

Testimony by Scott Perry
Director of the Latin American Youth Center Work Force Investment and Social
Enterprise Division
Before the DC Council Committee on Public Safety and the Judiciary

Good morning Chairman Medelson. My name is Scott Perry and I am the Director of the Latin American Youth Center's Work Force Investment and Social Enterprise Division – better known as WISE. I am here today to support Bill 17-913, “Juvenile Justice Improvement Amendment Act of 2008”.

It has been our experience that youth who end up in the criminal justice system can have productive lives if given the right kinds of opportunities. Spending time in adult jail creates hardened criminals rather than adults that can contribute to our community's welfare.

The mission of the Latin American Youth Center's WISE division is to provide 16-24 year old youth residing in the District of Columbia with job skills training and GED preparation. We serve approximately 250 youth a year – about half of them have had contact with the criminal justice system.

The program is built around the philosophy that given the right tools youth can lead crime-free productive lives. Our job training instructors are devoted to providing our youth with the skills they need to enter the work-force and successfully hold-down a job. Job development specialists create partnerships with local business and non-profit organizations where youth are welcome to apply for jobs. Each youth has a case manager

that helps him or her with urgent life needs such as housing, day-care and accessing medical assistance. The case managers also act as mentors and help the youth facilitate relationships with probation officers and guardian at litems. Over the past 3 years WISE has placed 103 youth in jobs throughout the metropolitan area. On average our youth stay employed for at least 6 months.

I'd like to highlight some success we have had with youth who have been referred to WISE by their parole or probation officer and are now employed and/or pursuing their education goals. One such person is Manuel who at age 17 Manuel was a 7th grade dropout and had recently become a father when he was charged with assault with a deadly weapon. Manuel's probation officer referred him to the WISE program so that he could be in a positive environment and complete his education. While at WISE Manuel showed great focus and determination and was eventually referred to the Department of Employment Services Out-of-School program so that he could earn a stipend while attending classes. Manuel also worked closely with his Case Manager and Job Developer to secure a job at CVS where he worked as a Cashier. In August Manuel took his GED exam and passed 4 out of 5 sections on his first attempt. This past week he registered to retake the 5th section and has already begun his college search for the Spring 09 semester.

Many other adjudicated youth have had similar successes while enrolled in WISE. There is Charles who was charged with possession of illegal narcotic, but turned his life around and just celebrated his one year anniversary with PNC bank where he works as a Teller. There's also Carlos who was facing multiple felony burglary charges when he enrolled in

our program, completed our Job Readiness Training course and went on to obtain his GED and enroll in community college. These young people and many more like them have greatly benefitted from the positive and supportive environment offered by the Youth Center and more youth should be given the same opportunity.

It is the Latin American Youth Center's position that providing strong community support youth can be truly rehabilitated and set on a course to lead productive lives. Sending a young person into the adult system that provides a trivial amount of rehabilitative services is condemning the youth to a bleak future.

The Juvenile Justice Improvement Act will ensure that fewer of our young people end up in the adult criminal justice system and that those who are there do not end up in the same facility as adult prisoners. I urge this Committee and the Council to approve this legislation.

Thank you for your time and I am available to answer any questions.