

Youth Ready Chicago Participant Survey

Examining Youth and Employer Feedback
on Chicago's 2009 Summer Jobs Program

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Dear Friends and Colleagues:

The summer of 2009 marked a milestone in youth workforce development. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided the first federal funding available for youth summer jobs in over ten years. The City of Chicago offered nearly 8,000 additional youth summer job opportunities thanks to the stimulus legislation.

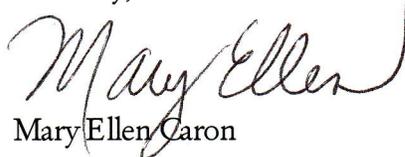
I am extremely proud of Youth Ready Chicago's successes. Despite an extremely short timeline, we enthusiastically mobilized to engage thousands of young people and provide meaningful work experiences with the Recovery Act funding. Still, the beginning of summer 2009 marked the lowest national youth employment rate in over 60 years.

Without continued federal investment, we will not only see severe declines in summer job opportunities and more young people disconnected from the labor market and the workplace, but we will also squander the national infrastructure and achievements that communities across the country worked so hard to build over the summer of 2009.

At the program's culmination, we asked youth and employers to complete an online survey assessing their participation in the Youth Ready Chicago Summer Jobs Program. As you can see from the enclosed report, respondents communicated their overwhelming satisfaction with the program and its contributions to young people's academic and career preparation. For example, over 90% of youth respondents rated their experience as good or excellent, and 94% felt the program helped prepare them for future jobs. Over 90% of surveyed employers indicated they would like to participate in the program again.

At the same time, youth asked for more— more hours, training, activities, and fieldtrips. Employers asked for more too— more training opportunities for youth and more thought at the federal level on how to make database, paperwork, and eligibility requirements less burdensome. We have learned a lot from these responses and will engage in a variety of opportunities that seek to expand programming and address administrative barriers.

Sincerely,


Mary Ellen Caron



Youth Ready Chicago: An Overview

The stimulus legislation passed by Congress in the spring of 2009 marked the first federal funding made available for youth summer jobs in over a decade. It came at a critical point as the national employment rate for teens dropped to 30%, the lowest level in over 60 years. In a matter of months, communities across the country developed administrative systems, marketing campaigns, partnerships, recruitment efforts, and meaningful work experiences to implement large-scale youth summer jobs programs.

The City of Chicago provided 8,100 additional summer job opportunities in 2009 thanks to funding provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Combined with other summer employment opportunities funded by the City and its partners, over 20,000 youth jobs were created. Due to the current economic crisis, the absence of stimulus funding would have resulted in a significantly reduced City-funded, stand-alone youth summer jobs program. In addition, it is important to note that a record of 79,000 applications were received, nearly doubling the total in 2008.

The Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS), which administers the City's Youth Ready Chicago Summer Jobs Program, partnered with 34 organizations that acted as hubs for recruiting and enrolling eligible youth participants, matching them with work opportunities, and facilitating work readiness training and support services. In some cases, hubs also served as job sites. Hub partners included sister City agencies (e.g. Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Park District, etc.), Workforce Investment Act (WIA) contract agencies, museums, non-profit community development organizations, and community-based and faith-based organizations.

Youth participants were placed at 880 job sites representing a variety of organizations including non-profit organizations (34%), government agencies (32%), private businesses (24%), and faith-based organizations (10%). Youth had opportunities to work in the fields of community development and social services (170 job sites), food service (50), retail (35), law and finance (20), healthcare (20), arts and media (20), and post-secondary education (17), among others. On average, placements lasted

approximately six and a half weeks, offered 23 hours of work per week, and provided wages of \$8.40 per hour. In total, youth participants logged 1,190,000 work hours and earned \$10,000,000 throughout the summer.

