



WHAT'S WORKING

A Message From DJJ Director Andy Block

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A Big STEP To Youth Success

CSU 7/City Partnership To Provide Summer Jobs For 600 Kids In Only 3rd Year Of Program

In recent years, the City of Newport News has seen an increase in juvenile and young adult related homicides, as well as youth involvement in gangs, drugs, and gun violence. To reverse this trend, in FY2014 the Newport News City Council funded a Youth and Gang Violence Prevention Initiative in the amount of \$1.1 million.

The initiative was comprehensively researched and structured after the U.S. Office on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the National Gang Center's evidence-based Comprehensive Gang Model. "The support, depth, and structure of the Initiative are unique to the Comprehensive Gang Model," says Newport News Assistant City Manager Alan K. Archer. "An Executive Committee, Steering Committee, and Intervention Team guide our work to support the mission of reducing the number of youth who are involved in negative, criminal, or gang-related crime."

The Summer Training and Enrichment Program (STEP) is one component of the Initiative to increase positive outcomes for youth and young adults in the



The STEP Partnership

Above: CSU 7-Newport News Probation Officer Michelle Burroughs-Vanhook has recruited hundreds of at-risk youth into the STEP program. Group photo, from left: Newport City Assistant City Manager Alan K. Archer; CSU 7 Director Lotus Wheeler; Newport News City Manager James M. Bourey; Newport News Youth Gang and Violence Coordinator MaRhonda Echols.

community between the ages of 16 to 24 through employment and exposure to the world of work. CSU 7 Director Lotus Wheeler has been involved since the early planning stages of the program. "My role in this great collaborative effort of our city was to provide insight and numbers regarding the court and juvenile justice system" Wheeler says. "This included compiling data specific to the number of gang-involved youth within our city."

The 10-week program is designed to provide participants with meaningful work readiness training, paid experience at a partner worksite, weekly program enrichment activities, GED preparation, transportation assistance, and end-of-program transitioning assistance for out-of-school youth. Participants are permitted to work up to 30 hours per week and earn between \$7.25 and \$8 per hour depending on their completion of high school or GED. All wages are covered by STEP and there are no direct costs for employers to serve as a host work site other than in-kind supervision while participants are working. To provide work experience for the participants, partnerships were created with private sector businesses, City departments, Newport News Public Schools, non-profits, higher education, and faith-based organizations.

MaRhonda Echols, Newport News' Youth Gang and Violence Prevention Coordinator, stated that the initial plan was to bring 100 participants into the program. However, the response was overwhelming. The City received 160 applications, and decided not to turn anyone away. As a result, every participant was placed at a work site.

In 2015, the number of STEP participants nearly doubled to 316. CSU 7 Probation Officer Michelle



600 Kids To Benefit In 2016

In only its third year of existence, Newport News' STEP program expects to provide summer jobs for 600 kids. The successful partnership between the City of Newport News, CSU 7-Newport News and 64 participating employers has resulted in a 17 percent decrease in juvenile criminal offenses.

Burroughs-Vanhook joined the STEP team to help recruit at-risk youth into the program. "The most amazing thing about this program is that it's strictly voluntary," Michelle says. "No one is telling these kids they have to do it. They are seeing the value in it for themselves and wanting to do something constructive during the summer."

Since STEP was initiated two years ago, 500 youth and young adults have participated in the program with an 80.4 retention rate last year. To date, 64 organizations have partnered with the City to provide worksite training opportunities for participants. Thirty youth gained full-time employment as a result.

With an exponentially growing program now on their hands, STEP organizers will cap the number of participants for 2016 at 600. "This also will allow us to be a little more selective about the applicants we choose," Echols says. "In the first two years, we sometimes had kids that really didn't want to be there. Our goal is to have every youth who begins the program graduate." Applicants

also will be accepted from a wider geographic area in the city this year. The City Manager's recommended general fund operating budget for FY 2017 increases funding for the program to \$1.5 million.

The program's remarkable success has resulted in features in the local Daily Press newspaper and on local TV news broadcasts. Wheeler reports that the combined efforts of STEP and the school system's Summer Program for Arts, Recreation and Knowledge created many opportunities for youth and young adults last summer. These initiatives, along with changes to the City's curfew ordinance and increased law enforcement, were responsible for a 17 percent decrease in juvenile criminal offenses compared to the same 60-day period last summer.

"The STEP program is another great example of a community partnership that has really worked," Wheeler says. "The city leadership has been extremely proactive from the beginning, and it's making a big difference."