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WORKFORCE

Democrats look to jump-start 'green collar' economy

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Published: Thursday, February 28, 2019



A SunEdison Inc. testing facility in 2012. Dennis Schroeder/Department of Energy

Business owners and social justice groups urged Congress this week to support the training and recruitment of more minorities, women and veterans to enter renewable energy fields.

Lawmakers, in turn, looked for answers on how to transition the American workforce in earnest to more "green collar" jobs — everything from installing solar panels and wind turbines to increasing building efficiency and servicing electric-vehicle charging stations.

The goal of creating such jobs — specifically in minority and low-income communities — is a key component of the economic changes promoted under the proposed "Green New Deal."

"Let me be as frank as possible, my primary and sole objective is exactly that, putting as many American citizens to work in good-paying and energy and manufacturing jobs as humanly and legislatively possible," Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill.), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Energy, said during a hearing yesterday.

It centered on his proposed legislation, H.R. 1315, the "Blue Collar to Green Collar Jobs Development Act of 2019." The congressman has been working on passing the bill since the 113th Congress.

Earlier in the week, Rep. Don McEachin (D-Va.), an Energy and Commerce member, helped lead a forum on the green jobs issue. Both McEachin and Rush are members of the Congressional Black Caucus, and McEachin co-chairs the Energy, Environment and Agriculture Task Force.

"In my judgment, there is nothing more important than speeding the transition to a green-collar economy; you need to make sure direct benefits accrue to all Americans," said McEachin.

Rush noted that while the bill is similar to previous iterations, the latest version aims to "beef up" financial support to help workers afford to retrain.

Witnesses urged members to help training programs in green-collar jobs and to start pushing science- and math-focused careers as early as elementary school.



Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill.), chairman of the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Energy, during a hearing yesterday. House Energy and Commerce Committee

"Our industry is changing pretty dramatically. We are seeing more and more aspects of industry served by smaller businesses traditionally done by the utility industry. These are the businesses that need support," said Anne Pramaggiore, senior executive vice president and CEO of Exelon Utilities, a unit of Exelon Corp.

She said yesterday, "They don't have the capacity to build the training, yet they have tremendous capacity to have economic impact."

'Enormously frustrated'

Rep. David McKinley (R-W.Va.) lamented the lack of detail in the Rush bill and from witnesses on how the transition would affect small rural communities like his. McKinley said many residents may have to leave.

"It's a noble idea to talk about the transitioning over to renewables and the possibilities of that," McKinley said. "But I'm enormously frustrated."

The Republican said, "I don't understand why we're not helping the transition using the resources and assets we have to be able to make a better transition from fossil fuels ... finding out how to use what we have cleaner and more efficiently. But that's not what I'm hearing come up in this discussion."

McKinley, a staunch supporter of his state's coal industry, has introduced bills in previous Congresses to boost energy job training and help displaced miners ([Greenwire](#), Oct. 7, 2015).

The focus of the hearing and forum was indeed on urban and minority communities rather than helping displaced fossil fuel workers, but advocates say the conversation is relevant to everyone.

"Those people who work in Pennsylvania or West Virginia absolutely could participate in this industry and make really good earning wages," said Leticia Colon de Mejias, CEO of Energy Efficiencies Solutions LLC.

'Panels don't get installed without people'

In McEachin's Tuesday briefing, social justice groups also laid out some of the groundwork that has already been done.

Rob Wallace, co-founder of the Power52 Foundation, told congressional staffers about his program that offers training in solar panel installation.

About a third of Wallace's trainees are people coming out of prison, whom he refers to as "returning citizens." A third of the rest are veterans, and a third are students coming out of high school.



Rep. Don McEachin (D-Va.) during an environmental justice forum earlier this month. @NRDems/Twitter

"I have guys who I remember on the streets of Baltimore, when they first came in, pants were sagging, hair wasn't cut, they didn't want to look someone in the eye, who are now building systems in New Hampshire," he said. "What you see is their whole person changes."

Cecil Corbin-Mark, director of policy initiatives at We Act for Environmental Justice, noted the potential for job creation in renewables compared with fossil fuel technologies, which he described as mechanized and capital-intensive.

"Solar panels don't get installed without people. Wind farms need technicians for maintenance. This means that on average, more jobs are created for each unit of electricity generated from renewable sources than from fossil fuels," Corbin-Mark said.

"And for the sake of our energy, environmental and climate justice future, this reality cannot be allowed to stand as is," he said.

We Act launched Solar Uptown Now in the Harlem and Washington Heights neighborhoods of northern Manhattan to help residents organize to purchase solar power. The group also works on training low- and moderate-income residents.

Challenges

While touting jobs in the environmental sector, advocates also warned of specific challenges, like not having enough funding to expand training.

They called for more government-funded stipends so workers can take time away for training and to help foot the bill for other expenses like transportation, child care and clothes.

Advocates cautioned against supporting hiring practices that asked about criminal records and sought more carve-outs in policy to require that a certain percentage of green-collar hires come from the communities where projects are taking place.

Beverly Wright, founding director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, said the organization has focused on providing environmental job training to people in communities that she described as undereducated and hard to serve — heavily contaminated by pollutants and vulnerable to climate change.

Participants in the program "not only get the basic academics; they get life skills, they get study skills. We are bringing people back into a learning process where in the past they never had a positive experience," she said.

Donele Wilkins, president and CEO of the Green Door Initiative in Detroit, noted an even more basic problem, explaining to people what the green power sector is and why it is worth their time to take part in it.

"My challenge has been, give me that money, that 5 percent of the job, to go to scale. When folks call us for employees, we don't have them; we need to be able to go to scale to produce more," she said.

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