



COUNTY OF KENOSHA

OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE
Jim Kreuser, County Executive

1010 – 56th Street, Third Floor
Kenosha, Wisconsin 53140
(262) 653-2600
Fax: (262) 653-2817

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Contact: Jennie Tunkieicz
262-653-2831

Kenosha County's Summer Youth Employment Program marks 10 years of success

KENOSHA – Kenosha County's Summer Youth Employment program recently completed its 10th season, providing work experience and life lessons to 210 participants at 35 worksites.

Modeled off of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Comprehensive Gang Model, the program has proved successful in sharply reducing juvenile arrests locally, County Executive Jim Kreuser said.

"If you look at the numbers, there's no question," Kreuser said, noting that juvenile arrests in the City of Kenosha during the summer months dropped from 1,140 in 2008, to 293 in 2017. "We know that the Summer Youth Employment Program keeps at-risk teens off the streets, and gives them skills that will help them to succeed in the future."

The program's aim is to provide at-risk youths with job and life-skills training, while decreasing gang involvement and juvenile crime, said Donna Rhodes, gang intervention supervisor in the Kenosha County Division of Children and Family Services.

Youths age 14 to 21 are referred to the program by case managers, social workers, counselors, probation officers or teachers. They are assigned to a participating worksite, and are paid \$7.25 per hour for eight weeks.

"The Summer Youth Employment Program is a wonderful example of government, social service agencies and private and nonprofit employers coming together to help at-risk youth develop the necessary skills to be successful in the workforce," Rhodes said.

This year's worksites included Petrifying Springs Park, where workers assembled picnic tables, painted playground equipment and filled in trenches where new broadband Internet cables were buried, and Brookside Care Center, where youths made landscaping improvements and cleared invasive weeds from the grounds.

Participating private-sector employers included Dildot's Catering, Boucher Ford and Grace Petroleum.

At the Brookside site, Askaree Henderson, an incoming sophomore at Hillcrest School, said he was learning a lot on the job, and having a good time.

“It’s fun,” he said. “I like it a lot. I’m learning how to do things that I’ve never done before.”

Some of the youths had the opportunity to express their creativity, working on mural and mosaic projects for the Youth Employment in the Arts program. A mural, illustrating “things to do in Kenosha,” will be installed this fall at the Kenosha County Job Center, while a mosaic depicting a Kenosha harbor scene will be displayed at Herzing University.

Antoine Rollins, an incoming sophomore at Bradford High School, was among the mural painters.

“I like to show how creative I am,” Rollins said. “Before this, I was going to sit in the house and watch TV all summer.”

Rhodes noted that the youths in the program receive specific job training, as well as soft skills such as the importance of arriving to work on time, getting along with others and conflict resolution, appropriate communications in the workplace and how to accept direction.

In collaboration with the Kenosha Unified School District, high school-age participants receive a half of a credit toward graduation for completing a 12-hour class with a Unified teacher in addition to working 60 hours at their assigned worksite. The class curriculum includes practice with job applications and interviewing scenarios, budgeting and financial management, job search skills and goal planning.

Since 2009, the Summer Youth Employment Program has employed 2,040 at-risk youth who have worked more than 216,000 hours. Using the skills and experience attained, 292 participants gained unsubsidized employment after completing the program.

The program has also helped the county to further beautify and improve its parks – in 2016, it received the Silver Star Award from the Wisconsin Park and Recreation Association in recognition of the tremendous amount of work completed in Kenosha County Parks.

“The Summer Youth Employment Program creates opportunities, gets valuable work done, and helps make our community a safer place to live,” Kreuser said.

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