**International City/County Management Association**

**2016 Program Excellence Award**

**Community Partnerships**

**Little Rock Summer Youth Employment Program**

As the baby boomers age out of the workforce, there is a growing need for young employees with the skills and work habits to be productive partners for economic growth. Likewise, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics as reported in *The Washington Post*, as the economy has improved, the youth unemployment rate has remained high. Clearly there is an opportunity to provide jobs while preparing the next generation of the workforce. Since 1996, the City of Little Rock’s Summer Youth Employment Program has given youth between the ages of 16 to 21 the opportunities to learn about careers while earning a wage during the summer.

In this program, private sector businesses and government at all levels partner with the City of Little Rock to offer positions for youth employees. These partners work with the City and several community stakeholders to help the youth develop the critical skills necessary to be successful members of the workforce.

As a worksite, businesses are asked to teach youth the value of earning a wage. This encourages the students to hone various skills which will increase their future employability. It also instills in them a strong work ethic which can lead them down a pathway to productive employment. Each worksite assigns the youth to an adult supervisor. This worksite leader works to advise and assist a participant on work assignments.

In 2015, 197 employers partnered with the City including 10 Fitness, American Red Cross, Andre Pendleton State Farm Agency, Arkansas Crime Information Center, Bonner’s Grocery, Clinton Presidential Center, Sports Therapy, Thornton Broadcasting Communications, and Walgreens. These employers created space for 720 youths to work. Unfortunately, there were over 1,300 youth who applied for those spots.

When the program was launched in the mid-1990s, the publicity from the first years lead to a high of 900 applicants in 1998. Due to a lack of recruiting effort, it fell to 400 applicants in 2003. Working with the City Board of Directors, the new City Manager made the Summer Youth Employment Program a priority. This emphasis led to renewed interest in the program by both the business community offering sites and youths wanting to apply. In the ensuing years, the number of applicants and the number of placements have increased.

Each year the City seeks more partners in order to find more placements for the youth. If private employers could participate and pay the salary, the City could continue to pay the insurance and benefits and give more students the chance to participate in the program.

The worksite supervisors are not the only safety net to help the youth succeed. The City of Little Rock Department of Community Programs employs twelve older students who function as mentors. It is the role of the mentors to act as liaisons for the program to both the worksite supervisors and the students. Their primary focus is to ensure quality, safe, enjoyable work environments for the employers and youth employees.

The mentors are assigned specific sites to monitor. They regularly check with each site throughout the workweek. At the beginning of each day and end of each day, the mentors meet together with Community Programs staff to discuss successes, strategize ways to resolve challenges, and anticipate opportunities for the future.

The student work assignments are for 32 hours a week. The youth are expected to report for full days every Monday through Thursday in the program. This schedule helps to teach the students the importance of reliability in the workplace. As an added bonus, many of the students enjoy knowing they will have three-day weekends. Unlike some job opportunities where the schedule may shift from week to week, the consistency of the schedule allows for the students to better plan their time.

Another key component of the program is the training before employment even begins. Prior to them reporting to their assigned worksite the first time, the City offers a week of training. This gives the participants the opportunity to learn about appropriate employee behavior, clothing, and other expectations from employers. This not only helps the youth learn, but it assures the participating employers that their employees will be outstanding representatives of the organization. The aspects of this training week are updated regularly based on feedback from the students, mentors and workplace supervisors.

At the end of the training week, the youth are given their assignments. The staff works to match the skill sets with the needs of the worksites. While many are excited by their assignments, invariably there will be disappointments. Staff and mentors work with those students to allay fears and concerns and to create a positive attitude. The youth mentors have risen through the ranks of the program and often share personal stories about their own challenges when they were starting in the program.

While the Community Programs Department is the lead agency on this program, they are not the only City department which participates. Because the program is important to the City Manager and the City Board of Directors, a number of City departments The Human Resources Department accepts the applications for the youth and screens them. They also issue any necessary employee IDs. The Finance Department works to make sure that the youth are paid and follow up with necessary forms for payment of taxes. The I.T. Department ensures that computer accesses is available to those who require it. Various other departments participate as worksites for the youth.

Research shows that youth who work part-time during the school year and participate in summer employment have a greater attachment to the labor market. Therefore, the City of Little Rock invests $1.2million dollars in summer employment. These dollars include payroll for participants and worker’s compensation insurance.

The money invested by the City of Little Rock and by the other employers has paid dividends beyond what can be measured. The benefits the youth receive go far beyond the actual salary earned. While it is hoped that the students are saving much of the money, the reality is, they are spending a good portion of it back in their community. By adding to the tax base, the students are reinvesting that money for future participants. If the youth were not earning this money, they would not able to contribute to the development of their city from an economic standpoint as well as from a productivity angle.

Each year the City of Little Rock works to refine the program. In addition to growing the number of participating employers, the Department of Community Programs seeks more ways to enrich the experience for the students. For the past few years, an end of summer celebratory banquet has been held to highlight the successes of the program. At that banquet, the students and their supervisors gather. Awards are given for the outstanding student, outstanding work site, and outstanding mentor.

Another challenge that has been identified is that some of the interested youth were not available to work the entire summer. In most of these cases it was because of school-related activities such as cheerleading camp or band camp. There is also one school in Little Rock with a year-round schedule which resumes classes in early July. To allow for more students to be able to participate, staff is expanding the program by including designated part-time positions.

This program can easily be duplicated in other places. There does not have to be hundreds of youths to have a successful Summer Youth Employment Program. All that is needed is a dedicated staff, funding to pay for salary and benefits, and the community leaders who will join with local government to help youths transition into the workplace.