

**Reinvesting in America's  
Youth: Lessons from the 2009  
Recovery Act Summer Youth  
Employment Initiative**

*Executive Summary*

February 26, 2010

Jeanne Bellotti

Linda Rosenberg

Samina Sattar

Andrea Mraz Esposito

Jessica Ziegler



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Rm. N5641  
200 Constitution Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20210  
Project Officer: Janet Javar

Submitted by:  
Mathematica Policy Research  
P.O. Box 2393  
Princeton, NJ 08543-2393  
Telephone: (609) 799-3535  
Facsimile: (609) 799-0005  
Project Director: Jeanne Bellotti

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## **ABSTRACT**

On February 17, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act into law. Passed in response to the 2008 recession, the Act's purpose was to create jobs, pump money into the economy, and encourage spending. Through the Act, states received \$1.2 billion in funding for the workforce investment system to provide employment and training activities targeted to disadvantaged youth. Congress and the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) encouraged states and local workforce investment areas charged with implementing these youth activities to use the funds to create employment opportunities for these youth in the summer of 2009.

To gain insights into these summer initiatives, DOL's Employment and Training Administration contracted with Mathematica Policy Research to conduct an implementation evaluation of the summer youth employment activities funded by the Recovery Act. As part of the evaluation, Mathematica analyzed (1) monthly performance data submitted to ETA by the states, and (2) qualitative data collected through in-depth site visits to 20 local areas. This report describes the national context for implementation, provides an in-depth description of the experience of selected local areas, and presents lessons on implementation practices that may inform future summer youth employment efforts.



## **DISCLAIMER**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The American economy lost an estimated 7.9 million jobs between the end of 2007 and the fall of 2009 (U.S. Department of Labor 2009b). Joblessness was high for many groups, but for young adults, unemployment was particularly high and could have lasting effects. In May 2009, the jobless rate for teenagers was 22.7 percent, more than double the national unemployment rate of 9.4 percent (U.S. Department of Labor 2009b). This joblessness could have lasting effects on the young adults' future careers. Funding for youth activities through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (the Recovery Act) was designed as one part of the solution and aimed to reverse the steep decline in youth employment.

Through the Recovery Act, states received \$1.2 billion in funding for employment and training activities targeted to the country's disadvantaged youth. Congress and the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) encouraged states and local workforce investment areas to use the funds to create employment opportunities for these youth in the summer of 2009. Although summer employment is made available as a component of youth activities under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), many local areas did not provide summer jobs for significant numbers of youth after the transition to WIA in 2000 (Social Policy Research Associates 2004). Local areas had from mid-February 2009, when the Recovery Act was signed into law, to the beginning of May 2009 to design their summer youth employment activities and prepare for implementation.

To gain insights into the design and implementation of these initiatives, DOL's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) contracted with Mathematica Policy Research to conduct an evaluation of summer youth activities funded by the Recovery Act. Although summer employment is only one component of WIA youth activities and is not funded as a separate program, the opportunities offered by local areas with Recovery Act funding in the summer of 2009 are referred to as the Summer Youth Employment Initiative (SYEI) throughout this report. The implementation study draws upon state performance data and in-depth site visits to 20 selected local areas (hereafter referred to as the study "sites"). The report aims to describe the national context for SYEI implementation, provide an in-depth description of the experiences of selected sites, and present lessons on implementation practices that may inform future SYEIs.

### The Recovery Act Allocation for WIA Youth Activities

Although Recovery Act funds could be spent on youth activities up to June 30, 2011, Congress expressed a strong interest in the funds being used to create employment opportunities for youth in the summer of 2009. Youth would be placed in summer work experiences with local public, nonprofit, and private employers and their wages would be paid with Recovery Act funds. The Act also contained two key provisions for the WIA youth activities funded under it. First, it extended eligibility from youth ages 14 to 21 years to include those from 22 to 24 years. Second, it stated that only one key indicator—achievement of work readiness goals—would be used to measure program performance. Local areas were also required by ETA to report another performance indicator—the number of youth completing summer employment experiences. Provisions for specific aspects of initiative design included:

- **Work experience should be “meaningful” and age appropriate.** Work experiences should be age appropriate and lead to youth meeting work readiness goals. ETA encouraged local areas to expose youth to “green” (environmentally friendly) educational

and career pathways. Local areas were also encouraged to match worksites with participants' goals and interests.

- **Local areas had flexibility in using classroom-based learning activities.** Local areas could decide whether to link classroom-based learning, such as occupational training, with youth's work experiences. Such a linkage was recommended for younger youth in need of basic skills and career exploration.
- **Registered apprenticeships were encouraged.** ETA suggested that local areas take advantage of local apprenticeship programs to create pre-apprenticeship opportunities.
- **Performance would be measured by one work readiness indicator.** Local areas could determine how to define the indicator but were provided with a definition for achieving work readiness goals. To encourage continued services for older youth, states could request a waiver to use only this indicator for youth who were 18 to 24 years old and who, after the summer months, participated only in work experiences.
- **WIA youth program elements were not required.** Local areas could determine which of the 10 WIA elements of youth programs to offer to participants funded by the Recovery Act. For example, this permitted local areas to determine whether or not to provide supportive services or follow up with participants for at least 12 months after receipt of services
- **Certain groups should receive priority.** The priority service groups for WIA programs—including veterans and eligible spouses of veterans—were also priority groups for youth activities funded by the Recovery Act. As for the regular WIA youth programs, at least 30 percent of Recovery Act funding for WIA youth activities had to be spent on out-of-school youth.
- **Local areas could request waivers for contractor procurement.** States were permitted to request a waiver from the WIA requirement for service providers to be selected through a competitive procurement process, but were still required to follow state or local laws that could not be relieved by federal regulations.

