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Q&A: Tough time to find summer jobs

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Correspondent Apr 21, 2010



SALEM — Mary Sarris, executive director of the North Shore Workforce Investment Board, sees a crisis in the lack of jobs available for teenagers.

The WIB, a public entity funded by federal and state money, helps people find jobs and tracks hiring trends.

The Salem News caught up with Sarris to ask her about getting teens to work.

Will there be jobs out there for teens looking for summer work?

It's a very tough year. We have a youth career center in Lynn, which helps kids find jobs. The teen employment is a crisis in this country, it's an all-time low. We do help them find summer jobs, and we advocate for companies that help. We also raise money for teens to put them in nonprofit organizations. It is a challenge for everyone under the age of 18 or even 21.

When you say it's at an all-time low, how do you measure that?

We use the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, and they do studies on this all the time and have come up with this: that employment is just not at the level it used to be. The reason behind it is because older workers are working longer or coming back, the economy is terrible, so people are bumping down into lower-level jobs. For example, you have college students doing a high school job.

How does WIB find summer jobs for kids?

We have a program called First Jobs where we ask companies to consider hiring teens — accepting the fact that teens are the future of the work world and if they don't work, then that's a big problem. Teenagers need the opportunity to build those skills and explore those options. So at First Jobs, we ask them to hire a teen and if they don't, we ask for a contribution, in which case we will get them to work at a nonprofit organization. The state of Massachusetts gives us money to put teens to work, and the federal government through the Stimulus Act gives us money. It's really a partnership because we work with a lot of people.

Where has the program placed them in past years?

When teens sign up, they need to attend a workshop where they learn how to find and keep a job, and then they are referred out and interview for them. This past year, we had close to 2,000 signed up and ended up finding 450 jobs — so there is a real lack of jobs. But we've placed them at law firms, banks, nonprofit and public organizations, YMCAs, Boys & Girls Club, North Shore Elder Services, National Park Service.

What's your best piece of advice for high school kids who want to find a job?

Go down to the North Shore Career Center in Lynn, Salem or Gloucester and sign up for the First Job program, then attend the workshops and participate in job fairs. We also tell them that if you can't get a job, then volunteer somewhere so you can get something on your résumé to show that you were participating.

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