With summer jobs scarce this year due to coronavirus, youth earn paychecks tilling the land

**Green areas amid pandemic**

**By Elizabeth Román**

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While most summer programs have been canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Farm Workers Council was able to secure summer jobs for 50 students in a six-week program. The program is funded by the state Youth Works program through the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development and the Commonwealth Corporation. It is administered regionally by MassHire Hampden County Workforce Board, Inc. Heriberto Flores, president and CEO of the Farm Workers Council, said he reached out to U.S. Rep. Richard Neal and Gov. Charlie Baker’s offices to ensure that at least some students would be able to get summer jobs.

“We normally provided jobs for hundreds of kids every summer so that’s what I wanted to do again this year, but many of our job sites were closed down,” Flores said. “This program got approval because it is possible to socially distance on the farm.”

The youth, ranging from 14 to 16 years old, have already been in the program for three weeks and have learned what it means to cultivate a crop from scratch, Colon said.

“I’m having them build community gardens within the farm site itself. They started with seed starters then they transplanted them into a plot that they weeded and tilled themselves. They put up the fence and the mulch around the crops as well,” he said.

All of the seeds are organic, and participants have planted everything from eggplant and spinach to aji dulce, a sweet pepper grown in Puerto Rico.

“We outsource the Caribbean vegetables from our commercial farmers. We wanted to give the students an idea of what growing a cultural and specialty crop looks like,” she said.

Martinez, 16, of Springfield, said he was expecting to do hard farm labor — and he has gotten just that.

“It’s definitely a lot of work. It’s very hard work, but it’s worth it because it helps me get in shape and maybe lose a few pounds,” he said.

Trust Greene, 14, of Springfield said she has enjoyed learning the process of preparing land for crops.

“We do a lot of weeding, a lot goes into it before you can even begin to plant the seeds,” she said.

Josh Segarra of Springfield plans on attending Springfield Technical Community College virtually in the fall. On the farm he supervises the younger kids as they work the land.

“They have really put in so much work,” he said. “It’s a lot of hours of weeding. I mean they have done so much weeding I feel bad for them in this heat, but then they get to grow something that they worked on with their own hands.”

The students are on the property from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. three days a week.

“We start the day with breakfast provided for free by Sodexo. They provide lunch as well,” Colon said.

“I also have them do a walk every morning and talk to the commercial farmers on the property.”

The kids then work on their community garden for the rest of the day, with breaks for water and rest.

The program also includes learning components as well as community service elements.

Next week the group will be packaging boxes of produce that will be distributed to elderly people in Holyoke.

“We will be making 20 pound boxes to deliver to senior housing communities in Holyoke,” Colon said. “We are sourcing 2000 pounds of produce right from the farms in the back, and then we will have the kids doing the packaging help us deliver them.”

Part of the reason the on-site summer work program was approved were the safety precautions taken by the Farm Workers Council, said Ana West Reyes, executive assistant for the agency.

Western Mass said Springfield and Westfield were the two communities granted permission by the state to place youth in summer jobs. Nuestras Raices is the only in-person worksite approved due to safety protocols the Farm Workers Council put in place. Two school buses each carry about a dozen participants to ensure social distancing. There are temperature checks before participants board the bus. At the farm there are individual snacks, water, breakfast and lunch offerings, mandatory masks and antibacterial sanitizers and soap.

“We have had so many parents tell us how appreciative they are that their kids can be outside in a safe environment,” West-Reyes said. Flores said it’s not just about them earning money, but about getting outdoors and improving their mental health.

“I believe this generation is going to experience a lot of mental health issues because of the virus and the fast changes happening in the world,” he said. “Being out here gives them a chance to do something as simple as sit under the trees or take a walk and talk to the Nuestras Raices farmers or look at the beautiful birds. It’s important for our youth to experience those things.”