## Overview of the Evaluation

Six major research questions guided the evaluation. By addressing each of the following questions, the study provides policymakers, administrators, and stakeholders a better understanding of how the SYEI unfolded in 2009:

1. How did the selected sites plan for and organize summer youth initiatives with funding from the Recovery Act?
2. How did selected sites identify, recruit, and enroll at-risk youth?
3. What were the characteristics of participants nationwide?
4. What services were offered during the summer months in selected sites?
5. What types of work experiences were offered to participating youth in selected sites?
6. What lessons can be drawn about the implementation of summer youth initiatives?

To answer these questions, the evaluation draws upon two key data sources: (1) state performance data submitted monthly to ETA through December 31, 2009 that covers all youth participating in services funded by the Recovery Act from May through November 2009, and (2) in-depth site visits to 20 selected sites during July and August 2009. The state performance data describe the national scope of the initiative and provide context for the implementation experiences of the 20 selected sites. The data collected during site visits include qualitative interviews with a total of 601 individuals across the 20 sites, including 373 administrators and staff, 79 employers, and 149 youth.

The 20 local areas listed in Table 1 were selected for the study from a list of 40 local areas nominated by ETA national and regional staff as offering innovative or potentially promising approaches. ETA and the evaluation team selected the final 20 local areas using three key criteria: (1) having at least three local areas from each region; (2) choosing areas that planned to spend at least 50 percent of Recovery Act funds during the summer of 2009; and (3) including rural, urban, and suburban sites.

**Table I. Sites Selected for In-depth Visits**

Region	Local Workforce Investment Board	City, State
1	Regional Employment Board of Hampden County	Springfield, MA
1	The Workplace, Inc.	Bridgeport, CT
1	Workforce Partnership of Greater Rhode Island	Cranston, RI
2	Lehigh Valley Workforce Investment Board, Inc.	Lehigh Valley, PA
2	Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board	Pittsburgh, PA
2	Western Virginia Workforce Development Board	Roanoke, VA
3	Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program	Hazard, KY
3	Northeast Georgia Regional Commission	Athens, GA
3	Workforce Investment Network	Memphis, TN
4	Denver Office of Economic Development	Denver, CO
4	Montana State WIB, District XI Human Resource Council	Missoula, MT
4	Workforce Connection of Central New Mexico	Albuquerque, NM
5	Minneapolis Employment and Training Program	Minneapolis, MN
5	Workforce Development, Inc.	Rochester, MN
5	Workforce Resource, Inc.	Menomonie, WI
6	Community Development Department of the City of LA	Los Angeles, CA
6	Madera County Office of Education	Madera, CA
6	Oregon Consortium and Oregon Workforce Alliance	Albany, OR
6	Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County	Seattle, WA
6	Worksystems, Inc.	Portland, OR

Note: The city and state reflect the location of the local area's central office.

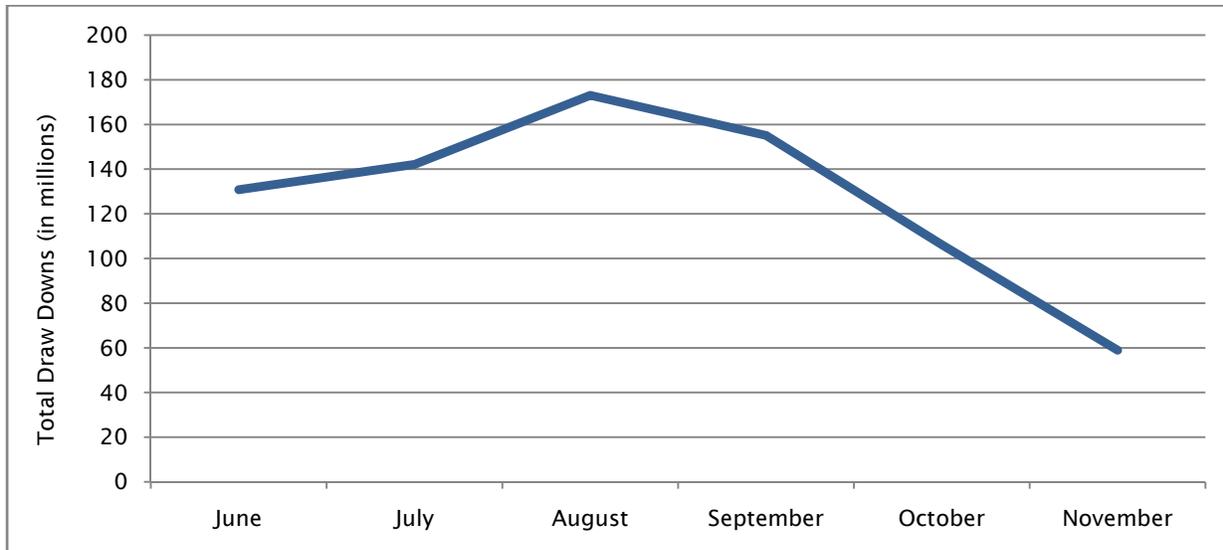
## The National Context

Enrolling more than 355,000 youth nationwide, states and local areas drew down more than \$717 million through November 2009, or almost 61 percent of the national allocation of \$1.2 billion in Recovery Act funds for WIA youth services. Of these participants, over 345,000 enrolled during the summer months of May through September, and 314,000 were placed in summer jobs. By

