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Kenosha County's Summer Youth Employment Program marks another season of success

KENOSHA — Providing at-risk youth with a productive way to spend their time today, while teaching valuable work skills for the future.

That has been the mission of Kenosha County's Summer Youth Employment Program since its inception in 2009, and this summer was no exception.

This year, 143 youth were employed in the program, working at Kenosha County Parks locations and 17 private worksites across the county. Participants earned \$9 per hour — a raise this year from the previous hourly rate of \$7.25 — received job skills training, and were eligible to earn a half credit toward graduation from the Kenosha Unified School District.

“The Summer Youth Employment Program is an investment in our future as a community,” said Kenosha County Executive Jim Kreuser. “This is all about making sure at-risk youth stay on the right track now, while enabling them with the tools to succeed in the long term.”

Funded by Kenosha County with the support of the County Board, the program is modeled after the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Comprehensive Gang Model. It admits at-risk youth, age 14 to 21, referred by social workers, counselors, teachers and other community stakeholders.

In addition to paychecks, participants receive training in soft skills needed to succeed in the workplace, as well as financial literacy.

“Youth learn the value of coming to work on time and how to take direction from a supervisor, and they also learn the importance of the feeling of accomplishment when you put in a full day's work and you do a good job,” said Ron Rogers, director of the Kenosha County Division of Children and Family Services.

The program is administered by way of a partnership of local organizations. The youth workers are officially employees of the Boys & Girls Club of Kenosha. The Kenosha Unified School District and private businesses provide worksites along with Kenosha County Parks, where workers are supervised by staff from Community Impact Programs.

“This program is successful due to the great collaboration and partnerships between the county and all of these other entities,” said Pamela Condos, division manager in the Kenosha County Division of Children and Family Services.

This year in the county parks, among other duties, youth workers moved 11 tons of asphalt to reshoulder Hill Road in Petrifying Springs Park, painted a gazebo at Kemper Center and playground equipment at Old Settlers Park, and conducted general mulching, weeding and maintenance at various locations.

On the Brookside Care Center grounds, they planted shrubs, put down landscaping stones and did other work to further beautify the property.

In total at all of the worksites, the youth worked 13,638 hours.

“This program is awesome to work in,” said Elijah Dykes, a sophomore at Indian Trail High School and Academy. “It is calming. It gives me something to do.”

As in past years, some participants were selected to work in the Youth Employment in the Arts Program, painting a mural that will hang in the Kenosha County Job Center and other signage for the Boys & Girls Club and its supporters.

This year’s mural — a Kenosha lakefront scene — was dedicated Tuesday afternoon, adding to a collection that has brightened the hallways of the Job Center.

Meantime, 20 of the youth who participated in the Summer Youth Employment Program this year were offered and accepted continued employment at their private worksites.

“I’m proud of everything this program has accomplished over the last 13 summers,” Kreuser said. “It is truly a win-win for our community.”

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