



Program Invests \$500,000 To Give Youths Summer Jobs

State funds pay wages to help region develop its emerging workforce

By [Patricia Daddona](#)

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As he harvested green beans in a FRESH Farm field at the Waterford Country School, Tylon Flowers, 14, of New London said he liked cleaning and bunching the vegetables.

But Reynaldo Sierra, 14, of New London, who was working beside him, piped up, "The best part is getting paid."

The Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board has made it possible this summer for nearly 350 young people to earn the minimum wage of \$7.65 at a wide range of jobs throughout the region.

Fourteen of those youth, including Flowers and Sierra, worked for eight weeks at the farm through the nonprofit FRESH New London, whose mission is to transform the local food system and in doing so, empower the consumer to eat healthier.

"I love the satisfaction of getting them employed, knowing they're gaining the necessary skills to be competitive and especially in a program like this, they're really gaining the knowledge to do the job," said Joelle Garrett.

Garrett is an outreach coordinator who works for New London Youth Affairs, which helped run the program for those 14 youth.

Diverse projects

Other projects and job categories include internships at area hospitals and some administrative jobs in public school systems, libraries, utilities, and parks, said John Beauregard, the ECWIB's executive director.

Based in Franklin, the workforce investment board is a not-for-profit organization that oversees public investments in employment and training strategies throughout a 41-town area and oversees CTWorks-East Centers in Danielson, New London, Norwich, and Willimantic.

The ECWIB here, like its counterparts throughout Connecticut, is responsible through the federal Workforce Investment Act for coordinating and overseeing education and job training efforts.

Eastern Connecticut is the largest geographic area in the state and this summer got \$500,000 from the state of Connecticut to put toward wages for the youth work program, according to John Beauregard, who heads the local workforce board. Statewide, \$5 million has been spent on jobs for about 3,000 youth, he said.

(Federal funding dried up eight years ago, Beauregard said.)

The teen program, which covers summer and year-round employment, started in 2006, Beauregard said.

"About 94 or 95 percent of the investment goes to wages for the kids and money back into the economy," he said.

L&M success story

At Lawrence & Memorial Hospital in New London, a "Health Pipeline" program has been such a success that in the past two years, the hospital hired two students to permanent positions - one as a patient transport worker and another in human resources, said Michelle Landry, career development programs manager.

"It's like test-driving," Landry said. "They get to see what the hospital's like and we get to see what kind of workers they are. The kids have a really good sense of belonging and it's good for our morale."

This summer, 10 youth participated in the L&M internships, which included 40 hours of online coursework that brought in "the kids who had sincere and deep interest in health care."

Besides L&M, which is in its third year doing the program, the William H. Backus, Day Kimball, and Windham Community hospitals participated this year for the first time, Landry said.

"In this climate, it's a huge issue because of the aging population, and it's one of the areas where there's huge, steady job growth, so all of the hospitals in the region came on board and are really focused on this," she said.

At some jobs, including those at hospitals, Beauregard said, technology is integrated into the workload, and that can foster retention of workers in the state.

"We're trying to shine a light on that issue with area employers," he said. "It's all a part of matching (youth) to jobs that will keep them here" in Connecticut.

Attending college

Back at FRESH Farm, Robert Maldon said he and his co-workers worked 25 hours a week this summer harvesting carrots, celery, lettuce, collard greens, tomatoes, peppers, onions, garlic, watermelon, and zucchini.

They also help market the produce and serve it to the community.

Maldon, 19, of New London, will be attending Monroe College in New Rochelle, N.Y., this fall to pursue a degree in culinary arts. Sierra is planning to return next summer.

"I learned a lot of stuff I never knew about, what are fruits and what are vegetables, how to run a tiller and how to harvest things when they're ready and when they're not," Sierra said.

The work teenagers do may not follow a direct career path, Beauregard said, but leads them "across industries" as they work their way up, introducing them to new skills and promoting lifelong learning.

"Every now and then there might be something tough - like working through a hot day, it was exhausting - but at the end of the day it was worth it," Maldon said.



By [Sean D. Elliot](#)

Arthur Lerner, left, director of the New London nutrition program FRESH, and Reynaldo Sierra, 14, a student in the Youth Workforce Investment Program, harvest green beans in the FRESH Community Garden at Waterford Country School.