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U.S. Labor chief Hilda Solis talks jobs during Valley visit

by **Jahna Berry** - May. 11, 2012 10:01 PM
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U.S. Labor Secretary Hilda Solis made a swing through Phoenix on Friday to talk up the Obama administration's effort to create jobs and to listen to economic concerns from metro Phoenix Latino community leaders.

Solis also spoke at a forum on student debt at Arizona State University and made a commencement speech at Estrella Mountain Community College.

Arizona is in the early stages of recovery from an economic spiral that erased 300,000 jobs. The state no longer has a double-digit unemployment rate, but more than 254,000 people are actively looking for work. The jobless rate is 8.6 percent.

"Our whole emphasis here is to emphasize investment in job training and education," Solis said during an interview in between her Phoenix events.

Solis faced a friendly but persistent crowd at the Cesar Chavez Foundation, at 14th and Washington streets. More than a dozen elected and non-profit leaders peppered the Cabinet official with questions about jobs and resources for entrepreneurs.

Young people need more access to jobs, said Roberto Franco, CEO of the Phoenix Community Development Investment Corp.

"It makes a big difference when a 15- or 16-year-old can get a paycheck," Franco said.

Jobs for youth came up several times during the Labor secretary's Phoenix stops. The jobless rate is even higher for young workers. In the U.S., the unemployment rate for workers ages 16 to 24 was 16.4 percent in April.

The Obama administration is addressing the issue through a summer job program, Solis said. The White House has set a goal of getting private and public entities to provide about 300,000 summer jobs to young people across the country, she said. Solis encouraged local leaders to prod national companies participating in the program to set aside jobs for Arizona youth.

State Rep. Ruben Gallego, D-Phoenix, told Solis that many local veterans were concerned about anticipated job cuts at the U.S. Postal Service. Traditionally, many veterans have gotten jobs at the post office after they complete their military service, he said.

All federal agencies give preference to veterans and they are all hiring, she said. Solis said local leaders should spread the word about special job-hunting services for veterans through one-stop centers, which are run by the Arizona's network of work force centers.

Earlier Friday, Solis heard from another group: college students who are worried that the interest rate on their student loans will





On July 1, a federal law is set to expire that keeps the interest rate for certain student loans at 3.4 percent. If it expires, the rate will double to 6.8 percent, for about 8 million college students.

Senate Democrats attempted to pass a bill to keep the lower interest rate, but it was blocked by Republican opponents.

Danielle Bryant, a 19-year-old student at Northern Arizona University, is worried about the interest rate on her \$7,000 in loans. Her father lost his job, which has made it more difficult to pay for school, Bryant added.

Students need a college education for good jobs, but it's often "a struggle to pay for school," Bryant said.

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