

Say Yes to New YES Program

By Jim Heck, Executive Director, Grow Southwest Indiana Workforce

A coalition of public and private organizations in Southwest Indiana is working together in a creative effort to improve the employment prospects of at-risk youth in the region.

Aimed at youth between the ages of 17 and 25, the program is called Youth Employment Services, or YES. It is an effort we hope will become a critical component of our area's workforce development system.

To review some statistical and anecdotal evidence that help frame the import of this program:

High school students from lower income level households, as indicated by free and reduced lunch program participation, graduate at a rate of 70 percent while those not on this program graduate at a much higher 87.5 percent rate. Those who do not graduate often are the children of high school dropouts and, thus most at risk of continuing in the cycle of poverty. In addition, our current workforce is aging, and many area employers are foreseeing high turnover and vacancy rates in the near future. This information underscores the vital importance of increasing the available workforce pool. No individuals should be written off as unemployable.

What is significant about the YES program is that, unlike many programs, private investment will be utilized to provide services, not typically covered by government funding, to the targeted youth. These services are a critical factor in determining whether or not an individual becomes "employable" and hence a contributor to our society and economy.

Here's how the program will work:

First, the program will provide participants with an array of opportunities that will not only help them obtain the necessary education and skills needed for today's workforce but will provide additional community services not presently available under existing programs. These additional community services are designed to break down barriers that often prevent an individual from becoming employed.

It is important to note that the community-based organizations (CBOs) which typically provide services to at-risk youth have become more and more unable to focus their resources on education, training and employability programs. Rather, because of funding and budget limitations, the CBOs currently focus on short-term, immediate needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare assistance.

As a result, there is a gap in services for youth such as GED preparation and other skill and job training services so vital to long term employability. The vouchers funded by our private sector partners will help fill the gap in providing these services and will be used in cases where other funds are limited due to eligibility, timeliness, or other system barriers. Grants of up to \$500 will help fund transportation or child care or help the individual with other "barriers" that limit their employability. These funds will be released to the community organization, which will assure the money is used effectively.

Bottom line: Community resources are thus maximized to help an at-risk workforce become more employable. The goal or end result of our effort is to provide companies with a more trainable workforce.

Secondly, Work One Southwest and the Grow Southwest Indiana Workforce Board are the public agencies involved in helping bring this program to reality. Together, these two organizations oversee and provide a variety of workforce development services to ensure that our region has a talented and capable pool of workers for area employers. These two workforce agencies have been joined in this effort by YouthBuild and the YWCA.

Thirdly, what's also impressive about the program is the commitment of several employers in the region -- who have chosen to invest, not only their funds, but the energies of their staffs in helping ensure that the programs efforts become top notch. Three leading employers: Vectren Corporation, German American Bank, and Toyota Motor Manufacturing Indiana (TMMI) have committed to the YES effort. Together, these organizations have stepped up to the plate, helped us identify a key problem in the training and employability of a difficult-to-employ youth population, and are providing us with resources to solve this problem.

We hope to add many other employers and not-for profit organizations to our collective efforts. This is an excellent opportunity for area businesses and employers along with workforce development to build the current goal of a pipeline of skilled workers for today's workforce needs. To become involved in this effort, please contact Jim Heck (jim.heck@workonesw.org or 812-604-5840).