

JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 551:
Education - Service Year Option Program - Establishment (Serving Every Region Through
Vocational Exploration Act of 2023)**

TO: Chair Brian J. Feldman and Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment
Committee

DATE: Tuesday, February 21, 2023

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. **JOTF strongly supports Senate Bill 0551 as a means of expanding occupational opportunities to high-school graduates through meaningful service opportunities that provide a living wage, career mentorship, and financial literacy.**

The Vocational Exploration Act will enable graduating high-school students, or those who have recently earned a GED, to explore career opportunities through experiential learning and by developing relationships with and learning directly from those who work directly in high-impact fields. These experiences have a multitude of benefits: they allow students to apply classroom knowledge in a professional setting, to develop their transferable skills, to build confidence, and to refine their career goals. Instead of being tracked directly into low-wage jobs in order to make ends meet, or into higher education programs that students may not know much about or may not be enthusiastic about, Senate Bill 551 would provide students an alternative that would help them in exploring occupational pathways.

JOTF especially supports the Vocational Exploration Act provision that employers pay participants a living wage of \$15 an hour. According to a survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, almost 40% of internships are unpaid, which is a significant barrier for low-income students. These internships benefit those who can rely on generational wealth and other financial safety nets, and perpetuate an equity gap: 75% of unpaid interns and 62% of all interns in 2020-21 were white, and the majority were men. The \$15 minimum wage requirement in Senate Bill 551 will enable students who have not traditionally been included in these types of career exploratory opportunities, to have a chance to participate, and to reap the benefits of these programs.

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JOTF also supports the bill provisions that participants be provided with career counseling and training in financial literacy skills. Financial literacy is critical in helping individuals gain financial independence, saving for emergencies, managing retirement, running a business, filing taxes, and more. Studies show that financial literacy improves the chances that individuals will use predatory financial services such as payday loans, minimizes debt, improves workforce readiness, and trains students in critical skills that are transferable to multiple fields of employment. Additionally, financial education and access to financial services lessens the racial wealth and wage gaps.

Too many Marylanders are struggling to secure full-time employment and to build economic security. With the growing demand for highly-skilled workers in the labor force - internships, apprenticeships, and alternative career exploration programs are a way to train and steer qualified individuals towards these positions. Promoting the careers of these Marylanders is an investment in not only their futures, but also the State's economy. For these reasons, we strongly urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 551.

For more information, contact:

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