



**Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2023 Executive Budget Proposal: Topic Workforce Development
March 1st, 2023**

Testimony of Ashley Ball and Kelly Li,
Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (OBT)

Thank you to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee members for the invitation to testify on behalf of Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (OBT). For 40 years, Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow has led education and workforce development in New York City. Since its founding, OBT has served over 15,000 participants through our mission of breaking the cycle of poverty and inequity through education, job training, and employment. We serve as a bridge to economic opportunity for youth, individuals, and families in underserved communities by providing the skills-based training, education, and job placement support they need to prosper and thrive.

Our programs serve youth and adults ages 16-55+, and over 90% of our program participants are people of color, and 100% are from low-income families. OBT's participants have incredible potential and navigate many challenges to securing gainful employment including gaps in academic skills; little to no experience and related job skills; underdeveloped social or soft skills; lack of a high school diploma or High School Equivalency (HSE); single parenthood; histories of homelessness; involvement with the foster care system; living with a disability; low self-esteem and self-efficacy; mental health challenges; past substance abuse and/or court involvement. Several HSE candidates who enter our program test at pre-HSE levels in numeracy, and a high proportion qualify for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) – meaning they have a diagnosed disability by the Department of Education.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City's overall economy was strong and growing. Unemployment was at 3.7%—an all-time low—with 60.7% labor force participation. The citywide poverty rate was 14.5%, the lowest in over 20 years. However, that prosperity was experienced unequally. Unemployment was twice as high for Black residents as White residents, and over 1.5 times as high for Latino residents. In addition, Black and Latino New Yorkers were twice as likely to live in poverty as White New Yorkers.

Multiple waves of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of these underlying issues, leading to job loss—with effects that still linger today. In May 2020, unemployment peaked at 20.1% - 6.5% higher than the US unemployment peak. Those more likely to be unemployed included Latino New Yorkers (12%), residents with incomes less than \$30,000 (21.8%), and those under 35 (16%). The pandemic's disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities underscores the important programs and support to assist every New Yorker in every neighborhood out of poverty, giving them a chance to join the middle class.

Sunset Park

882 3rd Avenue
Suite 10-10NE, Unit 18
Brooklyn, NY 11232
Tel: 718-369-0303
Fax: 718-369-1518

Innovation Lab

87 35th Street
Brooklyn, NY 11232
Tel. 718-801-8970

Bushwick

25 Thornton Street
Brooklyn, NY 11206
Tel: 718-387-1600
Fax: 718-387-5005

Jamaica

168-25 Jamaica Avenue
Suite 202
Jamaica, NY 11432
Tel: 718-526-2984



Access to and readiness for career opportunities for out-of-school and out-of-work students is critical to breaking this cycle, which is only possible through continued investments in workforce development programs. Thus, it is imperative we focus on investing in youth and adults in under-resourced communities through programs like OBT and equip individuals with the skills needed to access and sustain good-paying jobs.

We strongly believe that we can recover from the last few years and empower New York’s workforce to succeed in the future with your investment in the following:

- 1. Adequately fund ESD’s Office of Strategic Workforce Development** with a \$150 million grant program to support new innovative programming and scale what is already working. The Office should continue to award grants to proven providers that ensure New Yorkers are ready to meet employer needs while expanding access for marginalized communities through wraparound services and other tested models that reduce system-wide inequities.
- 2. Raise the minimum wage to over \$20 by 2026.** In New York City, the minimum wage has already plummeted more than 15 percent in value and is projected to fall more than 30% by 2027. In recent years, the cost of living has dramatically increased and become a burden for New Yorkers trying to maintain their standard of living as in previous years. This is a crisis and we need to raise the minimum wage and permanently index it to keep up with the rising cost of living.
- 3. Increase investments in community-driven, youth informed violence** interrupting initiatives as well as alternatives to detention and incarceration that focus on reaching youth. Access to and readiness for career opportunities for out-of-school and out-of-work young people is critical to breaking the cycle of poverty and violence. The less people experience unemployment and financial stress, the more likely they are to choose careers over crime. However, this is only possible through continued investments in workforce development programs.

Thank you on behalf of everyone at Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow for giving us this platform to testify about investments that will empower New York’s workforce and youth people. With your support, we look forward to building our partnership to provide our participants with the opportunity for a better tomorrow.

Sunset Park

882 3rd Avenue
Suite 10-10NE, Unit 18
Brooklyn, NY 11232
Tel: 718-369-0303
Fax: 718-369-1518

Innovation Lab

87 35th Street
Brooklyn, NY 11232
Tel. 718-801-8970

Bushwick

25 Thornton Street
Brooklyn, NY 11206
Tel: 718-387-1600
Fax: 718-387-5005

Jamaica

168-25 Jamaica Avenue
Suite 202
Jamaica, NY 11432
Tel: 718-526-2984