



WorkStarter program gives recent grads the chance to try out careers

By Colleen Jones

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A pilot program that places recent high school graduates in entry-level positions at St. Johns County nonprofits is expanding after a successful first year.

WorkStarter, an organization started by retired local businessman Scott Branch and his wife Barbara, who launched the initiative in 2018 as a way to give young people the chance to get work experience while providing community agencies an extra pair of hands.

Any St. Johns County resident with a high school diploma from a school within the county, or a GED, can apply for one of 10 jobs in an area of interest, from serving as a vet tech with the St. Augustine Humane Society to working as a carpenter's assistant with the St. Johns Housing Partnership.

"Based on the success of last year, we are expanding it for this year," Branch said in an interview with The Record Monday.

The WorkStarter program is funded through the Big Drawer Fund of the American Endowment Foundation. A grant is made to each of the nonprofits to cover the average market salary for each hire made. Most of the full-time jobs offered through the program pay between \$20,000 to \$25,000. Employees agree to work for one year and are treated like any other staff member of the organization.

Branch said the jobs are a good opportunity for recent grads who are not already committed to college or a vocational school to check out a field they may want to pursue, to gain on-the-job experience and learn how to deal with a supervisor and coworkers in a professional setting.

In return, Branch said, "The nonprofit gets another resource to help them achieve their mission."

St. Augustine Housing Partnership is just finishing up a partnership with WorkStarter and is looking to hire two carpenter's assistants for the coming year. Director Bill Lazar said the young woman they placed last year came to them from the construction academy at Pedro Menendez High School. The academies within the St. Johns County School District serve as a pipeline for this program as well as high school internships and career centers like Florida Coast Technical College.

"It really gives them a chance to kick the tires at a career path," said Lazar. "And the grant is helpful because it gives us a chance to take someone on and see if it's going to be cost-effective."

Recruiting talented trade workers is a big deal in the construction industry in particular, Lazar said, since fewer young people are going into the field and older workers are retiring.

The United Way of St. Johns County participated with WorkStarter last year, placing a 2018 graduate as a receptionist/administrative assistant, and has signed on again for this year.

"It's a great chance for someone with little or no office experience to expand their capabilities," said Melissa Nelson, president and CEO for United Way.

In addition, since the United Way works with a number of other organizations and businesses across the area, "We can create a vantage point for that student to learn more about the community," Nelson said.

Other area agencies participating in WorkStarter include the St. Johns Council on Aging, Wildflower Healthcare, the St. Augustine Lighthouse and Museum and INK!

Branch said the program hopes students are able to achieve tangible outcomes, such as getting them hired at the same organization or another one; helping them decide they don't want to pursue the field; or enrolling in a college or career training program.

WorkStarter is going into its second cycle now and accepting applications for employment at www.workstarter.org.