

Carmera Thomas says she loves nature and majored in biology in college. But the job market's so tough, she's been working part time in a restaurant since graduating in May.

Now the 22-year-old [Glen Burnie](#) woman is finally getting a chance to put her education and passion to work, under a new state program meant to train young people for jobs in environmental restoration and energy conservation while they perform community service.

Thomas and 15 other applicants debuted Monday as the inaugural class of the [Chesapeake](#) Conservation Corps, which pairs young adults with watershed organizations, local or state agencies, and community groups for a year of work and learning.

First floated last fall by Obama administration officials to give new energy to the bay restoration effort, the idea was seized upon by Maryland Senate President [Thomas V. Mike Miller](#). He pushed it through the General Assembly and joined other dignitaries Monday in hailing the group as pioneers and future leaders.

"This is about green jobs," Miller said during a news conference at the Arlington Echo Outdoor Education Center in Millersville, where the volunteers met Monday to begin their training. "It's about you getting benefits, but at the same time preserving and protecting Mother Nature."

Under the program, Thomas and the other corps members are to be paid a stipend of \$16,000 a year, plus health insurance and travel, for their labors on behalf of their assigned organizations. They'll also be eligible to earn academic credit or certification for the skills they learn.

The corps' initial class is smaller than the 25 or 30 people envisioned when Miller was persuading reluctant legislators to approve its creation earlier this year. That it passed at all might be remarkable, since lawmakers generally shunned any new programs as they struggled to close a huge budget gap.

The corps' first-year budget of \$525,000 is underwritten by a mix of state, federal and private

funding, including revenues diverted from an electricity surcharge all Maryland utility customers pay and the sales of motor vehicle license plates. Constellation Energy also donated \$25,000.

[Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin](#) , who helped secure a \$116,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, said he believed the effort would spur the creation of "green jobs" in environmental protection and restoration and in energy conservation. These jobs "can't be exported," he said, adding that "this is about creating an economy we want."

The corps members were chosen from among 28 applicants and paired with 16 organizations statewide, according to Allen Hance, executive director of the Chesapeake Bay Trust, which is overseeing the effort.

Elliott Wright said he heard about the corps from someone who works for the Department of Natural Resources. The 24-year-old Middle River resident said he has been cutting hair and jumped at the chance to do something different, working for DNR.

"I'm interested in seeing change," he said.

Lori Johnson, 23, of Savage said she discovered the corps while searching for jobs online. She only recently arrived in Maryland from Akron, Ohio, but is looking forward to applying her science education in working with the Anacostia Watershed Society in the Washington area.

Thomas will be working with the [Chesapeake Bay Foundation](#) in Annapolis. She had done community service work in Honduras while at North Carolina Wesleyan College and had been active in science and outdoors education before this.

"It's very difficult to find something," she said. Now, she'll spend a year working on oyster and watershed restoration and forestry programs efforts at the foundation's Claggett Farm.

"I'm excited to work in my county restoring habitat," she said. "I love the Chesapeake Bay, and I

love nature."

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