

The Buffalo News : City & Region

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COMMENTARY

Rod Watson: Keep Buffalo Neat: service + work ethic

Rod Watson

Updated: March 11, 2010, 7:59 AM / 15 comments

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In an old plant on Northampton Street, the snowblowers and pickups with plows attached anticipate winter's last hurrah. The lawnmowers await warmer times.

But it's not the machines that are the story; it's the people operating them. The county's anti-poverty agency is tackling one of Buffalo's most vexing problems: finding work for those no one else wants to hire.

That's the idea behind Keep Buffalo Neat, a jobs program with a twist: It's grounded in realism about both the economy and folks who have trouble getting jobs even in the best of times.

It's a departure from the myth that everyone can land a middle-class job despite a brush with the law, no high school diploma or other baggage.

"That moment in American history is passing," said Henry L. Taylor Jr., director of the University at Buffalo's Center for Urban Studies, which works with the Community Action Organization of Erie County. He said it's time to get "beyond that kind of Disneyland view of American society."

For the low-skilled or no-skilled, that means accepting entry-level work and learning to perform it on time and with a smile.

Enter KBN. It sends workers out to plow streets and sidewalks in the winter, cut grass and trim hedges in the summer, and work on CAO facilities in between. Not a make-work program, it's a subscription service that marries workers with homeowners—many of them elderly—who need these tasks performed.

Homeowners pay \$30 a month, and the program already has about 300 subscribers, with new ones signing up each week, said L. Nathan Hare, executive director of the CAO, which runs the program.

Funded with a \$1.6 million federal economic-stimulus grant acquired with the help of the Brown administration, the program launched last August, with wages that start at \$8.69 an hour and increase to \$10.17 after six months.

With uniformed workers whose visible presence can help deter neighborhood crime, it also restores pride as workers spruce up inner-city neighborhoods they grew up in.

“This is our backyard, so it's kind of like cleaning our own house,” said program coordinator Clement Hutchinson.

It's also a program of no illusions. It now has 34 workers, after hiring 46, but Hare envisions increasing the number to 300. He has no patience, though, with those allergic to work who would rather take their chances on the streets.

Unlike jobs programs that avoid the hard cases because their funding depends on retention rates, Keep Buffalo Neat offers support services and attitude training while embracing those cases, requiring only “integrity and a work ethic,” Hare said.

“It's just an excellent opportunity to [move yourself forward] in life,” said Reecie Barnes, 31, who enrolled in November.

What would Errol Weathers say to those who think this kind of work is beneath them?

“They missed out on a nice little job,” said Weathers, 50, who's getting back on his feet after getting laid off from temporary construction work.

As magic bullets go, this one—focused on renewing the urban core by investing in its people—is more on target than all the talk of spectacular developments funded by massive subsidies.

Changing attitudes about low-wage work, about taking care of one's community and about personal responsibility can rebuild neighborhoods and, equally important, the lives of the people who live in them.

I can't think of too many other projects we've undertaken around here that can make that claim—and at such low cost.

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Why don't we have all of the welfare freeloaders do the same thing? Have a place where they can bring all of their children for the day (ran by welfare recipients and make them put in a days work for their benefits? No work no benefits.

Posted by: swillman on Mar 12,2010 at 08:02 am

Inappropriate

Reply

"Hey Rod, Looks like your yard could use a little sprucing up...Why don't you lead by example and hire one of these poor souls with a few brushes with the law and other "baggage"? Nope? Thought so."

He can't, he chose to live in the white Suburbs. Ironic isn't it? You would think he would purchase a home in a struggling east side community to support his articles.

Posted by: Works4living on Mar 11,2010 at 06:44 pm

Inappropriate

Reply

How about we stop sending everyone's job overseas? No that would never work.

Posted by: Resistance on Mar 11,2010 at 05:44 pm

Inappropriate

Reply

"I can't imagine why a employer wouldn't want to hire someone with a "brush with the law, no high school diploma and other baggage" What's wrong with those rotten employers."

Doesnt everyone have a right to work? So you dont want them on welfare. But you dont care if they can find work or not. And you dont want them to rob you. Seems like you might be asking for a bit much.

Posted by: Resistance on Mar 11,2010 at 05:42 pm

Inappropriate

Reply

"Its a departure from the myth that everyone can land a middle-class job despite a brush with the law, no high school diploma or other baggage"

The publishing of this article most likely was done with good intentions. Although, some suggestions were a little bit disturbing, which makes this piece less than great. Facts: I know a KBN worker who has 25 years manufacturing experience, a college degree, and no children. In fact, I know two workers who are college-educated. Perhaps, you should have interviewed them for this piece.

Yes, I'm aware that KBN is an inner city project/program. However, residing in the inner city are those who are "skilled" have "no baggage" are "educated" and "work for Keep Buffalo Neat" Always a good idea to show two sides of the story.

Rod, sorry to say that many KBN workers were insulted by this article. They were not proud! Another reporter has agreed to write a piece that sheds a different light on KBN workers...an article they can make them proud.

Posted by: Msdoctoralstudent on Mar 11,2010 at 02:24 pm

Inappropriate

Reply

Hey Rod,

Looks like your yard could use a little sprucing up...Why don't you lead by example and hire one of these poor souls with a few brushes with the law and other "baggage"? Nope? Thought so.

Posted by: Ichiro on Mar 11,2010 at 12:49 pm

Inappropriate

Reply

"Another way for Mayor Erkle to hand out patronage jobs just like all the lazy people he has brought into city hall "

That aint no joke. I swear EVERYONE in city hall (every department) is run by ignorant, uneducated a&* holes. They don't like their jobs, they are rude to everyone, they are CLUELESS!!!! This town is a real joke when it comes to our so called 'leadership'. I am all for 'OUT OF TOWNERS TAKING OVER CITY HALL'. It seems, Buffalo (in City Hall) is still not aware it's 2010, and other places are far more advanced than we are.

Posted by: Taboo1981 on Mar 11,2010 at 11:27 am

Inappropriate

Reply

Another way for Mayor Erkle to hand out patronage jobs just like all the lazy people he has brought into city hall

Posted by: wasted on Mar 11,2010 at 10:38 am

Inappropriate

Reply

One of the best ideas I've ever seen! If they could eventually reduce the government's (ie: ME AND YOU) role in financing it to zero, even better! The money is going toward something productive and needed.

Some of the usual suspects are grinding their same old axes I see. One guy (gal?) wants all the employees locked up! That could get expensive. Unless they put 'em in the county Holding Center. Those guys have found a way to keep inmate costs to a minimum.

Posted by: sabreguy29 on Mar 11,2010 at 10:22 am

Inappropriate

Reply

"I can't imagine why a employer wouldn't want to hire someone with a "brush with the law, no high school diploma and other baggage" What's wrong with those rotten employers."

Oh, I know. Meanwhile, many people WITH an education, work experience and no criminal record are still searching for a job since the job market went down. I think it's only fair to hire those with the Qaulifications get hired first, NOT, just because I'm poor and come from da'hood.

Posted by: Taboo1981 on Mar 11,2010 at 10:04 am

Inappropriate

Reply

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