

Summer jobs program teaches teens as they work

Government, unions, banks team up on effort



John Shishmanian/ NorwichBulletin.com

Britton Wilson, 17, of Norwich, right, and Jake Pinard, 16, of Colchester, who work under an Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board summer jobs program, clean the seating area at Dodd Stadium in Norwich.

By JAMES MOSHER ~ Posted Jul 25, 2010

Towns, unions and banks have banded together to fight several job problems, including high youth unemployment and lack of skills in math and science.

The Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board's summer jobs program, which employs 600 youngsters throughout the 41-town region, has grown to include a science, technology, engineering and math track. A union mentoring program also has been expanded.

"Given the times we're in, we see the program has been especially beneficial," said Mel Olsson, a member of the Southeastern Connecticut Labor Council AFL-CIO and the Franklin-based workforce board.

Future union members

Besides cutting into the teenage unemployment rate reported at 25 percent nationally, the unions see it as a way to recruit future members. Older programs at Electric Boat Corp. and Groton Utilities involving steelworkers and marine draftsmen's unions resulted in interns becoming full-fledged members once they reached adulthood.

The unions understand "the importance (of) reaching out to the next generation of skilled workers and introducing them to good jobs in their own communities," said Gail Kinney, who works for the Rocky Hill-based John J. Driscoll United Labor Agency.

Having a job during a slack economy is the most important thing to most youngsters. Getting additional skills comes in a close second for those participating in the five-week program.

"I'm learning new things every day," Jennifer Neff, 16, of Killingly, said while checking a streets catalog in the town's engineering department. Neff is one of four interns in the engineering office this summer.

Neff's internship eventually may lead to her becoming an engineer, she said. Numbers of female engineers have been increasing in recent years, although the profession remains majority male.

"If she keeps doing good work, she might end up where I am some day," said Dave Capacchione, Killingly's assistant town engineer.

Neff's brother, Michael, 18, and Tyler Hartford, 16, are helping town employees Gary Martin and Tracy Bragg with land surveying in Killingly Industrial Park. The heat wave hasn't burned away the youngsters' enthusiasm for the work.

"You're not in a classroom," Michael Neff said while holding a tape measure. "You're outside."

Dealing with people

Interns are also learning the importance of customer service. The importance of such "soft skills" become magnified in a difficult economy, said John Beauregard, the workforce board's executive director.

The eagerness of the interns is helping a new business such as the Connecticut Tigers baseball team "make a statement," Vice President of Operations C.J. Knudsen said. Seven youngsters, including Jake Pinard, 16, of Colchester, and Britton

Wilson, 17, of Norwich, have thoroughly worked Dodd Stadium, beautifying the grounds and cleaning bathrooms and skyboxes.

"It's been an awesome experience for us," said Amanda Donais, 16, of Lisbon.

The interns also are learning about workplace competition. Working the Norwich stadium's inflatables stand, where balloons are sold, is the most sought-after assignment, promoting friendly rivalry.

"A little competition isn't bad," Pinard said with a grin.

A slack economy means dollars are tough to come by in the public as well as the private sector. The workforce board got \$1.4 million in federal stimulus money to pay for most of this summer's program. Local bank foundations contributed, with People's United Community Foundation chipping in \$17,500, Liberty Bank Foundation \$5,000 and Charter Oak Federal Credit Union \$3,500. Beauregard said he is "very concerned" about future funding.

"The time-limited nature of this stimulus source means a new federal resource must be identified," he wrote in an e-mail. "The importance of providing young people with work experience is a key factor in shaping the work-force supply to fuel our future economy."

Union leaders say they want to do their part to keep the program going. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees has partnered this year with the Killingly Engineering Department as well as for four interns at Eastern Connecticut State University. AFSCME and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 493 have teamed with the Town of Montville for two interns working for the building inspector and Water Pollution Control Authority.

"We're proud to be mentoring them," Olsson said. "This may turn on a light for them in choosing a career."

There's plenty of work for the youngsters, Capacchione said while driving around inspecting construction sites.

"We're extremely busy," he said. "We're certainly glad to have them around."

Copyright 2010 Norwich Bulletin. Some rights reserved