comparison, local areas served a total of slightly more than 250,000 youth through comprehensive services offered by the regular WIA formula-funded youth program during the entire 2008 program year, at a cost of \$966 million (U.S. Department of Labor 2009a). The higher cost for the regular WIA youth program likely results from the fact that youth receive comprehensive services for significantly longer periods of time.

States heeded the guidance provided by Congress and the ETA to focus efforts on summer employment. Large numbers of youth began enrolling in the spring, with 164,000 participants—46 percent of all youth enrolled through November—enrolling in May and June. Enrollment continued heavily through July and fell sharply in August and September, as initiatives focused on providing services to those already enrolled. Local areas also drew down funds heavily during the summer (see Figure 1). National draw downs averaged \$128 million per month during the summer, peaking in August at \$173 million for the month.

**Figure I. National Draw Downs of WIA Youth Recovery Act Funds in 2009**



Source: Monthly draw-downs of WIA Youth Recovery Act Funds.

Notes: Draw downs reflect the actual cash drawn daily by grantees from the financial system. By comparison, expenditures are the costs reported quarterly on an accrual basis, and therefore include all services and goods received by the end of the quarter, whether or not they have been invoiced or paid. As a result, draw downs may not account for all expenditures during the reporting period.

Data from March through June were only available in aggregate and are reported under the month of June.

The 2009 summer employment initiative enrolled a diverse array of youth (see Table 2). The majority of participants were in-school youth, a group largely composed of those ages 18 or younger. States also succeeded in enrolling a large number of out-of-school youth, a population that WIA has struggled to reach in the past but has made significant progress enrolling in recent years (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2004; U.S. Department of Labor 2009). A total of almost 9 percent of all those enrolled through November, or nearly 31,000 participants, fell within the newly added 22- to 24-year-old age range. It was challenging to enroll veterans—only 671 veterans were enrolled nationwide, or less than 0.2 percent of all enrollees through November 2009.

Employment was the main focus of local areas’ efforts to expend their Recovery Act allocations. As mentioned earlier, nearly 314,000 youth, or slightly more than 88 percent of all participants enrolled through November, were placed in a summer job (see Table 2). In addition, almost 13 percent of all enrollees were placed in work experiences outside the summer months. This percentage could include participants who were also placed in summer employment, who were enrolled in services during the summer but did not work during the summer months, or who only enrolled in the WIA youth activities funded by the Recovery Act in the fall.

**Table 2. Selected Characteristics of Youth Served and Services Received Under the Recovery Act Through November 2009**

	Number of Participants	Percentage of All Participants
Total Number of Participants	355,320	100.0
Characteristics of Youth		
School Status		
In-school	224,798	63.3
Out-of-school	127,869	36.0
Not reported	2,653	0.7
Age at Enrollment		
14-18 years	228,921	64.4
19-21 years	84,539	23.8
22-24 years	30,594	8.6
Not reported	11,266	3.2
Eligible Veterans	671	0.2
Services Received		
Placed in summer employment	313,812	88.3
Placed in work experiences outside the summer months	45,407	12.8

Source: State performance reports for WIA youth initiatives supported by the Recovery Act submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor as of December 31, 2009.

Notes: Data on age could not be broken into smaller subgroups.  
 ETA defines the summer months as May through September.  
 These figures do not include the 3,763 youth served by Indian and Native American grantees as a result of reporting procedures.

To streamline implementation, Congress only required states and local areas to report on one performance measure. States had to report on the percentage of participants in summer employment who attained a work readiness skill goal. Nationwide, local areas reported that just under 75 percent of youth achieved a measureable increase in their work readiness skills while participating (see Table 3). Beyond work readiness, states and local areas were also required by ETA to report on the proportion of youth who completed their summer work experience. State reports indicated a completion rate of more than 82 percent among those for whom data were available.

**Table 3. Performance Outcomes of Youth Served Under the Recovery Act Through November 2009**

	Number Reported as Achieving Outcome	Number for Whom Data Are Available	Percentage Achieving Outcome
Increase in work readiness skills	235,043	314,132	74.8
Completion of summer work experience	242,827	294,842	82.4

Source: State performance reports for WIA youth initiatives supported by the Recovery Act submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor as of December 31, 2009.

Note: These figures do not include the 3,763 youth served by Indian and Native American grantees as a result of reporting procedures.

Data were not available for youth who were still participating in services at the time of data reporting. In addition, data were not available for some participants due to delays in state reporting.

