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DANA JENSEN/THE DAY

Teens from New London listen Wednesday during an orientation for the summer youth employment and training program hosted by New London Youth Affairs at the New London Elks Lodge.

NL summer youth job program starts

By LEE HOWARD
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New London — Nearly 100 young people from the city who converged Wednesday on the New London Lodge of Elks for a summer youth employment orientation were urged to work hard and make an impression.

"This is your opportunity, this is when you get your references," said Mayor Michael Passero. "This is when you are going to make your first impression."

"You guys are the best of the best," added Recreation Director Tommie Major. "Take this as a gift. There's a lot of people in this world who don't have a job."

The Eastern Connecticut Summer Youth Employment Program, implemented in the city by the New London Office of Youth Affairs and administered regionally by the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, is funded by state and federal grants, the Department of Children & Family as well as foundations and philanthropic groups. About 270

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young people applied this year in New London, with only 104 earning slots.

Students are paid by the program during their employment, while employers get free help. Connecticut College, B.P. Learned Mission, Lyman Allyn Museum, New London Senior Center, Mi Casa, Drop-In Learning Center and Higher Edge were some of the organizations represented.

Youths between 14 and 21 are given support if necessary, such as transportation, work clothing and job counseling. New London youths will be working at about three dozen work sites in the city and surrounding towns, including schools, restaurants, supermarkets and a child care center.

"The program allows employers to become familiar with and benefit from trained youth to consider as potential future hires," Ellen Kleckner, coordinator of youth services, said in an email. "It also is an opportunity to improve marketable skills, initiate job contacts, connect with career related role models and identify resources for future employment."

Olivia Santana, 17; Imani Davis, 15; Goodness Adekoya, 18, and James Miller, 16, were some of the young people attending the orientation. They listened intently as speakers congratulated them, then milled about during "human bingo," an exercise in which they were asked to introduce themselves to people they didn't know and ask them questions.

Older youths like her, said Adekoya, who will be heading to Providence College in a few weeks, are given more responsibility. And she appeared happy with her job of being a counselor for 10- to 17-year-olds in a summer camp sponsored by Writers Ink.

But Davis, with a job at New London Public Library, said she would have preferred other work.

"I wanted Mystic Aquarium, but you have to be 16," she said. Santana smiled and said she would have liked work near a pool. Miller, meanwhile, said his job at the Fields of Greens farmers market is his third straight year at the site. He also has jobs at BJ's Wholesale and ShopRite.

"They always ask for me back," he said. "I like doing it."

State Rep. Ernie Hewett, D-New London, said he remembered his first job bagging groceries and one of his biggest mistakes — packing eggs in the bottom of a bag.

"I'm glad to see so many people here today — beautiful," he said.

City Councilor Anthony Nolan, whose first job was at Wendy's, urged youths to stay strong and make money.

"No matter what kind of job you get ... work hard and do your best," said Nolan, a city police officer. "Don't let anything take you out of focus."

About 400 youths from throughout eastern Connecticut are working at 120 sites in the region through the summer work program that covers all of New London and Windham counties and part of Tolland County. Wednesday was the first official day of work for the New London youths, who were given instruction about proper workplace behavior, dress and other basics before heading to their job sites Thursday.

"For a lot of them, it's their first job," said Cindy Alvarez, program coordinator.