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YouthBuild helps groom future of building trades

Boston Business Journal - by [Chris Auclair](#) Special to the Journal

Training unskilled and unemployed city youth for jobs in the construction industry in a souring economy may sound like a daunting task for any organization. For [YouthBuild Boston](#), however, the past few years have been marked by rapid expansion and new partnerships.

When the Roxbury-based organization was founded in 1990, it was the first replication of the YouthBuild program outside of New York City. The New York program, founded in 1978, has since changed its name to [YouthBuild USA](#) and is now headquartered in Somerville. It manages roughly 225 branches nationwide.

The core of YouthBuild is its construction training program, where unskilled or unemployed 18 to 24-year-olds renovate abandoned buildings and turn them into affordable housing. Participants get their GED or high school diploma, take classes on construction topics and receive one-on-one counseling.

Jim Hartman, director of development for YouthBuild Boston, said the downturn in the national economy has had little effect on the chapter's programs, which train and mentor about 140 youths annually.

"As for what is going on economically and in the construction industry, we are a bit insulated from that because of the way we work and the work that we do," he said. "Support and involvement of unions, employers and engineering firms, along with enforcement of the (Boston Residents Jobs Policy) really has made us a premier job training program."

The Boston Residents Jobs Policy, created in 1983, requires that certain percentages of the work done by employees on a city construction project are residents, minorities and women.

YouthBuild programs have youths ages 16 to 19 working on projects ranging from growing green roofs to developing a prototype design for a two-family home that uses low-cost materials while maximizing energy efficiency.

"Various students are learning green building design so low income home owners will be able to benefit through energy cost savings," said executive director Ken Smith. "It also benefits our students, who learn the latest technology and materials used in the industry."

James Blount of Dorchester has participated in the construction training program for about five months.

The 21-year-old high school drop-out had drifted away to Florida for three years before his brother — a YouthBuild alumni — recommended the program.

"When I first came, I had no construction skills," he said. "At the end of the first week, I knew how to cut drywall and measure properly," he said.

Hartman and Smith said the biggest challenges to their organization are posed by funding. Much of YouthBuild Boston's funding comes through the [U.S. Department of Labor](#), the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#), AmeriCorps, YouthBuild USA, the commonwealth of Massachusetts. The rest comes from private funding and corporate partnerships.

"A lot of people in Boston are interested in what we do, but it is hard to reach out and get them engaged," Hartman said.

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