

SPRINGDALE

Program teaches teens work culture, values

BY RICHARD MASSEY ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

SPRINGDALE — Joel Rubio and four others were weeding the median along Watkins Avenue in front of Arvest Ballpark last week. Under the watchful eye of Public Works employee Herb Worley, the teens dug small clumps of unsightly plants from the mulch and bagged them.

The task was menial, but for kids who are considered at risk of quitting school, ending up in court or whose parents are jailed, it is a winning proposition. The students of an alternative learning center in the Springdale School District volunteered for the summer duty.

They receive hourly wages, and more importantly, the chance to work alongside adults who have families, careers, benefits and responsibilities.

"I wanted to make a paycheck," said Rubio, 16. "I won't have to stay at home all day. I can do something good."

The program came about through the efforts of the Northwest Arkansas Certified Development Co., the Springdale School District and Youth Strategies, a nonprofit headed by Mike Fohner. When Fohner approached the city as a potential sponsor for the program, he found a sympathetic ear with Mayor Doug Sprouse.

"It's important to be open when citizens come to you with ideas," Sprouse said. "You could tell [Fohner] had his ducks in a row and that he knew what he wanted to do."

A former member of the Springdale School Board, Sprouse is familiar with, and supportive of, the district's Alternative Learning Environment, from which the students were recruited. That knowledge helped clinch Sprouse's approval.

"I'd like to see it grow and continue as long as it's a benefit to the kids and the city," he said.

At least eight students will be employed in the Department of Parks and Recreation. Six students will clean and mow parks, while the other two will work in the Youth Center as janitors and as organizers of children's activities.

With eight students handling smaller tasks, full-time employees can concentrate on jobs they haven't been able to finish because of heavy rainfall this spring, Parks and Recreation Director Rick McWhorter said.

The program is all about learning lessons.

"Once they start learning what it takes to keep a park clean, they'll think twice about littering," McWhorter said. "I hope they'll learn that it takes effort, but that they'll accept the responsibility."

The parks director has no plans of being soft on the new workers. McWhorter expects jobs to be finished, schedules to be met and the public treated with courtesy.

But if the students play by the rules, there won't be much time to lollygag.

"Without a doubt, there's plenty of work," he said.

At the Public Works Department, Sam Goade and his staff will take on 15 new employees, who will assist with animal services, landscaping, signage and bulky-waste pickup.

"It'll be up to the young people to get themselves to work and follow the rules and regulations," Goade said. "For some of them, this will be their first time to experience a real work environment."

On Friday, 16-year-old Pascual Carbajal leaned over a table with a sharp knife as he cut letters out of a stencil for a street sign. He was creating a new sign for Huntsville Avenue, which is being widened between U.S. 71B and Arkansas 265. On his third day of work, Carbajal, a 40-hour-per-week employee, had already helped on a materials estimate for signage along Don Tyson Parkway.

"I want a job," he said. "I want to take orders from other people and learn how to work."

Program participants can work a total of 200 hours. Minors make \$7.25 an hour while those ages 18 and up make \$8.25. State and federal employment laws apply, including for wages, and Workers' Compensation will be paid by the state in the event that a student is injured.

A plus is that later in life, a student can tell a potential employer that he worked for a city, not a fast-food franchise.

"This gives them a bit of a resume," Fohner said.



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Tarry Elio, 17, of Springdale picks weeds in a median on Watkins Avenue in Springdale last week. Elio is working this summer in a program designed by Northwest Arkansas Certified Development Co., the Springdale School District and Youth Strategies.