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New public/private partnership will place teens in summer jobs throughout Dane County

'Largest youth employment program we've ever had'

[Judith Davidoff](#) on Thursday 05/08/2014

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Wanda Fullmore is a bit sketchy on the details of the Neighborhood Youth Corps job she had at a south Madison day care center. It was more than four decades ago, after all, when she was a student at Memorial High School. But one thing she remembers clearly is how it led to a work program in Washington, D.C., the summer of 1972.

"The experience from that program was phenomenal," says Fullmore, 58, who last week [retired](#) after running the front desk of the mayor's office for 39 years.

Fullmore was tapped for the summer program by Lucille Loyce, who headed the [Neighborhood Youth Corps](#) in Dane County.

"Lucille came to my house and said we'd like you to represent the city," recalls Fullmore. "I said no because I was going to get my driver's license." But her mother intervened. "She said, 'Don't be a fool. You should do this.'"

Sponsored by the NAACP and targeted to "disadvantaged youth," the program gave Fullmore experience working in a federal agency. She also got to meet students from around the country, visit Harlem and observe Congress in action.





Fullmore was tapped for the mayor's office after getting experience through a youth jobs program in the 1970s. The city's new teen employment initiative is named for her.

Credit: Stuart Levitan

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"I got to see [former U.S. Rep.] Shirley Chisholm and [former U.S. Sen.] Ted Kennedy," she says.

Moreover, the youth corps experience proved key to her securing the position of office clerk in the mayor's office. She served under five mayors, starting and ending with Paul Soglin.

"She would never have gotten through the door to be considered without that limited experience in a youth program," says Soglin, who hired Fullmore in 1975, then a young high school graduate and single mother.

"She had everything she needed except experience," Soglin adds. "But the work she had done prior to that indicated she had the skill set, she had the brains, she had the ingenuity."

Fullmore ended her run with the city with a retirement bash last week at Monona Terrace that drew more than 500 colleagues, elected officials, friends and family. There she reflected on the Neighborhood Youth Corps and other anti-poverty programs of the 1960s and 1970s that gave her and other teenagers a leg up.

"Why doesn't the government do more things like that?" she asked. "Look at us!"

It appears that Fullmore's parting wish will come true -- at least on a local level. The city of Madison and Dane County are part of a new initiative spearheaded by the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County that will place some 160 local teenagers in paid internships this summer.

"A lot of our kids come from low-income communities and are the first in their generation to be on pace to go to college," says Michael Johnson, CEO of the Boys & Girls Club. "So we want them to see what opportunities are out there and work with people who will give them meaningful experiences. It also brings income in to the household."

The city of Madison itself will have a minimum of 21 hires for the summer, says Soglin. The city portion of the program will be named the City of Madison Wanda Fullmore Youth Employment Initiative.

With the program's combined public and private resources, adds Soglin, "this will be the largest youth employment program we've ever had."

Meaningful employment

Johnson credits Democratic gubernatorial candidate Mary Burke, a cofounder of the college readiness program [AVID/TOPS](#), with pushing the Boys & Girls Club to focus more on finding employment opportunities for kids.

CUNA Mutual Foundation followed up with a small grant a few years ago for a jobs training program that also helped finance some jobs for teens in the community. "But we were only hiring 20 to 25 kids, and we really wanted to grow that," says Johnson. About six months ago, the Boys & Girls Club hired a dedicated employee to find summer employment for kids.

In the meantime, the city was meeting with area service providers on the question of youth and

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employment, says Soglin.

"We identified this as a very high priority, and it correlated to what we were hearing from teenagers," he says. "They made it very clear that some kind of employment was a high priority, especially for kids in households where parents weren't able to provide allowances. But many just wanted to work. They wanted the experience."

And jobs for youth are not easy to come by, especially for kids of color. Nationally, the teen unemployment rate in 2013 was 25.1%, but for black teenagers it was 43%, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. In Wisconsin, the unemployment rate for teens increased from 15.5% in 2000 to 19.8% in 2012.

"Kids can get jobs at Burger King and McDonald's, but we wanted to connect our kids to places where they can get a career," says Johnson.

And where they will be paid.

"If work is to be valued, it deserves compensation," says Soglin. "And an important part of being in the workforce is having the responsibility of managing income and budgeting."

Employers are asked to pay a minimum of \$9 an hour, but some are paying up to \$15 an hour. "I never made that kind of money until I became an adult," says Johnson.

The city will fund its internships from agency savings, says Soglin. "We've asked city agencies to look around their departments. Perhaps they had a vacant position longer than anticipated. Perhaps some operating expenses were just a bit lower than anticipated."

Johnson says that a group of UW undergraduates in sororities have raised \$80,000 to help support the summer internship program and pay for summer camp for younger kids. United Way of Dane County is also sponsoring some kids to work in local community centers.

Changed lives

While the new summer internships are based on programs that came out of the 1960s' [War on Poverty](#), there is one big difference: Federal money no longer helps fund them. That money dried up over the last few decades, targeted by conservative lawmakers as wasteful spending.

But there are some similarities.

Kids will be matched, where possible, according to their interests, and program staff will help them navigate any problems that might arise on the job.

Loyce, the former head of the local Neighborhood Youth Corps, says that back then staffers assumed disciplinary duties, both to make sure teens acted professionally in the work environment and to make sure no one put the entire program at risk.

"The goal was to expose these kids to the world of work, keep them from dropping out of school and



help them go on to college and get a decent job."

And it worked, she says. "You'd be amazed at what can happen when you expose kids to things in life to make them productive. We changed their lives."

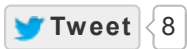
Teens will be placed in internships in marketing, sales, research and development, fundraising, medicine, and at summer camps, says Johnson. As for the future, he is thinking big.

"There's no reason the city and county couldn't put a thousand kids to work next year."

It has been done before, according to Susie Hobart, also a former head of the Neighborhood Youth Corps. "Back in the summer of 1974 we placed 1,000 teenagers in jobs in Dane County," she says, noting the county's population then was about half of what it is now.

Fullmore says she is not sure what's next for her, but feels a "calling" to share her life story with others in some way. She recalls one visit during her time in the mayor's office from a group of black teenage girls from the East Madison Community Center. She says they knew little about how government worked, or her role in the operation, but paid close attention when she filled them in.

"They were so excited and thanked me," she says. "I told them, 'Don't sell yourself short, and go for your goals. I was a young mother out of high school, but look where I am.'"



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