



# Legislative Department Seattle City Council Memorandum

**To:** Parks & Neighborhoods Committee

**From:** Ben Noble and Peter Harris, Central Staff

**Re:** Parks & Recreation proposal for Structured Teen Programming

## **Introduction**

Last fall, in a budget action eliminating proposed additions to community center hours, the Council dedicated some of the funding instead to programs for teens, and placed a proviso on these funds pending a report from Parks on how they would be used for this purpose. On March 19, Acting Superintendent Christopher Williams sent such a report to CM Bagshaw. This report includes a proposal for a new program targeting youth employment.

This memo reviews this report in light of Resolution 31425, which Council adopted ahead of last fall's budget process. You will recall that this resolution set out general standards for the establishment of goals and the measurement of program performance for any new or expanded programs seeking funding from the Council. Three basic questions underlie these standards: What are we trying to accomplish? Why do we believe the program will accomplish it? How will we know whether it does?

The report makes a good start on answering these questions, and a subsequent discussion with Parks management suggests that Parks will be able to refine the answers in a way that will strengthen the program. Another purpose of this memo is to suggest some directions for refinement.

## **Defining Goals, a Theory of Change and Measuring Success**

The overall purpose of the new Youth Career Training Program (YCTP) is to provide employment opportunities and training within Parks that will help youth prepare for future regular employment. It will focus on youth who otherwise could have difficulty getting started in employment.

The proposal from Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) describes three specific and measurable goals related to this purpose: Attainment of basic work skills, as described in Table 1 in the report; Placement and retention in post-secondary education, advanced employment training, apprenticeship or military service; and Attainment of a secondary school diploma or equivalent.

Thus, as now formulated, the goals reflect a joint interest in youth employment and educational attainment. While both these interests are laudable, we suggest that the program is best viewed as a specific opportunity to promote youth employment, both in the near- and longer term. The educational goals are certainly worthwhile and the City can and should track participants' educational performance over time. There is reason to believe that the self-confidence earned through a successful job could lead translate into performance in other venues, including school. However, this program would appear to offer the most direct opportunity for success in terms of promoting youth employment.

A program targeted in this way would address a significant known problem – *youth unemployment*. Even as the local economy has grown stronger, recent data show that more than 30% of the region’s youth (ages 16-19) are unemployed. And given general employment patterns in the region, this figure is likely significantly higher for youth of color.

Viewed and judged in the context of employment, the proposed program provides a clear “theory of change”, that is an explanation of how the program will address the problem at hand. In the short term, the program will itself directly employ the youth, targeting those that face the greatest barriers to employment. Success on this front will be measured by tracking the number of students who follow the program through to completion.

In the longer run, the basic work skills and employment experience provided by the program hold the promise of improving future job prospects for program participants. When applying for their next job, program graduates will have work experience, professional references and a defined set of skills. The importance of these employment basics could be measured by tracking program graduates over a period of a year or more to determine how their future employment rates compare to the region’s broader population of job-seeking teens.

Thus, the proposed program can be structured to address the three questions posed above: We are trying to increase youth employment. We think we can be successful because the program will offer direct near-term employment, as well as the skills and experience needed to support longer-term job opportunities. We will measure whether these goals are being achieved in the near-term by tracking the number of youth who successfully complete the program, and in the longer-run by tracking their employment success against benchmarks for comparable teen populations.

## **Conclusion**

If Council is supportive of a refocusing that makes youth employment the clear target, DPR’s proposed program provides most of the critical elements for measuring performance. The Department’s experience in operating similar programs suggests that it will be able to implement the program without too much trouble, which means that evaluation should be able to focus mainly on impact rather than process.

Two refinements would help. One would be to develop a better understanding of what groups of youth will be targeted by the program. This would help define eligibility, by telling us who it is most important to help first, and, if the program is successful, would tell us what would be required to bring the program to scale. The other would be to develop a comparison group of some form for an outcome evaluation. In combination with the existing program design, these refinements would tell us not only whether the program helps some individuals, but whether it is within the City’s reach to make a material difference in the problem as a whole in Seattle. Based on our initial constructive conversations with the Parks Department, we are confident that such refinements will be made if the program moves forward to implementation.