## Experiences of the 20 Study Sites

The experiences of the study’s 20 selected local areas provide a rich description of the activities that underlie these national figures. The sites covered each of the ETA regions and encompassed populations of different types and sizes. Although more than half of the sites included a city, the majority had areawide populations of less than 750,000. All experienced the effects of the recession, with more than half reporting unemployment rates above 8 percent in July and August 2009. Although not representative of local areas nationwide, the sites include a diverse array of local areas and provide a picture of the SYEI in sites that ETA staff believed might offer innovative and promising approaches to disadvantaged youth.

## The SYEI Goals, Context, and Organization

Selected sites reported that their primary goals for the SYEI included (1) serving as many youth as possible, (2) spending the Recovery Act funds quickly, and (3) providing meaningful summer experiences to participating youth. More than three-quarters of sites planned to spend 75 percent or more of their Recovery Act funds on the SYEI. Using those funds, they expected to enroll between 120 and 5,500 youth during the summer, with more than half of the sites planning to serve 500 or more youth.

To plan their SYEIs, the selected sites drew on their experiences providing summer work opportunities through recent programs funded by regular WIA formula funds and other resources, as well as programs under the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA, the predecessor to WIA). Administrators in 17 sites reported that their local area had continued to provide summer work experience to youth using WIA formula funds after WIA replaced JTPA. At least nine communities also had programs that had placed more than 200 youth in summer jobs using non-WIA funds from state or local government or private sources. Most sites took the opportunity provided by the Recovery Act to expand their existing programs and make modest modifications.

Planning for the SYEI was challenging given the short timeframe and gaps in key information. More than half the sites mentioned that planning such a sizable initiative in only a few months affected their initiative designs. One-third reported that, as they started to plan for the summer, they

did not know the amount of their Recovery Act allocation for WIA youth activities or were still unclear about the requirements for identifying providers.

All 20 sites, however, did successfully identify local providers and implement the SYEI. Almost half used a competitive process to identify providers. In the sites that held open procurements, some organizations that were new to WIA services received contracts. The remaining 11 sites relied on longtime providers of WIA services, either exercising waivers for the provider competition, extending existing contracts, or offering services directly through the lead agency.

## **Youth Recruitment and Intake Activities**

An expanded SYEI required sites to quickly scale up their youth recruitment and intake activities. Sites used both media campaigns and targeted recruitment with help from local organizations to successfully reach large numbers of eligible youth. Most sites also leveraged the workforce investment system by encouraging youth already engaged with WIA to enroll in SYEI and urging adults who used One-Stop Career Centers to tell family and friends about the initiative. Sites also sought partnerships with a wide range of agencies and social service organizations that served at-risk youth, including welfare agencies, the juvenile justice system, foster care agencies, local homeless shelters, and the agencies that oversee programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

All but one site reported receiving applications from more eligible youth than they could accommodate. Sites reported that between 40 and 80 percent of applicants ultimately enrolled. Among those who did not enroll, 10 to 30 percent were clearly ineligible because their incomes exceeded the eligibility cutoff. Another 10 to 30 percent were potentially eligible but did not complete all paperwork. A majority of sites maintained waiting lists of eligible youth who could not be served, enrolling youth from the list only when an existing participant dropped out or was removed from the initiative. Two sites with excess demand did not maintain waiting lists but instead referred youth who could not be enrolled to other agencies or service providers in the area.

Although recruitment efforts were successful overall, sites had difficulty reaching some targeted populations, including veterans and their spouses, older youth, homeless and runaway youth, foster youth, and juvenile offenders. Nine sites reported a lack of success recruiting veterans and their spouses despite targeted recruitment efforts. Six sites also experienced challenges recruiting older youth because they were often no longer in school and thus were difficult to locate. Three sites said homeless and runaway youth were difficult to enroll due to lack of documentation and difficult to keep engaged in services due to their mobility. Two specifically mentioned troubles recruiting juvenile offenders and foster youth.

Nearly all sites had difficulty processing the large volume of applicants. Common challenges included the tight timeframe, the amount of paperwork involved, and difficulty collecting documentation from youth and parents. Nearly three-quarters of sites hired temporary staff to help with the intake process. Sites also used prescreening of youth and links with partners to streamline eligibility determination. At least 11 sites prescreened applications before scheduling youth for an intake appointment to weed out those likely to be ineligible. In addition, seven sites asked schools and state and local social service agencies to help verify youth's eligibility.

## **Youth Preparation and Support**

Given the diverse array of youth enrolled in the SYEI, sites had to determine how to best prepare them for a successful work experience. Many participants had never held a job for pay and therefore did not fully understand the attitudes and skills necessary to succeed in the workplace. Even among those who had worked before, many had not explored potential career paths.

ETA required sites to conduct assessments and develop an individualized service strategy (ISS) for each SYEI participant, but gave the sites flexibility to determine what type of assessment and ISS was appropriate for each youth. Fourteen of the 20 sites used academic and career-related assessments to learn about youth's skills, interests, and needs. The six remaining sites reported not using assessments either because of the limited time available to work with youth or the lack of need since youth would not receive any services other than work placement. Across the 20 sites, a different set of 14 sites completed an ISS with every participant to get to know youth and identify their needs. In four more sites, at least one provider completed an ISS with each participant. The remaining two sites reported that the length of the summer initiative was too short to necessitate an ISS.

