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Youth Programs

STAND-ALONE YOUTH CENTER OPENS IN SPOKANE AREA

Spokane, Wash., is celebrating the opening of its newest one-stop career center, the youth-dedicated Next Generation Zone.

Opening a youth-dedicated one-stop career center not only will add much needed capacity, but hopefully will improve service delivery as well, according to Mark Mattke, workforce strategy and planning director for the Spokane Area Workforce Development Council.

The Next Generation Zone, a youth services office, has been around since 2007, after the workforce board consolidated youth services that had previously been deployed around the area in small programs with different providers, Mattke told MII.

For three years, Spokane's dedicated Workforce Investment Act-funded youth office has operated within WorkSource Spokane, the area's award-winning comprehensive one-stop career center in downtown Spokane.

In 2007, WorkSource Spokane won the International Association of Workforce Professionals' annual award for the nation's best one-stop career center.

While that move to centralize youth services with the Next Generation Zone helped build capacity for youth services, space grew tight. Youth program staff shared offices and some worked out of the one-stop's resource room.

From March 2008 to March 2009, the youth office served about 1,500 customers, with 450 of them receiving intensive and training services. This past year, those numbers just about doubled.

"The demand and the volume got to be so high that we grew out of our space," Mattke said.

The official grand opening of the Next Generation Zone is schedule for Friday, April 9, though the center has been up and running since January.

Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash), who has been spearheading a drive in Congress to appropriate another round of summer youth employment funding, is expected to attend.

Decorated with art from youth program participants, the new facility has been built up in vacant office space located just across a parking lot from

WorkSource Spokane. It offers 7,210 square feet of space, up from 3,015 square feet that was dedicated to the youth office in the comprehensive career center.

Although the workforce board and realtors looked at property in other parts of the city as potential sites for Next Generation Zone, its location next to the comprehensive one-stop center offers several advantages, Mattke said.

For instance, from a logistical perspective it remains centrally located in the city and situated on a bus line. In terms of service delivery, some customers in their late teens and early twenties might be more attracted to job searching and seeking services that are marketed to adults, and others might prefer to receive services in an office with a slightly more relaxed atmosphere, alongside their peers.

Clients that could be served by either the Workforce Investment Act adult program or the youth program will have the prerogative to use either facility.

"We liked having the linkage to the WorkSource Center in the past," Mattke said of the next-door arrangement. "This gives us the best of both worlds."

There are a variety of new advantages to having a separate facility.

One on One

At a very basic operational level, providing the center's dozen staff with private offices for client counseling is expected to improve one-on-one meetings.

In addition to the typical career exploration and job search assistance services often found in one-stop centers and youth programs, the Next Generation Zone is a hub for the workforce area's summer youth employment program. It houses its own General Educational Development program, as well as high school reentry and college access services.

Now with a classroom all its own, the center will be able to add more basic education and skills training. Goodwill Industries has come on board, offering its GoodGuides mentoring program on-site.

Mattke said local officials are looking to increase partnership and colocated service delivery with juvenile justice services as well as with the local community college, making some classes available at the center.

Generally speaking, an idea behind moving the Next Generation Zone out of the comprehensive one-stop and into its own nearby space is to make the variety of services available to customers more intensive and “more stackable,” he said.

“We want to work more closely with our youth clients to ensure that the services we deliver have a meaningful, quality impact on their lives,” Mattke said.

The workforce agency director also said he hopes that the move will have an impact on how employers perceive their own cooperation with the youth pro-

gram.

Rather than simply seeing the people they hire or take on for subsidized summer jobs as customers of the career center, local employers who work with a dedicated youth facility might see themselves as

making a difference for their community’s young people and may grow generally more willing to hire young people, according to Mattke.

—Ryan Hess

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