

## Kids at work: Madison is investing in youth employment to address disparities and crime



- PHOTO BY SAIYNA BASHIR

Wesley Underhill, 16, has been a part of several youth employment programs. He is currently a Wanda Fullmore intern and works part-time at the East Side Club.

- PHOTO BY MICHELLE STOCKER

Michelle Flores, 15, of Madison, cleans the silverware at Ironworks Cafe during the teen employment program at the Goodman Community Center in Madison.

Wesley Underhill, 16, was having one of those mornings.

He dropped his phone in a toilet the day before, rendering it, and its alarm clock, useless. After waking up late for work and missing the bus, he decided to call a cab but ran into more trouble.

“Phone books aren’t even a thing anymore, so I had to call the operator,” Underhill, 16, said. “Did you know you could do that?”

He arrived about an hour late for his shift at the Lakeview Library, but emphasized that he still showed up, despite the obstacles.

“If I have to walk to work, I will,” Underhill said. “There's no excuse on why you shouldn't come (to work).”

Underhill worked at the library this summer through Madison's Wanda Fullmore internship program, founded by Mayor Paul Soglin in 2014. This city-funded program, run by Common Wealth Development, is for high school sophomores and juniors who face barriers to employment due to racial and socioeconomic disparities in the community.

Interest in the program has grown over the past three summers, from 22 interns in 2014 to 33 in 2015 and 52 this past summer. Rachel Darken, youth programs director with Common Wealth, said the program received over 120 applications.

“Just by having a youth working somewhere in the city, whether it's in city government or local businesses, they start to understand more parts of their community and become more connected,” Darken said. “They start to see the community they live in a little bit differently.”

The 52 Wanda Fullmore interns joined the approximately 631 youth employment positions supported by the city this year, according to Madison Community Development Division data. This number is up from 101 paid internships or jobs for youth in 2005.

Madison's financial commitment to youth employment opportunities has increased from \$73,848 to \$753,472 in the same time frame. The city's effort and investment reflect a priority of putting kids to work as a way of addressing not just educational, social and economic disparities, but violence and other crime.

A goal of the Fullmore internship, Darken said, is to help youth plan for the future and develop skills and connections. It is important to note that students are earning money while working and learning. As a Fullmore intern, Underhill works 20 hours a week for about eight weeks and is paid \$9 per hour. He also works several hours a week at the Slide food cart, earning \$10 per hour.



Erieona Martin, an Operation Fresh Start student, serves on the organization's policy committee.

PHOTO BY SAIYNA BASHIR

Underhill said he has held jobs since middle school, including a stint on Briarpatch's street team. He lives with his grandmother on Madison's east side, attends the Gateway to College program at Madison College and said his income is "highly necessary" to buy shoes, clothes, food and other necessities.

"You shouldn't have to need money," Underhill said of teenagers. "I'd rather go have fun, go to school and go to football games and have time for my homework and all that good stuff."

Working from early on has given Underhill a different work ethic than other young people who do not have to work, Underhill said.

"Are you willing to pick up extra shifts? I'm on call personally," Underhill said. "My motto is, 'Why am I going to miss out on making some money while trying to go spend some money?' That doesn't make any sense."

### **Youth employment a priority**

When Mayor Paul Soglin returned to office in 2011, he renewed a focus on creating summer employment opportunities for Madison's youth, picking up on efforts from when he held office in the 1990s.

"The focus I have is to provide opportunity and a doorway to a future that broadens the young person's potential," Soglin said. "Whether it's in terms of employment or in terms of academics or in terms of their

families, whether it's the effort we made in the '90s or the work that we're doing now, it's getting us as a society to transition from the limited scope of charity to opening up opportunity."

Youth employment is often held up as an antidote for a number of community problems like violence, gangs and delinquency.

Mary O'Donnell, the city's youth services coordinator, said in her 21 years with the city, she has seen funding for youth employment increase along with a greater prioritization from the City Council and mayor on providing jobs to youth.

"I would say the uptick really started in the last 10 years with the increased focus on gangs and delinquency and low income neighborhoods," O'Donnell said. "From the municipal side, we're really looking at high needs situations, high needs neighborhoods."

A recent study of a summer jobs program called One Summer Plus, open to at-risk students in high-violence Chicago public high schools, showed a 43 percent reduction in arrests for violent crime among participants over a 16-month period.

Keeping the younger segment of the population engaged in summer jobs can also improve school attendance, academic outcomes and bolster soft skills like responsibility, positive work habits and self-confidence, according to a 2014 Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management report.

In May, after a string of connected homicides in Madison, Aids. Maurice Cheeks, District 10, and Matt Phair, District 20, introduced a set of gun violence reduction initiatives that included expanding youth employment in the city.

Cheeks and Phair also pushed for an amendment to the 2016 budget that added an additional \$125,000 for a private sector internship program, raising the total amount to \$200,000. Phair is a middle school teacher and Cheeks originally went to school to become a high school teacher and serves on the Foundation for Madison Public Schools board of directors.

