

# News

## School's Out, Now What? Youth Jobs at a Premium in Worcester

As seen in the Worcester Magazine

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June 25, 2015

<http://worcestermag.com/2015/06/25/schools-out-now-what-youth-jobs-at-a-premium-in-worcester/34635>



What are the kids supposed to do in the summer? It is a question that haunts parents everywhere; if they are not worrying about getting their own child a job, they are worried about other people's children and what mischief they will get into with their new-found free time after school lets out.

Like so many other things, the struggle to find employment is exacerbated for low-income youth, who often lose out without the advantages upper-class teenagers enjoy. For those youth struggling to find a job, there is subsidized employment – the state, or others, will chip in to create jobs for young people who would otherwise have nothing to do over the summer. The YouthWorks program will provide

350 jobs in Worcester this season, and although many residents have never heard of it, it is emblematic of the effort to get kids back in a jobs pipeline as the national economy recovers.

### SETTING THE TABLE

Massachusetts's teen unemployment rate in 2014 was 17.7 percent, according to the state Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. Even though that rate only takes into account teens who are looking for work, it is still more than triple the overall unemployment rate last year, which was around 5.3 percent.

Nancy Snyder is the president and CEO of Commonwealth Corporation, which helps the state administer the YouthWorks program and designs workforce development programs. She said the organization surveyed 200 employers and found the major reason for the discrepancy came down to experience.



"Employers did not see an issue with teen's hard skills," Snyder said when explaining why employers prefer adult applicants. "It was really an issue of work behaviors and job seeking skills."

Those who work with teen jobs in Worcester agreed the issue was not a lack of trying on the part of the youth population. Snyder pointed to the employment-to-population ratio, which was 54 percent for teens in 1999, meaning more than half of all teenagers were actively working at that time. That number fell to 31 percent last year, compared to 62 percent for the total population. Part of the gap can be explained by teen participation in sports, extracurricular activities or family vacations during the summer months.

Ellen Ganley of the Worcester Community Action Council (WCAC), which runs the YouthWorks program on a day-to-day basis in Worcester, said the organization has received around 2,000 applications for 350 youth job slots, meaning fewer than 20 percent of applicants will end up with a subsidized job.

The squeeze for youth jobs is not limited to the WCAC. Grace Sliwoski is program manager with the YouthGROW program for the Regional Environmental Council in Worcester, which receives some YouthWorks funding. This year 255 youth applied for 15 open positions at the urban farming program. Since YouthWorks and other subsidized jobs programs target low-income youth or teenagers with barriers to entering the workforce, Worcester has a larger presence of opportunities than other communities.

“YouthWorks is funded with a formula to distribute funds to target cities and towns with a high number of at-risk youth,” Central Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board Executive Director Jeff Turgeon said. “Because of that, we’re basically mandated to fund 90 percent of the allocated jobs in Worcester.”

He said there were other openings in Webster and Southbridge.

Of course, subsidized jobs are not free, and budget cuts have knocked YouthWorks down a peg. Turgeon said there are about 70 fewer positions available for youth this summer because of budget cuts at the state level and the recent raising of the minimum wage to \$9 per hour without a corresponding increase in funding.

## BENEFITS FOR YOUTH

Turgeon, expressing a sentiment echoed by many in the youth jobs scene, said it was important for subsidized jobs programs to target low-income youth because they lack the network more affluent kids may have to get summer jobs.

“Youth hiring in general is still very low compared to what it used to be,” Turgeon said. “Even though it’s bounced back a little, the hardest hit are low-income and minority youth. What it relates to, in general, the higher up you go in the income scale the stronger network that family has. And that stronger network helps connect youth with summer job opportunities. There’s a very strong correlation between family network and income and the ability of young people to find work.”

Family connections will not help anyone get a job at YouthGROW or Youth Growing Organics in Worcester.

“We’re a consensus-based program, so we really rely on youth input for the direction we go,” Sliwoski said.



That includes the hiring process – six youth in leadership positions actually conduct all the interviews with potential candidates looking to work at one of two urban farms in Main South and Bell Hill. Sliwoski said there are 34 slots open this year, funded from a number of different sources.

