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## Drop in the Bucket

By Sarah Karp

A shell of what it used to be, Chicago's youth employment program has seen its budget shrink and now helps only a few hundred teenagers get jobs and credentials---the program's two main goals. Representing a major shift in philosophy, the city's federally funded summer jobs program no longer exists. At its height in the 1980s, it provided more than 25,000 teenagers each year with minimum-wage jobs that lasted six or eight weeks. Since a new federal workforce development law went into effect in 2000, the city has used federal dollars to serve low-income teenagers over the course of an entire year. And, rather than using part of the federal grant to pay the teens' salaries, as it once did, the city now uses these dollars to hire a variety of agencies---social service organizations, alternative schools and adult employment programs---to find jobs for young people.

These programs are not only supposed to help young people get jobs, but also help them get educational or vocational degrees or "build skills." But, according to data provided by the city, most of the teenagers are not meeting those marks.

In the last fiscal year, which ended in June 2004, 3,278 people between 14 and 21 participated in youth employment programs, with 348 getting jobs and 448 earning high school diplomas, GEDs or vocational certificates. That year, the city got a \$14 million federal grant, compared with at least \$22 million in 1987.

"The kids that we are giving these services to are a drop in the bucket," said Jack Wuest, executive director of the Alternative Schools Network, which holds the city's largest youth employment contract. "It is an issue that we have to address or else we are going to have a whole future generation of kids who grow up with no work experience and [are] completely disconnected from that world."

Furthermore, under the new law, the pressure to meet performance standards is so high that some program directors are leaving behind the hardest-to-serve teenagers, Wuest said.

The new standards were supposed to make these year-round programs accountable, awarding bonus grants when benchmarks are met. The state's report to the U.S. Department of Labor shows that 264 out of 516 program participants in Chicago---or 64 percent---got jobs in 2003, exceeding the 58 percent requirement. The federal government requires that number be based only on 19- to 21-year-olds who left the program, not the total number who participated. When all participants are considered, 11 percent got jobs.

Every year, more than 1,000 youth are carried over to the next year. But city officials could not explain why the participants stayed. Chuck Mutscheller, a spokesman for the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, said young people "exit when they meet their objectives," but could not clarify why so many stay on.

One explanation for the carryover is that it could take 16-year-olds more than one year to earn their diplomas, prompting them to stay until they finish, said Seth Turner, manager of advocacy and policy for the Washington, D.C.-based National Youth Employment Coalition.

Sometimes programs will keep participants for a long time if they are not successful, rather than report a failed effort to get them a job or credential, said Therese McMahon, of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

"The federal government created a very complicated system," said McMahon, deputy director for the department's Bureau of Workforce Development. "It is really too difficult to explain."

The bigger problem is that it's hard for the troubled teens who come to the programs to get and keep jobs, said Lisa Hampton, senior policy associate for the Chicago Jobs Council, an umbrella organization for jobs programs. This is especially the case for those who have not been in structured programs for months, or sometimes years, she said. Many have dropped out of high school, are pregnant and parenting, or have criminal backgrounds.

She faults the city for not coordinating services for these teenagers and instead leaving jobs programs to figure out how to help them.

"There needs to be much more work done for out-of-school youth who have multiple barriers," Hampton said. "It is a much larger discussion than these jobs programs, and that discussion isn't taking place."

Furthermore, she said, the city could do more to encourage employers to be receptive to these young clients. Program directors tell her the poor perception of teenagers is a chronic problem among businesses leaders, who have their pick of out-of-work adults to fill positions. "It is not clear that this is a huge priority for [Mayor Richard M.] Daley," she said. "What we really need is leadership on this issue, and I don't feel like we have gotten that."

But Brian Caminer, deputy commissioner for the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, said the city does not have the money to do much more. In August, Daley announced that he'd allocate \$479,000 of the city's money to help youth find jobs. Caminer said this, along with press conferences that Daley has held highlighting the programs, proves the mayor is committed. But, with a tight city budget, Caminer notes it's unlikely that more taxpayer dollars are going to be committed to youth employment programs.

