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MAKE A CONNECTION

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Money

E3: Stimulus money used to 'employ, enrich, engage' local youths

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RACINE COUNTY — Not all federal stimulus money is building highways, bridges and the like.

Here, a good chunk of it is building job skills in young people.

Here, about 220 teens and young adults proudly wear their T-shirts bearing the words: Employ. Enrich. Engage. These are the E3 program members who this week will finish an eight-week work/training program largely funded by stimulus money.

The allocation was designed to help young people ages 14-24 who live in poverty to become work-ready through training and work experience.

The 15 partner organizations had ambitions to create the biggest, best possible training program around the stimulus money.

“Within a week of the signing of the stimulus bill, we invited the partners in,” said Mark Gesner, Racine County Workforce Development Center youth team leader.

He said the local intent was to create meaningful jobs and training.

“We really got together and said, ‘How are we going to make this exceptional — not just make-work?’ ” Gesner said.

Also, “in Racine we wanted to make it as inclusive as possible, and we were able to include a pretty diverse mix of the whole county.”

To find work for the youths, 50 employers from the public, private and nonprofit sectors applied to offer jobs. The best 40 were picked.

More than 800 youths applied for jobs, and 250 were offered employment, Gesner said. Not all of them accepted, some took other jobs, some were let go and some quit.

But about 220 youths, or 88 percent, are still fully — and, by all indications, enthusiastically — involved. “That’s a very high ratio,” Gesner said.

Early on, organizers allowed the youths to rename the bureaucratic-sounding Racine County Youth Employment and Training Program.

They came up with Employ, Enrich, Engage — and E3 was born.

Green focus

The program developed many aspects. The Racine YMCA, for example, came on board to teach physical fitness, because healthy workers are better workers. Educators Credit Union taught financial literacy skills.

Early on, the partners decided on a green focus for the work experiences.

Gesner said: “It was a combination of looking at emerging job markets in our region, understanding what a growing focus that is throughout the country, and we thought the youth would find it engaging and exciting — which turned out to be true.”

Marcella Bates, 17, a member of the E3 Youth Council, exuded that excitement last week, talking about Friday’s upcoming E3 closing ceremony — which the youths devised.

“We wanted to make it something to remember,” said Bates, a Horlick High School student.

E3 members went to Racine’s Festival Hall to talk with management about using that venue. There, she said, “We saw that a lot of things needed to be done.”

So the youths struck a deal, trading their labor for a good price. From a \$2,500 quote for rent and food for 400 people, they knocked the cost down to “zero,” Bates said proudly. Then, last week about 30 E3 participants descended on the Festival Hall grounds to do a sweeping facelift — repainting ticket booths, replacing picnic table lumber, landscaping and so on.

Results

Samantha Bouwma, 22, said she learned something about her capabilities through E3. “I learned that I could be a leader and not just a follower,” she said.

“I just pretty much been having fun with this,” said Jon Myron, 20. “And with this on my résumé, I should have a better chance (to find work).”

After the eight weeks, some of the stimulus money will remain and be used for further training, Gesner said. But even for the eight-week E3 participants, he said they will leave with:

- n A résumé.

- n A nationally recognized work-readiness credential.

- n A workplace safety certificate.

- n Many opened their first bank

- account.

- n Some will get scholarship support from E3 partners.

- n Two performance reviews — one at the halfway point and another at the end.

- n An offer for a discount YMCA membership.

- n Goals.

Gesner said some of the site hosts are already offering them jobs.

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