Summer Jobs Wilt
The forecast: Few slots and lots of uncertainty

By Jamaal Abdul-Alim

Youth summer jobs programs are preparing for a rough season.

Congressional delays last month left providers uncertain about how they'll manage federal jobs money, if it comes at all. Some states and localities are cutting their programs due to budget reductions. And the struggling economy leaves youths competing once again with more experienced workers as they look to scrape together a program, said Andrew Hahn, professor at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass. “But it will surely be at lower levels of enrollment than the needs kids and communities have.”

“Cities and places with leftover funds [from last summer] or private-sector partners might be able to scrape together a program,” said Andrew Hahn, professor at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, in Waltham, Mass. “But it will surely be at lower levels of enrollment than the needs kids and communities have.”

Even though youths are taking job skills training at such agencies as Workforce Development, Inc., in Rochester, Mich., grazing on limited city employment funding in a disaster zone, Jamaal Abdul-Alim, executive director of the National Youth Employment Coalition, said, “We make it real clear that we don’t know if we’re going to have the money to employ them.”

The situation for youth is a far cry from last summer when the federal Recovery Act provided $1.2 billion to put more than 300,000 teens and young adults (ages 14 to 24) to work. Summer 2010 looks like this:

- Daytona Beach, Fla., canceled its summer jobs program, saying Congress took too long to decide on a jobs bill.
- San Diego’s program expects to serve about 1,400 youths – less than half the 3,200 served last year.
- Baltimore is down as well, but the city has committed about $7 million for an estimated 5,000 jobs, compared with 7,000 jobs last year.

But for every youth employed, there will probably be several like 16-year-old Kaia Cloud, who took classes at Workforce Development. “It’s horrible trying to find a job,” she said. “I put a hundred applications in at the mall. The economy is so bad, they’re not hiring. Or they’re looking for a certain person with job experience, and I don’t have job experience.”

Federal role?

The federal government has not had a stand-alone youth summer jobs program for years, leaving states to want to make it work through their Workforce Investment Act funds. The recession created an exception last summer with the Recovery Act, and this year, $1 billion for summer jobs was tucked into The American Jobs and Closing Tax Loopholes Act of 2010. As Memorial Day passed, the bill’s fate remained uncertain.

Youth employment advocates say the federal approach shows that even if money is appropriated for this summer, it would come so late that cities and states are not sure if and how they would set up systems for getting bids, awarding contracts to local providers and processing job applications.

Jared Aaker, program manager at San Diego Workforce Partnership, figured maybe the city would work with providers who went through the recent federal proposals process last year. “I guess we’d cross that bridge when we cross it,” said Aaker, whose agency encompasses the local Workforce Investment Board that oversees Workforce Investment Act funding in San Diego.

Although the National Association of Workforce Boards encouraged its members to prepare as if the federal money would come, San Diego isn’t the only place where workforce officials have been taking a wait-and-see approach.

Similarly, the private for-profit sector, which created 320,000 job slots, is not sure if and how cities and states are not sure if and how they would set up systems for getting bids, awarding contracts to local providers and processing job applications.

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So is Baltimore, where federal funding would enable the city to expand the summer jobs program that has become embedded in the city budget. “If there is funding, there will still be a lag time, so that would cause us to sit down and consider options,” said Jeff Smith, executive liaison for public policy at the Baltimore Office of Employment Development. “But we can’t say how we would handle it.”

Meanwhile, summer jobs programs are being supported by whatever money workforce officials can hustle up at the state and local levels or, by leftover Recovery Act funds from 2009.

For updates about federal jobs funding, see Latest News at www.youthtoday.org.