

Youthbuild: transforming lives, saving millions of dollars

Visiting a home that youngsters are building for a low-income family was one of the best mornings I've spent in years. Fortunately, this is happening all over Minnesota in suburban, rural and urban communities via a free program called Youthbuild.

Learning how valuable this is for the 16- to 24-year-old participating students and state taxpayers, several legislators introduced bills expanding these programs. Here are brief summaries of participants' experiences, research documenting Youthbuild's value, and what legislators are proposing.

The following comes from reports compiled by Kay Tracy, director, and her staff Nancy Waisanen and Larry Eisenstadt at the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development:

- “Frank had a difficult childhood and run-ins with the justice system. Determined to turn his life around, he joined Youthbuild. He earned his diploma, NCCER (National Center for Construction Education and Research) credential, and driver's license. ... He's now a union apprentice earning \$27.50 per hour.”

- “Kaithlynn earned her diploma, two-wheel and ATV Forklift, OSHA 10, Lead Worker, driver's license, First Aid/CPR, and HBI RCA credentials in Youthbuild. She is a Local #322 registered apprentice carpenter at Frana Construction” (in Hopkins).

- “Joey earned his high school diploma, forklift operations, rough terrain boom lift, lead safety, and OSHA 10 certifications in Youthbuild. He now earns \$25 per hour as a Local #563 apprentice with Mavo Systems in the asbestos division.”

- “Dylan dropped out of school, was homeless and in the court system. Youthbuild helped him find housing, pay off his fines, reinstate his driver’s license, earn his diploma and an OSHA 30 certificate. He now works at Range Steel Fabricators.”

- Since joining Youthbuild, Jezzalyn worked on construction projects, earned her OSHA 10 certification, bought her first truck, chose a career and enrolled in PSEO. Asked what about Youthbuild was particularly helpful, Jezzalyn replied: “When we painted at the homeless shelter, I realized that a lot of people don’t have what I have. It inspired me to serve my community,” She also recently made an international softball team that is playing in Europe.

Joy Nelson, director of the GAP (Guadalupe Area Project in St. Paul, which I visited), told me about Hon Say Na: “He’s a Karen refugee from Burma (now known as Myanmar) who graduated in 2022. Though he needed to learn English, he wanted a career in construction. After graduation, he became an apprentice in a carpenter’s union. ... He’s now making more than \$25/hour and working toward his dreams.”

Waisanen, Youthbuild coordinator for DEED, examined Youthbuild’s “return on investment” for Minnesota taxpayers. After studying 398 participants who began the program, she found:

- The majority had dropped out of school and were from low-income families.

- 33% had some form of disability.

- 23% had experienced homelessness.

- 20% were pregnant or teen parents.

Results were very encouraging:

- 91% completed a high school or GED degree.

- Only 5% of those with a prior offense were rearrested or reconvicted within two years of enrolling in the program, compared to 27% for a similar cohort.

- Minnesota taxpayers saved about \$3 million in costs of reincarceration.

- The overall “return on taxpayer investment” was \$3.20 for every \$1 spent on the program.

Rep. Matt Norris, DFL-Blaine, and Sen. Zaynab Mohamed, DFL-Minneapolis, who attended St. Louis Park High School, are lead authors on bills HF 1310 and SF 1693 that will expand Youthbuild. A staff member of Sen. Lindsey Port, DFL-Burnsville, told me that she will be a co-author.

Current Youthbuild sites are throughout Minnesota: Intermediate School District 288, serving Scott and Carver counties; Central Minnesota Jobs and Training Services, serving Monticello, Pine City, Chisago, Isanti, Kanabec, Pine, Sherburne and Wright counties; plus Bemidji, Detroit Lakes, Duluth, Grand Rapids, Minneapolis, Moorhead, Rochester, St. Cloud and St. Paul.

For more information about ISD 288, visit www.swmetro.k12.mn.us. Central Minnesota Jobs and Training Services youth programs are headquartered in Monticello; learn more at bit.ly/3lZVjtJ or by calling 320-365-0321. You can read more about Youthbuild at bit.ly/3ZgfeCZ.

Youthbuild is government at its best – transforming lives and saving taxpayers money.

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