



JOANNE S. LANTON

Sources Revealed | Veronica Nolan

Skills challenge

At the Urban Alliance, formerly the Urban Alliance Foundation, Veronica Nolan trains the District's at-risk youth to enter the work force and places them in summer jobs with private employers. She has expanded the organization from serving one school to 13, and its participants have a 96 percent high school graduation rate — results that helped Nolan pick up a \$100,000 prize from the Meyer Foundation. She talks about why she decided to step in to help the city's Summer Youth Employment Program, how the city could run it better and a better way for employers to achieve that "warm, fuzzy feeling."

Interview by Jonathan O'Connell

The Urban Alliance provided work readiness training for the city's Summer Youth Employment Program this summer, even though you've never taken city money in the past.

Why? The main reason is it was such a need from the kids' perspective. We've been very fortunate to this point to have almost every local foundation in the city support us at the level they are able to support us at, and we are so incredibly grateful. But that said, that pot of money that typically nonprofits get funded by — that box was checked. We're really not going to have the opportunity to expand significantly to serve a greater number of kids. We had 400 kids call the office in August, and we only have the capability to serve 130 of them. So how do you bridge that gap, was the question that was posed.

Any concerns about it? I don't want it to hinder our quality. The beauty of not accepting government money is that you get to say how your program will be run, whereas government money comes with a lot of red tape.

Couldn't the summer jobs program's rocky history mar your brand? When we made the decision, the way I looked at it was how could accepting government money allow us to serve more kids in the quality and fashion we're used to doing, and what are the ways we can do it? So we're very strategic. For example, us providing the training for the 12,000 kids at the summer youth employment orientation, what would we have control over? I was only going to do it if we had control over the parts we needed to have control over and that was the curriculum, the teachers, pretty much that. I wouldn't have moved forward with it if we were just going to hand our curriculum over to them.

You have placed youths with dozens of private employers. How will your deal with the city affect your relationships with those companies? When we go out to job pitches and corporations, we sometimes will hear, "Oooh, I don't want to work with the [D.C. Department of Employment Services] job program." So I think we need to be very cautious about maintaining the Urban Alliance brand. It was more attractive to us and more attractive to me to have the capability of serving significantly more city youth than chasing the dollars and then saying, what can we do with that? It was exciting to us as a staff. Imagine — your whole career you're working with youth and you're trying to serve as many as possible. To be able to serve 12,000 in one pop and to do it well ... the biggest high we've had the whole time was how well it went.

Other cities contract out their entire summer youth programs. If D.C. did that, would you consider it? We would be open to conversations that would lead to that type of discussion, but there's a lot that goes into that. There's so much that goes into putting on a program for 22,000 kids. And I do take the Urban Alliance's brand seriously. We'd only even remotely consider

it if I thought that we would have the resources and the planning time to do the quality job that we've always done.

If you were running it, how would you improve it? I would do is organize a kitchen cabinet type of advisers, like Lori Kaplan [executive director of the Latin American Youth Center], Lindsey Buss of Martha's Table and Eshauna Smith of D.C. Alliance of Youth Advocates. The first thing I would do would be to listen. From all stakeholders that have been involved in this — what are the positives and what are the negatives? Without a doubt, even though we did the training, I wish it had been longer. We prepared each kid for like an hour. And I don't know how realistic it is with 22,000 — I mean that's a lot of kids — but at Urban Alliance we've had a lot of success with case management. Kids walk into job sites not knowing what appropriate dress is. And then employers as well need to be trained about how to structure a work environment because it is very different. Also, and I think DOES tries to do this, but I think it should continue: The 14- and 15-year-olds should have some sort of leadership, life skills component. The 16- and 17-year-olds should be in the government, nonprofit sector, and I think the college students should be in the private sector. As you grow up in age and up in experience, you're going to get a more fruitful experience that is going to lead you on a path to a real career.

Is that because the private sector jobs are the hardest? I think so. I also think it's the least nurturing. Because everyone says the private sector needs to be involved more, but we, as youth providers or the government or whoever is asking the private sector to accept these kids, have to understand that the private sector is worried about the bottom line. So unless this is going to enhance their bottom line, why should they participate? They can go read to a fifth-grade classroom during one lunch hour or write a check to get that warm, fuzzy feeling about corporate giving. Here's a few reasons to participate: No. 1, you give junior-level employees an opportunity to manage for the first time and really enhance their professional development. You get to add value to your workload. You get to have people who never get to delegate to someone to delegate to someone so they'll be more productive. So you have to appeal to the private sector as to why its beneficial to them. No. 2, you need to prepare them. You can't just plop a 17-year-old kid in their office and expect them to be youth development experts.

You just changed from the Urban Alliance Foundation to the Urban Alliance. Why? A lot of our founders have international aid experience, so 'foundations' overseas are charities, whereas here they are people who give out money. So people would be so excited to meet me at networking functions, but it wasn't because of my dashing personality.