The Day

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Local money saves part of youth summer jobs program despite lack of budget

200, or half the usual number of young people, able to work

By ERICA MOSER
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The lack of a state budget has kept $500,000 in state funding from making its way to eastern Connecticut for the region's Summer Youth Employment Program. But that hasn't stopped the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board from making the program happen anyway, albeit in a scaled-back form.

In an effort spearheaded by EWIB, the sponsor of the program, several organizations collectively contributed $375,334 to keep it going this year. This enabled about 200 youths to work this summer, half the usual number.

"There's a lot of buy-in, a lot of good feelings about the summer youth program," said Mark Hill, chief operating officer for EWIB. "You're talking about kids that are at-risk, that need skills and experience in the workplace."

According to a news release from EWIB, the contributing organizations were the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut Foundation, Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, Liberty Bank Foundation, Mystic Aquarium, New London Public Schools, Windham Regional Community Council and People's United Community Foundation, along with federal funds.

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TONY SHERIDAN, PRESIDENT, CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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People's United Community Foundation Executive Director Karen Galbo said in the release that the Foundation "is proud to step up as a partner to ensure low-income youth in Eastern CT have the opportunity to participate in their first paid job opportunity. Providing youth with work experience is essential to helping them develop employability skills for future success."

Youths aged 14-21 are placed at various public and private organizations — often doing work in customer service, maintenance and medical records management — in EWIB's 41-town region.

One place is Mystic Aquarium, which has been involved in the program for four years, said the aquarium's senior director of human resources, Kateri Wheeler. This year, the program has eight youths, and each will be working 20 to 24 hours a week for eight weeks.

One downside to the state budget situation is the program started later this year than usual. Mystic Aquarium likes to start youths on weekends in May, Wheeler said, but they didn't start until the end of June this year.

"They're more confident when they're able to start earlier, as opposed to starting in the peak of season, because we are a tourist area," she said.

The 16- to 18-year-olds employed at the aquarium typically work in guest services; after their interviews, they're placed based on their skills.

"The youth bring a different point of view," Wheeler said. "They're young, they're starting out on their careers, [and] it's been nice watching them learn about different careers within the organization and seeing their passion."

Tony Sheridan, president of the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut, noted that one struggle is the youths are often employed with local municipalities, which are in distress this year.

"This whole budget business is a real tragedy, because young people need experiences, and certainly the parents want them to be busy in the summer," he said.

EWIB President John Beauregard noted that young people in the region will never get the opportunity back to begin building their resume, and he feels that EWIB's community partners recognized this with their generosity.

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