

Program gives students a career head start

By **CAITLIN M. DINEEN**, Chronicle Staff Writer

WILLIMANTIC — Instead of spending the summer gearing up for the next school year at Windham High School, José Alvarado and Stephanie Antonetty spent six weeks at Windham Community Memorial Hospital.

They're OK, though. They were there to work.

Working through the Summer Youth Employment Program, a collaborative effort sponsored by EastConn and the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, they learned interview techniques, work habits and work place etiquette that should make them more employable once they finish high school.

For Alvarado, this was more than just a summer job. It was a means to develop a career, something many local high school students can have difficulty doing.

"It opens more doors, I know more people and I have developed references," Alvarado said.

Since the beginning of July, 90 students from Windham High School and Windham Technical High School immersed themselves into the arts, clerical, business, human services, health, marketing or construction fields to learn more about the types of jobs offered in the state.

Participants in the program are between the ages of 14-21 and complete 125 hours of fieldwork. To be eligible for the program, participants must be identified as low-income individuals and be part of the free or reduced-price lunch program.

Students in the program earn regular paychecks for the hours they work and were responsible for maintaining contact with site supervisors throughout the summer.

They also received high school credit for successful participation in the program.

Through the program, and their decision to work in health care, Alvarado and Antonetty were placed to work at Windham Hospital.

Students involved in the healthcare program can also work at Day Kimball Hospital in Putnam, The William W. Backus Hospital in Norwich or Lawrence & Memorial Hospital in New London.

According to program organizers, students learn interviewing techniques and get training that puts them ahead of their peers for future employment and career opportunities.

"More students should be involved in the program," said Antonetty.

According to Antonetty, who interned in the family centered care department, the experiences she's gained during the summer have prepared her for a future in health care.

According to EastConn youth coordinator Cyndi Wells, the summer program provided participants with core employability skills and enhanced learning.

EWIB Director of Strategic Planning Virginia Sampietro said the program is an excellent way for high school students to gain real world experience before they need to decide a career path.

Sampietro said the board is invested in the program because it allows participants to see what careers are available in the state.

She said the board hopes to encourage participants to stay in the state to ensure Connecticut has a constant pool of future employees.

"(Hospitals are wondering) where their next worker is going to come from," she said.

According to Sampietro, the program has been able to offer internships with hospitals in the past, but this is the first year many eastern Connecticut hospitals have been unified in the program.

Under the program, EastConn staff supervisors act as a liaison between participants and supervising site staff to ensure a quality work experience for both parties involved.

While the program historically has been supported through federal and state funding, this year the \$500,000 price tag was completely funded from the state.

The program is not offered to only residents of Windham/Willimantic. Approximately 350 participants from all areas of the eastern portion of the state are enrolled.

Wells said she has seen students grow and learn during the program.

"I see the gratitude in their faces," she said, adding that for some participants this is the first real job experience they have.

Wells said the program is beneficial because it gives students the chance to get their foot in the door to a career while learning networking skills.

Participants who successfully complete the program earn high school credit and may be offered job shadow opportunities outside of the summer program from their respective work sites.

For more information about the Summer Youth Employment Program, contact the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board at (860) 859-4100.

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ABOVE: Jose Alvarado, center, works at the pain management unit in the Hatch Building at Windham Community Memorial Hospital as part of the Summer Youth Employment Program. Here he accompanies patient Katherine Kasacek of Willington from the waiting room to receive care from nurse Marge Farrell, who takes the paperwork. **BELOW:** Mary Horan, right, Windham Hospital's director of family centered care, looks over the finished 'Family Book' that Stephanie Antonetty has completed as part of the summer program.

