

The Vindicator

Ohio listening tour comes to City Club

Working class discussed at Monday session

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By GRAIG GRAZIOSI

ggraziosi@vindy.com

YOUNGSTOWN

A group of policy researchers from some of the most influential think-tanks in Washington were in town Monday on an “Ohio listening tour” during which the group presented a slew of policy proposals to help bolster the working class.

The presentation took place during a meeting of the City Club of the Mahoning Valley at Stambaugh Auditorium and featured panelists Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution, Tamar Jacoby, president of Opportunity America, and Bruce Reed of the Aspen Institute.

James Dignan, president of the Youngstown/Warren Regional Chamber, and Stephanie Shaw, executive director of Eastern Ohio Education Partnership, joined the delegation of policy researchers on the panel. Jacoby moderated the discussion.

Robert Doar of the American Enterprise Institute and Anne Kim of the Progressive Policy Institute did not speak during the panel but were contributors to the policy proposals and attended the discussion.

The discussion was organized by Team NEO, a business-development organization for Northeast Ohio.

The bipartisan group of policy researchers discussed proposals from their 113 page report “Work, Skills, Community: Restoring Opportunity for the Working Class.”

“Working class,” as the report defines it, is “people with at least a high-school diploma but less than a four-year college degree living in households between the 20th and 50th income percentiles – roughly \$30,000 to \$69,000 a year for a household with two adults and one child.”

Many of the policies outlined in the research are focused on the idea that work is a central provider of value and opportunity in the lives of those deemed “the working class” and that returning those to work who aren’t working – whether they are unemployed, receiving benefits or disability or have disengaged from actively searching for jobs – back to the workforce.

In addition to a focus on work, the group also proposed increasing wages for both working families and individual workers through expanding some programs – like opening up Earned Income Tax credit for single workers – and through experimental policies, like a direct wage subsidy for low-wage workers. The group did not endorse policies that would raise the federal minimum wage or a universal basic income.

Education and skills training were also central tenets for engagement in the policy proposals.

Jacoby argued for viable and federally supported alternatives to traditional four-year college as the model for higher education. The group recommended expanding the federal Pell Grant to cover more than just public universities and colleges, but also to include quality certification and skills-training programs as well.

Reed, who was the chief domestic policy adviser for President Bill Clinton, argued that occupational licensing sometimes played a part in barring otherwise employable people from jobs.

Dignan was optimistic about the proposed policies and said he believed several could help Youngstown, such as subsidizing the wages of workers and offering tax credits to employers to encourage them to invest in their employees' training.