



## Stimulus aids young workers

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MANKATO July 12, 2009 12:11 am

— Sixteen-year-old Katrina Petersen hears that it's really hard to find a job this summer. How hard, she never had to figure out. The employers came to her.

She signed on with a program administered by the Minnesota Valley Action Council and told them where she'd like to work. Among her top choices was child care, and she was given an interview at Little Stars Early Learning Center, where she now works.

Federal stimulus money is helping about 375 people in south-central Minnesota get jobs this summer, about three times as many as usual. (Full disclosure: The Free Press has one youth employed by the program.)

About \$1.2 billion is earmarked for the program nationwide. Youth aged 14 to 24 are eligible.

"Without the help of this program, I wouldn't have been able to get a job this summer," Petersen said as she rocked an infant to sleep in her lap.

There is no cost for the employer, and the employees are paid the new minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, which takes effect for other workers on July 24.

To participate, youth need to be low-income or be disabled and have an additional risk factor, including dropping out of school, being homeless, being in foster care, being pregnant, having a criminal past, limited English skills or chemical dependency.

Each of the teenagers spending their summer at Little Stars has baby-sitting experience, owner Collette Sternitzke said. The program is a good way to give young people a taste of the field of their choice — either to build a resume or to find out that it's not for them.

The other girls like working with kids so far.

Angie Baker, 18, likes watching the children run up to her when she comes to work.

Melissa Wimes, 17, likes being around the energetic pre-schoolers and would like to be a child psychiatrist one day.

Most of the young people in the program are doing manual labor like landscaping, but there are a handful of office workers.

Among them are Lindsay Herman, 24, who is working at Hatanpa Insurance Agency. On one recent day, she was typing names and addresses in a calling list into the computer.

She'd like to be a medical assistant or a paralegal, so office skills will help build experience.

Herman, of Le Sueur, would also like to stay on at the company after this summer.

But that, as she notes, "is up to Aaron" Hatanpa, the agency head.

The boss had some doubts about whether the participants would be a good fit in a business environment, but said insurance companies generate a lot of paperwork and Lindsay is working out well.

The program runs for 10 weeks, but it can spend the stimulus money through the end of September.

Bonnie Stanton, who administers the program for MVAC, said she always expects the youth to work and earn as much money as they can. But they take vacations, so the program might have leftover spending.

They're still taking applications (go to [www.mnvac.org](http://www.mnvac.org) and print out an application or stop by one of their field offices) but there's a waiting list considering more than 800 people have already applied.

Petersen, the 16-year-old Little Stars employee, is thankful for the help she got in securing her first full-time job, but soon learned the working life isn't all paychecks.

"When you come home, you're all tired," she said. "It's fun, though."

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## Photos



Katrina Petersen, 16, plays with 1-year-old Hailie Joerg at Little Stars Early Learning Center in Mankato. Petersen is part of a stimulus-funded program that puts youth to work at no cost to the employer.



Angie Baker, 18, leads 2-year-old Maddie Janzen through a playground. She said her friends tell her it's hard to find jobs, and she's happy to work with kids.