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Poor economy makes for a tough summer job market for teenagers

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STAFF PHOTO BY TEESHA MCCLAM/DAYTON DAILY NEWS

Case manager Shelica Arnold helps teenagers complete forms for the Summer YouthWorks program at The Job Center on Wednesday, May 13.

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Lenique Johnson, 18, and other teenagers fill out forms for Summer YouthWorks program at The Job Center on Wednesday, May 13.

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Trenton Williams, 18, Kamarquist Lang, 17 and Sharrod Jones, 19, wait to meet with a case manager to start process of getting a part-time summer job through Summer YouthWorks program at The Job Center on Wednesday, May 13.

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Blaire Kennerly, 19, walks away with a smile after completing the interview with case manager Toni Poole for a summer job through Summer YouthWorks program at The Job Center on Wednesday, May 13. Summer YouthWorks program is for people in between the ages of 14 and 24, from a low-income family, live in Montgomery County, and go through the process of interviews and training to be able to work part time summer job.

Montgomery County program allows employers to offer students jobs where the businesses' only cost is for supervision.

By Doug Page
 Staff Writer

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You want to stimulate the economy? Hire a 17-year-old.

“Who spends money faster than a 17-year-old? Talk about economic stimulus,” said Rocky Rockhold, supervisor of special projects and youth activities at the Montgomery County Department of Job and Family Services.

“If we had enough jobs for all our kids, we’d have a tremendous local economy. (But) the jobs aren’t there. The companies that traditionally have hired kids for seasonal employment are hiring older workers now,” he said.

Miami Valley teens are not alone.

Teen summer employment has dropped like a stone. A study by the Center for Labor Market Study at Northeastern University found the summer employment rate of 16- to 19-year-olds fell from 48.4 percent in 1989 to 32.7 percent last summer.

Another center study found that from October 2007 through

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November 2008, employment of those 30 and younger dropped by more than 1.2 million jobs. During the same period, more than 1 million jobs were added, filled by workers 55 and older.

“An older person comes in, they get picked first,” said 19-year-old Blaire Kennerly, who was at the county Job Center looking for work through Rockhold’s Summer YouthWorks program.

One of the reasons may be experience.

“Employers are doing everything they can to get you productive quicker,” said Dale Frost, head of the apprenticeship program at the Miami Valley Career Technology Center in Englewood.

Experience is what YouthWorks hopes to foster.

“Kids need more interaction with adults and business,” said Al Sicard, a State Farm insurance agent in Dayton who has employed YouthWorks students for three years. “They are getting exposed to things that show what their education is for.”

“While it’s not what it used to be, for students with basic skills there are jobs out there,” said Frost.

The experienced ones

Catherine Hicks and Cody Garber are seniors in the CTC’s electrical trades program. Both worked summers throughout high school.

“My brother went through the same program, and he got me hired on at the same company he works for,” Garber said.

Hicks is one of eight children. She worked for two years doing lawn work for a member of her church before landing a summer job through the CTC with an electrical contractor.

“Most of my money goes into savings,” she said.

Both have scholarships to Sinclair Community College in construction management.

Gaining experience

For 12 years, Rockhold has led the Montgomery County’s Summer YouthWorks program that places 1,500 14- to 17-year-olds with private business, local governments and nonprofits.

With a budget of \$2 million from state and local sources, the program has taught kids work and academic skills — and put money in their pocket for the work they do.

Federal stimulus money has added an additional \$2.4 million to the program, which is expanded to include 18- to 24-year-olds for an additional 750 jobs.

Within three days of opening the program for the young adults, Rockhold had 864 applicants for the 750 positions. By Friday, May 15, Rockhold had found 550 jobs.

The only direct cost to the employer is the cost of a supervisor to work with the kids. The young workers’ wages and often transportation is covered by the county program.

“With the job cuts we’re seeing, some employers ... don’t have anyone to supervise the kids,” Rockhold said.

The payoff

The Trotwood-Madison school district is hiring seven of its nine-month employees to supervise 60 of the 14- to 17-year-olds YouthWorks kids for the summer. Most will be district students.

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“The real value for the district is monetary savings,” said John Smith, the district’s operations manager. “We also give our kids something to do in the summer that is constructive, something that teaches the value of hard work.”

Sicard agreed to employ a high school student three years ago at his State Farm insurance agency in Dayton.

“The no cost was appealing, but I wondered if a high school student could handle moving all the paper,” he said. “But (YouthWorks) tailored the student to the job.”

This year, Sicard’s agency will employ three students. The original student now wants to be an insurance agent. She’s been hired to speak to other State Farm agents on the value to their agencies of hiring high school students.

“She became an important part of my team,” Sicard said. “All communities should be doing this. ”