



Lessons from the Recovery Act: Opportunities for Young People in 2009 Reveals Need for Permanent Summer Employment Strategy

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Background Information

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) marked the first federal funding dedicated to a summer youth employment program in almost a decade. This federal investment arrived at a point when the national employment rate for teens dropped to 30 percent, the lowest level in over 60 years.¹ Through ARRA, states received \$1.2 billion in Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding to provide employment and training activities targeted to disadvantaged youth. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) strongly encouraged local workforce areas to expend the majority of funds to create summer employment opportunities in the summer of 2009. The ARRA Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) resulted in 314,000 disadvantaged youth being placed in summer jobs nationwide.² This is significantly more than the approximately 250,000 youth served through the regular WIA program during the entire 2008 program year.³

In Chicago, ARRA funding allowed the City to significantly expand its existing summer jobs program. With this funding, the city provided an 8,100 additional summer job opportunities to low-income young people, ages 14 to 24 years⁴, through Youth Ready Chicago, Chicago's SYEP. Combined with the city-funded stand-alone youth summer jobs program, over 20,000 youth jobs were created in Chicago. While over 20,000 Chicago youth gained summer work opportunities and work readiness training last summer, it is important to recognize that 79,000 youth applied to participate in a summer employment opportunity, nearly doubling the total applicants in 2008 and indicating the significant need for a large-scale youth summer employment program.⁵

Several entities, including the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC)⁶, have engaged in local and national evaluations of the SYEP under ARRA. These evaluations considered performance data submitted to DOL's Employment and Training Administration (ETA); qualitative interviews with local workforce administrators and participants; in-depth site visits; and feedback from youth, SYEP providers, and employers through surveys and focus groups. Though the details of the evaluations differ, they all agree that the overall positive impact of the SYEP was considerable. In order to continue having a large scale effect on youth unemployment, continued and adequate federal investment in summer youth employment programs is essential. More specifically, based on these evaluations, CJC has identified several key recommendations to improve programming, implementation, administration, and the overall positive impact of future summer employment programs.

Recommendations

Enrollment and Eligibility Determination

The most significant challenge of the SYEP, in Chicago and many workforce areas across the nation, was documenting the eligibility of the youth being enrolled in the program. Local workforce administrators, contracted SYEP providers, worksites, as well as youth participants and their parents, all identified the process of documenting eligibility as a major challenge. Enrollment into the WIA-funded program required youth and parents to submit documents to prove age, residence, household size and family income, TANF or food stamp eligibility, selective service and work status, and presence of additional barriers to employment. This involved significant effort, and often frustration, on the part of youth and parents, especially if they did not already have or were unable to collect all of the required documents. Additionally, it was both time intensive and administratively demanding for local workforce administrators to collect the documents and input the data into state's online database. While this eligibility documentation process is used in the year round WIA program, the large number of participants and the short time frame for enrollment into the SYEP made it particularly challenging.

The local Chicago workforce administrator, as well as many of the SYEP providers, reported that the eligibility documentation process greatly affected the overall implementation of the summer program. The administrative time dedicated to documenting eligibility took away from time and energy that would have focused on creative program design, youth readiness training, appropriate job matching, and ensuring quality work experiences. In order to make future summer employment programs easier to administer, and allow for a greater focus to be placed on program quality, it is important to simplify the eligibility documentation and enrollment processes.

Work Readiness Assessment Tool

A main provision for the SYEP was that only one key indicator, the achievement of work readiness goals, would be used to measure program performance. The DOL provided local areas with a definition of achieving work readiness goals, and gave local areas the flexibility to choose the assessment tool to be used. Thus, work readiness assessment tools and activities varied across states and local areas. Illinois decided to employ a uniform work readiness tool in all 26 local workforce areas. All local WIA administrators and providers used the statewide, online work readiness tool that is used in the year round WIA programs. While using a common assessment tool made it possible to have a standard measurement of work readiness across local areas, many Chicago SYEP providers reported that the statewide work readiness tool was not appropriate for youth. Instead of being used uniformly across all ages of youth, providers felt that the tool should be tailored to more targeted age groups in order to increase its effectiveness with youth at different levels of education and work experience. Providers also cited the need for a tool that is more suitable for youth with barriers to employment.

For future summer youth employment programs, it is important that providers utilize a work readiness tool that is appropriate for the population of youth being served. The tool's activities and assessments should be suitable in terms of age and educational levels and should be appropriate for youth with a range of barriers to employment. Additionally, in order for young people to more effectively demonstrate work readiness skills on the job, the work readiness tool should be coupled with work readiness training sessions. The combination of an assessment tool that is tailored to participants' needs and that incorporates interactive work readiness training will allow all participants to gain the most from their summer employment experience.

Connecting Youth with Year Round Workforce Development Services

In order for youth to gain the most from their summer employment experience and work readiness training, it is important that they have the opportunity to transition to year round workforce development services and employment. While many youth expressed an interest in continuing their employment and work readiness training opportunities beyond the summer, the ability to do so was often missed due to both lack of guidance by local areas and inadequate funding for year round WIA services.

To address this, it is important that local areas inform their SYEP providers and youth participants about how to transition to appropriate year round workforce services and employment opportunities. Generally, youth are eligible to transition to regular WIA Youth and Adult formula-funded programs, or other workforce development programs in the local area, such as CDBG programs.

