

EDGE: YouthBuild program offers earn-while-you-learn opportunities

By RONALD WORLEY, The Herald-Dispatch

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The Huntington Housing Authority provides three great opportunities for young men and women to improve their lives while improving their community. The HHA's YouthBuild program offers 18 to 24 year olds a shot at a G.E.D., practical instruction in construction principles and valuable leadership skills. In this earn-while-you-learn program, participants use their newfound abilities to refurbish substandard residences so that the HHA can provide affordable housing for those in need.



Program Coordinator Michelle Perdue emphasized that YouthBuild is more than just rebuilding homes or getting a G.E.D.

"A great deal of emphasis is placed on community service and leadership development," Perdue said. "We also take time to enjoy Huntington, such as visiting The Huntington Museum of Art or spending the day in Ritter Park. This program is about giving young adults a second chance at rebuilding a positive community and a better future. It's our motto, 'Better Lives, Better Homes, Better Futures'."



Students in YouthBuild alternate between the classroom and their worksite. Class work includes four hours a day preparing for the G.E.D. exam and four hours training in carpentry, electricity, plumbing and masonry. On Fridays, students attend leadership classes that cover topics such as communication, money management and goal setting. They receive a training stipend up to \$400 a month while in the program.

Watching youths achieve their goals and finish the program warms its coordinator's heart

"I have seen a great transformation within each YouthBuild trainee," Perdue said. "Most of the students came to this program without any expectations and now will be leaving the YouthBuild program with many accomplishments achieved and goals set for the future. I could never express how wonderful it is to see someone succeed."

Part of that definition of success involves landing a job once the YouthBuild experience is over. To that end, YouthBuild offers classes on resume writing, interview techniques, and job search skills.

Currently, five students remain in the program following recent graduations. Some recent graduates are enrolled in college or employed. Orientation for the next training cycle begins July 10, and enrollment space is limited.

Perdue, a former elementary school teacher, mixes compassion and toughness in her leadership approach.

"To take on the responsibilities of this position requires a great deal of patience, compassion, and having the ability to connect to people coming from a variety of backgrounds," she said. "For women in this position, separating yourself emotionally is probably an obstacle. I know the YouthBuild trainees struggle sometimes in their personal lives and





my heart goes out to them. I try to help them work through the issue. However, if I am not hard on them or have little expectations, then I am not doing my job or the students any justice."

Like any government program, YouthBuild survives on public funding. Perdue is cognizant of the risks of possible budget cuts and has contacted U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall, D-W.Va. who, along with 98 Congressional colleagues, signed a letter of support for YouthBuild. Perdue expressed her desire for the public to get involved "It's important for people to write to Congress," she said. "Write to Rep. Rahall about the program."