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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a massive increase in unemployment throughout the United States. Many youth transitioning into the workforce struggled to find summer employment. Youth with disabilities transitioning into the workforce were hit especially hard by the economic downturn brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the unemployment rate among youth with disabilities ages 16-19 reached 31.2% in July, compared to the 18.8% unemployment rate of all youth ages 16-19, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy.

Recognizing the major disadvantages youth with disabilities face when entering the workforce, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) launched the COVID-19 Summer Youth Employment Program (C-SYEP). C-SYEP helps disadvantaged youth, such as youth with disabilities, develop "Essential Employability Skills", and earn at least 180 hours of work experience.

Illinois Department of Human Services Secretary Grace Hou emphasized the importance of helping disadvantaged youth through this program during the COVID-19 pandemic. "IDHS exists to assist residents who are in greatest need and who have not had access to resources and opportunities," Hou said. "In response to COVID-19, we have deployed additional resources to protect and support people who need it most, and to reach marginalized communities during an extremely difficult time".

The Illinois state government subsidized employers participating in C-SYEP, helping them afford the wages of participating youth despite economic restrictions brought about by COVID-19. In exchange, participating employers fulfilled requirements to help participating youth gain essential employability skills that the Illinois Department of Human Services deemed important in preparing youth for the workplace. These include;

1. **Work-based learning** that gives participating youth the opportunity to practice and enhance essential skills and knowledge necessary for the workforce;
2. **Career-development experiences** that helps participating youth prepare specifically for their career area of interest;
3. **Pre-apprenticeship programs** that prepare participating youth for success in an apprenticeship;
4. **Employment readiness activities** that assist youth in preparing for employment, such as job search, resume, application, and other job-finding skills;
5. **Essential Employability Skills Development** to help youth develop self-assessment, skill-development, and worksite professional skills assessment capabilities.

Employers also agreed to provide support services to participating youth, including transportation, work clothes, tools and supplies, social-emotional support services, and life skills assessments.

By July, the 29 employers participating in C-SYEP had provided 2,400 jobs for economically disadvantaged youth and youth with disabilities. Policies that focus on the employment of youth with disabilities, like Illinois' C-SYEP, reduce the massive obstacles youth with disabilities face when entering the workforce, especially during times of crisis. The Illinois Department of Human Services

took a major step toward employment equality for youth with disabilities through the C-SYEP program.

For more information on C-SYEP, visit <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=125094> [2]

By:

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