Summer jobs participants represented every region of the city and were composed of the demographic characteristics described in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Demographics of Youth Enrolled in Youth Ready Chicago

Youth Participants		%
Sex	Male	42%
	Female	58%
Age	14-18	64%
	19-21	27%
	22-24	9%
Race	White	11%
	Black	74%
	Hispanic	18%
	Asian	2%
School Status*	In-School	57%
	Out-of-School	43%

**As defined by WIA regulations*

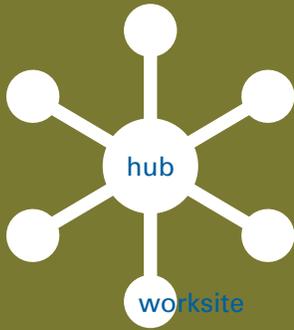
To qualify for a stimulus-funded summer job, participants were required to be between the ages of 14 and 24 and demonstrate one of the following low-income categories: Cash Public Assistance; Family Income at or below the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) or 70% of the Lower Living Standard Income Level (LLSIL); Food

Stamp recipient; Homeless; Publicly supported Foster Child; or an Individual with a disability and income at or below FPL or 70% LLSIL. In addition, the young person was required to demonstrate an additional barrier category including Basic Skills Deficient; School Dropout; Homeless, Runaway, or Foster Child; Pregnant or Parenting; Offender; or requires additional assistance to complete an educational program or to secure and hold employment.

Among Chicago participants, nine percent were pregnant and/or parenting, eight percent were educational dropouts, three percent were offenders, and two percent were classified as homeless. Just over 30% had graduated high school.

Hub Partners & Other Innovations

The Recovery Act provided DFSS an opportunity to implement systemic changes to its summer jobs program.



Hub/Worksite Infrastructure

The Youth Ready Chicago infrastructure is composed of hubs (partner agencies) that are geographically distributed throughout the city and each supervise a cohort of worksites where youth are employed. Hub responsibilities also include program design, providing services to youth participants (eligibility processing, work readiness training and assessment, job matching, supportive services, etc.), data collection, and payroll management, among others. In addition to expanding the pool of potential job opportunities, this infrastructure allowed DFSS to diversify its partnerships with youth-serving institutions and foster new relationships between hubs and local employers.

Unified, Web-Based System

A web-based single-point-of-access application for youth and unified data collection system allowed DFSS to increase coordination among partners and more effectively meet the needs of young people based on demographic, geographic, and career interest information.

Citywide Strategic Vision

DFSS strengthened its network of government, non-profit, and private sector partnerships in working toward a sustainable, citywide vision for youth employment programming. Partnerships include the Chicago Workforce Investment Council, the Citywide Youth Employment Committee, and the Out-of-School Time Project.

Survey Findings

At the conclusion of the summer jobs program, DFSS administered an online survey to youth and employers, soliciting feedback on their experience as part of Youth Ready Chicago (ARRA-funded portion). DFSS received responses from 919 youth and 196 employers. The survey collected program impact data, asking both youth and employers to identify the effects of program participation on academic and professional experience and skills.¹

Both youth and employer respondents demonstrated overwhelmingly high levels of program satisfaction. The large majority of youth respondents expressed gains in valuable personal and professional experiences and skills. Many also expressed that wages earned through the program contributed to meeting their own and their families' basic needs. Employer

Over 90% of youth rated their experience as good or excellent.

respondents gained effective workers and enjoyed providing development opportunities for local youth.

Offering young Chicagoans opportunities to learn and grow through summer employment, the data indicate that Youth Ready Chicago successfully fulfilled its mission to support young people's transition to the workplace.

Youth and employer responses also highlighted areas for program improvement. While the large majority of

Nearly 90% of employers would recommend the program to other employers.

respondents were satisfied with their experience, youth and employers reported challenges in navigating the program databases, paperwork, and eligibility requirements. These responses indicate a need to strengthen communication and administrative systems, provide additional resources to participating hubs and job sites, and reexamine eligibility documentation and verification requirements.

¹ The current survey participation was strictly voluntary and the authors therefore recognize the limitation of the data and sample size. Future consideration will include plans for expanding the scope of the data collection.

