



Summer Youth Employment Program Profile Building career pathways for public housing residents and at-risk youth in Denver, Colorado

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The Youth Employment Academy (YEA) at the Denver Housing Authority (DHA) provides mentoring, education, employment, and training services to promote and develop the job readiness and career goals of low-income youth in the Denver community.

Background

Since 2007 YEA has offered career training and mentoring to local low-income and at-risk youth who are both residents and non-residents of Denver public housing. DHA originally implemented the program with blended funds from the state Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). At that time, YEA aligned services with WIA grant requirements, focusing on youth between 14 and 21 years old.

YEA offers case management services, relationship and communication classes, career exploration guidance, job readiness activities, and personal finance tutorials. In addition, YEA incorporates a series of academies into their programming to encourage the development of relevant skills for particular career pathways. One such program, the Culinary Academy, offers a general overview of the restaurant industry as well as hands-on instruction and training in culinary arts. On average, YEA hosts seven occupational academies per year, typically during the summer. Academies include a total of 48 classroom hours (which can be over a three to six week time period, depending on whether they are geared towards in-school or out-of-school youth), plus another 160 hours of hands-on work experience training, typically over an eight week period for specific academies. YEA staff develop the academy curricula, which, in addition to the culinary arts, focus on areas such as advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and customer service.

Throughout YEA's development, program staff have partnered with various organizations to develop mentoring programs catered not only to the youth living in Denver public housing, but also to local young adults not receiving housing assistance. In 2009, YEA received American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding and began focusing service delivery to Denver youth ages 16-21. During the summer of 2009, YEA served 300 youth through a series of tailored programs that focused on developing work experience and education. In 2013, YEA became a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization, primarily to create closer connections to private partners and funders.

Program Model

YEA services are available to all youth in the Denver community between the ages of 16 and 21 years old. Public housing residents receive enrollment priority, although a large percentage of YEA's caseload are youth eligible for services based on a lack of education, low basic skills, or residency in high crime



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neighborhoods. After acceptance into the program, youth and YEA staff meet for an initial intake assessment to discuss relevant job experience, career interests, and any criminal history that might impede future employment. Staff do not formally enroll youth participants in the program until they return to YEA for a second visit.

During this return visit, youth fill out a basic YEA application, provide personal identification, and, if needed to confirm eligibility, offer any proof of income. During the intake phase, staff also work with youth to complete a career goal plan, which includes enrollment in career exploration, job readiness training, and personal finance classes. Upon completion of these activities, youth are eligible for placement in an industry academy (if appropriate) and are then eligible to begin their 160-hour paid work experience in positions with local employers that match the youths' skill level and career interests. YEA participants must meet with their assigned case worker every 90 days, but often meet more frequently.

YEA uses a job developer to seek and maintain partnerships with local employers. The job developer engages with local establishments by approaching organizations in the community, and by capitalizing on connections with other DHA employees. If a YEA participant is interested in a field in which YEA does not have a relationship, the job developer will conduct cold calls to try to facilitate a partnership.

Program Challenges and Lessons Learned

As with most non-profits, YEA's most daunting challenge to date is maintaining a steady funding stream. To address the resource needs of their growing program and in response to decreases in available federal funding, YEA elected to become a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization in 2013. This status enabled YEA to pursue private as well as federal funding opportunities. Private funders include JP Morgan Chase and local manufacturing companies, among others.

Program Outcomes

YEA serves between 200-300 youth per year through their array of services, partnerships, and academies. Approximately 90 percent of youth enrolled in an academy graduate from the program, and over 75 percent of the participating youth earn a national occupational certification. YEA also estimates between a 70-80 percent placement rate for youth in either post-secondary training or college education.

Youth Success Story

Lovety is a refugee from Liberia, West Africa. Her family was separated during Liberia's civil war, and only a few of her family members were able to get to the United States. At age 18, Lovety lived with her mother, two brothers, a niece, and two nephews in Denver public housing and joined the Youth Employment Academy (YEA). Knowing very little English, Lovety received intensive tutoring assistance from YEA, graduated with her high school diploma, and began attending the Community College of Denver. Working full-time at a grocery store stocking shelves at night and going to college during the day, Lovety completed her associate's degree while caring for and supporting her





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disabled mother and younger family members. Lovety also completed the Pre-Professional Occupations in Healthcare program at YEA, finished nurse aide training and certification, and became a U.S. citizen! Because of her exposure to disease and death during her experiences in a refugee camp, Lovety is determined to become a nurse and help others. Lovety currently works as a certified nursing assistant at an assisted living facility and is applying to colleges to earn her Bachelor of Science in Nursing.