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SUMMER JOBS PROGRAM KICKS OFF IN HELENA

HELENA, MONTANA—American Jobs for America’s Youth Montana (AJAY MT) held their Summer Jobs Program Kick-off on May 24 at Helena College, with over 50 student participants, mentors, and partners in attendance. The event celebrates the beginning of summer and offers an opportunity for students to meet their mentors over a meal.

Summer Jobs Program participants are motivated high school students and recent graduates who build work skills, explore careers, and strengthen the local workforce. The SJP has grown from its roots in Helena to serve 75 students this year, with new regional programs in Anaconda, Billings, Bozeman, Whitehall, and the Flathead Valley.

Isabella Williamson, age 18, of East Helena participated in the program the past two summers, working for the Helena Area Chamber of Commerce in 2021 and the Lewis and Clark County District Court in 2022. “The best thing to me about the Helena Area Summer Jobs Program is all the opportunities to learn they give you. Not only do they provide online courses to complete before you work, but you also get to attend various workshops and request a mentor who specializes in a subject that interests you,” she says.

AJAY MT, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, created the Summer Jobs Program in 2019. By 2022 enrollment doubled, with the program expanding to six areas. “Our partners make it happen,” says Executive Director Gabrielle Eklund Rowley, who actively engages students, volunteers, and agencies to grow the program. “It’s a very collaborative effort.”

The Summer Jobs Program matches high school students and recent grads with paid work experience, providing work skills training and connecting students with adult mentors. “The work skills training and opportunities to grow employability skills are unmatched. This program is essential in moving the dial in the workforce arena and shows a huge benefit to our community and area businesses,” says McKinley Winkle, vice president of the Helena Area Chamber of Commerce.

Local partners include businesses, school districts, Helena Area Chamber of Commerce, Helena College, Reach Higher Montana, and STOKÉ. Funding for the program comes from the Gianforte Family Foundation, Reach Higher Montana, community and private foundations, sponsors, and individual donors.

The program helps communities as well as the young employees, Eklund Rowley says. “The program is designed to sustainably improve the lives of young workers. The job skills students learn serve them well after the program ends, benefiting them as individuals and strengthening their communities.”

Businesses also benefit. “Opportunity Bank of Montana sees tremendous value in the Summer Jobs Program and the additional workforce pipelines it creates,” says Tom Burkhart, recruitment and retention officer. “We’ve matched with several fantastic students, one of whom has blossomed into a

wonderful, long-term team member.”

Eklund Rowley says it’s gratifying to see the youth grow over the summer. “They learn so much about themselves. They really learn about what brings them satisfaction in a work setting. They learn to manage time, problem solve, talk with employers and coworkers, and build skills that will transfer across their careers.” Williamson adds, “To future Helena Area Summer Jobs Program participants, just go for it! I know it can seem daunting, but it will be worth it.”

Kickoff events for students and mentors in the six regions are happening this week and next, with students starting their SJP work positions in June. More information is available at <https://www.americanjobs4youth.org/sjp> or by contacting Gabrielle Eklund Rowley: gerowley@americanjobs4youth.org or 406-490-4954.