

Summer jobs program squeezed



Codion Ison, 16, of Benton Harbor cleans the front door windows at the YMCA in St. Joseph as part of Michigan Works' summer jobs program in 2009. This year, Michigan Works expects to be able to provide only 80 kids with summer jobs, compared to the typical 200. Don Campbell / H-P staff

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BENTON HARBOR - For the past six years, hundreds of area youths have been busy with summer jobs.

This year, the number of kids Michigan Works will be able to serve in its Summer Youth Employment Program could be much smaller due to cuts in state funding.

At this point, Michigan Works expects to provide summer jobs for just 80 kids, compared to the typical 200.

Community leaders are concerned.

"This is devastating for the communities we serve," said Todd Gustafson, executive director of Michigan Works.

He said he is working with state lawmakers to try to secure more funding.

"We understand that there is a lot of competition for discretionary funds right now, but we want to emphasize how important this program has been to our communities," he said.

Candice Elders, director of community relations for Michigan Works, said in each of the past six years about \$350,000 in state and federal funding has paid for about 200 youths to participate. Last year, the organization was able to place more than 800 young people in jobs using extra funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Michigan Works has about \$150,000 in leftover stimulus money to put 80 kids to work this summer, but needs another \$500,000 to serve about 400 kids.

Elders said Michigan Works recognizes the importance of summer jobs for youths and will continue to vigorously seek funding for the program.

The organization's Summer Youth Employment Program, which provides jobs for six weeks for youths 14-21, started in Benton Harbor in 2004 after riots rocked the city. It has since provided summer jobs for more than 2,000 youths in Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties.

The cut in funding couldn't come at a worse time, Elders said.

"With the economy suffering and so many people out of work, it's going to be a lot more challenging this year for teens to find jobs," she said.

The impact on communities can be severe, according to Marcus Robinson, president of Consortium for Community Development.

Research has shown that youth joblessness can contribute to flare-ups in crime and gang activity, an increase in teen pregnancy and a higher high school drop-out rate.

Robinson said summer employment "provides young people with valuable workforce skills and exposure to opportunity that is vital to their upward mobility."

According to U.S. Department of Labor statistics, nearly half of all youths ages 14-21 had jobs in 2000. Last year, fewer than one in three found work. It was the lowest youth employment rate since the federal government started tracking youth jobs in 1948, and it is expected to be worse this year.

Gustafson said it is his hope that funding sources recognize the need for summer youth employment.

"It's in no one's best interest to have hundreds of kids with nothing productive to do in summer," he said.

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