that no matter what you've done in your past, that there's always a chance to better your future. Hope Center has made me a better person. My perspective about my community and life has matured. Through this program I can honestly say that I'm proud that I'm a part of it.

Due to Hope Center's YouthBuild program I'm in a position where I've been offered a job upon graduation. I give thanks to everyone that's a part of the organization and for giving me the opportunity to give back to my community even though I'm not rich and famous.

Wayne Whack
YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School
Philadelphia, PA
Class of 2006

As I reflect back on my experience at YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School, I am reminded of the process that I went through to become a student in the program. The high school I attended before gaining acceptance at YouthBuild was not meeting my needs. The support in the school was lacking, as was the sense that you were even cared about as a student. The caliber of the teachers was sub par; they would hand out crossword puzzles rather than give the students work to do during the period. To top it off, each class had about 38 to 40 students, which was very distracting. Most of the teachers approached the students as if the students knew why they were there and were expected to teach themselves. There was also a lack of supplies for the students and this was a huge turn off. Due to these factors, I stopped attending class because I felt I needed more and deserved more.

I learned of YouthBuild Philadelphia and began to pursue the acceptance process. Being a student at YouthBuild allowed me to have the level of comfort to let my guard down. Initially, I entered the school under the pretense that the school “owed” me something and that I was entitled to whatever services that were offered. It was not until becoming further acquainted with the school and the staff that I realized that the program was all about uplifting me as a person. I discovered how to become a learner at YouthBuild. I discovered that there were talents that existed inside of me that were not able to be brought to the surface elsewhere. I wanted to become a part of Youth Congress, editor of the yearbook, etc., because other schools simply did not have the opportunities for me to grow and expand. The biggest thing about YouthBuild, however, is the genuine love and dedication that the staff exudes. As a student you feel cared for, nurtured, valued and are pushed to become the best you can possibly be. The support that I received from the staff members enabled me to become a strong, capable, and efficient student.

Since graduating in 2006, I have been able to give back to YouthBuild Philadelphia through an internship and by assisting various department programs within the school. This has allowed me to have a behind the scene glance as to how the school and personnel are solely dedicated to the mission at hand. Part of me wishes all of the students could have a behind-the-scene moment in order to witness all of the hard work and commitment that goes into each day to ensure that the students get the best education they can. I have witnessed that it is not just a “job” to the staff at YouthBuild, it is a calling. As a graduate, I made a promise to myself that I would keep in touch with the school. The school constantly speaks of YouthBuild as a family and it truly is. It is a very positive thing for me to stay in contact and I consider YouthBuild my family. I chose to participate in Youth Congress because I want to remain on the scene with the program. I talk with people on Facebook who are former students, and I am constantly looking to engage myself in YouthBuild activities. My sister and cousin are currently students here because I could not imagine not passing this experience on to others. I wanted to introduce my new family to my blood family so that their lives could forever be enriched and changed like mine.

In closing, the future of YouthBuild is not only bright because of the personnel and the way in which the staff are seemingly handpicked to guarantee the right people are teaching and working in the program. But it is also bright because of the vision of a new-found movement entitled A Thousand Leaders. This movement is in place to bring forth a thousand leaders of YouthBuild students from all over the country to help enhance the vision and the drive of the mission. It will be my honor and duty to be a voice within the National Alumni Council and bring to the forefront all of those students that will speak for the cause. There are leadership qualities and capabilities in everyone and nothing will please me more as a YouthBuild alum than to encourage and support those students that can stand with me and lead for a stronger and better YouthBuild.

Wilfried Plalum

Youthbuilding Alternatives

Portland, ME

Class of 1995

YouthBuild has helped shape my life for the last thirteen years. The oldest of seven children, I came to the US not by choice but as part of the lost boys of Sudan. Both my parents were killed in the civil war in 1997. My parents were refugees when I was born, and when they were repatriated to Sudan, another war had begun. I was eleven. By the time I was seventeen years old I had lived in displacement camps inside Sudan, jailed by the government in Khartoum, escaped and lived in refugee camps in Uganda and Kenya, and after years in the camps I finally came to the US in 1994.

While playing soccer, I met one of the YouthBuild staff who introduced a group of us to the program where I immediately enrolled and got my GED and got a certificate in construction. In my country of origin I was unable to complete my education and in total, only ten years of school were completed. After program completion I was awarded an AmeriCorps scholarship which encouraged me to apply to college and in 1997 was enrolled at the University of Maine, where I graduated in 2002 with a BA in International Relations. Upon graduation, I returned to Portland, Maine, where I volunteered as a community leader in the Sudanese community and have been helping Sudanese file for green cards, teaching citizenship classes, being an adult education volunteer teacher, establishing youth soccer teams, helping write resumes, helping Sudanese women get their drivers permits, and most importantly helping them file for financial aid and college applications and college tours. In 2004 I volunteered for the Kerry Campaign where I did a voter registration drive and most importantly, I voted for the first time in my life!!

After working as a Refugee and Immigrant Children's Case Manager for a year I decided to enroll in a Masters Intensive Program at Southern New Hampshire University School of Community Economic Development. Thanks to the Helene D. Stoneman scholarship

and an IDA account, YouthBuild USA helped pay part of my first and second semesters at Southern New Hampshire University.

After eighteen years, I returned to south Sudan to start a youth development project modeled after YouthBuild. It engages war-affected youth ex-combatants in reconciliation, conflict resolution, and reconstruction of the country through building and construction while, at the same time, getting basic education, job training, and leadership practice and entrepreneurship. Initially, the pilot project was for fifteen students but it has since been overwhelmed with more than it can absorb.

While in south Sudan, I volunteered as a high school teacher teaching evening classes. As a research assistant I helped establish the office of South Sudan Human Rights Commission, and I helped prepare the budget and strategic plan for the Commission, among other things.

In this past election, I helped in registering new voters from my community who voted for the first time. Currently, I keep in touch with the local YouthBuild program where the staff act as mentors to me in my daily life. What is stated above would not have been possible without YouthBuild, to whom I offer all the credit of my success and of many other youth in the program that continues to touch many in different shapes and forms. It is also one that can give hope to youth in post-conflict Sudan and the world over that we can be productive and be part of “change we believe in.”

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