Hampton adds that the state has little clout to receive more federal money. Only one local lawmaker, U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. of the far South Side and south suburbs, is in a position to do so. Jackson, who serves on the House Committee on Appropriations' labor subcommittee, didn't respond to The Chicago Reporter's requests for an interview.

As the system to help connect teenagers with jobs has crumbled, teenagers are finding it increasingly difficult to get work on their own.

In the last three years, the number of young people in Chicago with jobs has gone from 35 percent to 22 percent, according to a report released in March by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston. For black teenagers in Chicago, the numbers are even worse, with 13 percent working in 2003.

"There is an increased competition for low-wage jobs," said Edward Montgomery, dean of the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the University of Maryland and former deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor. "As adults take those jobs and stay in those jobs, it gets harder for teenagers to find jobs."

Sheryl Holman, chief executive officer of Community Assistance Programs in the South Side's Englewood neighborhood, says the teenagers in her youth employment program are competing with women coming off welfare and others streaming out of prison. Teenagers can sometimes have an edge in these situations because they seem fresher and less encumbered by problems, Holman said. Still, she said, there aren't many jobs to go around. "Mostly we can get our kids fast food jobs or jobs in stores."

In the Chicago area, job growth has happened in the suburbs, while poor city neighborhoods have struggled to hold onto businesses, said Nik Theodore, director of the University of Illinois at Chicago's Center for Urban Economic Development.

For example, Englewood has about 40,000 residents and 2,555 jobs, according to the census and "Where Workers Work," an annual report by the Illinois Department of Employment Security. The most prevalent jobs were in health care, social services and retail.

By contrast, Schaumburg, a northwest suburb, has 75,386 residents and 79,709 jobs. Most of the jobs were in retail, hotels or professional services.

More than any other age group, teenagers are tied to the neighborhoods around their homes, Theodore said, and, when those neighborhoods have no businesses, teenagers don't have jobs.

Sitting around a table at Jobs for Youth/Chicago, the city's largest job placement program for teenagers, a group of young men agree that their neighborhoods do not offer them much opportunity. This is one reason why they come to Jobs for Youth, housed in an

office building downtown.

Melvin Bilbo, a thin, 24-year-old who drives a truck, has frequented there for three years. It is a far cry from his South Side neighborhood, where many men would just hang out and give him trouble for trying to be different. "I am a young black gentleman trying to do my thing," said Bilbo, who wears a striped dress shirt and creased blue jeans. "They want to take my head off."

Though driving a truck bores him, he likes getting out of the neighborhood. And he dreams of getting into the music industry. "People are scared to leave this trap city," Bilbo said. "They say they can't. Their community---it is like it has walls and it keeps them in."

Darnell Felder, 18, adds that jobs in his Woodlawn neighborhood on the city's South Side are scarce, and he sees little possibility that he will find work there. After his GED class at Jobs for Youth, he likes to spend time going up and down Michigan Avenue, seeing who is hiring and putting in applications. "My neighborhood is bogus," said Felder, who lives in a large cluster of brown three-story, subsidized apartments. "There's nothing going on there."

Of 77 city neighborhoods, the 20 with the worst youth unemployment rates are all on the South and West sides. And the unemployment rates only include those teens who are actively seeking work. An average of 58 percent of the teens in these high-unemployment areas are considered out of the labor force---which means they are not looking for jobs. Theodore said it is safe to assume that many of them have given up looking for work.

Some of them are in school. But, according to the census, a quarter of Chicago's black teenagers are out of school with high school diplomas or less. "Partly they are discouraged because of their own experience in the labor market and partly because their job search networks are so incredibly shut down, they don't know where to turn," Theodore said.

Felder said he fights becoming dejected. He continues to fill out applications, but not getting great responses from potential employers is beginning to wear on him. "I go in there dressed to impress and talking all nice, but I ain't got one call back," Felder said. "I have been trying to figure out what is going on."

