

# United States Senate

May 21, 2021

The Honorable Martin J. Walsh  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Labor  
200 Constitution Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20210

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Walsh and Secretary Vilsack:

I write today regarding the need to create reopening plans for Job Corps programs. Job Corps centers are critical components to communities across the nation, and the two centers in Montana are no different. Last year, the outbreak of the public health emergency in March forced nearly all on-campus activities to shut down abruptly and the ongoing pandemic continues to drastically impact the operation of Job Corps. While I am encouraged that the Department of Labor (DOL) announced a phased reopening in October, I am alarmed that Job Corps centers are still awaiting guidance from the Department about moving ahead with resumption of in-person activities.

The Trapper Creek Job Corps Civilian Conservation Center and the Anaconda Job Corps Civilian Conservation Center (CCC) provide hundreds of Montana youth with practical skills, service learning opportunities, and career and technical education. Since the closure last March, Job Corps has struggled to keep participants connected to the curriculum. Montana CCC directors are eager to get students back in-person and parents are concerned that their children will not get the Job Corps experience despite admission to the program. In addition, as Montana continues to grapple with drought conditions and expectations of a dangerous wildfire season, Montana's CCC programs are critical elements of Montana's wildland firefighting efforts, providing direct firefighting personnel and support service like food service and heavy equipment operators. If students are not actively participating in training programs during Montana's fast approaching and relatively short summer season, they may miss a full year of field experience.

Ensuring the safety of Job Corps participants and staff is paramount. However, as schools, vocational training centers, and colleges across Montana continue or resume in-person operations, I am concerned that DOL's blanket guidance on nationwide Job Corps operations missed the mark. At Trapper Creek and Anaconda, there are still delays in enrollment and students are currently required to fulfill "virtual enrollment" for 60 days before they can transition to in-person learning. Unfortunately, many students in these communities lack access to the reliable broadband service necessary to fulfill these requirements and limited bandwidth at the centers themselves will present challenges. Furthermore, mimicking national trends, the COVID-related risks in Montana are falling, enabling students to return to in-person schooling. Job Corps participants should be treated no differently.

Over the years, I have spent a lot of time speaking with students and graduates of Montana's Job Corps centers and have heard countless stories of young people overcoming adversity directly because of the Job Corps program. Most of those stories include peer mentorship and the amazing staff interactions in the first days and weeks at a CCC that set students up for success. Former students and career professionals who dedicate their lives to helping these young people are unequivocal in the belief that the in-person experience at Montana's centers are key to positive outcomes. The success is quantified in Anaconda and Trapper Creek ranking among the top performing centers nationally every year, as ranked by DOL's Center Report Card. That is a testament to the people who interact with students on a dedicated personal level every day, and provides further evidence these centers are fully committed to the success and safety of their students.

I urge DOL to issue updated guidance for Job Corps operations in order to expedite students' return to these important programs and to ensure that another class of participants does not miss out on the opportunities that impacted so many students last year. Reopening in-person Job Corps is just one element of resuming normalcy in our communities but is a vital element to returning to normalcy and safety for many Job Corps students and their families. I recognize there are parts of the country at high risk, but one-size fits all approaches rarely work. The CCCs in Montana have proven capable of conducting risk assessments and proper quarantine procedures. Allowing in-person enrollment on a case-by-case basis, and placing trust in the career professionals who have managed centers so effectively should be considered. This cannot wait any longer. Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester

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Jon Tester  
United States Senator