

Summer jobs program for youth proves to reduce crime

Public Safety Award

City of Newport News

DESPITE TARGETED EFFORTS to reduce youth and gang violence, the City of Newport News found that the number of young people involved in gangs or illegal activity was on the rise in 2014. A new approach was needed.



A STEP participant gains on-the-job training while working for Newport News Parks.

The Council responded by dedicating more than \$1 million to fund a Youth and Gang Violence Prevention Initiative, which includes the Summer Training and Enrichment Program (STEP). The goal of STEP is to improve kids' chances for a brighter future by providing them with employment during the summer – a time when youth traditionally find themselves at loose ends and at a greater risk of getting into trouble.

The program is targeted at youth ages 16 to 24 who have been involved in the criminal justice system or may be at risk. Many of them lack relevant work experience and find it hard to find employers who will hire them.

The voluntary 10-week program began in 2015 and provides participating youth with 30 hours per week of work or training at \$7.25 or \$8.00 an hour. All wages are covered by STEP and there are no direct costs to employers.

The city collaborated with the Peninsula Chamber of Commerce to recruit worksites for STEP participants. A total of 64 private sector businesses, city departments and non-profits have partnered with the city to provide work training opportunities. Businesses benefit by having a pool of applicants to fill needed vacancies without the expenses of traditional recruitment and training.

In 2015 – the program's first year – the number of participants was 163. That number nearly doubled this past summer to 316. Actual direct payments in excess of over \$736,000 were distributed to participants during a two-year period.

In FY16, participants averaged 22 hours a week at their work sites or \$170 per week. The money was the first "real" paycheck for many, and STEP assisted the participants with opening bank accounts. Participants reported that paychecks were used to support their family (19%), help offset educational costs (17%), pay for transportation (12%), and save for the future (12%). At the end of the second year, 30 participants were offered a permanent job, with 81% of them maintaining employment 45 days after program completion.

STEP transforms lives by exposing participants to mentors, enrichment activities, GED preparation, and career planning, in addition to the meaningful work readiness training and on-site paid experiences. Participants in the program have an improved work ethic and gain valuable skills they can use for future employment.

STEP participants were also referred to needed supportive services. In 2014, there were 40 connections made for food; five participants received assistance with utilities at home; eight were provided baby supplies; and there were two placements made for housing assistance/sheltering. Fourteen young adults registered for Adult Continuing Education Services and GED classes after completing the program.

STEP is making a difference in public safety. During FY15-16, the city saw a 17% decrease in the number of juvenile offenses during the summer in a year-to-year comparison. In FY16, only one out of the 30 participants referred by Court Services Unit re-offended during the 10-week program.

Based on the success of STEP, the City Manager's office recommended that the operating budget for FY17 increase funding for the Youth and Gang Violence Prevention Initiative from \$1.1 million to \$1.5 million in order to serve 600 participants next summer and hire additional program staff. The City Council approved the recommended increase.



What the judges had to say

"Very bold to spend money on youth workforce development in the hopes of reducing crime."

"A proactive approach to dealing with the challenges that some of our young people face."