

GothamSchools

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NYC's summer employment program a model for cities nationwide

by [Philissa Cramer](#)



Francesca Martinez, left, and Alexis Noa

While many teens spent their summer vacations relaxing, Francesca Martinez and Alexis Noa manned the phones and filed purchase orders at the employment office of the [Henry Street Settlement](#), a comprehensive service provider on the Lower East Side.

Noa, a senior at Manhattan's High School for Leadership and Public Service, and Martinez, a junior at Millennium High School in Tribeca, were among the 43,000 young people who this spring won an annual lottery: a job through the city's [Department of Youth and Community Development's Summer Youth Employment Program](#).

Nearly three decades old, SYEP is more popular than ever — this year receiving more than 100,000 applications for 43,000 positions — and a model for summer employment programs in cities around the country, even as DYCD officials refine the program's structure here in New York.

Thanks to a vigorous outreach campaign and growing familiarity with a relatively new online application, SYEP this spring received about 10,000 more applications than last year and was able to offer positions to just over 40 percent of applicants. Except for a small number of young adults who are guaranteed a slot because they participated in DYCD's school-year program, applicants ages 14 to 21 are selected by lottery, without regard to past work experience or financial need.

Those who are selected work 25 hours a week for up to seven weeks, earning the state minimum wage of \$7.15 as assistants at thousands of the city's camps, offices, and stores. Community organizations coordinate the vast majority of positions, and some even pony up extra cash to give the young adults they hire full-time employment. Participants receive debit cards that automatically reflect their earnings, marking for many the first foray into money management.

"I haven't used my debit card once yet," Noa said proudly, a week before her job ended. "College isn't cheap, so I'm saving for that."

Earlier this spring, as the mayor and City Council hashed out [a deadline-beating budget](#), some feared that SYEP might suffer. But it emerged able to serve more young adults than last year. "Both sides of City Hall are really committed to this program," said DYCD spokesman Ryan Dodge. In fact, Dodge noted, since the beginning of Mayor Bloomberg's first term, the city's funding for SYEP has increased by 68 percent — mostly to make up for a decline in federal funding. Still, the program has never had enough funding to provide a job for every applicant.

Martinez said a cousin of hers wasn't selected in the lottery and ended up getting a job through the New York Times Foundation, which targets low-income students; it's one of a few outlets, including the NYPD Police Explorers and the city's lifeguard program, for teenage jobseekers spurned by SYEP. But she said she knew of others teens who didn't do much of anything this summer.

"Kids who really want to work, we say keep calling back," said Danielle Algranati, Henry Street's director of adolescent services, herself an alumna of the program; some students selected through the lottery opt not to accept a position, often because they must attend summer school, limiting their job options to evening positions located near their school.

Young adults don't have to be enrolled in school to be eligible for a SYEP job, but directing out-of-school or undercredited youth toward resources, such as DYCD's [Young Adult Internship Program](#), that can get them back on track has been an objective of the summer program since the DYCD absorbed youth employment programs in 2003. Before then, the city focused its attention on providing earning opportunities for poor youths, and the Department of Employment administered SYEP. The new incarnation, which integrates social services, makes sense, Algranati said, given the huge numbers of young adults for whom SYEP marks the only time they encounter service providers.

DYCD requires that providers offer 17 hours of educational programming: an orientation and sessions about health, career, college, and financial literacy. At well-run organizations such as Henry Street, which employed nearly 1,000 young people this summer at over 100 locations, those workshops can be well-executed and informative.

“At first I wasn’t too excited about going,” Martinez said. But the activities and instruction were interesting, she said, especially the one about health. “They way they taught it was more fun than in school. In school it was just textbooks and boring.”

Unfortunately, not all providers have always provided interesting or high-quality programming, according to Alan Cheng, SYEP’s director. “It was built in as a very flexible component, and we trusted that community-based providers would know their youth better than we would,” he said. “But some didn’t have as good resources — they didn’t bring in people; [the classes] might have been more boring.”

Now, as part of a contract renewal process that could alter the organizations that provide SYEP jobs, DYCD is planning to standardize SYEP’s education component for future years. “To the young people and the city, it will be seamless,” Cheng said. “Behind the scenes, it will be a lot of work.”

DYCD consults regularly with summer employment programs in other cities to help them replicate New York’s success, Cheng said. This year, for example, officials in Washington, D.C., where the summer youth program attracted sustained press attention for being [disorganized and wasteful](#), reached out to DYCD. “The problems they’re going through, we went through on a smaller scale,” Cheng said.

But New York will always have an advantage when it comes to putting together a comprehensive summer youth employment program, Cheng said, noting that unlike New York, most other cities lack “really good providers” that are rooted in communities and can ensure mentoring as well as substantive work experiences.

Through those experiences, participants develop skills and attitudes about work that will serve them long after they’re through being eligible for SYEP.

“Even if in my career I’m not doing exactly the same thing as I am at Henry Street, it’s good to know how to communicate and talk to people in a professional way,” Martinez said.