

STIMULUS WATCH: Teens lack jobs despite job effort

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By GARANCE BURKE
Associated Press Writer

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) - The Obama administration's economic stimulus program to find jobs for thousands of teenagers this summer couldn't overcome one of the bleakest job markets in more than 60 years that had desperate adults competing for the same kind of work.

Almost one-quarter of the 297,169 youths in the \$1.2 billion jobs program didn't get jobs, as more adults flooded the labor market seeking similar low-wage positions at hamburger stands and community pools, according to an Associated Press review of government data and reports from states.

Congressional auditors warned Wednesday that the government's plans to measure the success of the federal program are so haphazard that they "may reveal little about what the program achieved." The new report from the Government Accountability Office also said many government officials, employers and participants believe the program was successful.

"After a decade without a dedicated federal summer jobs program, the effort created opportunities for young people that would have not existed otherwise," Labor Secretary Hilda Solis said in a statement Wednesday. "We have succeeded in our efforts to increase job skills and career readiness for our nation's youth through this targeted program."

Vice President Joe Biden described the Workforce Investment Act summer program as a way to keep teens out of trouble and off the streets while reinvigorating the country's summer youth employment program, which had gone dormant for a decade. But the program didn't prevent youth unemployment rates from soaring to 18.5 percent in July, the highest rate measured among 16- to 24-year-olds in that month since 1948.

"The summer program was basically half-disaster," said Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston. "It was too little, too late and too poorly constructed to have any lasting effect on our youngest workers."

Cameron Hinojosa, 16, went through a two-day stimulus-funded workshop on how to write a resume. But he didn't end up with a job because the summer program in Fresno County, in the heart of recession-battered central California, had already ended.

"When I went in I was hoping I would get a job and was looking forward to getting that extra money," said Hinojosa, who had planned to share his earnings with his mother to pay bills for their household of eight. "You get some adults that got laid off from their jobs, so you still have to work against them."

In Illinois, the GAO said, some local officials didn't follow eligibility rules. Paperwork was missing from some files in California. Some youths who got jobs through the program had trouble collecting their paychecks, waiting in lines up to four hours in the rain, and sometimes police were called to help with crowd control, the GAO said.

In Pennsylvania and Connecticut, bureaucratic holdups kept some young workers from entering training programs until July, cutting into summer job opportunities, the AP's review found. In California, which received about 16 percent of all funds nationwide, less than half the participants in all stimulus-funded youth job programs reported getting jobs by the end of July, the most recent month for which state and national youth employment figures are available.

"Things are still totally chaotic with this program," said Rachel Gragg, federal policy director for The Workforce Alliance, a Washington-based group that advocates for more national job training funds. "In many communities they will tell you that they are still struggling to understand where the money is and where it is coming from."

Despite the challenges, many states put together strong programs that gave needy teens experience in everything from banking to restoring nature trails, as well as year-round skills training and mentoring support, Gragg said.

Labor Department officials acknowledge they are still working out the kinks, and say even if not all participants got jobs, the program has helped youth build valuable professional skills that will serve them and the national economy.

"We don't think everybody is perfect, but we think there is a lot of good news coming out of this program," said Jane Oates, the department's assistant secretary for employment and training. "If there were mistakes made we're happy to correct them, because we want to make sure that this program sticks around."

To qualify for the one-time program under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, job-seekers had to be 14 to 24 years old and from families living at or below the poverty line, or meet other income criteria. States were encouraged to use the federal money to create summer jobs, but also could use it in year-round programs for youth.

New York, which has run its own summer employment program for years, was ready to channel those funds to placement specialists from Manhattan to the Catskills, and by August, had hired 24,000 youth, job training officials reported.

Massachusetts officials said they had trouble placing teen job-seekers with private employers, many of whom opted out of the program to hire experienced older workers or young college graduates. Labor officials in other states said such problems were common.

"It's kind of hard to convince companies to hire teens for summer jobs when they're laying off their adult workers," Mary Sarris, who heads the North Shore Workforce Investment Board in Salem, Mass. "This is the worst summer we've ever seen."

In November, California auditors cited a litany of financial problems at the Los Angeles County Department of Community and Senior Services, including overpayments to its director and \$1.27 million in questionable costs that the agency still hasn't fully accounted for.

The agency received nearly \$15 million in stimulus funds for youth jobs training this summer. Officials said the director's salary had been adjusted, other accounting problems corrected and about 5,400 participants found jobs.

"There are so many passthroughs before this program actually turns into money that helps the population it's intended to help that it's almost criminal," said Laura Chick, who was appointed inspector general by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to watch over California's stimulus funds. "If the local board isn't watching what they're doing, even less money is getting to where it's supposed to go, especially if it is being siphoned off to pay for administrative expenses."

Once the summer program ends this month, states won't have to show that teens actually got jobs. The Department of Labor's only requirement is that graduates be more "workforce ready," a term all states can measure for themselves.

Ashley Maydon, who was among the nearly 2,660 youth the Fresno County board placed with employers, said she was sorry her \$8-per-hour summer job would finish at the end of the month.

"I wish it could last longer, because it's a good experience and it's my first job," said Maydon. "It's really hard to get a job right now, especially if you're young."

(This version CORRECTS number of participants in jobs program from 279,169 to 297,169.)

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