

BUILDING BRIGHTER FUTURES WITH YOUTH

UMass Memorial Medical Center | Worcester, MA

Overview

The City of Worcester has a large and very diverse population of youth, many of whom live in low-income neighborhoods that are plagued with various social and economic challenges, including a strong gang presence. Worcester teens are further burdened by a 22 percent unemployment rate (ages 16 to 19), with Black and Hispanic teens facing the highest unemployment rate by ethnic group. Many of these youth lack positive role models and access to pathways to building a better future for themselves and their families.

Poverty and lack of access to educational, social and economic opportunities are among the leading social determinants of health. Statistics show these socioeconomic factors result in lower utilization of health care services, higher rates of risky behavior and disease, and poorer health outcomes later in life. At nearly 30 percent, the rate of children under the age of 18 living below the poverty level in Worcester is almost double the state average. Youth living in poverty are exposed to and at greater risk of becoming involved in gangs, or affected by gang-related violence. In addition, many young people often seek medical care for violence-related injuries in hospital emergency departments (EDs). Thus, youth violence can also affect the health of communities by increasing health care costs, impacting livability of neighborhoods and decreasing property values. Providing low-income youth with job skills and pre-employment training opportunities improves their likelihood of obtaining and holding employment as adults, thereby improving their ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle, eating habits and access to care.

UMass Memorial Medical Center listened to inner-city youth who said, during focus groups held



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on these topics, that they needed jobs to be healthy, off the streets and out of hospital EDs. In response, in 2005 UMass Memorial launched Building Brighter Futures With Youth (BBFWY), a youth jobs development initiative. This program provides summer



employment opportunities to inner-city youth through a partnership with the City of Worcester; Worcester Community Action Council, a federal anti-poverty agency; and other organizations. BBFWY places youth ages 16 to 24 in employment positions where they gain valuable on-the-job training by UMass Memorial staff in departments across the hospital. UMass Memorial's involvement and contribution to this effort has enabled the City of Worcester to secure funding from the Massachusetts YouthWorks Program. The jobs provided by UMass Memorial are used as the required 20 percent match that leverages the YouthWorks state funding.

Impact

Since 2006, the hospital has provided approximately 400 onsite jobs. Since 2008, the hospital's involvement has enabled the city to leverage \$5,168,678 in state YouthWorks funding and provide a total of 3,648 youth jobs city-wide. As part of the hospital's investment in the Bell Hill neighborhood, each year BBFWY youth are placed in employed leadership positions at the Grant Square Community Garden, a collaboration with the Worcester Regional Environmental Council's YOUTHGROW urban agricultural program, where they learn valuable leadership and job skills.

Lessons Learned

As a health care anchor institution, we see this program as a community-building activity that promotes economic growth and carries out our strategy of leveraging – and aiding our partners to leverage – resources to improve population health.

Future Goals

UMass Memorial will continue to invest in youth jobs to keep the community safe, and to help to overcome the poverty cycle.

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