

Creating Strong Partnerships for a Sustainable Youth Employment Program: An Examination of the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth who are neither connected to school nor to employment, otherwise known as “disconnected” youth, are at high risk for poverty as they are unable to develop the skills necessary to obtain adequate jobs to help them become self-sufficient. Fortunately, the federal government recognized “disconnected” youth and the challenges they face, and created the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1988. WIA authorized federal funds for the development of youth employment and job training programs to help youth achieve basic skills through both academic and work experience. In addition, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) provided additional funds for youth employment programs.

In 2009, utilizing ARRA funding, the Sonoma County Human Services Department established

the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps (SCYEC) to provide high-risk youth with job training skills. Through partnerships with local public, private, and non-profit agencies, SCYEC has since serviced over 1,000 at-risk young people by providing them with subsidized work experience opportunities that focus on ecology and environmental stewardship, while also increasing their work skills and their community involvement. This case study examines SCYEC and how its program design provides San Mateo County with different strategies to consider in developing its own comprehensive, coordinated youth employment services program for the at-risk youth in its community.

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Introduction

The transition to adulthood is a stressful time for most young people. Financial self-sufficiency is one of the most important elements to achieving independence and self-reliance; however, few young people are prepared to be truly independent at age 18.

“Disconnected” youth, defined generally as those ages 16 to 24 that are neither employed nor enrolled in school, face additional challenges to achieving self-sufficiency and experience more crises compared to their “connected” peers. These challenges may include any of the following: below average educational achievement, unemployment due to a lack of workplace skills, poverty, and homelessness due to lack of stable and affordable housing. Those at highest risk for disconnection include: native-born 14- to 18-year olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school diploma; unmarried teenage mothers 14 to 18 years of age; court-affiliated and/or incarcerated 14- to 24-year olds; youth involved in the foster care system between their 14th and 19th birthdays; and unmarried, unemployed young adults who hold a high school diploma or less, and are not enrolled in school and have experienced long-term unemployment.¹

Being connected to work or school is important as the impact of disconnection on youth and for society is great. Without a high school diploma, general educational development (GED), or further schooling, these youth forego an opportunity that can assist them in gaining the skills and knowledge necessary to obtain adequate employment, which then affects

their ability to develop a work history that could contribute to future higher wages and employability. Ultimately, this cycle could result in placing this population at greater risk of poverty, and may result in increased reliance on cash and non-cash assistance programs.

According to the Commission for Social Development (2007), one intervention strategy to re-engage disconnected youth is to look at youth employment training programs, as participation in these services encourages social interaction and development and promotes self-esteem.² Further, training programs can help by providing an opportunity for youth to gain job readiness skills necessary to help them succeed. There is some information to also indicate that young people who work are less likely to drop out of high school compared to those who do not have jobs, experience smoother transitions to the labor market, and earn higher wages after graduating from high school.

Fortunately, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1988 authorized federal funds for the development of youth employment and job training programs to assist eligible low-income youth, ages 14-21, who face challenges to employment.³ Funds are distributed to state and local areas where workforce providers are tasked to develop strategies to assist youth in achieving their educational and/or vocational goals through a combination of academic and occupational learning. Under WIA, providers have the opportunity to develop comprehensive youth development programs that coordinate services and

resources, allow for collaboration between public and community-based organizations (CBOs), and leverage additional funds to serve at-risk youth in the community.⁴ The purpose of workforce development activities is to enhance the participant’s employment, job retention, earnings, and occupational skills, as well as provide access to leadership development and community service activities, which in turn expands the quality of the workforce, reduces welfare dependency, and meets the needs of the community.⁵

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 provided additional funding for youth programs until 2011, when the funding ceased. The primary objective of ARRA was to stimulate the economy to save existing jobs and create new jobs, reduce taxes, and invest in education and future

technologies.⁶ Congress specified that a portion of the funds should be used for summer youth employment and to expand year-round employment opportunities for young adults up to the age of 24.

In 2009, out of ARRA, Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) established the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps (SCYEC), a youth employment training program designed to provide at-risk young people with subsidized work experience opportunities while teaching environmental stewardship. This case study examines SCYEC, and how its program design provides San Mateo County with different strategies to consider when developing a comprehensive, coordinated youth employment services program to engage the at-risk youth in its community.

