

Columns



Local View: Summer youth employment program worked for Washington

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BY BRANDI STEWART-WOOD

Contrary to a recent Associated Press national article ("Many teens couldn't find summer employment," Thursday's Columbian) and apparently unlike some areas in the country, Washington can boast great success with its Summer Youth Employment Program. The program, funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), brought millions of dollars to Washington to put low-income 14-24-year-olds to work this summer. The goals were to teach them to work hard, develop job-specific skills, and put money in their pockets, and ultimately back into our economy.

While some parts of the country may have had trouble placing youth in jobs, Washington did not. In Southwest Washington's Clark, Cowlitz, and Wahkiakum counties, our community came together to put 696 youth to work in 126 organizations at 185 different job sites. Our youth collectively earned more than \$1.1 million and worked 106,696 hours this summer.

The story is similar in other parts of the state. In King County, 887 young people worked for 260 different employers at 373 work sites. The northwest Washington counties of Skagit, Whatcom, Island, and San Juan placed 344 youth in jobs at 211 different employers.

The task was not easy, especially with little time to prepare. Funds were released to the state's 12 workforce development councils in late March. A competitive procurement process was required to select providers to recruit and screen youth and employers and to oversee the program. Lots of paperwork was required. The barriers of our target population posed challenges in placing youth in certain jobs. In Southwest Washington, 23 percent of our participants had a disability, 17 percent were drop-outs, 12 percent were homeless, 10 percent were court-involved, and 9 percent were pregnant or parenting. All had limited or no work experience.

Mentoring beyond norm

However, through a community effort, youth were at work by the first week in July and received weekly paychecks on time. The employers were required to provide a level of coaching and mentoring beyond the norm for a regular employee. It took a special kind of employer, which Washington clearly has in abundance.

As a workforce development agency, we hear frequently from employers that young people today do not have a strong work ethic or the soft skills to be successful in the work place. To address this, Southwest Washington's youth worked 24 hours per week and attended classes six hours per week focused on appropriate workplace behaviors, communications and team building, conflict resolution, financial management, and workplace rights and responsibilities. Dozens of community and business leaders spoke to these classes, demonstrating their faith in the future of the youth. Youth prepared résumés, participated in mock interviews, and learned about education and employment resources.

Ninety-three percent of our youth made gains in work-readiness skills. Seventy-four percent returned to educational pursuits after their summer job, and 25 percent reported securing employment. Eighty-four percent of participants said they would participate in the program again.

Yet it's not all about the youth. In addition to the benefit of getting work done that they may not have

had the resources to complete, an overwhelming majority of our employers said they had a positive experience; 90 percent said they would do it again. This is what truly made a difference for these youth, many of whom do not have positive role models in their lives.

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As the summer draws to a close, these youth have a job under their belt, increased skills and confidence, new adult mentors and role models in their lives, and a little money in their pockets. Our community has the satisfaction of knowing we can pull together to make a difference in the lives of our young people, while at the same time, helping to prepare our future workforce. Perhaps other areas of the nation need to look at Washington to see what works.

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Brandi Stewart-Wood is the director of strategic initiatives for the Southwest Washington Workforce Development Council, the organization responsible for administering the Summer Youth Employment Program in SW Washington.

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