



July 14, 2021

Combating Violence By Bringing Back Trade Schools Like Washburne

President Biden has called on Congress to make a historic and overdue investment in our roads, bridges, rail, ports, airports, and transit systems, according to the White House. The President's plan will ensure that these investments produce good-quality jobs with strong labor standards, prevailing wages, and a free and fair choice to join a union and bargain collectively. These investments will advance racial equity by providing better jobs and better transportation options to underserved communities. These investments also will extend opportunities to small businesses to participate in the design, construction, and manufacturing of new infrastructure and parts.

Added to the President's push, Illinois is pushing an energy build that will create thousands of jobs. But, who will actually work in these jobs? Now more than ever, we need to promote the trades and bring vocational training back in our high schools and trade schools to prepare for the coming demand of a skilled work force. These jobs will be not only in trades like construction, electrical, carpentry, and HVAC, but will also be in solar panel installation, broadband and IT expansion, and other technical fields. Chicago and Illinois can be a magnet in education for these fields, and many of the people drawn to Chicago for education will stay to help build our infrastructure and build up our communities.

Furthermore, we need to end the systemic racism that has excluded Black workers from good-paying union jobs once they have learned their trade. Our political leaders must bring union leaders to the table to create lasting structures that hire Black people who want to work. White people made it to the middle class through trade jobs. Blacks need the same opportunities. There is enough infrastructure to include everyone, including Black people - there is no need to lock anyone out.

We need a return of trade schools like Washburne in Chicago. Washburne was a school with a long and proud tradition of training more than 50,000 skilled workers and found jobs in the Chicago metropolitan labor market. At one time in its history, 28 programs were located at the school.

I am working with concerned organizations on legislation to amend Illinois' School Code. The bill will allow school boards to allow students to substitute the entirety of grades 11 and 12 with vocational or technical education courses. These courses would be approved jointly by the State Board of Education and the Illinois Workforce Investment Board. As chair of the House Higher Education Appropriations Committee, I hear the voices of students and families seeking the trades as a pathway to the workforce. Work in the trades provide careers and living wages. We were fighting for \$15 an hour, but trade jobs are actual living wages. Good jobs in the trades can net an income of \$70,000 a year or even higher.

And this a big part of how we combat the violence we have experienced over the long term. We must cut off the pipeline to prison and create a pipeline to the workforce. The trades create jobs that will allow men and women

to work themselves out of poverty and raise up their families. People with a job have hope and dignity, and it is the promise of a better life to those who are at risk of a cycle of crime, incarceration, and lack of opportunities on release from incarceration, or worse, at risk of dying due to violence.

We must give hope to men and women who don't want to attend universities but have a desire to enter the workforce through the trades. Bringing vocational training back into our schools will be a pipeline to build the workforce to respond to President's call to rebuild Illinois' roads, bridges, schools, ports, airports and crumbling communities in Illinois, and is a key part to end the violence plaguing many of our communities in our state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSK', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District