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Bank's giveback boosted by group's mentoring resources, support



PHOTO | CONTRIBUTED

KeyBank Corporate Responsibility Officer LaKisha Jordan works with Hillhouse High School sophomore Shynes Moore at the Peabody Museum Tuesday during an event marking the end of this year's KeyBank mentoring program.

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Connecticut businesses may not realize that if they want to offer employees an opportunity to mentor young people, they need not worry about connecting with schools or youth groups on their own, or grapple with a time and place to volunteer that might be inconvenient.

Community-minded businesses only have to reach out to the Connecticut Governor's Prevention Partnership (GPP), as did Jeff Hubbard, market president of KeyBank. Training, resources and planning help are at the ready.

Then, of course, once a mentorship begins, there is the question of, "What are we going to *do* with these kids?"

"The Governor's Prevention Partnership gives you the curriculum you need," Hubbard said. "You won't have awkward moments with these kids. I think that's where people get nervous."

With about 25 percent of the state's young people in need of mentors, according to the GPP, the group has been nationally recognized for its mentorship work. It's trained hundreds of adults to serve as mentors to youth.

KeyBank and Hubbard have led the way in this kind of community contribution, program officials said.

Role-model mentorship

Jill Spinetti heads the GPP, an affiliate of the national group MENTOR, which targets youth drug abuse, drinking, bullying and school violence. As an affiliate, Spinetti's office provides links, leadership, training and resources for area mentors or groups in the community looking to make a difference.

These mentorship arrangements can be customized, as they were for KeyBank, which mentors students from James Hillhouse High School in New Haven, where the bank's main branch is based.

"The bank chose a broader mentor approach," said Spinetti, not focusing only on banking as a career for mentees, but on professional environments in general.

"They do handshakes, talk about the importance of making eye contact, work on resumes, and are preparing mentees for the world of work, or their future," such as college. (During one mentoring session this year, KeyBank volunteers toured Yale University with mentees.)

For Hubbard, environments teach. It was important to him where the bi-monthly mentoring meetings took place.

"I thought it was important to have kids come to the bank," he said. New Haven Public Schools worked with him to coordinate bus service to bring the kids downtown, where they ride in the elevator, sit in the corner office, meet in a conference room, and are exposed to a professional work atmosphere and the people who work there.

Guest speakers are another part of the program. In May, a New Haven Promise scholarship program addressed the 18 or so mentees. Earlier this month, an HR executive from Comcast discussed her career experiences and what the company looks for when hiring employees. Students also spent a day giving back with KeyBank mentors — volunteering together at Ronald McDonald House in New Haven.

Employee recruitment and mentor training takes several months, Hubbard noted. The GPP helps with both, as well as volunteer background checks. The training involves how to start conversations with kids, to get them talking, said Hubbard. About 20 bank employees are mentors, and several substitutes were trained as well.

"Last year when we started [the program], they were shy, huddled together," he said of the students, who are mostly girls. "Now they have all seen us before. They'll ask us anything: 'What car did you drive in here? How much money do you make?'" he said, laughing.

In kids' corner

"We watch what Connecticut is doing closely as a national leader," said Robert Listenbee Jr., former administrator of the office of juvenile justice and delinquency prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, at a youth mentoring summit in 2016.

He said mentoring is "a powerful strategy for youth," whether it's for students facing challenges or young people in the juvenile justice system. "Connecticut should be proud of the work the state has led in this field," he said.

Spinetti recognizes Hubbard as the kind of business leader who makes it all work, so kids can experience all the benefits of mentorship: increased confidence, better school attendance, higher grades and improved family and peer relationships.

"Jeff is a role model for other business leaders. His heart is so big. He's made a commitment I think is rare," Spinetti said. "Some companies choose younger kids, or those in the suburbs. He cares about older youth and it's the type of big heart in Connecticut we need."