Although not a federal requirement for the SYEI, 16 of the 20 sites required youth to attend work readiness training. These training sessions were intended to equip youth with basic workplace skills, expose them to diverse career interests, and prepare them for the responsibilities that lay ahead. Training time in sites that used standardized curricula ranged from eight hours to two weeks. In some sites, training occurred prior to worksite placement but at others it took place throughout the summer. Some youth were assigned to work readiness tracks based on their characteristics, such as age, experience, offender status, or disabilities. Youth in almost all sites reported that this training was one of the most useful aspects of the initiative.

Nearly all sites also offered supportive services to participants once they were placed on a job. Transportation to worksites and help paying for work supplies were the most common supports. Help paying for child care was less commonly offered because sites reported that few youth required child care assistance and, if they did, other funds were available to meet this need.

## **Recruitment and Involvement of Employers**

Employers were important partners in sites' efforts to provide youth with successful summer experiences. Though employers were receiving a summer employee whose wages were paid with Recovery Act funds, they were voluntary partners with their own interests that sites needed to address. Site staff had to recruit enough employers to place a large number of youth with wide-ranging interests and still be mindful of ETA guidance on ensuring appropriate and meaningful experiences.

Sites identified many interested employers in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Half of the sites focused their recruitment on a specific sector. Of particular interest, four sites heavily targeted private sector employers largely because they felt that private firms were more likely to offer participants regular positions after the summer. Almost half reported that they recruited more employers than they needed. Employer recruitment began early, often before sites began enrolling youth. Sites contacted employers they knew from previous summer programs and the regular WIA youth program, conducted media campaigns, and made direct contact with employers new to the workforce investment system.

Sites focused on carefully screening employers and orienting them to the initiative. Formal screening processes could involve a review of an employer's application (conducted at 10 sites), a visit to the worksite (conducted by at least 11 sites), or signing a worksite agreement (developed by 9 sites). Three sites chose to use all three of these techniques. More than three-quarters of sites also held formal or informal orientations with worksite supervisors to inform them of their SYEI roles and responsibilities.

Employers were eager to participate to advance their businesses but also to make a difference for youth and their communities. Respondents in nine sites reported that employers perceived the SYEI as free training of potentially permanent employees. In addition, many employers were either facing hiring freezes during the summer or could not afford to hire the extra staff they needed and thus appreciated the contributions that SYEI participants could provide. Finally, nearly all employers and staff also reported that employers felt that summer employment could improve the chances that youth would be engaged in productive work and stay out of trouble.

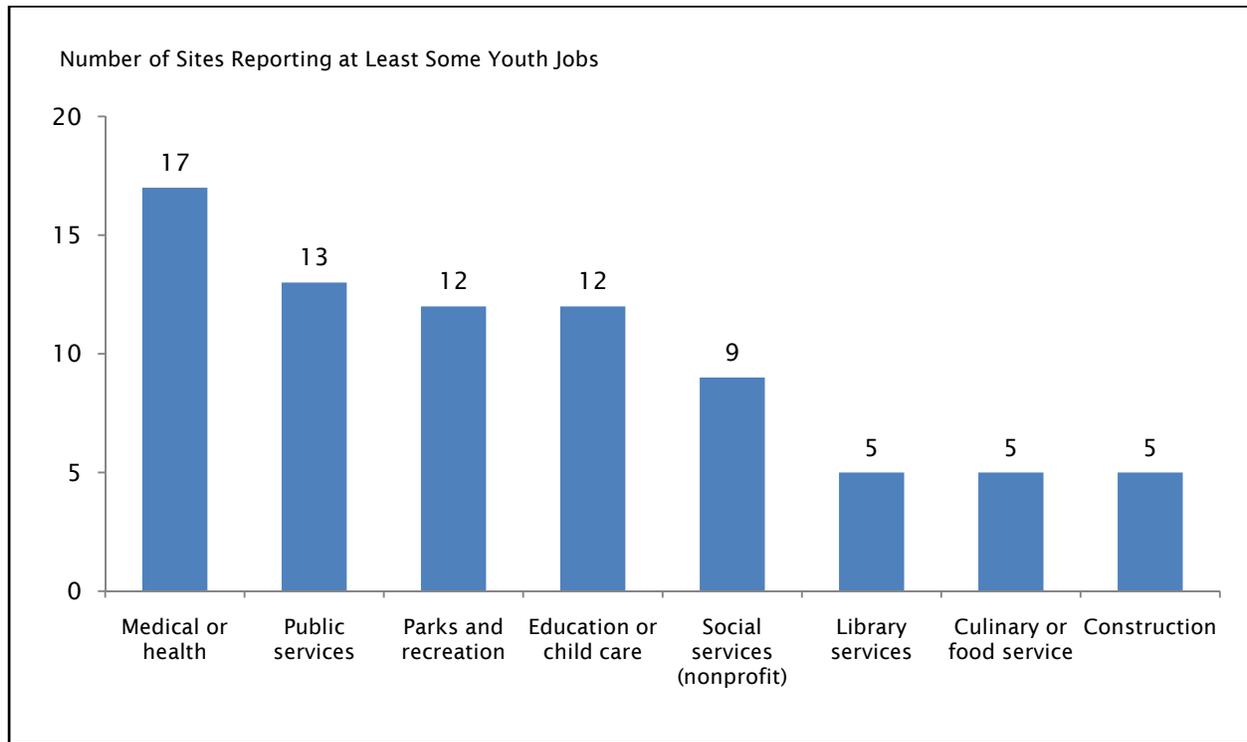
## **Youth's Summer Experiences**

The heart of the summer experience did not begin until after the tremendous effort to recruit youth and employers, determine their suitability for the SYEI, and prepare them for the workplace. Although some youth were placed in academic services in the classroom, most were placed in employment. About one-third of sites emphasized work, offering few other services beyond work readiness training. The remaining two-thirds offered academics to at least some youth. Few sites offered any of the other 10 program elements required by the regular WIA youth program but optional for the SYEI funded by the Recovery Act.

