

Program brings education, skills to Camden youth

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CAMDEN - Miguel Chacon wants to show his children, 2 and 7 years old, something different.

"They see me doing something positive," said the Centerville resident, now six months into his stint with PowerCorps Camden. "They'll see me being a better person."

PowerCorps, which trains city youth ages 18 to 26 to enter the workforce, got a boost with the launch of Camden Corps Plus, officials announced Friday.

The 12-month program will offer 113 city residents educational assistance to get their high school diploma or equivalency, mentoring and social services, life skills training and job training — all thanks to a \$1.9 million federal Department of Labor grant.

The city will offer information sessions for potential applicants throughout the month and the program will begin in July, Mayor Dana Redd said.

It's a crucial way to help young people in a city where 50 percent of its students do not receive a high school diploma, Redd said, calling it "an exceptional program."

"You might not have gone the traditional route," said U.S. Rep. Donald Norcross to the PowerCorps participants. "But you still have a chance."

Center for Family Services CEO Richard Stagliano said the grant is a sign of a different Camden.

"There was a time when funders were afraid to invest in Camden," he said. "They weren't sure their money would be well-spent.

"That has changed."

Camden County's Youth One Stop center on Mount Ephraim Avenue will be the starting point; to be eligible, participants must be city residents ages 16-24 and out of school, without a diploma or equivalent.

The only other requirements? Willingness to train, learn and work.

Officials from the City of Camden, Camden County, Rutgers University, the state Department of Labor and the Center for Family Services announced the program at the One Stop, a nondescript building off Mount Ephraim Avenue that belies the hive of activity inside, where people learn the skills they need to transition from joblessness to employment.

Chacon and his fellow PowerCorps member Paige Prado talked about making that transition as they move from learning to leading, becoming assistant crew leaders to help new participants adjust to the program.

"The goal is working," Prado said. "We learned how to present ourselves, how to act in certain situations, how to resolve issues."

Before, said the 23-year-old from North Camden, she “sat around the house all day,” and a drug charge and lack of a driver’s license made it difficult to find a job.

PowerCorps helped her work with her probation officer and get a driver’s license. After her second six-month stint is complete, she hopes to work with the city’s Department of Public Works and will use educational stipends from the program to further her education.

“I just want to work outdoors, and work with my hands,” she said, smiling.

Camden Corps Plus will offer its participants a high school equivalency, industry-recognized credentials in fields including culinary arts, certified nursing assistant, construction, customer service, technology and manufacturing. Work experience will come through paid internships and work sampling, and mentors and case managers will assist with challenges like child care, transportation, coping skills and financial literacy. Upon completion, participants will receive job placement assistance as well.

For Chacon and Prado, PowerCorps has been a “second chance at living in society,” after a life spent worrying more about day-to-day survival than long-term, sustained employment.

“Being a citizen in Camden, we deal with a lot; there’s a lot of negativity,” said Chacon, who’s hoping for a job with the Camden County Municipal Utilities Authority.

“This is our transition to be better people,” Prado agreed. “And then we can help make the city a better place.”

For more information, contact the Center for Family Services at (856) 964-8096.

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