

## YouthBuild program helps young people develop skills

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In honor of National YouthBuild Day, which is being observed today, those at Community Action Inc.'s Beloit Fresh Start program have been celebrating its impact in the community and opening its doors to the community.

On Wednesday, those at Community Action were providing tours of housing projects FreshStart students are working in the Merrill neighborhood. And to celebrate Janeville's 12 administrative personnel from Community Action moving to the Beloit facility at the Eclipse Center there was a ribbon cutting ceremony at 4:30 p.m. followed by an Business After Hours event at 5 p.m.

Since the program launched in 2006, there have been 88 graduates and an 80 percent success rate, according to Gary Wagner, program manager.

In the program, students age 18 to 21 who have dropped out of high school can get re-enrolled to attend classes at the Community Action Pathways Center to obtain their diploma and obtain job skills. Students have three career path certifications they can choose from — certified nursing assistant, business and customer service or construction, said FreshStart Academic Supervisor Linda Fair.

Fair said students can obtain their high school diplomas with the chance to walk across the stage in the graduation ceremony by taking online classes.

Next year the business and customer service certification will be replaced by a welding certificate. Efforts are also under way for the welding program to be held at Beloit Memorial High School's newly remodeled career and technical education area.

In light of the successful programming, Candelaria Diaz and Ike Lee are visiting Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. today to speak about the need for funding for YouthBuild USA. The Fresh Start program of Community Action is funded partially by YouthBuild USA and is up to renew its grant nationally. Diaz and Lee graduated from the program and are now program assistants working through AmeriCorps.

In Beloit one of the most popular career paths for the Fresh Start program has been in construction. A few years ago Community Action purchased more than 17 properties in the Merrill neighborhood. Students in the FreshStart construction program worked on rehabbing the homes as they gained work skills. The homes are then resold to qualified low income families through the Merrill Housing Initiative.

FreshStart Construction instructor Deitra Green said students graduate from her classes with a pre-apprenticeship certificate from the nationally-recognized Home Building Institute. Green, an electrician with more than 20 years of experience in construction, said students completing her classes know how to use tools as well as the basics of building and fixing homes. On Wednesday, she was helping her students work on a home at 1346 Yates Ave. Many of them were learning the fine art of dry wall installation.

The students in Fresh Start's construction program work on rehabbing a home to sell each spring.

Taylor Laidig, 18, is one of the students who will graduate with a certified nursing assistant certification. Laidig, who had her son in tenth grade, said she couldn't continue her education because of childcare. At the time she only had 6.25 credits and needed 24 credits to graduate.

However, now her son is enrolled nearby in Head Start and she is able to attend classes at FreshStart. The program has also helped her get assistance with an apartment and transportation. Once Laidig graduates, she hopes to continue on to college to become a pediatric nurse while using her CNA certification to get a job as she gets through school. Laidig is currently attending some of her classes nearby at the Blackhawk Technical College site in the Eclipse Center and doing clinical work in Brodhead before she will take her state board exam.

Wagner said there were more than 70 applications for the program which can only accept 21 students. He noted that applicants must pass a thorough interview process and a 2-week "mental toughness" component to demonstrate if they are ready to fully commit themselves to the program.

Community Action is an 100 percent local, not-for-profit organization, offering a broad spectrum of community programs aimed at preventing and reducing poverty in Rock and Walworth counties. It operates the Fresh Start program, offers child care, at-risk youth programming, teen parent support, women's health care, senior benefits counseling, home ownership programs, affordable housing units, home weatherization and rehab, assistance in dealing with a housing crisis, food for area pantries and shelter for the homeless.