Academic offerings ranged from occupational skills training to recovery of school credits. Occupational skills training was offered by 10 sites, with the training most commonly targeted to the health care, manufacturing, culinary, and construction industries as well as entrepreneurship. Less common academic programs included recovery of school credits, GED preparation programs, and remediation. Most youth were placed in jobs either after or while participating in academic offerings. However, some youth—often younger participants between 14 and 16 years of age—in five sites spent the entire summer in the classroom.

Youth worked in a wide range of industries. The most common reported by sites in the study included health care, public service, parks and recreation, and education or child care (see Figure 2). Seventeen sites placed youth in the health industry with jobs in hospitals, nursing homes, mental health centers, dental offices, and other medical facilities. Another 13 had youth working in public services with county and municipal government agencies such as the town hall, the Chamber of Commerce, the public housing department, the fire department, Veterans Affairs, or public works.

**Figure 2. Common Industries for Summer Work Experiences**



Source: Site visit interviews in 20 selected sites.

Notes: This table includes only industries mentioned by five or more sites. Industries cited by fewer than five sites include agriculture, legal services, retail, workforce development, automotive, computer services, media, hospitality, and finance. Green jobs were not categorized as a separate industry but were included in the most closely related industry listed above. These jobs are discussed in detail later in this document.

N = 20 sites.

Within this wide range of industries, youth typically held entry-level jobs often involving administrative or clerical work, landscaping and outdoor maintenance, janitorial and indoor maintenance, and construction (see Table 4). Sixteen sites involved youth in administrative or clerical tasks, such as answering phones, filing, completing paperwork, and word processing. This was common within the top two industries, namely health care and public services. Another 14 sites reported that at least some youth were conducting park reclamation, green space protection, and urban forestry. Day-to-day tasks in these areas often included weeding; raising plant beds; planting flowers, bushes and trees; digging and laying recreation trails; raking; trimming bushes; and cleaning and restoring playgrounds.

Notably, youth and staff both reported that, although the daily tasks performed by participants may have been entry-level, youth were nevertheless exposed to the world of work, the work process, and careers within the industry in which they were placed. For example, a youth filing paperwork at a doctor’s office learned about HIPAA regulations, observed health care workers interacting with patients, and experienced the general operations of a health care facility. Two sites also reported that some older and more experienced youth were placed in higher-level positions or supervisory roles in a range of different industries.

**Table 4. Common Tasks Performed by Participating Youth at Worksites**

Task	Number of Sites Reporting at Least Some Youth Performing This as Primary Task
Administrative or clerical duties	16
Park reclamation, landscaping, and outdoor maintenance	14
Janitorial or indoor maintenance	12
Construction	11
Recycling computers, paper and other materials	10
Child care, senior care, counseling at summer camps or playgrounds	10
Weatherization and energy efficiency	8
Agriculture, community gardening, and urban gardening	8
Food service	7
Service, sales, or hospitality	7
Computer repair or maintenance	6

Source: Site visit interviews in 20 selected sites.

Note: This table includes only tasks mentioned by five or more sites. Additional tasks cited by fewer than five sites include health care tasks, automotive repair and maintenance, and pet grooming or care.

N = 20 sites.

More than half the sites reported at least some success placing youth in green industries and jobs. The most common green jobs were in park reclamation, recycling, weatherization, and agriculture. A lack of guidance about what constituted a green job, however, created confusion within and across the sites, with respondents using varied definitions. For example, some referred to green jobs as those directly related to occupations in renewable energy, environmental consulting, and energy-efficient construction. Others included non-green jobs—such as administrative or maintenance tasks—within green industries or organizations. Still others talked about green exposure within non-green jobs, such as the use of recycling and environmentally friendly products in day-to-day business.

## Matching Youth to Worksites

Ensuring a solid match between youth and employer was critical to both satisfying the employer’s needs and maximizing the likelihood that the youth had a meaningful experience. Site staff reported four key considerations when matching youth to worksites: (1) the youth’s personal interests expressed through their application, orientation, or meetings with staff; (2) direct employer feedback after a formal interview; (3) the youth’s age, experience, and skills; and (4) transportation needs or other logistical issues.

Twelve sites had all or some youth formally interview with employers to simulate a real interview experience, ensure the employer was comfortable with the match, and allow the youth to become familiar with the potential work environment. Once staff members determined a potentially good employer match, most interviewing involved one-on-one personal interactions between the employer and the interested youth. Respondents in the eight sites that chose not to conduct

interviews said either that the timeframe was too short or that it would have been logistically too challenging to have all youth interview.

