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Laudable Way to Work

Daily Item

---- — Most Americans recognize that we have a basic humanitarian obligation to help out-of-work Americans make ends meets. At the same time, many may have suspicions that a hard-to-define number of jobless people while away their time collecting government payments without really trying to find work.

Wouldn't it be better, though, to pay people to work?

That, in a nutshell, is the brilliant philosophy behind Way to Work, a wage subsidy program that provides government dollars to employers that hire new workers. For the life of the program, the employer pays $2 an hour toward the wages of the worker, while the government picks up the rest.

The program helped 43 adults and 285 youths gain jobs locally. Employers are not allowed to use the money to rehire workers who have been laid off.

What's the rub?

The Way to Work is set to expire on Sept. 30. Workers enrolled in the program have no iron-clad assurance that they will have jobs come Oct. 1.

Workforce development officials say the best hope is that participating workers will have proven themselves so valuable that employers will keep them permanently. We are crossing our fingers.

It would be tempting to wish that the program would compel employers to keep their government-funded workers for a while after the program ends. However, it would not be worth the effort if that would deter businesses from participating.

We are better off allowing people to work temporarily, gaining skills and bolstering their resumes.

Much of what passes for economic stimulus seems a lot like throwing money in the air and hoping it lands somewhere useful. Money spent on economic development rarely translates directly into measurable job creation.

The Way to Work is a laudable exception. It may be an example of the kind of progressive government program that more Americans can whole-heartedly embrace — even those who worry about the implications of round after round of unemployment benefit extensions.