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## Stimulus Funds Fuel Summer Jobs

Get going now, be innovative and heed the new rules.

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It's not easy to spend \$1.2 billion quickly and well - as people who provide summer jobs for youth are about to find out.

The youth employment funds in the federal economic stimulus package provide a sudden boom for agencies that serve needy youth - but also new challenges, including short deadlines, eligibility requirements that some youth employment advocates see as cumbersome, and school districts ending their academic year as early as late May. On top of that, the nation is watching to make sure the stimulus money is spent well.

"I don't envy the people running these programs," said Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, in Washington, D.C.

He means people like Robert Bloom, president of the Solano County, Calif., Workforce Investment Board, who initially planned simply to replicate a program his agency ran nearly a decade ago. But after reflecting on how to meet the federal government's expectation that the jobs will provide a meaningful work experience for youth, Bloom said he realized the program needed to be "state-of-the-art" and "innovative."

So instead of the usual tactic of sending youths to work at public agencies and nonprofit groups, Bloom wants to operate special projects that are driven by specific sectors, such as the health care and manufacturing industries. "I'm having a spectrum between 'keep it simple,' so I can be sure to hit the ground running in implementing this program in a hurried fashion, versus innovating and bringing in some business-driven models that will prepare young people for careers," Bloom said.

Bloom's focus on specific industries is right in line with guidance issued last month by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration (ETA), which says stakeholders should "develop and refine innovative service delivery strategies in the context of regional economies."

Here's something else to keep in mind: As stimulus money for summer jobs moves to state workforce boards - the agencies that will administer the funds and contracts with service providers - everyone involved will be under pressure to meet the Labor Department's expectation to spend the money both expeditiously and effectively.

"In many ways, this is the first wave of the stimulus," Carnevale said of the summer jobs money. "The risk here is if the first wave looks like it's failing or there's lots of disorganization, it's going to make the rest of the stimulus stuff look bad."

Even workforce board directors in cities that have run summer youth employment programs admit they have a learning curve for using the stimulus funds.

"I'm a little anxious about it," said William J. Monagle, executive director of the Little Rock (Ark.) Workforce Investment Board. "I think we're up for the challenge, though, especially a city in our position, where we have a program in place."

### Restrictions

One of the first challenges is dealing with restrictions on how the money can be used.

The ETA prohibits the stimulus funds from being used for some jobs, including jobs at zoos, casinos, aquariums, golf courses and swimming pools.

There are also rules against using youths to replace people who've been laid off.

Perhaps most daunting, youth employment advocates worry that youths could have difficulty proving they are poor or disadvantaged enough to qualify for the program. For example, the rules do not allow agencies simply to use free and reduced lunch criteria to determine eligibility.

Mala Thakur, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based National Youth Employment Coalition, described the eligibility requirements as "cumbersome."

"I think there are some potential obstacles there," she said. "If it's hard to provide the documentation, you can't serve a young person."

Low-income means, among other things, that families that get cash payments under a federal, state or local income-based public assistance program or meet other complex criteria used to determine poverty.

Participants must also show that they have at least one of the barriers to education or employment identified in the Workforce Investment Act. Those barriers include being deficient in basic literacy skills, a high school dropout, homeless, a runaway, a foster child, pregnant or parenting, an offender or an individual who requires additional assistance to complete an education program or hold a job.

### The Best Approach?

Not everyone agrees on the best way to carry out the stimulus-funded programs.

John Twomey, executive director of the New York Association of Training and Employment Professionals, said youths should be put to work in small groups that are easy to supervise and be given more substantial attention.

"When you have 50 kids, you have some that are going to sit down and goof off," Twomey said, adding that smaller groups give supervisors more control and more time to teach practical skills.

But going small isn't universally accepted for all jobs. Consider the advice of Greg Weltz, director of the Office of Youth Services for the Labor Department. Urging attendees at the annual convention of the National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB) in last month to "think green," Weltz at the same time encouraged them to look for ways to get "large numbers of young people engaged," as opposed to having them work in "onesies and twosies."

Steve Corona, president of JobWorks in Fort Wayne, Ind., said it's important for agencies not to delve into uncharted territory this summer, because there is not enough time to plan. "Keep it simple," Corona said during the same panel discussion at the NAWB convention. "Don't try to get fancy this year. Plan carefully and set a manageable goal."

Because the funds can be used to help youths ages 14 to 24, Thakur said agencies should strive to reach older youths who may not be inclined to seek summer jobs.

Not all of the money, however, has to be spent on salaries. Some can be spent on education and training.

And it doesn't all have to be spent this summer, but the expectation is that most of it will be, said Byron Zuidema, Chicago's regional administrator for the ETA. "Even though the life of the funds extends over to 2011, let me say that we are not expecting that you're taking the money, dividing it" and running summer programs this year and in future years.

Weltz urged agencies to start recruiting youth and making other preparations immediately. The agencies can use stimulus funds retroactively to pay for any stimulus-related preparations made after Feb. 17, the date the stimulus package was signed into law.

#### Build on What You Have

While some workforce boards already have contracts with service providers to run summer jobs initiatives, Little Rock is an example of a city where new service providers may be able to get in on the action. Although the city has a contract with Arbor Education & Training, of Media, Pa., to run its summer jobs program, additional service providers may be needed.

The ETA guidance says states may seek waivers to expand existing contracts or to conduct expedited limited competitions for service providers, but in the latter case, the providers must have "proven records of success."

Monagle said Little Rock is looking to build on its existing summer jobs program. In recent years, 400 youths have worked summer jobs in Little Rock. Now the city will get \$504,000 in Recovery Act funds for summer youth employment, according to Monagle. Of that amount, \$280,000 will go to hire 200 more youths for 32 hours a week, for six to seven weeks.

The ETA's guidance on the stimulus act's summer jobs funds is at <http://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEGL/TEGL14-08.pdf>.

#### Federal Funds Flow for Youth Work

Never before has so much federal money been available for youth work so suddenly. The recently passed fiscal 2009 budget is a typical mixed bag, with a few cuts and some moderate increases. But the budget included nearly 1,000 earmarks for youth-related programs.

Add to that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which will bring millions more dollars to youth programs over the coming months. The president's 2010 budget proposal promises increases in some social services spending, but the White House plans to release line-item details in April.

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