## **Youth's Hours and Wages**

Across the 20 sites, summer work experiences lasted an average of seven weeks at an average of 28 hours per week. Hourly wages averaged \$7.75, with half the sites offering the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, allowing youth to earn an average of about \$1,500 if they completed summer services from start to finish. Summer experiences ranged from 3 to 20 weeks in length, with youth working 16 to 40 hours per week.

More than three-quarters of sites experienced payroll challenges due to the increased volume of workers. Logistical problems in the flow and functioning of the payroll process occurred during timesheet collection, processing of paychecks, and distribution of paychecks. Although most sites had already begun to remedy these problems by the time of the site visits, some were still considering alternative strategies to help stem the problems in future summer initiatives.

## **Assessing Youth Progress**

Sites developed procedures to assist youth both during and after their job placements and to track their progress over time. Youth at all but one site were connected with an adult mentor—typically the worksite supervisor, a colleague, or a frontline SYEI staff member—at the start of their summer experience.

Once youth were placed in jobs, sites monitored worksites both formally and informally through in-person visits by staff. Formal visits, conducted by 11 sites, generally involved a standard protocol or monitoring checklist. Staff spoke with supervisors, spoke with youth, and observed working conditions. Informal visits, conducted by 17 sites, were more casual and typically occurred as staff picked up youth timesheets or dropped off paychecks. Staff unanimously agreed that ongoing monitoring through in-person visits was essential to ensuring high-quality experiences and heading off problems between worksite supervisors and youth before they became serious.

Every site dealt with at least some youth who performed poorly on the job. When problems could not be resolved through mentoring or guidance, youth were typically moved to a new worksite or other program activities. Despite staff efforts to mediate performance issues, all sites reported that a small portion of youth were terminated by the program, quit their jobs, or dropped out of the program.

Sites were also responsible for formally measuring growth in youth's work readiness skills for federal performance reporting requirements. Administrators and frontline staff were overwhelmingly appreciative of the limited requirements in this area for the SYEI. The flexibility given to the states and local areas, however, created inconsistency across and sometimes within sites. Most, but not all, sites measured work readiness skills before and after youth participated in activities, thereby capturing some assessment of growth or increase in skills. However, sites varied substantially in the timing of these assessments, the methods of capturing data (such as through staff observations, employer feedback, and tests of youth), and the types of skills assessed.

## Overall Impressions of the 2009 Summer Experience

This evaluation documents the experiences of selected sites, paints a detailed picture of SYEI implementation, and gives a voice to the youth and employers who were at the core of this effort. Drawing from the detailed data collected, it identifies overall impressions of implementation from the perspective of local implementers, youth, and employers.

It took enormous effort to get this large initiative up and running in a short period of time. Parties at all levels of the workforce investment system—including Federal, state, and local levels—had to act quickly to ensure that the SYEI could get off the ground in time. The size of the initiative and the quick timeframe affected every aspect of planning and implementation. As a result, some sites reported having to make compromises along the way, including curbing the extent of innovation and implementing practices without exploring all possible options. Despite these limitations, administrators and staff reported pride in their accomplishments in the summer of 2009.

Although there were inevitable challenges, the SYEI was implemented successfully without any major problems. Sites were able to recruit sufficient numbers of youth to fill the program slots, to place them in employment, and to provide additional services.

Administrators and staff in the study sites reported that the SYEI had a threefold effect. First, they got money into the hands of needy families. Second, youth and their families spent the disposable income earned through SYEI jobs in their depressed local economies. Third, youth gained valuable work experience, increasing their human capital and long-term job prospects.

Youth valued the opportunity to hold a job, gain work skills, and build their résumés. They also valued the exposure to professional environments and mentoring adults. Many were enthusiastic about having money and being able to help their families in these tough economic times. In the absence of the initiative, many reported they would be competing for jobs with more experienced adult workers or doing nothing productive over their summer break. Although youth had some important feedback on key ways to improve the summer initiative, their most common complaint was that the initiative was too short and offered too few work hours.

Employers were overwhelmingly positive about the initiative. They felt that the experience of mentoring a new employee was worth the effort and almost unanimously agreed that they would participate again if given the opportunity.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

Despite the positive feedback from staff, youth, and employers, implementation of the SYEI was not without its challenges. Based on discussions with local staff, employers, and participants, as well as observation of program practices across all 20 sites, the study identifies challenges and lessons in seven key areas from implementation of the 2009 SYEI.

### 1. Enrollment and Eligibility Determination

Staff across all sites struggled to handle the increased volume of youth, particularly the process of determining their eligibility. For future summer initiatives, local areas should consider providing more training to less experienced staff members to prepare them for summer tasks. As did some sites in 2009, local areas should also consider relying more heavily on experienced staff to perform

more complex tasks, such as eligibility determination. Local areas should also examine other possible strategies to reduce workloads and maximize staff resources such as streamlining intake procedures through prescreening applications and coordinating with schools and social service agencies to determine youth eligibility.