The Importance of Youth Summer Jobs

Summer jobs programs provide a crucial opportunity for young people to gain the skills and experience necessary for their future success in the workforce. Through these work experiences, youth gain exposure to a professional environment, develop workplace skills, explore career options, and examine their own professional strengths and interests. Young people with early work experiences are more likely to transition into the workforce successfully and earn more over their lifetime.²

At the same time, summer employment gives youth the immediate opportunity to earn

much needed wages, spend available summer time contributing to productive work, and can serve as a powerful tool for building connections to the community and to the array of additional resources for youth. Employment also offers young people a safe, positive, and productive environment in which to invest their free time that may otherwise be spent in unsupervised, unproductive, or even harmful ways.

In light of the importance of providing young people with summer work opportunities, the recent steep decline in national youth employment rates is troubling. According to research

by the Center for Labor Market Studies, the seasonally adjusted national employment rate for 16 to 19 year olds had dropped to 30% at the *beginning* of the summer of 2009, the lowest level in over 60 years. (This figure had declined to 26% in the first quarter of 2010). In Illinois, 16 to 19 year olds experienced a 20% decline in employment between 2000 and 2009 to 28.6%.³ Considering the crucial skills, experience, and resources gained through summer jobs, our nation's young people need increased employment opportunity programs to connect to early work experiences.

Survey Findings: Youth

The survey data indicate that youth participants overwhelmingly found their involvement with Youth Ready Chicago to be a positive experience, helping to prepare them for their academic and professional careers in the long term while gaining an opportunity to contribute to their personal and families' financial needs in the short term.

Over 90% of respondents rated their overall experience in the program as good or excellent and an equal percentage

94% of young people said that participating in Youth Ready Chicago helped prepare them for future jobs or careers.

and 74% felt the program helped them academically. The data demonstrate that youth not only recognized a connection between the experience and their academic and professional pathways, but also identified specific skills gained through participation.

rated the supervision and guidance at their job site as good or excellent. In addition, 94% felt the program helped prepare them for future jobs or careers,

The results displayed in Figure 2 show the concrete professional skills young people felt they developed during the program that can be utilized in future work experiences, with teamwork (83%), workplace conduct

Figure 2: Youth Self-Assessment of Skills Gained

Skills Gained	%
working with others as a team	83%
how to appropriately conduct yourself in the workplace	66%
public speaking	50%
problem-solving	41%
how to budget your earnings	38%
computer	35%

(66%), and public speaking (50%) ranking highest. Surveyed youth also identified additional areas that were not incorporated into the survey response options including skills in leadership, interviewing, teaching, and working with different populations such as children and the elderly.

The survey also indicates that young people are feeling the effects of the economic crisis and deep recession, with

² Andrew Sum, Neeta Fogg, and Garth Mangum, *Confronting the Youth Demographic Challenge: The Labor Market Prospects of Out-of-School Young Adults*, Johns Hopkins University, October 2000; Harris, Linda, *The Tragic Loss of the Summer Jobs Program: Why it is Time To Reinstate!*, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, July/August 2007.

³ Sum, Andrew, et. al. *Illinois Youth Labor Markets in Deep Recession: The Severe Deterioration in Labor Market Opportunities for Teens and Young Adults in Illinois, 2000 -2009*, Center for Labor Market Studies, September 2009

What are youth saying?

The best part of my work experience was...

“...I really learned a lot about myself over the course of this summer...I learned how to be professional in the workplace and I was able to help my family with our household expenses with my first check. I am very proud of myself. I have matured as a young adult.

-female, 16, employed at a non-profit housing agency

“...working together in groups to accomplish something big.”

-female, 16, food industry

“...the team experience, the positive activities we had, it helped me stay out of trouble over the summer, and it gave me the opportunity to become a positive leader and role model on the youth.”

-female, 16, community-based organization

“...I really enjoyed the Career Workshops that we as interns had to participate in. I really learned so much, and I truly appreciate our instructor who broke the information down to us, and helped us to understand things much clearer.”

-female, 20, government agency

“...being able to work in such a creative environment, meeting amazing people who are truly the movers and shakers of the world.”

