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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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East St. Louis program tries to help kids get and stay on the right track

When you've dropped out of school like about half of the kids in East St. Louis, building a future is a bleak prospect.

Without the most basic building block of a high school diploma, a prosperous job and a promising economic outlook aren't likely.

You can't easily buy a house or raise a family on minimum wage.

Saving for retirement is pointless if you don't have a job to retire from.

Shera Dalin



But an ambitious neighborhood group in East St. Louis hopes to chip away at the problem of unemployed young people.

The Emerson Park Development Corp. won a \$300,000 HUD grant for the Tomorrow's Builders YouthBuild Program. The project, which already exists in the Souard neighborhood in St. Louis, will gather 30 high school dropouts ages 18 to 24 from Alorton, Brooklyn, Centerville, East St. Louis and Washington Park beginning Jan. 31.

The dropouts will become pre-apprentice carpenters through classroom and work-site training. They will also receive GED instruction from Belleville Area College.

At the end of a year, if the YouthBuild graduates pass the GED as well as math and other

tests administered by the carpenters' union, they will become apprentice carpenters.

Although they only receive a stipend of about \$100 a week in the program, they will be framing together a carpentry career that could eventually earn them \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year, said Tadas Kiciulinski, executive secretary treasurer of the Southwestern Illinois Building and Construction Trades Council — a co-sponsor of the program.

That beats flipping burgers.

"It's a program to take misguided young people and redirect their positive energy," said Vickie Kimmel Forby, executive director of the program, operated through the Lessie Bates Neighborhood House in East St. Louis.

She said those unmotivated to succeed should not bother applying. "If they are sincere and motivated in making the changes for getting a living-wage job, we will try to help them. But they have to have an inner sense of motivation," Forby said.

Besides passing a drug test, applicants will have to complete several simple tasks to demonstrate their motivation, such as getting a copy of their birth certificate and obtaining a library card.

For young people who are unemployed and, in some cases, homeless, those tasks might be insurmountable, I countered.

Forby said the idea isn't to make the application process impossible. Step-by-step instructions, phone numbers and thorough directions for meeting the program's initial

demands will be given to the applicants, she said.

Once they have been accepted into YouthBuild sometime in March, the students will receive a combination of classroom, work-site and leadership training.

The students will help expert carpenters and trade workers renovate a house at 1818 Winstanley Avenue in East St. Louis.

In the summer, they will help build a house from the frame up.

They'll also develop leadership skills that they will take back into their communities, where they can become role models for other young people, neighbors and their families, Forby said.

The students will also make trips to Washington, D.C., to discuss with Congress members the program, their plans and the need for more funding.

For these kids, it's a glimmer of a life once unimaginable.

"These are things a lot of young people never get a chance to do. They can build up their own character and improve their communities," Forby said.

It won't change the desperate straits many young folks in the Metro East find themselves in, Kiciulinski said, "but you have to start somewhere."

After all, it's a lot easier to build a future if you know how to use a hammer and nails.

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