Felder, who dropped out of school when he was 15, is in a GED class at Jobs for Youth. Until he gets his GED and qualifies for the agency's job placement services, Felder is on his own in his job search. He knows he wants something different than just being on the street all the time. It keeps him going.

His dream is to go to Morehouse College---one of the few he has visited---to become an engineer. And he has a plan to pay for it: "I am going to cut hair."

Yet, as he looks for a job without success, the lure of the money he could make dealing

drugs is ever-present. That is how he used to make cash. He needed it, he said, because he was "sick of not having things." He has lived with his grandmother since he was 15.

"I had to make my own money and clean my own clothes," he said. "If I wanted soap, I had to make money to buy it."

Youth employment programs can break down some of these barriers. Brian Foggs, 21, explains how one worked for him. A tall, straight-backed young man with a fade haircut, he spent months doing what most people do when they look for a job: He scoured the listings, searched the Internet and asked for applications at every store with help-wanted signs out front. The summer came and went, yielding nothing. Then came the fall, and nothing still.

A kid from a poor neighborhood who quit high school to support his family, Foggs reached a conclusion. "You need to know someone to get a job. You need to have resources that you can call on," he said. "I don't really have anyone with that kind of pull."

He eventually turned to a job program run by Goodwill Industries. This move proved to be a good one: Staff helped him fill out an application for a Sears, Roebuck and Co. and gave him pointers on how to present his skills. In November, Foggs started ringing up customers at the downtown store.

Robert Barnett, executive director of Jobs for Youth, said he and his staff are able to secure teenagers jobs in tough economic times by maintaining good relationships with business owners. The agency also keeps up with the hot industries and trains its clients in them. Right now, two to watch are security and reprographics, which is maintaining and reproducing documents.

James Zeckhauser, the staffing specialist at Youth Guidance, which works in Chicago schools, said he's identified "angels" in certain companies who're not only willing to offer teenagers jobs, but also will look out for them; one lawyer he knows mentors a teen himself.

The agency also gets jobs in Hyatt Hotel kitchens for students from the culinary program at Roberto Clemente High School on the Near West Side.

Another program, run by the Illinois Manufacturing Institute on the city's Southwest Side, teaches students how to fix bikes and computers and then places them in related jobs.

These inroads into companies make it easier for teens to find work, Theodore said. But the shrinking federal grant has forced programs to cut the numbers of teenagers they serve.

The Reporter surveyed 24 of the 43 programs that were granted federal money through the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development in 2003. All but two, which said their funds had fluctuated through the years, had seen significant decreases.

Some of the smaller organizations said they had to turn people away, noting that, if they are cut much more, they will be forced to stop offering any job programs for youth. Those from bigger organizations said they can compensate by turning to other sources of funding, such as private donors, or convincing the teenagers to give up looking for jobs.

Bill Leavy, executive director of the Greater West Town Project, which has a \$439,879 contract, said he has worked hard to find other ways to pay for the programs his organization offers. He said some of the cuts have been balanced by increased funding to serve dropouts. The alternative high school run by his agency receives money from the Illinois Board of Education and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, which funds it to work with wards of the state.

Jobs for Youth/Chicago also receives grants from other government agencies, including a large one from the labor department that it used to place more than 1,000 young people in jobs. In addition, it relies on donations and fundraisers.

Sharon Simmons from the Boys and Girls Clubs of Chicago, which offers employment and career programs at four locations on the West and South sides, said she has fewer staff to work with teenagers. When their caseloads are full, they have to refer interested teenagers to other agencies.

But exactly how many teens participate in these programs is questionable. According to city data provided to the Reporter in November, 2,443 teenagers participated in the last fiscal year. A few weeks later, officials added more than 800 teens to the rolls. But neither of those totals matched reports the employment programs made to the city, or state documents, which added even more teens. Program directors also say they are sometimes confused about how to count and categorize the teens.

