

Youth Employment Program a two-way street of benefits

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This year the prospect of summer jobs for youth got a much-needed boost from the Obama administration's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. In an effort to provide employment with the added benefit of training in both work force and life skills, \$2.5 million was earmarked specifically for salaries.

Throughout Contra Costa County, 200 youth are forming partnerships to ease their transition into the work force.

At Delta Diablo Sanitation District 15 students, including Allan Sanchez, Lisabet Ortega and Moses Brown, are demonstrating how this stimulus funding and community commitment has, in fact, created a win-win situation for employees and employers alike.

The summer youth employment program was open to county residents between the ages of 14 and 24. Administered by the Workforce Development Board of Contra Costa County, each youth is paid \$8.25 per hour for up to 200 hours of work. Before placement, the youths attended workshops in basic job preparation where they learned skills, including creating a resume, interview skills, proper business attire and conduct, employer expectations, money management skills and training.

When training was complete, they went through job interviews and were placed in positions based on interests and aptitude. According to Beth Hoering, spokeswoman for the Workforce Development Board, youth have been employed by a diverse mixture of industries such as construction, green businesses, health care, community outreach, local government, private businesses and county departments spread throughout the county. While employed the young workers also undergo mentoring from a variety of sources, including counselors from the Workforce Development Board.

Delta Diablo Sanitation District was notified about the stimulus funds.

"They wondered if we could provide employment," said Steven Dominguez, plant manager. "I told them absolutely, we could take 12 to 15."

Those 15 youth went through a rigorous application process. More than 40 applicants met with Dominguez and Cheryl Rhodes Alexander, Human Resources manager.

"Steve and I conducted a very intensive, round-robin, four-hour interview," Alexander said. "We had a standard set of interview questions that we administer to any applicant."

Dominguez and Alexander clearly identified the 15 students.

"We were looking first and foremost for someone who understood the importance of being responsible, accountable and wanting to do a good job, willing to get in there and learn as much as they could about what it is that we do," Alexander said.

Hard skills were considered, but attitude was a defining consideration.

"Those who had the right attitude, we were willing to take and teach," Dominguez added.

The young workers are now treated as regular employees, working in a number of departments, from administration, human resources and IT to operations, maintenance and warehouse.

About halfway through the program, Allan Sanchez, Lisabet Ortega and Moses Brown have already gained from their experiences.

Sanchez, 19, resides in Oakley and is a student at Los Medanos College studying computer science. He's working with Delta Diablo's IT team, putting into practice the computer skills he's learned in school and hoping to learn more. "I've studied certain things but I've never actually worked on computer servers, managed a network or seen how things work day-in and day-out," Sanchez said.

He also recognizes the importance of people skills. "You can have the technical knowledge but if you can't grasp how to communicate or get along with people — that's something you need," Sanchez said.

Ortega, 20, of Antioch wanted to expand her skills on a professional level and working as an administrative assistant has increased her self-confidence.

"Now I can talk to a person that is already in the professional environment. I've learned a lot by being here and the people you work with are really nice," Ortega said.

A first-generation American and the mother of two children, she hopes to continue her education toward becoming a registered nurse, while working toward increased administrative skills.

Brown has faced many challenges in his 20 years, including proving wrong those whose expectations of him are negative. A full-time student at Los Medanos College and working in the operations department, Brown is gaining both valuable work and life lessons, enough to make him confident about the possibilities ahead.

"I came here because I needed work experience, but I'm also learning life skills. Punctuality is probably the most important thing I've learned because you cannot maintain a job being late," Brown said. "I wasn't sure what to expect, but it's a good working environment. No one judged me, everyone just wanted me to do good."

Delta Diablo takes this contribution seriously and recognizes what they've gained from the Summer Youth Employment Program.

"Our staff is having an enriching summer being mentors to these young people. We see it as a two-way street," said Angela Lowrey, public information manager. "We want the public to know that these students want to make transitions in their lives. A lot of them have not had a lot of opportunities to date but they still believe that there are opportunities for them."