

Students learn valuable job skills in youth employment program

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Hundreds of local residents have spent the past six weeks developing valuable skills as part of a county wide effort to promote youth employment and improve the environment.

The students are part of the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps. The six week program includes 250 at-risk county residents between the ages of 14 and 24 working at sites around the county. Participants were chosen for the program after completing an application process and are paid \$8 per hour. The program is funded through a \$1.2 million grant from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Five non profits applied for grant money to oversee the project in different regions of the county. Seven municipalities and 15 other organizations provided work opportunities for students.

The Center for Social and Environmental Stewardship (CSES) oversaw the project in Northern Sonoma County including approximately 10 Healdsburg residents. Nancy Lesa, executive director for the CSES, said students have been building bird boxes, creating animal habitats, conducting trail maintenance, removing weeds, painting benches and creating fire breaks around the area.

She said the program provides more than a paycheck. "It's an example of kids having a hands on opportunity to develop skills that will help them become employable," she said.

Windsor participants have been constructing a community garden near town hall. Crew member Kendell Jack said he felt a sense of accomplishment from the project. "After seeing the final product, I can say that I built that with my hands," he said.

Eduardo Martinez said working with a team was a valuable experience. "It makes me happy to accomplish something with the crew," he said.

In each case, participants are working on projects within their community. Lesa said that was a deliberate goal of the program. "When we wrote the grant we wanted to have kids in their own towns. That's why we're in three different locations. We want them to walk past maybe the

bench they painted and feel pride,” she said.

Kathleen Roberts Program Director for Adult & Youth Employment Services for West County Community Services, organized west county projects including work for the Sonoma County Water Agency, Chanslor Wildlife LLC, the Russian River Keeper and the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods.

Two west county participants undertook individual internships while the remaining 24 students were divided into four six-man work crews. The crews rotated through several worksites including Chanslor Ranch in Bodega Bay, Fife Creek in Guernville, Mirabel Pond in Forestville and several other locations around the area.

Roberts said the program helped teach students about their surroundings while providing an opportunity to work. “These young people are getting to know their own environment,” she said. “It’s not just working on the crews, it’s also an education.”

While the students develop skills of life-long value, Lesa said the community at large also benefits. “You’re growing future community leaders, potentially,” she said.

Roberts said the focus on at-risk youth had a long-term benefit. “(The program) gives them an opportunity to make money and be productive,” she said. “It’s been proven that the more productive people are, the more they can contribute and the less likely they are to get into trouble.”