Mutscheller, from the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, said that there shouldn't be any discrepancies and had trouble explaining why they exist. "The numbers might be in flux, but I don't know why that would be because they represent a static time period," he said. "Things might also be entered retroactively, but I don't know that for sure.

"I wish that this was more black and white and didn't have so many shades of gray," he added.

By any measure, however, few teens are getting help. Thirteen of the 43 programs placed no teenagers in jobs last year, and only three found jobs for more than 20 teens, according to their yearly reports to the city. On average, the agencies' contracts were about

\$321,000.

Caminer and McMahon said this doesn't trouble them, because the federal law emphasizes helping teenagers earn high school diplomas or GEDs, or build skills.

Wuest, of the Alternative Schools Network, stresses that a diploma or GED increases a teen's chance of earning a decent wage exponentially. "If I can get a dropout back into school, then the benefit to society is over \$300,000," he said.

Leavy said that 30 years ago there were what he calls "survival jobs," including back-breaking but well-paying work in steel mills and factories. But these jobs have virtually disappeared. "It is short-sighted to just give someone a part-time job and send them on their way," he said.

Still, according to city data, only 448 teenagers, or 14 percent of all program participants, got GEDs or diplomas, or gained skills last year.

Also, those who run these programs say that they have little money and are under pressure to meet the performance standards. Under these weights, they say, some shy away from taking the hardest-to-serve teens.

Malcolm Jackson, coordinator of the Goodwill program, said that it would take years for some of the teenagers who walk through his door to get both a GED and a job. He doesn't think it's a fair expectation. Twenty years ago, the crack cocaine epidemic was in full swing and now the children born in that time are coming of age, he said. Many have been subjected to hardship as a result of their parents' drug abuse.

"I had one young man whose grandma was 54 years old and died of a crack overdose," Jackson recalled. "Both of his parents are strung out. Now, how can he go to work? He has so much emotional stuff inside him. And, when he starts to act out, they put him in jail. If we had funding, we could work with them for three or four years. Then, we could give them incredible outcomes."

Even though he works hard to help, many do not meet the federal standards, Jackson said. He pointed to Ricardo Sanchez, a thickly built man with a slight hunchback and stubble on his face. Because Sanchez has had problems passing the GED, Goodwill has yet to get full credit for working with him, despite the fact that he has held a job for more than a year.

One Tuesday in September, Sanchez came to the Goodwill program after working the nightshift for 12 days in a row cleaning the floors at a downtown Jewel.

He said he works hard because he wants to provide for himself, his girlfriend and the baby they are expecting. But he also likes the fact that he's doing legitimate work. Once a high-ranking member of the Latin Kings, Sanchez spent his teenage years in prison for selling drugs. When he was released just after his 18th birthday, he wanted to do

something with his life.

"I got tired of what I was doing, and, when I got out, the neighborhood gang I was involved in had changed," he said. He also credits his girlfriend: "She was pushing me to change."

Sanchez credits Goodwill for not only helping him land his job, but for teaching him computers and getting him two internships. The idea that he might be able to do something more with his life than cleaning floors has kept him going. "This program showed me it never gave up on me," he said.

Caminer, from the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, concedes that Chicago's programs have struggled in recent years. He notes that the population of teenagers they see is harder to serve than in suburban or rural areas, and the competition for jobs is fiercer in Chicago.

But he's skeptical that the programs turn away those most in need of help. In order to be eligible to participate, teenagers have to be poor, high school dropouts, homeless, runaways, foster children, pregnant or parenting, or ex-offenders---all of those factors, along with low literacy skills, are considered substantial barriers to employment.

"The reality is that a lot of our clients have been abused or live in single-parent households. They have dropped out of school and been involved with the criminal justice system," Caminer said. "These are not our best or our brightest, or they would not qualify. It is not a surprise that we are not 100 percent successful."

*Efren Arcos, Josh Kantarski, Bianca Sepulveda and J. Diamond Weathersby helped research this article.*