

# CSBG Spotlight: South Carolina Youth Leadership Institute

*By Beenu Puri*

Since 2000, the South Carolina Youth Leadership program has prepared a group of middle and high school students for leadership opportunities in their community by stressing the importance of character, education, and pride in being a productive citizen. The program is run out of the South Carolina Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) in conjunction with 11 community action agencies (CAAs) in the state. This past summer program participants engaged in the first South Carolina Youth Leadership Institute, a five day retreat at Hickory Knob State Park in McCormick, SC. The Institute was created as an extension of the Youth Leadership Programs and brought together 28 high school students from across the state. In addition, 48 middle school participants attended the Institute in the middle of the week.

High school participants in attendance at the Youth Leadership Programs represented the following CAAs: Charleston County Human Services; GLEAMNS Human Resources; Lowcountry Community Action Agency; Pee Dee Community Action Agency; SHARE, Inc., and Wateree Community Action. The middle school students in attendance at the Institute represented the Youth Leadership Programs in Chesterfield-Marlboro EOC and Darlington County Community Action.

According to the 2000 census, 34% of South Carolina's poor are ages 17 and under. By utilizing CSBG discretionary funds, South Carolina offers this Youth Leadership Institute in an effort to provide opportunities for young individuals to improve their academic, behavioral and social achievements to break the cycle of poverty to create opportunities for self-sufficiency.

While at the Institute, high school participants engaged in four daily workshops, team meetings, talent performances, and recreational and social activities. The six pillars of character were constant themes throughout the retreat: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. The Institute's slogan was "Education Plus Character Equals Leadership."

There was also a strong emphasis on critical thinking, as participants engaged in mind development exercises. Other sessions focused on important topics such as communication, health and personal hygiene, career preparation, dealing with adulthood, peer pressure, crime prevention, and drug and alcohol abuse. In addition, the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice escorted a group of detained youth in their custody to share their experiences with the participants. They spoke about their decisions and choices and encouraged the program participants to make more informed decisions.

Participants also contributed to a Newsletter Development Project which allowed for team-building and goal attainment activities. Students staffed the production and writing side of the

newsletter to produce the *Youth Times*. The Newsletter has been utilized by both participants and the Institute staff.

The Institute concluded with a results-and-learning session where participants shared their feelings about the week long program. Those who have completed the program were able to describe how positive character aids in the attainment of their goals, emotional health and healthy relationships. Students also gained critical thinking skills, better decision-making skills and problem-solving skills to aid their future success.

To learn more about the South Carolina Youth Leadership Institute, please contact Bertie McKie, OEO Director, at [BMckie@govoep.state.sc.us](mailto:BMckie@govoep.state.sc.us).