

# Tapping Camden youth to help map infrastructure



Phaedra Trethan, @CP\_Phaedra 9:59 a.m. EDT May 18, 2016



*(Photo: Phaedra Trethan/Staff photographer)*

CAMDEN - Camden's nearly century-old water and sewer pipes snake through the city, with its hydrants, valves and meters scattered across streets and neighborhoods.

American Water, the Voorhees-based company that took over the city's water and sewer service operations and maintenance in February, announced Tuesday it would partner with a city program to map out pipes, drains, meters and hydrants. The goal is twofold: to enable American Water to better maintain the system and conserve water, and to help Camden's young people hone their work skills on the path to employment.

Participants in the city's PowerCorps program, an offshoot of AmeriCorps, will fan out through the city to gather information that will be fed into a database for American Water. Once the mapping is finished, American Water can make improvements aimed at reducing water loss, improving water quality and managing storm- and wastewater better.

"This helps our city's young people focus on the environment and our infrastructure," said Mayor Dana Redd, before she spoke at American Water's Camden Operations Center, just off Admiral Wilson Boulevard, once a frequently-flooded thoroughfare.

“They’ll see firsthand how technology and infrastructure come together,” Redd added, noting the city’s work – in partnership with Camden County and its Municipal Utilities Authority and the Camden Coalition – to mitigate flooding, create more sustainable infrastructure and turn defunct industrial sites into green spaces.

PowerCorps participants — men and women between the ages of 18 and 26 with a high school diploma or equivalency — are given a small living stipend for their 900 hours of service over a six-month stint. During that time, they learn life skills and employment skills. The first group, with 23 active participants, will graduate next month, said program director Juan Rivera.

The challenges facing aging water infrastructure like Camden’s are too big for one entity to tackle, according to Radhika Fox, executive director of the Value of Water Coalition.

“No one sector can solve this,” she said. “The mayor, the private sector, the city ... none of them can do it alone.”

Ashley Ruiz, a 19-year-old who lives in East Camden, said the work she’s doing now with PowerCorps has already paid dividends that will impact her future.

“I’ve been able to improve myself and my professionalism,” she said. “Before, I was very shy. Now I can talk to anyone and I can network and put myself out there” to prospective employers.

Keith White echoed her. The 20-year-old said he grew up in foster care and kept to himself as he moved from place to place.

“Now I can see myself stepping up more and taking on more leadership roles,” he said. He’s hoping those skills will lead him to a career as a corrections officer and a mentor to youngsters like himself.

“I want to be able to give back.”

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