“We patched together a bunch of different programs, but YouthWorks is the core,” Sliwoski said. “That’s what we started with, that’s what enabled us to formalize our program and have the structure and build the year-round program around it. It really revolutionized and amped up our program, because it provided structure and incentives.”

Youth working in the program grow more than 2,500 pounds of food per year while learning about the food industry. Sliwoski said the program is more about education than producing a bumper crop.

“We rotate what we’re growing for the health of the soil, but also because it’s more interesting for the youth,” said Sliwoski, whose first job was working as a barista. “It might be more profitable for us just to grow kale, but that’s not that fun.”

Amanda Thompson is the director of the Salvation Army’s Bridging the Gap program in Worcester, which helps put youth who are court-involved or at risk of becoming court-involved back on track through a comprehensive curriculum. The Worcester chapter is the only one in Massachusetts that has a job component as well. “

I just think of it as a part of our program,” Thompson said. “A lot of times knowing you have a summer job at the end of graduation really helps motivate them.”

Thompson puts some kids in the program to work in the Salvation Army’s child feeding program. While subsidized jobs programs target low-income youth in general, Thompson said providing jobs to youths who may be on probation or involved with the state Department of Children and Families is especially effective.

“Not only are they getting a second chance and getting to build a reputation for themselves, and they get a job, but their first job is doing social work and feeding children, and they really love it and it really changes them,” she said.

Thompson herself had a classic first teen job – working at McDonald’s – and said the subsidized jobs program looks much better on a resume than most private sector jobs.

“You get to say your first job was helping homeless children,” she said. “My first job was making Big Macs.”

The private sector is important for supplying youth jobs, though, and some subsidized jobs programs provide a boost to that industry.

Dania Flores works at the Pleasant Street Neighborhood Network Center trying to put youth to work in Worcester through two programs – Around the Corner and Park Stewards. Around the Corner aims to get

youth as young as 14 working in their neighborhood at local shops and businesses. Flores said there are only nine open positions this year, down from 12 last year, but hopes it will still make a difference, both for youth and for the businesses. The business pays half the youth's salary, while the other half is subsidized.

"The fifty-fifty helps us double our money, but when the economy is tight it's hard for those neighborhood entities to come up with half the money," said Frank Kartheiser of Worcester Interfaith, a community organization that brings together a number of religious and community institutions.

The other program, Park Stewards, offers 40 kids the opportunity to work at one of the city's more than 60 parks doing cleanup and maintenance. Participants work in teams, and work their way up – the first year is spent learning the job, the second year deals with management and tools, while the third year gives youth the opportunity to become a supervisor. Although the program has been around for about a decade, according to Flores, this is the first year it will officially run through the city's Parks and Recreation department.

"I think it's great this year that it's going through the parks, because it look good on a resume," Flores said during a youth jobs kickoff at the neighborhood center.

The Parks Department is not the only city division stepping up in the youth jobs arena this year. The Summer Youth Jobs Corps is funded by YouthWorks in partnership with the city, with both sides funding eight positions. The 16 youth chosen for the Job Corps will work 20 hours per week in the city's Human Resources office, Department of Inspectional Services, Worcester Public Library and the Division of Public Health.

"How do we give [youth] skills, but also give a public benefit?" City Manager Ed Augustus Jr. asked at the recent announcement of the youth jobs program at Crompton Park.

Sister Michele Monde of the Marie Anne Center, a ministry of the Sisters of Saint Anne known for its after-school activities in St. Bernadette's Church on Lincoln Street, runs a summer program for young children and receives subsidization for counselors.

"Our program could not run without them," Monde, who is hiring four YouthWorks workers this summer, said.

Monde, whose first job was as a dental assistant for her father, said she believes the program is just as beneficial for the youth involved as it is for the Marie Anne Center.

"I think they're learning basic job skills," she said. "They're learning responsibility – they have to be here, they have to be here on time, if they're tired that's too bad, they just have to look as though they're not. All the basic things about working. A lot of kids, this is their first job."