-male, 20, media organization

“...being independent and making my own money. Learning how to take care of myself.”

-male, 16, community-based organization

76% reporting that they would have been unemployed during the summer without the program. Youth Ready

76% of youth said they would have been unemployed during the summer without Youth Ready Chicago.

Chicago provided a first work experience for 38% of respondents. In light of these findings, it is important to note that the financial resources youth respondents gained through the program were dedicated to crucial personal and family needs as well as savings.

When asked how youth used their summer earnings, the top responses included clothing (70%), savings (65%), household expenses (55%), and food (51%). Youth also put earnings toward tuition, school supplies, transportation, and to support their parents or children.

Survey Findings: Employers

Employer respondents also expressed high levels of satisfaction with their involvement in Youth Ready Chicago. Over 90% indicated that they would participate in the program again and nearly 90% would recommend the program to other employers. Responses repeatedly communicated employers' pleasure working with bright,

What are employers saying?

“The program was excellent. It allowed youth to engage in positive reinforcing activities during the summer months...Our youths were mentored while working to embrace life-changing values to be productive individuals. Great relationships were also formed that will leave an everlasting impression on both our youth and the employer. – *service industry employer*”

“We enjoyed having the youth working with us; they were a tremendous help and excellent members of our team. They worked really well with our program participants, followed directions well, very teachable, produced quality work and displayed a high degree of professionalism.” – *community organization employer*

supportive, young employees, with 86% expressing satisfaction with the youth workers. Overall, the data indicate that Youth Ready Chicago provided employers with an exciting opportunity to engage local teens in meaningful work opportunities.

92% of employers would like to participate in the program again.

The survey results also point to the program’s added value in building relationships at

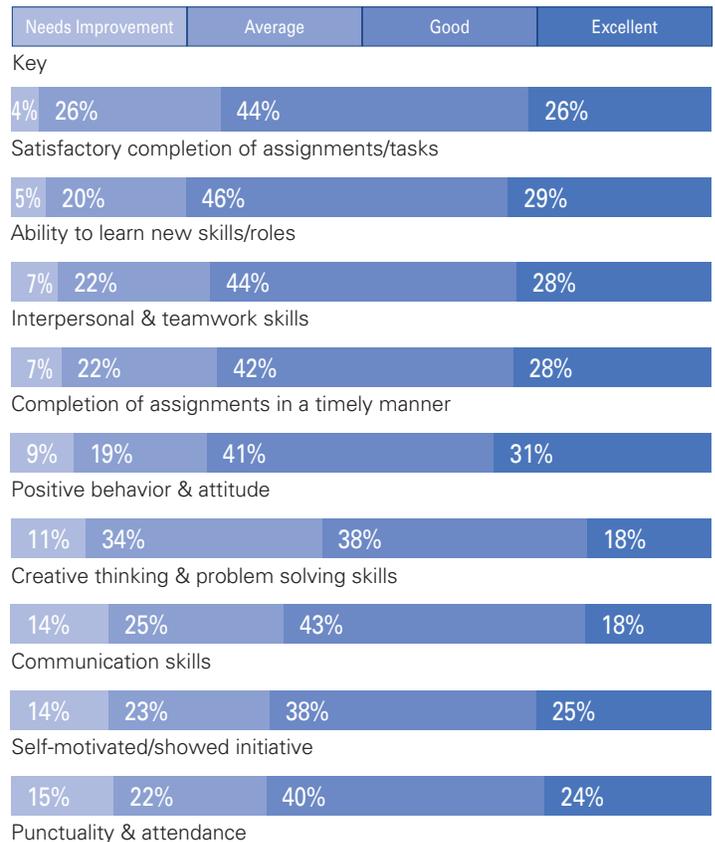
the community level that may not have existed otherwise. Nearly 60% of surveyed employers had never participated in a summer jobs program previously and over half found out about the summer program through a hub. The connections built between hubs and job sites provide opportunities for sustained employer partnerships and collaboration.

