

Workforce council launches career awareness initiative

Inspire Washington website set up to serve as venue for interaction

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The Spokane Area Workforce Development Council has launched a career awareness initiative named Inspire Washington that aims to help job seekers, students, and teachers connect online with businesses, career professionals, and volunteers.

The council is using Spokane and Eastern Washington as a test site for the initiative, but the effort "will continue to evolve," with the hope that it will become a statewide program, says Rob Crow, a project team manager with the organization. The intent is to fund the initiative long term through a mix of state and federal grants and community partners, including corporate and education foundations, he says.

The council has launched a website, at inspirewa.org, where employers can set up accounts and begin to interact with prospective future employees, Crow says. Students and job seekers will be able to use the website through a "partner location," such as a school or an agency such as WorkSource Spokane that has a software license agreement with Inspire Washington, he says.

The goal of Inspire Washington, he says, is to help further the career aspirations of students and adult job seekers across the state by providing a free platform through which they can interact with professionals in their chosen fields and participate in work-based learning activities.

"You can't get a job without work experience, and you can't get work experience without a job," and study data show that young job seekers in particular have found that obstacle more daunting in recent years, which is something Inspire Washington will seek to address, Crow says.

A central focus of the initiative, he says, will be "just raising the awareness of who employers are and what their needs are in tomorrow's workforce and how does tomorrow's workforce gain that education and experience."

Inspire Washington's Web-based platform is powered by careercruising.com, which already is being used by more than 170,000 users in the state to explore and develop their career goals, Crow says. The Inspire Washington program is modeled after North Carolina's Futures for Kids program, which reaches more 500,000 users at 800 sites.

The Spokane-based initiative is designed to connect job seekers with local companies through online career discussion boards and to enable students to progress out of the classroom through activities such as company tours, job shadowing, summer internships, and mentoring, Crow says. For employers, it provides them a place to create a profile, increase their visibility with potential job candidates and others, and highlight their community involvement, he says.

Career coaches, discussion board moderators, and certain other Inspire Washington users who have direct contact with students and job seekers will be required to undergo a background check, Crow says. The intent is to ensure that the organization's Web portal provides a safe environment for the exchange of career-related information.

The Spokane Area Workforce Development Council announced recently that it will become a stand-alone nonprofit organization, ending a 38-year relationship with the city of Spokane, and will establish a new partnership with Community Colleges of Spokane to streamline management and increase efficiency.

As a nonprofit, it said, it will have the opportunity to attract funding from a more diverse range of sources, in addition to federal and other grant monies it receives. Its offices are expected to move within a few weeks from City Hall downtown to the Spokane Community College campus, in East Spokane.

The council is using Spokane and Eastern Washington as a test site for the project, with hopes of expanding it.
