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Programs meet growing teen jobless needs

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The ailing economy has left many of the region and nation's youngest workers with little to do over the summer.

The unemployment rate nationally for teens 16-19 in June was 29 percent, roughly the same as Ohio and Kentucky, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's twice the rate from June 2000.

Yet some summer youth jobs programs have found new ways to keep teens productive and have evolved to include long-term career training and emphasis on education.

One of Greater Cincinnati's largest, Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency's Summer Youth Employment Program, expanded from 375 slots in 2009 to 990 this year. Applications increased from about 1,200 last year to 2,500 in 2010.

"This economy is denying our youth of opportunities that can have a tremendously positive impact on their lives," said Gwen Robinson, Community Action Agency president and chief executive.

The Hamilton County program has partnerships with employers and Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, which provides up to 90 minutes of career readiness training a week - even if youth have jobs cutting grass in parks or emptying waste baskets.

All participants are learning to write resumes and experience mock job interviews.

In Northern Kentucky, efforts to help young people work are folded into those that assist workers of all ages.

The Northern Kentucky Area Development District - whose eight-county service area includes Boone, Campbell and Kenton - uses federal welfare money to pay the low-wage salaries of workers with 56 employers. Money from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANF) goes to eligible workers to do clerical, building maintenance, lawn care and child care jobs.

"What we're finding with youth is they are competing with displaced adult workers whose unemployment benefits have run out and who now are more willing to take lower-level jobs," said Barbara Stewart, director of the Northern Kentucky Workforce Investment Area, a regional planning agency which oversees the jobs program.

The jobs once territory for the young, including those in fast food and retail, are now held by older workers.

"A silver lining might be that folks are choosing to go back to school," Stewart said. "A challenge is to get them to think long-term, beyond today or next Tuesday and think of more than basic employment."

The Northern Kentucky program is helping people finish high school educations by completing their GED and offering financial incentives through the federal Workforce Investment Act to help low-income people pursue higher education at Gateway Community and Technical College.

Employers in Hamilton County also receive free work, too, because the Community Action Agency

pays workers' salaries.

One of three grants used for the Cincinnati-Hamilton County program, almost \$1.3 million, is TANF money, too. It pays for jobs for 500 youth ages 16-24 for jobs from July 5 through Aug. 20 at a rate of \$9 an hour for 24 hours a week.

The other sources of money for jobs in Greater Cincinnati are:

-The City of Cincinnati, \$574,000 for 365 youth ages 14-18, for 15 hours a week at \$7.30 an hour for jobs from June 14 through Aug. 6.

-American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, \$304,800 for 125 jobs for young people ages 14-18.

"It's important that we invest in these youth," said Shawn Kerley, Community Action Agency director of youth services.

In addition to getting professional job experience, he said, "jobs are safe havens. We are keeping them off the streets. They are assets to their communities instead of being liabilities."

Of the 990 Hamilton County/Cincinnati program participants, 25 are paid \$7.30 an hour for 15 hours a week to participate in the financial training program at Cincinnati State.

In addition to learning business skills - including the creation, production, marketing and selling of products ranging from T-shirts to calendars - these high school honor students receive tailored help in math and writing.

The eight-week program completed its fifth week Friday.

Stacie Prewitt, 17, of Kennedy Heights, a Withrow International High School senior; and Logan Crosby, 16, a Withrow junior from Madisonville, are two of 25 going to Cincinnati State.

"It feels like a job," Prewitt said. "We were here 40 hours a week for the first four weeks."

The experience has helped her realize that college could be a reality. She wants to attend Shawnee State in Portsmouth, major in business and eventually start her own company.

Crosby would like to go into design and has interest in math and science, especially astronomy.

He filled out a half-dozen job applications to no avail.

"I'd be sitting at home, hanging out with friends," Crosby said. "Now I have a summer job and am getting an education at the same time."
