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Eastern CT youth find purpose and opportunity in CT Youth Employment Program



Courtesy

Youth workers Madison L. (left) and Keyanna M. (right) at Covenant Soup Kitchen food pantry in Willimantic.

REGION — This summer, 634 eligible young adults across Eastern Connecticut embarked on a transformative and educational journey as part of the CT Youth Employment and Training Program.

The CT Youth Employment and Training Program is a program of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board (EWIB) and is funded through various federal, state, town and private sources. EASTCONN, in partnership with New London Youth Affairs and Norwich Human Services, conducts this program in the 44 towns of Eastern Connecticut.

"EWIB is proud to partner with funders and youth service agencies who deliver the CYEP, which this summer provided over 634 youth with work experience, a paycheck, and the work-readiness skills employers want," said Michael Nogelo, President/CEO of the Eastern Workforce Investment Board (EWIB).

Participants aged 14-24 earn minimum wage for approximately 95 hours of work while also receiving training in essential workplace skills, career planning guidance, and exposure to in-demand industries like manufacturing, healthcare, information technology, and environmental sciences.

"It's so important for the youth because they're the future, and they have to find their passions, their career pathways," said Kelsie Rivera, EASTCONN program facilitator. "What better way to do that than by getting paid to try different things and help others?"

More than 135 worksites were developed across eastern Connecticut.

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Participating businesses ranged from cultural institutions like the Lyman Allyn Museum and Mystic Seaport to social service organizations such as FRESH New London and local municipal offices across the region.

This diverse range of worksites highlights the program's extensive reach and impact. "The substantial collaboration between the Connecticut Youth Employment Program and institutions such as Mystic Seaport Museum, The Garde Arts Center, and NSA Supermarket benefits our communities by bridging present and future employment in young people's lives," said Cindy Alvarez, Teen Development and Employment Program Coordinator at New London Youth Affairs.

Participants also attended workshops on topics including financial literacy, labor market information, youth labor laws, career decision-making, equity, mental health and wellness, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, time management, entrepreneurial education, and driver's education preparation.

This comprehensive approach, Rivera said, leads to increased confidence and a sense of purpose. "I see hopefulness," she said. "I see growth. I see responsibility. I see them evolve from where they start, becoming more vocal, advocating for themselves… Youth needs to be successful at something. I find that so rewarding, and it just changes me."

EASTCONN continues to offer support throughout the calendar year, but on a smaller scale.

"We do have a number of youths in our programs during the year – around 40 – and they might come in different increments," Rivera said. "But it's so good, because a lot of these kids: their parents might not have the tools to guide them to things like this or help them get jobs."

For many young workers in the Willimantic area, the CT Youth Employment and Training Program offered a first glimpse into the world of employment and an opportunity to make a difference in their communities.

Isaac B., 15, from Mansfield, spent the summer working at Covenant Soup Kitchen in Willimantic. The experience, he said, changed the way he looked at unhoused and itinerant individuals and families. "My perception was a very negative one when I first got here," he said, "but I've met some very interesting people this summer."

A shift in perspective was a common theme among the youth workers. "It's been good, I've seen different things," said Daelen C., 15, who worked at the Access Community Agency food pantry in Willimantic. "A lot of people don't have the resources that we have, so it's very sad. But I'm glad to help out people who don't have a lot of stuff… It's good to work with people who are unfortunate and don't have a lot of resources. It's a different outlook on things."

"It feels great, helping the community out, making sure that they have great food as opposed to bad food, giving them seconds if they want them," said Gustavo V., 18, from Willimantic, who worked at Covenant Soup Kitchen. "I've gotten to know some of the people in the community. It feels really great."

Madison L., a 15-year-old from Windham, said she made valuable friendships working at the Covenant Soup Kitchen in Willimantic – including "new best friend" Keyana M., 17, who replied: "[Madison is] probably the person I trust the most."

The program also addresses a critical demand for labor in local communities.

Maria Rodriguez, Food Pantry Supervisor at Access Community Action Agency, said her nonprofit organization is nearly always understaffed. "On Mondays and Tuesdays we get shipments of supplies in Willimantic and Danielson from Connecticut Foodshare," she said. "If I didn't have these [youth workers], I couldn't make it happen."

Beyond the immediate impact on participants and communities, the CT Youth Employment and Training Program strives to address broader challenges facing youth in eastern Connecticut.

A recent report by Dalio Education and the Boston Consulting Group titled "Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis" highlighted alarming rates of youth disconnection in the region, with some towns seeing 30-40% of young people neither working nor in school.

The Youth Employment and Training Program serves as one crucial intervention in this landscape. "These kids are really excited about building essential life skills," said EASTCONN program facilitator Kevin Segar. "If you see the interaction with the adults, they're really building a rapport with other people, and they're really enjoying it. I think having this kind of job makes them feel important."

As eastern Connecticut grapples with the challenges of youth disconnection and workforce development, the CT Youth Employment and Training Program offers a beacon of hope. By providing meaningful work experiences, skill development, and community engagement opportunities, the initiative is helping to shape the region's future workforce while addressing immediate community needs.

For the young people who participated this summer, the program has been more than just a job – it's been a stepping stone towards a brighter future.

"I learned more about communicating with people and helping people more," 15-year-old Gennadi F. "It feels exciting. I feel happy when I help people and I see that people are happy. I think it's really going to help me in my future."

To learn more about the CT Youth Employment and Training Program, please visit www.eastconn.org/youth-employment.