Maryland Delegate Cory McCray is currently sponsoring a bill moving through the House of Delegates entitled the POWER (Providing Our Workers with Education and Readiness) Apprenticeship Act (House Bill 467). As a graduate of a 5-year apprenticeship program, McCray has been a long-standing advocate for state expansion of apprenticeship legislation.

This bill requires recipients of grant money earmarked for apprenticeships to either utilize registered apprentices with the Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLLR), make payments to a Maryland registered apprenticeship program, or make payments to the Maryland Apprenticeship Training Fund.

According to McCray, many apprenticeship programs have no accountability requirements or apprenticeship standards. The POWER Act ensures that money Maryland already appropriates works more efficiently and effectively by creating these accountability requirements.

McCray explains that contractors sometimes take advantage of people who want work but don’t know anything about apprenticeships. Employers can pay apprenticeship wages with no accountability for the progress of the apprentice. Since some of these apprenticeships aren’t registered apprenticeships they are not monitored by the DLLR.

Registered apprenticeships require apprentices to sign an agreement with the DLLR who keeps track of compensation, work hours, education components, and general progress. If the apprentices are not treated fairly, they can report it to DLLR who keeps employers accountable by acting as the middle man. Utilizing registered apprentices with the DLLR and the Department of Labor provide guidelines that must be met for skills development, worker protection, and labor standards that safeguard the welfare of participating apprentices.

CSG was able to speak to Delegate McCray about the POWER Apprenticeship Act and his general thoughts about the state of apprenticeships in America.

**Can you talk about what inspired you to initially introduce the legislation?**

“As background, I am an electrician who graduated from a 5-year apprenticeship program with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and a small business owner. When I finished high school, this program gave me a job and offered to pay for my school. I thought it was some kind of a scam. I didn’t know anything about being an electrician but thought it was too good an opportunity to turn down.”

“I believe that the building trades offers young men and women the opportunity to earn a good wage, affordable healthcare, and a dependable retirement. Legislators should always be looking for opportunities to make state taxpayer’s dollars work more efficiently and effectively. Those interests
drove me to introduce House Bill 467, which will allow more young men and women to enter the trades as registered apprentices. It ensures that, on state projects, young men and women receive the critical on-the-job training and in-classroom education that will help them to perfect his or her craft.”

What advice would you give to other states looking to introduce apprenticeship legislation?

“Analyze the state budget and ask yourself “how do I make taxpayer dollars work harder?” Registered apprentices and registered apprenticeship programs are valuable for both the apprentice and employer. Apprenticeship Legislation can give your state the competitive edge in terms of skills training and an educated workforce.”

What are some of the challenges you faced while developing The POWER Apprenticeship Act?

“No one knows anything about apprenticeships. If I asked the general assembly in Maryland ‘Who knows how apprenticeships work?’ maybe 2 people would raise their hands. Although a majority of my colleagues—on both sides of the aisle—support apprenticeships, only a few of my colleagues understand how apprenticeships work. Once upon a time there were many people in the trades or individuals had a family member directly connected to the trades. However, our culture has shifted to push for education at a college or university and have come to the value the trades less. As a result, many of my colleagues lack the understanding.”

“Compounding the issue is the lack of access to data. While colleges and universities cite enrollment rates, graduation rates, age and gender breakdowns, and residency breakdowns, there is no system in place to track and report such data for apprenticeships. The challenge presented is that my colleagues don’t know which programs are successful and which ones are not; they do not know how apprenticeship issues impact which legislative districts.”

What are your thoughts on pre-apprenticeships or generally incorporating the apprenticeship model into secondary education?

“I believe that pre-apprenticeships provide an opportunity for students to hone their math skills, job readiness, and basic tools for the trade. I believe that pre-apprenticeships should be anywhere from three to six months – but should not be any longer than that. After a student successfully completes a pre-apprenticeship, they should get some sort of guaranteed access or incentive to be accepted into an apprenticeship program because the participant invested the time and energy into successfully completing the pre-apprenticeship program.”

“However, we should be mindful of those businesses that prey on our constituents, looking to benefit monetarily off of the industry without providing the same type of guaranteed job access after completing the pre-apprenticeship. Sometimes pre-apprenticeships are used as a means to make money. The students have to pay $10,000 and it’s advertised as ‘Become a plumber in 18 months.’ Let me tell you it takes 4-5 years to be a competent plumber and even then you are just starting to get the hang of it. If states are going to appropriate dollars, they have to be sure that these are registered apprenticeships with standards, accountability, and the proper education component.”

How should states change the cultural stigma around apprenticeships to encourage more participation?

“Folks don’t value apprenticeships. It’s hard to sell the value of apprenticeships sometimes because of physical appearance. Even those these guys are making more than you would behind a desk, $80,000-$90,000 a year, because they look dirty people think they’re not smart or successful.”
“It is imperative that we continue to strengthen the promotion of the building trades to high school students. We have to encourage our education departments in our respective states to track data on apprenticeships in the same way that our colleges and universities do. We must also base our high schools’ success on the number of students who enter registered apprenticeship programs – the same way we do for colleges and universities and job placement. We have to value our respective labor departments and understand that registered apprentices and registered apprenticeship programs are superior to those that just get on-the-job training and we should be championing the educational component. Legislators should be reminded that carpenters, electricians, plumbers, roofers, et cetera will always be in demand.”

The POWER Apprenticeship Act is currently in Maryland’s senate, and is scheduled to be heard by the Senate Finance Committee on April 4th. Delegate McCray remains committed to bringing more registered apprenticeships to Maryland, and ensuring these opportunities are equitable for the participants.

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