



COUNTY OF KENOSHA

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August 10, 2022

News release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

Some put their paychecks in the bank to save up for necessary life expenses as they become adults. Others help their families to get by. And, of course, some like to use their hard-earned money to treat themselves a bit.

No matter how they approach it, participants in Kenosha County's Summer Youth Employment Program gain more than a little spending money.

The program, now in its 14th season, offers at-risk youth a productive way to spend time during the summer while teaching valuable work and life skills for the future.

"These youth are taking so much more than a paycheck from their experience with the program," said Kenosha County Executive Samantha Kerkman. "They're learning skills that will help them throughout their adult lives."

The Summer Youth Employment Program represents a successful public-private partnership between Kenosha County, the Kenosha Unified School District, the Boys & Girls Club of Kenosha, Community Impact Programs and the participating worksites, said Donna Rhodes, Kenosha County Gang Intervention Supervisor.

Rhodes said the goals of the program include:

- Improving employment skills and learning appropriate work conduct.
- Developing strong work ethic and learning the value and pride of an honest day's work.
- Increasing knowledge of career interest.
- Decreasing gang involvement and juvenile crime in the community.

Participants, ages 14-21, are referred by social workers, counselors or other professionals knowledgeable about their risk levels. Once in the program, they work 20 hours per week for eight weeks, earning \$9 per hour. Kenosha Unified students also earn a half credit toward their high school graduation after completing the program and a related work-skills curriculum.

About 125 youth are participating in the program this summer, stationed at mentor worksites representing government and private, nonprofit agencies, as well as private businesses.

Kenosha County itself is a user of the program, putting youth to work in the county parks. Among other things, they are painting playground equipment and park shelters, weeding, mulching, and performing trail maintenance — tasks Parks Division staff do not have the time to perform amid their daily maintenance duties.

At Fox River Park, for example, a team of Summer Youth Employment participants restored a sand volleyball court that had become overgrown with grass and weeds.

Sam Nachtigal, an incoming freshman at Harborside Academy and one of the youth working on the team that revitalized the court, said making connections with new people is one of his favorite parts of working in the program.

“I’m going to get a job after this,” Nachtigal said. “I want to save up for a car.”

Amayah Houston, an incoming junior at Indian Trail High School, is spending her summer at an entirely different type of worksite, but her objective is similar to Nachtigal’s.

“I want to save for driver’s school, and for clothes for the new school year,” Houston said, of her plans for her summer earnings.

Houston is part of a team that worked on another annual beneficiary of the program: The Youth Employment in the Arts initiative, in which participants create a mural for public display in Kenosha County government facilities. They also paint smaller signage as a “thank you” to private businesses and other organizations that support the program.

“This program is just a wonderful example of public and private entities collaborating, all for the benefit of these youth and the community,” said Kenosha County’s Rhodes, who coordinates the Summer Youth Employment Program.

Rhodes also noted an important preventative benefit of the program: Summertime youth arrests have declined sharply during the years Summer Youth Employment has been operating — from 1,140 in 2008, to 117 in 2021.

At the current Wisconsin Department of Corrections daily rate of \$1,178 for a minimum nine-month stay in juvenile corrections, one youth deferred from that system saves Kenosha County over \$300,000.

“This program,” said Kerkman, “is a good investment in prevention and setting a positive path forward for many youth and families in our community.”

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