Additionally, while providing the guidance and administrative support necessary to transition youth to year round work readiness training and employment is important, increased federal funding for youth workforce development is necessary to make this possible. In Chicago, only 2,200 youth, ages 16 to 21 years, are served through the year round WIA Youth program, while 8,100 youth participated in the ARRA-funded SYEP this past summer. This represents a significant gap in available youth employment services. In order for more youth to transition to year round work readiness and employment programs, and build upon their SYEP experiences, increases in federal WIA funding is critical.

Targeted Recruitment and Tailored Services for Older Youth

The DOL expanded the age range for ARRA WIA Youth activities to include older youth, ages 22 to 24 years. This was an important provision, considering that a significant portion of this population lacks work readiness skills and real work experience, including those who are enrolled in post-secondary education. Recent college graduates and other young adults are experiencing an increased jobless rate, even as the national unemployment rate has decreased. For example, the employment rate for young adults in their early twenties in Illinois was only 60 percent in 2009, which is 12 percent below its value in 2000.⁷ While approximately 9 percent of Chicago's SYEP participants were ages 22 to 24 years, the need for employment opportunities for this population is significantly larger.⁸

In order to increase participation of older youth in future summer youth employment efforts, it is important to consider the characteristics of this population when promoting the program. It is essential that local areas do not characterize the program as being for 'youth' only, since potential participants may assume that the program is only for individuals ages 21 years and younger. Recruitment and marketing efforts should emphasize that the

program will be customized to meet the work readiness and employment needs of older youth, so that participants understand that the program will be appropriate and beneficial to them. Work readiness activities and assessments, the types of job placements, and support services must all be customized to address the unique needs of older youth.

Expanded Work and Training Opportunities

When surveyed at the end of the SYEP, both participants and providers overwhelmingly expressed the need for increased work hours and weeks, as well as a more extensive job readiness training component, in order to augment the positive impacts of the program. In Chicago, the average work experience was 6.4 weeks, with participants working an average of 23 hours per week.⁹ While the majority of Chicago SYEP participants reported that the program helped them to gain skills and prepare for their academic and professional careers, they also felt strongly that increased program opportunities would improve the overall benefit of the SYEP.

In order to increase the time on the job and dedicated to work readiness training, local areas must be able to begin program preparation earlier. Given the tight time frame for implementing the 2009 SYEP, local areas had to rush to enroll eligible youth and place them into jobs. If future programs allow program design, recruitment, and the eligibility verification process to begin earlier in the year, SYEP providers will be able to dedicate more time to work readiness training, careful job matching, and ensuring quality work sites. This will ultimately enable youth to gain additional professional skills and experience and make greater contributions to local employers.

Conclusion

Though CJC has several recommendations for improving the ARRA Summer Youth Employment Program of 2009, it was a successful program overall. This infusion of federal funding provided over 300,000 disadvantaged youth across the country, and over 8,000 in Chicago, with a meaningful work experience. Without this investment, the majority of these young people would likely have been unemployed last summer. The SYEP enabled youth to gain experience in a professional setting, develop workplace skills, explore potential careers, and earn much needed income. Additionally, it provided a first work experience for many young people.

Unfortunately, without continued federal investment, this successful program will not be replicable in future years. The many local and national evaluations of the SYEP highlight its overall successes for our nation's youth and underscore the significant need for establishing a permanent, designated federal funding stream for youth summer employment. Now, more than ever, we must prioritize investment in work experiences and related training for our nation's young people.

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¹ Andrew Sum, *The Collapse of the Nation's Labor Market for Teens and Young Adults (20-24): Designing A Set of Workforce Development Strategies to Improve the Immediate and Long-Term Employment Prospects of the Nation's Youth* (Presentation), Center for Labor Market Studies, May 2009. View at: <http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/>.

² Jeanne Bellotti, Linda Rosenberg, Samina Sattar, Andrea Mraz Esposito, and Jessica Ziegler, *Reinvesting in America's Youth: Lessons from the 2009 Recovery Act Summer Youth Employment Initiative*, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., February 2010. View at: http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/newsroom/releases/2010/ARRA_youth_emp_3_10.asp.

³ U.S. Department of Labor. *Performance and Accountability Report FY 2009*. Washington, D.C.: DOL, 2009a.

⁴ The demographics of participants served through Chicago's SYEP mirrored the program nationally, with the exception that Chicago served a higher percentage of out-of-school youth (43% vs. 36%). Almost two-thirds of Chicago participants were ages 14 to 18 years and 36 percent were ages 19 to 24 years. [From Hollander et al.(cited below)]

⁵ Allison Hollander, Christian Denes, and Anthony Raden, *Youth Ready Chicago Participant Survey: Examining Youth and Employer Feedback on Chicago's 2009 Summer Jobs Program*, Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, Updated March 2010. View at: http://www.cityofchicago.org/content/dam/city/depts/fss/supp_info/Policy/YouthReadyChicago2009ParticipantSurveyReport.pdf.

⁶ *Summary: Youth Ready Chicago Hub Feedback Sessions*. Chicago Jobs Council, December 2009. View at: <http://www.cjc.net/publications/>.

⁷ Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, and Joseph McLaughlin, *The Lost Decade for Teen and Young Adult Employment in Illinois: The Current Depression in the Labor Market for 16-24 Year Olds in the Nation and State*, Center for Labor Market Studies, January 2010.

⁸ Hollander et al.

⁹ Hollander et al.