TABLE 1
SCYEC Logic Model

	NEEDS	RESOURCES	STRATEGIES	SHORT-TERM RESULTS	LONG-TERM IMPACTS
YOUTH	More Youth with Needs than there is Capacity to Serve Disconnected Youth High Youth Unemployment First Generation of Youth Less Fit than Parents	Youth	Exposure to Work Environment Crew Work and Individual Placements Physical Activity Mentoring and Role Modeling Referrals to Community Resources	Safety Improved Work Skills Relationship Building Improved Income for Families Planning for the Future Youth Satisfaction	Increased Graduation Rates Increased Participation in Post-Secondary Education Increased unsubsidized Employment Reduced Criminal Behavior Reduced Obesity
ENVIRONMENT	Multiple Conservation Projects Summer Work and Maintenance for Streams	Renewable growth of work to be done	Environmental Education Ecology Work Hire and Train Crew Leaders and Crews	Increased Environmental Knowledge Completed Ecology Projects	Healthy Streams Increased Employment in Resource Conservation
COMMUNITY	Disparate Resources	Funding Materials and Equipment Paid Staff Expertise and Commitment Volunteers Project Hosts	Cross-Sector Collaboration Diversion from Unstructured Activities Networking Events	Exposure to Community Service	Workforce Readiness Community Support for Youth Development Reduced Crime

Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps (SCYEC)

Sonoma County has an Upstream Investments policy, in which a vision, mission, and goals have been identified to improve the health and well-being of the county's residents. Part of the policy is to ensure the interventions used are in line with the county's vision and mission, and can demonstrate they have the highest likelihood of success backed by sound evidence.

In response to Sonoma County identifying that its youth ages 16 to 24 face higher rates of poverty and unemployment than adults ages 25 and older, that disconnected youth were at higher risk for many negative outcomes, and that many community projects were on hold due to limited funding and staff, SCYEC was developed. A logic model was established in which the program's focus is on providing youth work experience opportunities with an emphasis on ecology and the environment to enhance their work skills and to strengthen their participation in society while also benefiting the community (see *Table 1 – SCYEC Logic Model*). SCYEC was designed to teach youth about the relationship between academic learning, its relevance to the workplace, and its connection to careers by providing skill-building and experiential opportunities. Its objective was for the youth who participated in the program to leave with a sense of accomplishment, to introduce a strong work ethic, to encourage their return to school and community involvement, to reinforce the relationship between educational and vocational skills acquisition, and to improve their chances at future employability.

Collaboration and partnerships. HSD administers the program in collaboration with numerous county departments, nonprofits, and community groups, including: Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board (SC-WIB), Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA), Sonoma County Office of Education, Sonoma County Youth Council, New Ways to Work, six contracted youth service provider agencies, and project hosts throughout the county. SCWA in particular has maintained a strong partnership with SCYEC since the program's development, and

provided the majority of the program's funding in 2011 to 2012 as the agency received extra revenue to complete maintenance projects that had previously been deferred. Now that the deferred maintenance projects are current, the SCWA funding contribution has decreased; however, its commitment to the program has remained the same.

HSD, specifically the Employment and Training Division, is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the program as well as program events. HSD staff work with the contracted youth service providers and serve as subject matter experts and primary contact for providers. Staff are also responsible in overseeing eligibility and documentation requirements based on WIA, CalWORKs, and other funding source regulations. HSD monitors the SCYEC program and visits worksites to ensure contract compliance.

The contracted youth service provider agencies, located throughout the county, serve as the employers of record and are responsible for recruiting, selecting, hiring, training, and supervising their respective participants. The contracts specify what percentage of the funding is required to pay the salaries of the participants.

Program funding and targets. SCYEC is supported by various funding sources that change from year to year. The primary funding sources currently include WIA, SCWA, CalWORKs, grant funds, and other contributions from local businesses and organizations.

Funding sources determine the population of youth who can be served through SCYEC. As such, although the program is open to all Sonoma County 14- to 24-year-olds, the program's first priority targets include the economically disadvantaged, current or former foster youth, CalWORKs recipients, current WIA participants, pregnant or parenting youth, those currently or previously involved in the justice system, individuals with disabilities, and youth who are out of school.

Program structure. During the summer, participants work in crews comprised of six to eight participants and a crew leader to complete projects with a focus on ecology and the environment. In 2012, the

program was expanded to include extended and year-round work crews for the 18 and older participants to work for SCWA. Participants for the extended and year-round work crews are chosen based on their experience and work performance. Although SCYEC focuses on crew work, some participants decide that crew work is not what they want to do. Therefore, another component of SCYEC is to provide individual paid and unpaid internships in different public or private nonprofits that relate to the individual's career goals.

Examples of projects crews participate in include creek and habitat restoration, removal of non-native or invasive plants, planting of native plants, creek and trail cleanup, debris removal, parks cleanup, and other projects that benefit the community and the people who visit these sites. In addition to the projects and the mentoring and training by crew leaders and project hosts, participants receive weekly formal environmental education lessons developed by SCWA employees and facilitated by Sonoma State University interns. The SCYEC program also provides financial workshops and career planning services that the participants attend. Depending on which youth agency the participant is connected to, some participants receive credit recovery or re-entry units toward their academic requirements. SCYEC is in the process of researching whether credits could be offered to all participants since it is a good incentive, and because they are required to receive educational lessons during their participation in the program.

