

SPOTLIGHT ON LOCAL WORKFORCE INNOVATIONS

Guilford Summer Vocation Program: From Vision to Impact *A Police Chief's Vision Creates Workforce Change*

Imagine stepping out of school and straight into a career. That's the future envisioned by the Guilford Summer Vocation Program's vision—a transformative youth employment and training initiative that began as a public safety strategy and has since become a model for workforce development and community empowerment. Originally launched by former Greensboro Police Chief Brian James during the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has grown into a comprehensive system that connects young people to jobs, mentorship, and long-term career paths. Chief James said, "Some of the skills that can be learned in a part-time job are easily transferrable to life," and could positively impact the youth. But why would a police department lead the initiative? Chief James simply responded, "It's needed."

In its **first year**, the program exceeded its goal by placing **over 600 youth** in jobs. The aim was to **prevent crime** by targeting crime-challenged areas and offering job opportunities there. The team worked hard to connect youth with employers, matching experience levels to the right positions. Some of the jobs even became **permanent**.

The chief emphasized that **community safety** doesn't just come from more police—it can also come from **access to jobs, healthcare, and opportunity**. Chief James believes this program offers hope and direction to youth facing tough environments.

The program naturally evolved into an effort of the formal **public workforce development system**, represented by the local workforce board, GuilfordWorks. Chief James said that change was a good thing, because "we realized the program required an infrastructure that specialized in that area." Many participants improved their situations, enrolling in college, joining the military, or finding stable paths forward.

Dr. Danielle Harrison, Executive Director of GuilfordWorks and President of GuilfordWorks Foundation, credits the chief for his vision and creation of the program. She noted that as the program moves forward, there is an increased focus on impact over numbers. Rather than aiming for 500 job placements, the program now emphasizes holistic support which leads to better long-term outcomes. GuilfordWorks has also developed its own registered apprenticeship program: [Gear Up | ASAP](#).

Program Overview

The Guilford Summer Vocation Program, led by GuilfordWorks, targets youth aged 16–24. Its goals include:

- Preventing crime by keeping youth engaged
- Equipping young people with real-world job skills
- Helping participants overcome barriers like transportation, access to resources, and limited career exposure
- Offering pathways to employment, education, and apprenticeships

Initially launched as the [Police Chief's 500 Jobs Program](#), it placed over 600 youth in its first year, exceeding its goal. It has since evolved beyond just job placement to include workforce training, vocational exposure, and holistic development.

Partnership with Local Businesses

The program thrives through strong partnerships with employers, schools, and community organizations. These partnerships provide youth with internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship.

Requirements for Participants

- Aged 16–24
- Must obtain a worker's permit
- Provide valid identification documents
- Participate in readiness activities and assessments
- Those not seeking employment can still access education and training resources

PROGRAM REVIEW

Lessons Learned

Chief James reflected on his first job as a youth, bagging groceries and how it kept him on a positive path. He shared that **community safety isn't just about policing—it's about opportunity.**

Key Lessons from the Program:

- Focus on impact, not just numbers
- Community partnerships are crucial
- Other models matter—learning from Durham's program helped refine this one
- A data-driven approach using crime and unemployment maps guides resource placement

Outcomes

- Over 600 job placements in the first year
- Expansion across Guilford County
- Inclusion of apprenticeships, reentry programs, and job training
- Measurable success through:
 - Enrollment
 - Retention
 - Family engagement
 - Continued services (tutoring, mentorship, education)
- Increased employer engagement, making the program a sustainable talent pipeline.

Success Story: James

James joined the program through Guilford Technical Community College, gaining key skills like conflict resolution and time management. Despite struggling to get interviews at first, he remained committed and eventually landed a job as a summer camp counselor at the YMCA. His performance led to a permanent position, showing how determination and support can change a young person's life.

Program Highlights

- Expansion from Greensboro to all of Guilford County
- Holistic services beyond employment: education, arts, recreation, and mentoring
- Industry certifications in trades like automotive, welding, construction, healthcare, culinary arts, and IT
- Career readiness tools including resume writing, interview prep, and virtual reality job exploration
- Support for justice-involved youth through reentry programs
- Access to apprenticeships and paths to long-term employment
- Strategic collaboration with Guilford County Schools, Parks and Recreation, local libraries, cultural arts departments, faith-based groups, and NCWorks NextGen



Conclusion

The Guilford Summer Vocation Program began as a strategy to reduce youth crime and has grown into a full-fledged workforce development model. By combining job training, community partnerships, and access to education, it has empowered hundreds of young people with the tools they need to succeed. The program's shift from counting jobs to creating impactful experiences is a powerful lesson in what happens when a community comes together to invest in its youth.

► About the Series

Brought to you by the NCWorks Commission, the Spotlight on Local Workforce Innovations series showcases local innovations in collaborative, employer-led workforce development partnerships across our state. This spotlight was written by Veronica Howard Green, Director of Local Innovation. The series will highlight promising practices that can be replicated across North Carolina.

The NCWorks Commission is the state's Workforce Development Board. Led by a private sector chair, the 37-member, Governor-appointed commission includes representatives from the business community, heads of state workforce agencies, educators, and community leaders.

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