

# Tough summer job market for teens



Rancho Cotate High School senior Chris McPherson, 17, shakes hands with Mayra Perez Lopez, after his interview for a job at the Boys and Girls Club. Jessica Hetherington, middle and Amal Munayer were part of the panel interviewing in the career center at the Rohnert Park high school.

*JOHN BURGESS/Press Democrat*

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Taken from The Press Democrat printed on May 22, 2011.  
<http://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/20110522/BUSINESS/110529925?p=1&tc=pg>

**Published: Sunday, May 22, 2011 at 4:00 a.m.**

**Last Modified: Friday, May 20, 2011 at 4:21 p.m.**

Irwin Tenorio spent Friday morning volunteering in a community garden near the downtown Santa Rosa Plaza shopping center. But the 19-year-old is hoping that his donated hours eventually could lead to a paycheck in a tight job market.

“In the future something might pop up for me,” said Tenorio, taking a break from hauling wheelbarrows of dark soil over to raised planter beds.

Tenorio, who aspires to one day take classes at Santa Rosa Junior College, wants to land a summer job tending the garden. Managers of the nonprofit Social Advocates for Youth, who oversee the garden, said he has proved himself a committed, reliable worker.

Many teens will struggle once more to find paid jobs this summer as employment levels for young people hovers at historic lows. But several local agencies are offering work, as well as programs to help youths prepare to land a job.

A common theme among experts is that volunteering and getting educated about basic job skills will pay off in time.

“It will open up doors for them in the future,” said Karen Fies, the county's director of employment and training. “If they do a good job, people will notice.”

For the third year, the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps will return as the biggest summer jobs program for local teens.

Next month, 200 youths will begin cleaning overgrowth from local creeks and doing other jobs as part of the \$640,000 program. The teens will earn \$8 an hour during eight weeks of part-time employment.

Officials said the program is worth sustaining because it has the double benefit of employing youth and preventing winter floods.

“The public's getting a lot of service for a relatively low cost,” said Mike Thompson, an assistant general manager for the water agency.

U.S. teen employment last summer reached the lowest level recorded since the end of World War II, according to Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies. Only 26 of every 100 teens ages 16-19 years old found jobs last summer, compared to 45 out of 100 in 2000.

The center called this summer's job outlook “bleak,” saying the number of jobs could come close to that of 2010.

While data on teen employment in Sonoma County isn't available, local experts think the county appears to be following a similar trend.

“It is not looking like a very good summer for the teen labor market,” said Robert Eyler, director of Sonoma State University's Center for Regional Economic Analysis.

Construction, retail and tourism may offer more temporary jobs this summer, Eyler said. But overall, many retirement-age adults are hanging onto jobs, providing fewer openings for younger adults, college students and youths.

“That unfortunately has a domino effect down to the teenagers,” Eyler said.

The Ecology Corps began in 2009 with the help of federal stimulus funds. The program this year is a joint effort of the county, the water agency and other organizations. It is financed with a mix of local and federal dollars.

This year six local nonprofits already have stopped taking applications and begun conducting interviews and filling the 200 Ecology Corps slots.

Mayra Perez Lopez, a youth employment specialist for Sonoma County Adult and Youth Development, a nonprofit in Rohnert Park, went to Rancho Cotate High last week to interview some of the 60 youths seeking 25 job slots. She said those who work in the program receive the added benefit of learning about the world of work.

“They know how to behave in a job setting,” she said. “They know what's professional and what isn't.”

Several agencies said teens have shown strong interest in landing one of the program's jobs. Kathleen Roberts, director of employment for West County Community Services in Sebastopol, said young people started inquiring last fall about a chance to join a summer work crew.

For the Ecology Corps and for Social Advocates' gardening program, some youths like Tenorio have been involved in the court system. Others have learning disabilities or challenges at home that make them “at risk” in finding jobs, officials said.

Several agencies hiring youth this summer said that many of their new workers got their start as program volunteers.

The YMCA will have about 60 teens as volunteer counselors-in-training at summer day camps. The youths, ages 13 to 15, often move on to paid work within the agency, said program director Erin Hamor.

“It's a great pathway to the job,” she said.

The city of Santa Rosa employs about 500 young adults throughout the year. But this summer it will have another 350 teen volunteers. Those youth, mostly 13 to 15 in age, will donate hours at city day camps, pools and Howarth Park.

The city collects \$75 from each volunteer in the program, and the teens are limited to volunteering 100 hours in order to make room for everyone. But a number of the available paid jobs each summer typically go to those who first have served as volunteers.

“We get them already trained,” said recreation and parks supervisor Amy Rocklewitz. “We know them.”

This summer about 20 youths will take a six-week class at Chop's Teen Center in Santa Rosa in order to receive a county “work ready” certificate. The nonprofit is still accepting applications, and plans to offer the classes throughout the year.

“We want to give teens the skills they need to be successful in finding jobs and keeping jobs,” said Chop's executive director Diana Curtin.

The curriculum was developed by the county Office of Education. Steven Jackson, the office's director of career development, said local business leaders told educators that all workers need to be able to possess some key abilities, such as showing up on time, have a good work ethic and working effectively in teams.

On Friday morning, Tenorio's efforts in the community garden were overseen by Toni Abraham of Social Advocates for Youth.

Abraham, the nonprofit's employment services director, said she tries to help young people understand that good work can get noticed and lead to bigger things.

“You never know who's watching you,” she said.