## YOUTH LEADING YOUTH





The ultimate goal of subsidized youth jobs is to help participants find permanent jobs. In the majority of cases those jobs are in the private or public sector, separate from the job placement programs that provide youth their first job; in some cases, participants do such a good job they are hired back as part of the same program.

“We’re now seeing some young people who maybe started as youth in these programs, they became youth workers themselves, and now they’re getting jobs as supervisors,” Kartheiser said.

Pernet Family Health Service employee Will Pickens, a youth coordinator, is one of those success stories.

“I started at 14 as a gardener,” Pickens, who is now 22, said, recounting his time with YouthGROW. “I showed initiative and went through tiers of leadership. I went through three years of programming, each year taking a little more responsibility, and when I graduated they hired me as a part-time worker on their own payroll.”

Pickens now supervises nine kids per summer in the Green Islands Gardens program, and joins with other program leaders in advocating for more funding for subsidized jobs at the state level. He said the opportunity he was given when he first applied for a subsidized job years ago put him on the path to becoming a youth coordinator.

“I consider myself a product of YouthWorks jobs and what it can do if you start at a young age,” Pickens said. “It shaped who I am. I’m a youth advocate because of it.”

When Ralph Weah started at the YouthGROW program, he did not know he would rise to the rank of assistant farm manager.

“I’m not going to tell you that when I was 15 I was interested in farming,” Weah said, noting he took the job mostly to make money.

Weah said over the course of working for the Regional Environmental Council, he learned to appreciate the food industry, small industry in general, and the concept of social justice as it relates to where food comes from – all goals Sliwoski said are core parts of the program.

“Most of the [kids] are not going to grow up to be farmers,” Sliwoski said. “We’re really looking at this as an opportunity for them to learn about the food system and learn leadership and job skills that will translate in general.”

Sliwoski said YouthGROW’s ultimate goal is not to raise a crop of future farmers, but to help youth reach a place in their lives where they can be confident applying for new jobs and can feel a sense of accomplishment.

“Most youths we work with, [farming] is very new to them,” Sliwoski said. “And it can be very transformative to see the huge physical change in the space over the time they work. For a lot of youth who aren’t as successful in school, they can really thrive in doing physical work outdoors and seeing a kale seedling grow from a couple inches high to a full head of kale.”



Thompson said the population of kids with whom she works – ones who are court involved or at risk for becoming court involved – are the same as any other group of youth. They are looking for a purpose, and if they get a job, they run with it.

“I’ve had kids who have come here on house arrest, and we gave them a job and they totally turned around,” Thompson said. “They were given an opportunity and they took it. It’s a myth that they’re lazy and they don’t want to work, because every kid I’ve run into has risen to the occasion.”

## TIPS FOR YOUTH

Many youth jobs advocates talk about “soft skills” - businesses do not usually care whether a teenage applicant knows how to use the fax machine or hook up a video call right away, but skills such as interpersonal communication and workplace etiquette are important to employers, which could put teens who have never had a job before at a disadvantage.

“What adults bring is work experience, which means they’re more likely to have the work behaviors we’re looking for,” Snyder said. “We’re trying to build a base of young people who understand the importance of these work behaviors.”

Christina Hatziemmanuel helps youth work on resumes and hone their interview skills at the Worcester Youth Center, and said many of the tips she gives teenagers are the same ones she would give adults.

“It’s always important to have someone else edit your work,” she said. “Even myself, I have someone else edit my cover letters and resumes. A lot of times employers are getting so many applications, if they have one that’s even slightly off or grammatically inaccurate they’ll set it aside because they have so many coming in that are perfect.”

Hatzziemmanuel, whose first job was at Barnes and Noble, said every youth has to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, but said general tips involve smiling, being attentive, and listening to potential employers rather than talking over them.

“This almost gives [the businesses] time to audition the youth,” Hatzziemmanuel said. “This is a summer job – assuming it goes well, maybe at the end they can hire them. It’s hard enough for adults to get jobs, let alone kids with no experience. And we want them to have a fighting chance.”