Employers were asked to assess the youth employees on several professional skills and at least 85% rated the young people as average, good, or excellent in every area. As shown in Figure 3, over 95% of employers ranked the youth’s ability to satisfactorily complete assignments and tasks as average, good, or excellent. Ability to learn new skills and roles and interpersonal and teamwork skills were also rated highly. These skill assessments point to youth participants’ strong potential for growing, working with others, and adding value to a work environment, and present a clear contrast to negative conceptions of young peoples’ attitudes toward work.

Considering the extent to which employers felt teens had the capacity to learn new skills, the results also

demonstrate areas in which summer employment can continue to provide opportunities for youth development and training. Creative thinking and problem solving, communication skills, self-motivated/showed initiative, and punctuality and attendance were rated as needing improvement more often than other skills. However, in the

Figure 3: Employer Assessment of Youth Skills



majority of surveyed cases, lack of particular training or skills did not prevent youth from making a positive impact at their job sites, and employer comments consistently praised their workers' contributions. Employers considered the opportunity to assist in youth's development to be one of the most rewarding aspects of the program.

Survey Findings: Areas for Improvement

Both youth and employers were asked to provide feedback regarding ways their experience could have been improved. Their comments highlighted several recommendations for future programming, specifically surrounding increased program opportunities and administrative improvements.

When asked what would improve their experience, many youth called for a more robust program and expanded opportunities. Youth respondents consistently cited the need for more work hours and weeks, training, available worksites, activities, and field trips. Many also reported a desire for opportunities to continue working beyond the summer. Though employer respondents touted the preparedness of their workers, many felt the youth would benefit from more training.

Several of the surveyed employers expressed the need for better coordination and administrative support. Problems with eligibility, and consequently paychecks, negatively influenced many of the worksites' experiences, and some employers reported feeling overwhelmed and confused by the administrative demands of the program. In particular, respondents expressed that the eligibility process and requirements were not clearly communicated, and that data systems and paperwork were intrusively time-consuming for agencies with already limited human resources.

Some youth respondents also raised issues about the program administration. Problems with eligibility documentation and verification delayed start dates and paychecks, and shortened the duration of the program for some youth. These responses echo the experience of communities across the country with the resource-intensive WIA eligibility documentation and verification regulations.

Conclusion

In 2009, federal funding was made available for youth summer jobs programs for the first time in over ten years. The stimulus came at a critical point as the national employment rate for teens dropped to 30%, the lowest level in over 60 years. In a matter of months, communities across the country quickly developed administrative systems, marketing campaigns, partnerships, recruitment efforts, and meaningful work experiences to implement large-scale youth summer jobs programs.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 allowed the City of Chicago to enroll over 8,000 additional low-income youth in work experiences through its Youth Ready Chicago Summer Jobs Program. The Youth Ready Chicago participant survey highlights many of the benefits summer jobs programs provide for both youth and employers. Youth respondents relished the opportunity to gain valuable skills, contribute to productive work, and earn wages that helped to meet their own and their families' basic needs. Employers, the majority of whom had never participated in a summer jobs program before, expressed overwhelming satisfaction with their summer job employees and enjoyed providing development opportunities for local youth.

The success of Youth Ready Chicago, and other programs across the country, not only demonstrates the benefits youth summer jobs programs provide to young people, employers, and communities – it also confirms the strong need for continued funding. While DFSS provided a total of over 20,000 youth summer employment opportunities, the City received nearly 80,000 applications. In addition, at the direction of the US Department of Labor, many communities, including Chicago, expended the large majority of stimulus funding for youth summer jobs in 2009 and have insufficient remaining program dollars to implement a comparable program in 2010. The failure to capitalize on the successes of 2009 by making a continued investment moving forward would send the wrong signal to communities across the country that rapidly mobilized to engage young people and provide them with meaningful summer work experiences. Fortunately, the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, and the potential for additional job-focused stimulus legislation, provide historic opportunities for the nation to reinvest in the next generation of American workers through youth employment programs.