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## Empowerment program aims to help city's young adults

By Natasha Clark

Assistant Managing Editor

SPRINGFIELD Last fall the Urban League of Springfield Inc. received a grant worth \$236,250 from the Department of Labor to help "high risk" young adults gain employment opportunities through the Urban Youth Empowerment Program (UYEP).

The program was created to implement a comprehensive workforce development program for 45 out of school 18-21 year olds with educational and employment opportunities. So far only seven have officially signed on to the program.

"It's basically a work force continuum. The goal is to continue to build job readiness skills," Dawn Leaks, director of Youth Development & Education at the Urban League of Springfield, said. "It's to help them improve in every area of their lives."

Leaks explained that UYEP offers GED training, community service and paid internships. She said those that participate in the the program are exposed to personal development, confidence building and financial skill sets. There is also a weekly \$50 stipend and participants are required to attend sessions from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily for 32 weeks.

Applicants have to pass a test to be accepted into the UYEP; they have to test at a sixth grade math and seventh grade reading level. Unfortunately, Leaks said that has been a challenge, too.

Andrew Cade, director at the League, said some of the people who have applied to participate in the program are even high school graduates, yet some still failed to meet the sixth grade math/seventh grade reading benchmark.

"It's really strange. We have had people who have come through and are interested in the program but can't reach the bench. The average [level of applicants] is third grade math and fourth grade reading," Cade said.

Cade said, of the students he's spoken to, a number of them cited boredom as the reason they left school.

"They understand that they can't get a job without their GED. Most of them have gotten caught up in drug activity or were bored in high school," Cade said.

The Urban League is funded to fill 45 slots in UYEP, which ends on May 31. If it is unsuccessful, it may not be funded again in the future. Cade said filling those slots and getting the participants the help they need is crucial.

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"This particular program is only funded for a three-year period. The National Urban League has to see if they can get refunded. It depends on what happens in Congress and what is able to be negotiated upon. If the program is funded [again] through the National Urban League they would have to evaluate [the local chapters that apply]," Cade explained. "We want to do the best that we can to try to get [people] in here to get them some skills. Most of them don't want to be in a structured program."

Beside internships that pay \$7 an hour in addition to the weekly \$50 community service stipend, UYEP also provides additional initiatives such as transportation, food, clothing and emotional support.

An advisory council comprised of the Hamden County Sheriff Department, the District Attorney's Office, Future Works Career Center, American International College, Faith Unlimited, Springfield Technical Community College, The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, Massachusetts Career Development Institute, AWAKE Inc., Holyoke Community College and Branford Career Institute has been put together to assist with the program, including referring possible applicants.

As of press time 38 slots remained open. For more information on the Urban Youth Empowerment Program, contact Andrew Cade at 739-7211 ext. 110.

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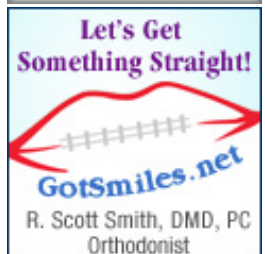
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