"Cities are made up of people, and if we aren't investing in youth ... at the end of the day, I'm not sure what all of the rest of our city's investments are meant for," Cheeks said.



Keith Pollock, TEENworks manager, at the Goodman Community Center in Madison.

PHOTO BY MICHELLE STOCKER

Phair added: "I think we have a lot of gaps to fill, but I think we have good leaders in the field ... who will work with some of the other groups around town."

Investing in youth employment was also included in a merged report from the Focused Interruption Coalition, comprised of community and grassroots leaders and activists. The group introduced a \$3 million multi-stage set of 15 recommendations to reduce violence in the community, which Soglin supported.

It remains to be seen if these will be included in his 2017 executive budget. Soglin introduced the executive capital budget Tuesday and is scheduled to release the operating budget on Oct. 4.

"Now our focus is to take care of the commitments we have already made and to ultimately reach that goal that every teenager who wants a summer job will have one," Soglin said.

To keep the city moving forward, Soglin encouraged participation from the private sector and effective coordination of nonprofit agencies.

"We can't provide all the jobs. We can't provide all the funding and financial resources and we shouldn't," Soglin said. "We can't run the nonprofits. But what we can do is encourage better alignment."

### **Organizing opportunities**

While Madison is making youth employment a priority, many say the current structure of community and municipal agencies involved need to collaborate on the effort. One solution is to harness unique skill sets to create a stair-step approach to youth employment.

Hugh Wing works in Briarpatch's youth job center and is the youth services organization's street team coordinator. He said one difficulty is the competitive process these agencies undergo to apply for city funds. The competition by nature prevents agencies from working together.

But in March, Briarpatch, Common Wealth, Operation Fresh Start and the Madison Metropolitan School District applied individually for a total of \$200,000 to jointly create a Madison area youth service network.



Michelle Flores, 15, of Madison, checks the items in the cooler at Ironworks Cafe during the teen employment program at the Goodman Community Center in Madison.

PHOTO BY MICHELLE STOCKER

“We have to work together,” Wing said. “We have to identify each agency's special interests and skills and then have a comprehensive approach, so at the end of it you've got a collective impact (and we're) leaving something with the community.”

In action, this could mean a 14-year-old like Josephine Looper, who is working on Briarpatch's street team cleaning up downtown Madison for \$7.25 per hour, would be able to follow a pathway of jobs and higher pay.

Looper said she heard about Briarpatch's program through her sister, but it's not easy to learn about jobs for teenagers and they're difficult to get.

“I feel like people don't take kids seriously as in they want the job and they're going to try hard for it,” Looper said while working a morning shift at the Tenney Park Locks. “I feel like a lot of kids are probably taking care of their family members ... while their parents and stuff are at work.”

Briarpatch helps fund satellite teams in the Bayview and Brentwood neighborhoods in addition to a community food cart internship. Students who participate in these programs, as well as on the street teams, also receive class credit through MMSD.

Briarpatch's variety of youth development opportunities allows young people to learn on the job before it becomes necessary to hold down full-time employment as an adult. If a teen misses a shift, a coordinator will use that as a teaching moment.

“I want to build a program where a young person can make their mistakes and learn from it while they're getting paid for it, so when they go to work they understand what's expected,” Wing said.

Keith Pollock, Goodman Community Center TEENworks manager, said creating a strong network of youth employment job agencies will help more youth in the community.

“We find that a lot of us are working with either the same youth or the same type of youth, and we wanted to be able to find the best fit for individuals,” Pollock said.

Goodman's best fit is training youth for jobs within the food service industry. With commercial-style kitchens and an in-building cafe, teenagers can learn to navigate a food industry job through the TEENworks program.

Program participants walk away with certification, assistance with finding a job in the food service industry, a reference for future jobs and class credit.

Operation Fresh Start, an education and training organization for young adults, could serve as an outlet for youth such as Erieona Martin looking for an alternative to traditional school and employment.

“Our niche in the overall youth employment services in the community is really at that transition point of folks transitioning from being a youth to being an adult,” OFS executive director Greg Markle said.

The program, which receives city funding, connects kids to jobs in conservation or construction and provides classroom time, so students still graduate with high school diplomas. Martin recently graduated from the program after attending Madison Memorial High School and another alternative education program.

Martin struggled to focus in school because of her mother's health problems and some anger management issues. But she said working in construction has helped her deal with the pain and frustration she deals with at home.

"The main struggle for me probably would be my mom's health issues, but then coming here, it's a barrier just because I'm building a house and I'm working with a hammer and nails," Martin said. "Since I've been here I don't really get angry as much as I used to. I'm using my hands, and I don't always have to fight to do something."

Assisting youth in a transition period from high school to employment or postsecondary education by combining education and paid work experience allows students to focus on one program without splitting time between school and work. Martin said she often missed school to earn money.

