

Summer gardening program grows green teens, benefits local food pantries

By PATRICIA A. RUSSELL, Valley Breeze Staff Writer

WOONSOCKET - Walton Davis, 16, a junior at Woonsocket High School, scrambled to find a summer job but hit a dead end.

John Smith wanted a summer job to help pay for upcoming college expenses. The 18-year-old Cumberland resident applied to several places. No one called him back.

Woonsocket resident Jaylen Carter, 16, needed a job to buy back-to-school clothes.

Jen Wilder, 23, of Woonsocket, tried to get a job at all the usual places young people look for work, including fast food restaurants. She never got hired.

These youths might have had to spend the summer jobless, but that didn't happen. They all landed jobs pulling weeds.

For weeks now, they've been getting \$7.40 an hour to work in a community garden in Woonsocket, thanks to funding through the federal economic stimulus plan allocated to create summer work opportunities and training specifically for low-income youth.

In Woonsocket, Family Resources, a not-for-profit family-centered, social agency received \$218,973 in stimulus funding for summer youth employment. Of that, \$65,355 is funding the garden project.

Family Resources put 100 teens to work through its YouthWorks411 program, one of 13 such programs in Rhode Island founded by the state Department of Labor and Training.

The teens have been working in a garden that actually got its start last summer, according to Jo Goode, a coordinator with YouthWorks411.

Then, 15 teens conducted a feasibility study to see if Woonsocket folks would be interested in a community garden. A survey indicated an overwhelming response in favor of one.

"With the stimulus funds, we developed a gardening program around the community garden," said Goode. "We've been able to put youth to work learning all about different career paths in the green industry," she said, adding that teens are getting exposed to careers in the agricultural and horticultural fields. They will also be active participants in a canning session later this month.

George Brainerd, executive director of the YMCA in Woonsocket, offered the use of a one-acre vacant lot on Clinton Street, once the home of a Little League field situated behind the Verizon building.

Vegetables grown in the community garden will be donated to the nine food pantries in the city.