

The Register-Guard

FRIDAY, MARCH 26, 2010

Give teens summer jobs and help battle recession's fallout

BY CHUCK FORSTER

Improvements in the economy, even small ones, can have many of us breathing a sigh of relief, thinking that the worst soon will be over. Jobs will return to pre-recession levels, consumer spending will rise, housing prices will recover and financial institutions will increase the flow of funds to small businesses.

However, economic realities tell us otherwise.

Unemployment is likely to remain above pre-recession levels for years to come. Job creation will be the slowest we have experienced in years. The manufacturing and construction jobs that have been lost will be slow to recover, and many never will return.

What's worse, some of the most serious and harmful consequences of unemployment and under-employment have yet to manifest themselves.

An article by Don Peck in the March edition of the Atlantic Monthly magazine chronicles many of them. For many, lifetime earnings will be reduced; career opportunities will be missed; and family stability, physical health and mental well-being will be jeopardized.

According to the Economic Policies Institute, in 2009 the unemployment rate for Oregon teens from 16 years old to 19 years old who wanted to work averaged 31.2 percent. The national average was 24.3 percent.

Oregon's figure was the third highest rate of unemployment for teens in the nation, behind only California and Nevada. Why Oregon's rate is so high is open to question — but what is not in dispute is the long-term effect of teenage unemployment.

Teenagers who do not work will not have the opportunity to develop basic work habits that all employers require and are necessary for future job and career success. Joblessness in teen years reduces future employment and earnings.

Furthermore, jobless youth are more likely to drop out of school, less likely to complete postsecondary education and have a greater likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system, according to Andrew Sum and others, authors of "The Collapse of the Nation's Male Teen and Young Adult Labor Market, 2000-09" (written for Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies).

Put all of the above into the context of an innovation-driven economy where good jobs will demand more and more academic and technical skills, and you can see that unemployed youth, especially those from low-income families, are more than likely on a road to nowhere.

All of this raises the question: What can we do to put them on a road to success?

One answer is: Jobs!

This past summer, with support from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the Lane Workforce Partnership ran a Summer Jobs and Careers Program. Through our network of youth providers, 320 young people were placed in work experiences and internships.

They worked more than 45,800 hours for community-based organizations, government offices and local businesses. They worked as office assistants, landscapers and maintenance workers, research assistants, organic gardeners, members of trail crews, weatherization installers and more.

Some worked in service crews that completed projects benefiting local communities. Examples of these projects include a public walkway alongside the McKenzie River, landscape improvements at Pleasant Hill and McKenzie high schools, and preparation and implementations of the free lunch program for Oakridge families.

Additionally, many took part in career academies at Lane Community College in health occupations, green jobs and construction and manufacturing.

They experienced the value of work, developed work readiness skills, improved their financial literacy skills and learned about career opportunities. Many received their first paycheck.

More than \$385,000 went directly into the hands of young people. That money was spent locally to support their families, to pay for clothing for school and, of course, for fun.

A recent study funded by the Oregon Workforce Alliance and conducted by Oregon State University tracked the spending of 1,200 young people participating in rural Oregon Summer Youth Employment Programs. It found a return of \$1.46 for every dollar earned by youth.

Assuming the same return in Lane County, the wages paid to young people yielded an investment of more than \$562,000 in our local community. Summer jobs benefit everyone: young people, families, the community and local businesses.

I urge every employer in Lane County to consider providing a job to at least one young person this summer. I know this may be challenging. However, the most compelling argument for summer jobs comes directly from the youth themselves. Here are a few of their comments:

◆ "I was in a rough spot, feeling low. With this program, not only did I get a job, but I got one in a growing field. I'm more on top of my game now. I really, really appreciate it."

◆ "I liked working, period. Getting a paycheck makes me feel better about myself. I enjoyed learning new things."

◆ "I feel more confident in my skills. ... Thanks for opening jobs for people."

If you are a local employer interested in providing a job for a young person this summer please contact me at chuckf@laneworkforce.org.

Chuck Forster is executive director of the Lane Workforce Partnership.