

Job fair brings teens, employers together

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About 300 Boston teens attended a job fair last week organized by GOTCHA (Get Off The Corner Hangin' Around), a collaborative of Roxbury and Dorchester community organizations. Held at the Bird Street Community Center in Uphams Corner, the event gave high school students a chance to connect with dozens of organizations looking to hire youth for summer jobs.

Young job-seekers roamed the large room, pausing at employers' tables to pick up brochures and talk with company representatives — or just to fill in their contact information and move on.

Deidra, 14, a first-time job-seeker, was gathering information on organizations with an education slant, such as The City School, which hires youth leaders to work on social justice issues.

"I want to help the community and work with children," she said. With a shy but proud smile, she showed her just-printed résumé, created that day in the Bird Street Community Center's computer room with the aid of a volunteer.

"It's been so helpful to have [the job information] all in one place, and to have people help you," she said.

At the Harvard School of Public Health's table, a steady stream of teens stopped to find out about the school's seven-week Research Apprenticeship Program (RAP).

"You would be experiencing what it's like to work in a lab," RAP manager Sarah Keeping told them. She mentioned research topics such as cancer, nutrition and asthma. "You don't have to know a lot about science," she assured them, "you just have to show you're interested."

The GOTCHA collaborative is led by five organizations: Bird Street Community Center, Bowdoin Street Health Center, Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation (EDC), Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and The City School. All five hire youth for summer or year-round jobs. In addition, about 20 other employers participated in the fair, including Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Children's Services of Roxbury and the new Salvation Army Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center, which opened two weeks ago on Dudley Street not far from Uphams Corner.

The Kroc Center's program manager, Drew Forster, was busy talking up both the center's facilities — pool, gymnasium, climbing wall — and the job slots for teens such as day camp attendant, special event assistant and office assistant.



Ninth-grader Deidra created her first résumé and gathered information about summer jobs at the GOTCHA job fair at Bird Street Community Center on March 17. (Sandra Larson photo)

"We need both the high energy interactive types and the organized types," he explained.

One of the largest employers present was the Bird Street Community Center itself, which hires 147 students for summer jobs and has another 130 part-time jobs during the school year, according to Executive Director Andrea Kaiser. She ticked off some titles: newspaper reporter (for the center's newsletter), sports intern, computer lab intern and arts entrepreneur — jobs she says give kids lasting value.

"It has to be meaningful work that builds skills — otherwise it's just wasting time," she said.

A short program acknowledged elected officials particularly supportive of teen jobs funding. State Reps. Carlos Henriquez and Martin Walsh, state Sens. Sonia Chang-Diaz and Jack Hart, City Councilor-at-Large Felix G. Arroyo, City Councilor-elect Tito Jackson and Mayor Thomas Menino were all thanked for their work.

Henriquez, who started at the Statehouse in January after winning the Fifth Suffolk District seat vacated by Marie St. Fleur, told the audience about his first summer job at age 15, working as a janitorial assistant at an apartment building just a few blocks from Bird Street. The next summer, he was working downtown at IBM, wearing dress pants and a shirt and tie.

On that subject, he had some firm words for the assembled youth.

"I see only a few young men and women dressed correctly for a job fair," he admonished. He spelled out that for men, appropriate dress would be hard bottom shoes, pants, "a shirt that buttons all the way down" and maybe a tie, while women should have hard bottom shoes, pants and a blouse.

He offered to teach young men how to tie a tie, and to even lend them one if they need it.

"There are not a lot of summer job opportunities. So basically, you're coming here to compete. Did you come here to compete, or just to come check it out?" he asked. "If this is something you believe in and want, please don't go halfway, because it won't get you there."

Job fair organizers were unable to give a figure on how many jobs would come of the job fair, as funding is still uncertain. But Dan Gelbtuch, director of Dorchester Bay EDC's Youth Force, said it would almost certainly be more than 300. He expressed cautious optimism about funding this year.

Boston is fortunate to have city funding in the form of the Boston Youth Fund, he said, and to have a mayor who urges private employers to provide jobs for teens. On the state level, Gov. Deval Patrick doubled funding for youth jobs in his proposed regular and supplemental budgets for fiscal year 2012 — but the Legislature will have the final say in actual funding allocated.

"As long as we can shepherd this budget through," Gelbtuch said, "we'll have more teen jobs this summer."

GOTCHA also organizes teens to fight for funding. Last month, Gelbtuch helped coordinate a march and rally in Boston in which youth from across the state urged legislators to support jobs funding. And at the job fair, he took the microphone to remind students of another rally at City Hall on April 5, the day of a jobs funding hearing arranged by Councilor Arroyo.

A sustained effort by youth is crucial, Gelbtuch said. "We need to keep telling politicians this matters to us."