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YouthBuild gives city residents work skills

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Five years ago, when Cesar Ramirez of Providence was 21 years old, he was a high school dropout in search of a future.

He found one when he was accepted into YouthBuild Providence, an intensive 10-month program for low-income Providence residents, 16- to 24-year-olds, that helps them obtain GED degrees, as well as work experience building affordable homes. Most participants lack high school diplomas.

YouthBuild this month for the first time teamed up with The Community Builders in a Providence pilot program that could be expanded into other states.

At YouthBuild, Ramirez attended academic classes, earned his GED and, at the same time, he worked on building a house in Olneyville, where YouthBuild Providence is headquartered. Today, he is a construction trainer for the nonprofit agency. YouthBuild "put me on the right path," he said, "and taught me how hard work and dedication pay off."

He is one of 300 young people who YouthBuild has helped since the Providence chapter was established in 1997. The program, open only to Providence residents, is supported mostly by federal funds and grants, according to Anthony Hubbard, program director in Providence.

About 60 people take part each year, Hubbard said, although demand is greater than that. He said the agency has a 300-person waiting list every year.

The agency also received a \$100,000 grant recently from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to cover the expense of adding a program that would give participants the option of studying for actual high school diplomas, rather than GEDs. YouthBuild is working with the state Department of Education and the city school system on the diploma program, Hubbard said, and it should be in place in 2012.

But the biggest news for YouthBuild Providence was announced July 1. That's when YouthBuild USA, the parent agency, formed a partnership with The Community Builders, a nonprofit development corporation based in Boston that owns approximately 25,000 units of affordable housing in 12 states.

The partnership is a 12-week pilot program – starting in Providence – that sees YouthBuild participants work on TCB affordable homes and, if successful, it could be expanded to other communities, such as Worcester, Mass., Albany, N.Y., Hartford, Conn., New Haven, Conn., and Pittsburgh.

In Providence, 10 YouthBuild participants are now working on Omsted Commons, two TCB-owned buildings off Branch Avenue with 24 two-bedroom apartments. The youths are rehabilitating



PBN PHOTO/NATALJA KENT

BUILDING SOMETHING: YouthBuild Providence participants, from left: Richard Bridges, Lionel Brown, Karan Sol and Cesar Ramirez.

kitchens and bathrooms, replacing exterior doors and painting exterior walls, and are paid between \$8 and \$13 per hour depending on experience, Hubbard said.

Tony Berthod, who oversees Omsted Commons and three other Rhode Island properties for Community Builders, pegged the cost of the Omsted project at \$200,000. If the Providence partnership goes well, he confirmed, it will become a model for similar-sized or larger programs in other cities involving YouthBuild and Community Builders.

Those who work at YouthBuild Providence are, in fact, employees of The Providence Plan, the nonprofit that specializes in identifying community needs and launching innovative programs to address them.

Most YouthBuild participants work in construction after graduation, Hubbard said, but much depends on the status of the construction trade, which right now remains sluggish in Rhode Island. That is an unfortunate situation that Ramirez, the construction trainer, is well-aware of.

As much as he loves helping YouthBuild participants – “I can relate to what they go through on a day-to-day basis,” Ramirez said – his goal is to find a good-paying job in the construction field “if the economy picks up.” •