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Thanks: With aid of public and private sectors, North Shore WIB making a difference

To the editor:

The North Shore Workforce Investment Board and Career Centers, along with the Essex County Community Foundation, which accepts private contributions on our behalf, would like to thank all companies, cities and towns, philanthropies, and agencies who worked with us this summer on our F1rstJobs Summer Youth Employment program.

This year, we received funds from the federal government through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, from the state government through the YouthWorks program, through our local police departments through the state-funded Shannon Grant, and from several companies and foundations who continue to believe in the need and value of youth employment.

As everyone can imagine, the challenges for youth employment continue to build, and at a much faster pace given the current economy and the heightened competition for jobs all around.

According to Dr. Andrew Sum of Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies, the employment rate for teens in Massachusetts has gone from a high of 53 percent in 1999 to a low of 30 percent this year.

Of added concern is the center's research proving that teen employment has a direct positive impact on high school graduation rates and successful transition to either work or post-secondary education, all critical to our high-skills economy.

Through the F1rstJobs program this year, we had more than 2,000 teens apply for work. In partnership with these funding sources and the many city, town, nonprofit, and other agencies, we were able to place 491 in work for the summer.

All teens participated in job preparation workshops that included topics such as work ethics and workplace culture. Few were fired or dropped out, a testament to the work readiness preparation that the Career Centers provided for these teens.

Many older youths who are unemployed face fragile life circumstances. In the current economic market, young males under the age of 25, and those who have dropped out of school or have a high school diploma with no additional training, have been hit particularly hard by unemployment.

Examples of the impact summer employment opportunities can have on teens' lives include an 18-year-old who was placed at a local nonprofit, but became homeless and shared this information with adult staff who then increased his hours, helped him relocate to a furnished room and assisted him in getting health insurance and food stamps.

Another youth who is a young father of two at the age of 21 performed above and beyond his job description and was given the opportunity to increase his hours, his salary and to move forward in possible occupational training in order to obtain self-sufficiency for himself and his children.

These examples of successes to older youths do not deflect from the hundreds of in-school teens who worked this summer and developed experience and maturity that will support their efforts to complete high school, make informed career choices and move into post-secondary education that will provide the basis for success within these careers.

Youth employment programs such as F1rstJobs provide essential workplace skills for teens that if not learned early will leave them unprepared for the competitive job market.

While employed, teens learn skills such as taking direction, working as team members, attendance and punctuality, motivation and taking initiative.

When asked about her summer job, one teen said, "I find myself taking on a lot more challenges than I'm used to. It's a wonderful experience. There are times you get stressed out and then you bounce back."

This summer is the first year that National Park Service Salem Maritime National Historic Site, assisted by the Essex National Heritage Commission, participated in F1rstJobs, hiring nine teens.

Douglas Law said, "The kids did such a good job we decided to keep four of them through October, and we will definitely participate again next year."

The North Shore Career Center staff provides assistance to youths beyond the summer. While most teens return to school, additional services and support are provided to teens who are out of school, with the goal of moving them toward continued education and job skills.

These services are facilitated through the North Shore Youth Career Center, headquartered in Lynn at 181 Union St., with services also available at the Career Centers in Salem (70 Washington St.) and Gloucester (11-15 Parker St.).

It is critical that we continue to support our local youths as they gain the necessary skills to compete in a high-skilled work force. The public and private funds directed toward youth employment provide opportunities for youths who may otherwise not be able to participate in the job market.

Without this assistance, many of these youths would "fall through the cracks" with resultant negative social and economic consequences.

Again, we thank our supporters, including Congressman Tierney, all members of the North Shore Statehouse delegation, Salem's Mayor Driscoll, and our other mayors and town managers, for making this possible and look forward to continued service throughout the year and in future summers for our emerging work force.

William Tinti

Chairman, North Shore Workforce Investment Board

Salem