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Student Activists Bring Demand for Jobs, Local Voting Rights to State House

Youth Coalition Looks to Build on Beacon Hill Successes

Sam Drysdale | 2/23/23 5:31 PM



Boston Latin School freshman Dani Idemudia joins the rally outside the State House for increased state funds toward YouthWorks. [Sam Drysdale/SHNS]

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, FEB. 23, 2023.....Carrying colorful signs in contrast with Beacon Hill's snowy backdrop Thursday, young Bay Staters demanded more state funds for youth jobs,

a lower voting age of 16 for some elections and the ability to seal eviction records from future housing applications.

More than 200 young people and youth leaders came to the rally, the 15th annual event since they began gathering at the State House when the Legislature in 2008 planned to cut the state-funded youth jobs program YouthWorks from \$8 million to \$4 million in the budget.

After their success in 2008 and subsequent increases to the program year after year, the youth justice coalition "I Have a Future" was up on Beacon Hill again Thursday -- less than a week before Gov. Maura Healey unveils her budget -- this time demanding \$33 million for the program.

YouthWorks provides summer and part-time school year job opportunities for young people in 31 municipalities across the state. The \$33 million the coalition is asking for represents a 16 percent increase from the \$28.475 million allocated in the current year's budget, and a 37.5 percent increase from the \$24 million the program got the previous year.

Healey unveils her budget on Wednesday, March 1, and has not yet indicated how much money she is recommending be dedicated to the program.

Kimora Scott, a senior at North High School in Worcester who, through YouthWorks, worked at an urban farm and now interns at the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission doing community outreach, said her working experience has prepared her for life after graduation.

"Retail and fast food jobs can cause unnecessary pressure and stress, funding better jobs will allow us to explore the world in a positive light. Having the opportunity to experience a variety of jobs and build skills with the trades will make everyone's futures better," Scott said.

The coalition is also advocating for the passage of a Sen. Liz Miranda bill (SD 1050) to allow 16- and 17-year-olds in Boston to legally vote in municipal elections.



Sen. Liz Miranda speaks at the 15th annual youth justice rally. [Sam Drysdale/SHNS]

The Boston City Council passed a petition in November to enfranchise residents aged 16 and up, though City Councilor Julia Mejia warned that the State House (which the petition will also have to pass through to become legal) is where "most things go to die."

In 2019, twin bills (H 720 and S 389) to grant municipal governments the power to lower the voting age in their communities without individually seeking home rule petitions died after a public hearing on the proposals.

To Boston Latin School freshman Dani Idemudia, allowing teens to work but not allowing them to vote is "taxation without representation."

"I work, and I'm 14. A lot of my peers work, and a lot of us pay taxes," Idemudia said. "I believe in no taxation without representation."

Mejia, who attended the rally Thursday, encouraged the young advocates to vote. She told them a story about having only won her race for City Council by a single vote. Mejia was the first Afro-Latina to be elected to the council.

"The only reason why I was elected citywide to represent the city of Boston was because I chose to dedicate my time and energy to people who they expected not to vote. They said Black and

brown people in certain neighborhoods don't vote, so why would you waste your time there?" Mejia told the youth advocates, who were mostly people of color. "And I said 'You know what? I would rather lose and uplift my people than win without them.'"

Other policy priorities for the coalition this session include raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction to include 18-20 years olds, making schools safer and sealing eviction records.

Chelsea High School student Brian Martinez recalled the experience of receiving an eviction notice and having to help his mother, who is not proficient in English, through the housing court system.

"This year has been really hard," he said. "And I'm afraid of an eviction mark on our record."

A recent report by the ACLU said there is a "growing number" of children being listed on eviction notices in Massachusetts, which can permanently mark their housing records.

The youth advocates knocked on lawmakers' doors after their rally on Thursday afternoon and met with Miranda and her staff.

"Don't let young people be told all the time that they're the future, no -- they're the present," Miranda said.

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