## **2. Recruitment of Veterans and Older Youth**

Although overall youth recruitment efforts proved very successful, sites had difficulty reaching older youth between the ages of 22 and 24 as well as veterans and their spouses. Sites should think beyond “youth” when designing and promoting youth activities, given that many veterans and young adults have children, household responsibilities, and significant work experience. Sites reported that it was important to avoid alienating older youth by characterizing the SYEI as a youth program. Local areas should also consider developing new partnerships or reframing old partnerships with organizations that already serve these young adults. Finally, they should consider implementing strategies to differentiate services based on the unique needs of these older participants.

## **3. Recruitment of Private Sector Employers**

Although federal guidance encouraged the involvement of private employers, some sites were hesitant about including them. Sites raised three concerns: (1) the advisability of choosing one private employer over another for a government-subsidized job, (2) the lack of sufficient information on the quality of private sector jobs, and (3) the age and background restrictions imposed by private employers. While not necessarily appropriate for all youth, the private sector can be a good source of high quality jobs for many participants, particularly older, more experienced youth. Most sites did successfully engage at least some private employers, and the private employers involved in the study appreciated the opportunity to participate and support local youth. About one-third of sites felt that private employers were more likely to hire participants permanently and were a better fit based on youth interests. In addition, sites did not report any problems or conflicts related to equity among local businesses. With sufficient planning time, local areas can address concerns about the quality of private sector jobs by sufficiently vetting potential employers and training worksite supervisors to ensure that they can provide quality tasks and professional mentoring.

## **4. Green Jobs**

While more than half of sites reported at least some success placing youth in green industries and jobs, administrators and staff across sites and even within sites often did not use a common definition for green jobs. Respondents in three sites explicitly expressed confusion over the definition. To further expand youth opportunities in this emerging field, sites require additional guidance from ETA on what constitutes a green job. The Bureau of Labor Statistics as well as several states, foundations, and private organizations have already begun efforts to define the concept of green jobs more clearly and conduct inventories of these jobs across the country.

## **5. Job Matching**

Some sites felt—and youth agreed—that job matching of youth to employers could have been improved by either aligning employer recruitment to the interests of youth or more closely considering data from youth intake and assessments when determining the most appropriate employer. To the extent possible, local areas should match youth to employers based on their

interests and career goals to help maximize the potential for a valuable summer experience that may lead to better employment opportunities. To help achieve this goal, sites should consider using information on the types of jobs that best suited the interests of youth enrolled in the summer of 2009 to help focus initial employer recruitment efforts in future summers. In addition, if sites chose to recruit employers before enrolling youth, they should consider continuing employer recruitment as needed once youth are enrolled to accommodate the interests of as many participants as possible. Given that all matches may not be ideal, staff should also work to ensure that both employers and youth have reasonable expectations for the summer experience. In particular, staff should stress to youth that, no matter what their work assignment, they will be able to build their résumés and can learn important work skills.

## **6. Measurement of Work Readiness Increases**

Sites varied dramatically in their measurement of work readiness increases among youth and sometimes used different approaches within a site. These inconsistencies make it difficult to assess the true meaning of the national performance measure. To ensure the use of a valid measure across all local areas, sites require additional guidance from ETA on standards and best practices in measuring increases in work readiness skills. This includes guidance on the timing and frequency of youth assessments, the most appropriate sources of data on youth performance, and the types of skills that should be assessed.

## **7. Innovation**

Variations in the local infrastructure and economy of study sites clearly affected their implementation of the SYEI. For instance, one site reported denying services to some youth who did not live near a participating employer because the youth's community lacked a good public transportation system. However, other sites with youth in similar situations either developed their own van routes or recruited businesses within the communities where youth lived to allow them to participate. As another example, administrators in some areas said they could not place significant numbers of youth into green jobs given the lack of green industry in their local economies. Other sites in similar situations, however, developed their own green projects or tapped into the public sector for green opportunities. Addressing local circumstances may require innovation. When encountering an implementation challenge, administrators should consider new or innovative models, including looking to other sites with similar local circumstances for potential solutions.

## **Looking Beyond Summer 2009**

Although the SYEI of 2009 was a monumental effort, it was not the end of the road for participating youth. Many participants came out of the summer initiative looking for new opportunities to expand on their experiences. How they fared beyond the summer and what effect the SYEI had on their employment prospects can only be determined through long-term follow up or better efforts to track future participants. However, some sites had already begun reflecting on what worked and what could be improved for future summers.

Many youth who participated in the SYEI hoped to transition to new opportunities in the fall. The largest proportion of participants planned to return to school. Some youth could receive additional services from the workforce investment system, including the regular WIA youth and adult formula-funded programs, and from other organizations within the community. Still other youth sought to move into permanent jobs. Respondents, however, mentioned several issues that

might have limited these opportunities. Although the regular WIA programs for youth and adults could serve some youth, some of these programs already had waiting lists due to excess demand. In addition, while every site expected at least some youth to enter permanent jobs, the state of the economy may have limited the number of permanent placements for youth.

Sites appeared prepared to offer summer opportunities to significant numbers of youth in 2010. During the summer of 2009, sites worked through many challenges inherent in the implementation of a new initiative and learned lessons that can be used to inform future efforts. Sites looked forward to offering summer work opportunities to youth in 2010 if funding is available. Even if dedicated funding is not available, a few sites felt the success of the SYEI in helping youth gain a better understanding of the world of work would prompt them to consider dedicating a larger portion of their regular WIA formula funds to develop summer opportunities for youth.

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