

Youth Leadership Development Program

by Karen Minty

The new Youth Leadership Development program aims to empower youth through learning new skills, leadership training and providing volunteer opportunities to practice these skills.

The pilot project is offered in partnership with LEADS Employment Services and Service Canada - Canada Corps. Five sites are currently operating in Stratford, Woodstock, St. Thomas, Strathroy and here in Sarnia.

"We are recruiting youth who want to be more engaged in their community. We are going to partner youth to work together and learn from each other. Leaders, who may or may not have a disability or barrier will mentor other youth who have self-identified as having a disability or barrier," explains Youth Coach, Heather Roberts. Together the leaders and mentees volunteer at different events and non-profit organizations throughout the



Kyle and Heather

year.

Leaders receive training in coaching, health and safety, inclusion and accommodations before being matched with a volunteer mentee. "When they volunteer, we immediately ask them, 'do you see yourself as a leader?' and let them make the decision

on what role they will play," says Heather.

The program aims to engage youth in the community through volunteerism. "If we can help get the youth involved early, they have much more success later. Volunteering bridges the gap between school and work. It pro-

vides opportunities for those with limited work experience, setting them up for success with future employment," explains Youth Coach, Kyle Walker.

As part of the leadership training, volunteers are taught how to recognize and develop both hard and soft skills and understand how they are transferrable from one context to another. "We teach them how what they are doing now will benefit them later. Skills such as leadership, management, reliability are all transferrable to employment opportunities," explains Heather.

An Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) is created for each participant to highlight their progress through the program. It identifies their goals, previous experiences, strengths, areas of interest and any accommodations they may require.

One of the desired outcomes for the Youth Leadership Development

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opment program to achieve is the establishment of a Youth Advisory Council for Youth with Disabilities. They hope to engage youth to create a self-governing, youth-led community service project that will extend the life of the original project.

The goal of this council is for youth to have a voice in their community and tackle issues that are important to them. "We want the youth to find their passion, and when we discuss different issues that affect them personally, you can really see their passion bubble to the top," says Heather. The youth have already identified the environment as a key issue on their radar.

The program is open to young adults between the ages of 15 and 30. Accommodations will be made for those who self-identify as having a disability or barrier. Recruitment and intake are continuous throughout the year. Volunteer hours may be eligible for the community service requirement to graduate secondary school or complete post-secondary programs, and excess hours worked will open up opportunities for bursaries and scholarships for students.

For more information on the program or to volunteer, email Heather Roberts at heather.roberts@leadsservices.com or visit their website at www.leadsservices.com or call 519 330 2982.