Program outcomes. SCYEC administers an annual evaluation gathering qualitative and quantitative information about the youth served, program operation, and short-term impacts of the program for the youth, the environment, and the community. SCYEC has been approved for placement on Tier 2 (Promising Practice) of Sonoma County's Portfolio of Model Upstream Programs as the program has been evaluated, established positive outcomes, and demonstrated that its model can be replicated in other areas.

Based on SCYEC's 2013 Evaluation Report, 204 youth and young adults participated on crews and 42 participated in individual placements, of which 77% of participants met the criteria for at least one target group (youth with disability, current or former foster youth, CalWORKs recipient, pregnant/parenting, and court-affiliated). Some of the program outcomes include:⁷

- When measured on the 12 Sonoma County Work Readiness Skills, 86% of participants were rated as "entry level or exceeds" by the end of the summer, which is almost double the percentage compared to the beginning of the summer.
- 48% of youth planned to return to high school, and 24% planned to return to college after the summer.
- 99% of participants reported they benefitted from their participation in SCYEC.

There were also a number of community benefits as a result of the collective work completed by the crews, including the maintenance of 10.5 miles of waterways and 9.2 miles of trails, the removal of over 74,635 square feet of invasive plants, the planting of 1,532 crops covering 4,208 feet, the harvesting of 2,300 pounds of crops and distribution of 1,000 pounds, and the removal of over 14,719 pounds and 25.8 cubic yards of debris, just to name a few.

In addition to these outcomes, the evaluation also indicated a significant finding in that current or former foster youth were less likely than non-foster youth to complete the program (13 percent compared to 30 percent). As a result, HSD and the Family, Youth, and Children Division are re-examining their efforts to support foster youth, including identifying signs the foster youth is struggling sooner in order to provide the necessary supports to help them continue in the program to completion.

Recommendations for San Mateo County

Collaborating and strengthening partnerships with entities that impact the life of a youth is a necessary component to creating a comprehensive youth services program since developing our children's

potential is not just a workforce development effort, but a community-wide effort that impacts many systems involved in the life of a child. Without partnerships, these entities work in silos, which prevent the sharing of ideas, expertise, and knowledge.

Fortunately, the San Mateo County Workforce Investment Board (SMC-WIB) is currently working on its strategic plan by partnering with representatives from the education sector, local businesses, labor organizations, CBOs, and others to develop priorities and strategies that guide funding and leverage resources to create a cohesive workforce investment program. In addition, when considering what strategies are needed to create an effective program, those most impacted need to be included in the planning process, which is why SMC-WIB identified a committee comprised of young people, known as the Peninsula Youth Council, to take on the responsibility of youth activities, planning, and stakeholder collaboration.

While SMC-WIB is off to a good start in partnering with others and identifying key stakeholders, the following are a few recommendations based on the SCYEC program design to consider when creating a comprehensive youth employment services program:

- Contract with youth-serving CBOs that employ staff familiar with the target populations and to whom youth can relate so that an outreach team can be created concentrating on engaging the targeted, hard-to-reach, and isolated youth for services.
- Collaborate and partner with entities that are currently working with and supporting the youth, such as those from the education, health, child welfare, justice system, and faith-based sectors in order to provide comprehensive, coordinated services to encourage the youth's success as taking advantage of programs may be difficult when a young person is also worrying about other issues like housing, transportation, and/or how they are going to support themselves and/or their families.

- Provide incentives that could encourage participation, such as monetary incentives, educational incentives (e.g. recovery of missing credits to be used in high school or continuing education credits), or certificates indicating skill attainment that the youth can include on their resume.
- Provide opportunities for year-round, and not just summer, employment for those high-risk youth so that they remain connected and can continue receiving services to better their chances of success.
- Design an evaluation that could assess both the short- and long-term effectiveness of a program's intervention, as this would not only result in accountability and transparency, but could identify the program's successes and/or improvements needed; illustrate whether the interventions produce the desired outcomes; improve the well-being of the community it aims to serve; and, most importantly, demonstrate that it is a program worth investing in.

As with the creation and implementation of any new program, there are associated costs. However, it appears that by taking the time to collaborate, research, and create a coordinated and comprehensive youth services program for the most vulnerable population, it would be money well invested in now rather than paying for the consequences of a failed and inexperienced workforce in the future.

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Increasing Placements with Relatives and Kin: Santa Clara County's Strategies for Supporting and Familial Placements Sustaining

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the crux of the California Continuum of Care reform are enhanced efforts to place children in family home settings. Placement efforts with biological family and kin must be prioritized and sustained with adequate services and support to maintain this effort and align with best practices.

Santa Clara County's child welfare program has implemented successful strategies to make and sustain relative placements. Sonoma County's child welfare program has experienced a steady decline of kinship placements since 2007, and can benefit from the strategies highlighted in this case study.

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