

Program Model

# 'Teen Summer Experience'

Young people want to be connected to friends and family, and learn, work, and be respected for their choices.

*Teen Summer Experience*, a youth program of the Bethlehem, PA-based Via of the Lehigh Valley, helps teens and young adults develop social skills and peer networks that lead to success in life, career development, and independence.

*Teen Summer Experience*, open to teens and young adults ages 14-21, connects youth to their community through recreational, social, volunteer, and educational activities. *Teen Summer Experience* is an intensive 11-week program, with opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities that includes job shadowing and career counseling, volunteer activities in a variety of inclusive settings, and a series of recreational and team-building activities.

"It's important to not only link them [teens] to a career, but the social life that goes with it," said Lisa Musselman, director of Community Connections with Via

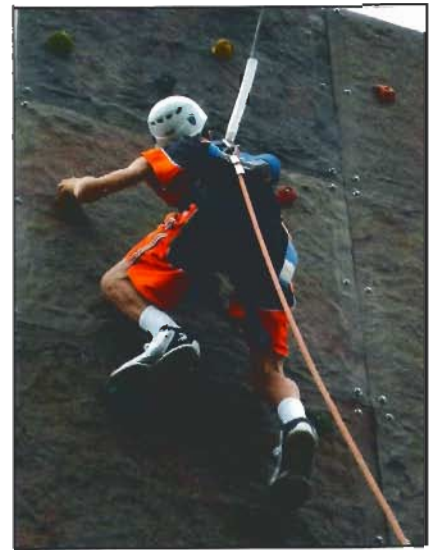
of the Lehigh Valley. "Because teens with disabilities are often isolated, it's important for them to work on social skills. This is important for a good quality of life."

*Teen Summer Experience* evolved out of a small Via summer camp that began several years ago. As the venture has grown, Via partners today with more than 75 small and large employers and 42 local agencies and institutions of higher education. Through these partnerships, *Teen Summer Experience* provides opportunities for teens and young adults to participate in:

- Inclusive learning and volunteer activities;
- Post-secondary educational opportunities;
- Non-credit classes and recreational activities with their peers;
- Career interest inventories;
- Job shadow, job site visits, and career exploration;
- Mock interviews with Human Resource managers at Lehigh Valley companies;
- Résumé preparation; and
- Recreational activities, including swimming and sports excursions.

With the current economy and a scarcity of paid summer jobs for youth, programs like *Teen Summer Experience* are needed more than ever, according to Musselman.

"We've had an increasing number of referrals," said Musselman, noting that about 30 youth are presently enrolled in the program. (Registrations were still open



when this story was written.) "Parents and teens want to know what kind of career preparation it'll take to find a job next year."

*Teen Summer Experience* also works individually with each teen and his/her family to develop educational, recreational, and vocational goals for the summer program.

"Each of the teens and young adults have an idea what kind of work they want to do, but if we put them all together, we couldn't play to an *individual's* interests and strengths," Musselman stated.

Parents agree that the program does just that. "The Via staff really seemed to know my son after he attended just a few times. I am definitely interested in my son coming back for future summers," said one parent.

Goals focus on individual interests and center on developing skills and experiences that further develop teens' social and vocational skills, as they prepare to transition from school to adult life.

"We want them [youth] to leave after the summer, résumé in hand, better prepared for their future," Musselman concluded. ■

Source: *Via of the Lehigh Valley* ([www.vianet.org](http://www.vianet.org)).