Part of that fighting chance is job training offered as part of the YouthWorks program, and the recently piloted “Signaling Success” program that tries to teach kids valuable lessons about more permanent work.

“Massachusetts is the only state we know of that invests in work coaching for low-income teens,” Snyder said.

Roy Lucas, the Youth Coordinator at the Workforce Investment Board’s career center, said tips for how to apply for and succeed at a job were important, but everything stemmed from education.

“I want to help them to know the importance of education,” Lucas said, adding he tells kids who are not in high school to get an equivalency degree or look into trade classes. “We spend a lot of time, not only with job readiness, but how education can enhance job readiness.”

Lucas, whose first job was working petty cash at the Lincoln Street Boys’ Club, said he asks young people for the three things they want to do if they were to gain employment, and then works from that starting point to craft a plan with the youth to match them with youth-friendly employers.

“They should look at the type of experiences they’ve been a part of,” Lucas said. “Young people may not have hands-on experience with a paid position, but they can look at what they’ve done in an educational setting. Looking at awards, sports, clubs, volunteerism – what have you done in terms of establishing some kind of experience?”

#### A COALITION OF HELP

Kartheiser, whose first job was doing asphalt construction, has been a longtime advocate for funding for youth jobs at the state level.

“We don’t want youth jobs where we’re just getting money and sticking kids into slots,” Kartheiser said. “This is about youth development, and how do you create a ladder or a pipeline so these young people get their first summer job, and the next year they take a step up, and how does that get them into paid work?”

Kartheiser recently joined with a number of local organizations to form the Central Massachusetts Youth Jobs Coalition, which is planning on taking state representatives on a tour of a few sites in late July to illustrate the importance of subsidized jobs funding. The argument for increased funding is that it provides an entry point into the workforce for young people who might otherwise be left out of the labor pool.

“We have a very strong network of people who see the value in this,” said Turgeon, whose first job was at a private dog kennel. “They not only learn the basic skills of work and the value of work – it’s good they get a dollar in their pocket today – but it gives them an opportunity to get their next job on their own. So it really is an investment in our future workforce. Those kids are going to go on to bigger and better things in their lives because of this summer.”



The network of youth jobs providers provides other benefits, too, including improving the summer jobs experience for youth and their employers.

“By us all meeting together we have leaders learning from each other – what worked at your site, what worked at mine – so they’re learning best practices,” Kartheiser said.

The coalition’s goal is to secure more funding and transition more youth into the workforce. Kartheiser said he is also hoping some sectors of the economy that may not be hiring as many youth as nonprofit organizations, become more involved with the process.

“When the economy went south on us, not only did those folks not have the money to support some of this, they just didn’t have the work,” Kartheiser said. “So we want to get back to that. A lot of the young people now work for nonprofits, and that’s good, but we also want to see this work its way into the private sector more.”

Pickens, who works for a nonprofit, said the community at large should pay attention to the youth jobs funding debate, because it affects the entire city.

“The importance of the subsidized funding for youth jobs is that when it comes to using public funding, it’s taxpayer dollars, so it’s important for the community to know where those dollars are going,” Pickens said. “A lot of private companies are not hiring young students. The economy was hit bad, so there’s a lot of older folks and recent college grads going to positions they’re overqualified for. It leaves nothing for the teenagers.”

Part of Kartheiser’s vision for the coalition is for Worcester youth to become politically involved, since the state controls the funding that has the potential to impact so many young lives in the city.

“We want our young people to understand where the money comes from and what it’s for, and how to increase that money,” Kartheiser said.

The coalition is important, Turgeon said, to get Worcester’s youth back to work. He made the argument that youth jobs subsidization, which on the surface costs taxpayers money, in the long run has a positive impact on the economy, offsetting its costs and paying for itself.

“You’ve almost got a whole generation of kids who haven’t experienced work,” Turgeon said. “So we risk losing some competitiveness as an economy if we don’t have kids experiencing work, especially kids facing these barriers. In the long-term, the public support they’re going to need to get by if they’re not actively engaged in work – whether they’re unemployed, incarcerated, going into rehab – those consequences cost our society a lot of public dollars.”