

City youth gain 400 jobs for summer

Opportunities hope to stem wave of violence

By Meghan E. Irons and June Q. Wu, Globe Staff | Globe Correspondent | June 29, 2010

Boston officials, hoping to stem a wave of early-summer violence, announced more than 400 new summer jobs and new summer school programs for at-risk youth.

Private foundations and nonprofits donated \$635,000 to the city to hire 423 additional individuals ages 14 to 24 in three city neighborhoods that have recently faced violent involving young people: Franklin Field, Grove Hall, and the Bowdoin-Geneva area, which includes Four Corners in Dorchester, officials said.

Meanwhile, the Boston public schools are launching a revamped summer school curriculum targeting ninth-grade students who have failed or struggled.

"We need to pull together," said Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who announced the additional jobs at the Holland Community Center in Dorchester yesterday.

Officials said they are trying to direct the jobs to places that can use it the most.

"What's unique about this effort is that the funds are targeted to where they're needed most, and we will track the outcome," said Joe McGrail, vice president of community affairs at State Street Corp., which led the initiative called Youth Violence Prevention Funders Collaborative.

Those backing the effort include Liberty Mutual, the Lenny Zakim Fund, the Boston Foundation, and the United Way of Eastern Massachusetts.

City officials have also received grants to hire teens with criminal records, said Conny Doty, who heads Boston's Jobs and Community Services Department.

Though faced with budget constraints, she said, the city has so far hired some 7,000 teenagers and young adults, down from the nearly 10,000 employed last year. Jobs range from working in day camps, cleaning city parks, and helping out at organic farms. More than 12,000 have filled out applications this year and are still awaiting work, Doty said.

Jobs, she and other officials said, build critical life, networking, and employment skills, and they help to curb crime.

“People need to earn money, and this program is focusing on young people who come from low-income families and who don’t have the kind of connections that middle-income youths have,” she said.

The employment rate for African-American teens is 13 percent, and 19 percent for Latino teens, said Doty, quoting a recent Northeastern University study.

Speaking at the press conference yesterday afternoon, Menino said his administration has long been committed to offering summer jobs even as the city faces funding cuts from the state and federal government. He lauded other private businesses, including John Hancock and Bank of America for also helping to get city teens employed.

But more should be done, he said.

The jobs effort coincides with the summer-school initiative of the Boston public schools, which officials said will provide additional hours for reading, math, and science for ninth-graders and give them opportunities to talk openly about the impact the violence is having on their lives.

“We really want to take this opportunity while we have a captive audience of ninth-graders to say, ‘Let’s talk about some of these issues, talk about what you’re going through as a teen,’ ” said Shonda Huery, the district’s assistant chief academic officer.

The department also plans to add weekly field trips for the first time and two extra hours for art, music, and dance lessons for all summer school students. In addition, Huery said, each ninth-grader will be given a copy of “All Souls: A Family Story from Southie,” Michael Patrick MacDonald’s memoir detailing his experiences growing up South Boston at a time of economic duress and social strife.

Huery said that Boston high school principals first approached her with concerns that the previous summer school curriculum was not enough to capture the interest of struggling ninth-graders.

“They were the first individuals to say, ‘You have to do something different to get them there,’ ” Huery said. “If we could keep them engaged for five weeks, get them excited for school, it will be easier for them to transition to the 10th grade.”

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