

Santa Clara's Intern And Earn Program: Identifying Strategic Opportunities and Gifts of the Youth Through the Sueños Program In Santa Cruz County

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alicia (name changed), a first-generation soon-to-be college graduate, shares the story of how the Intern and Earn program has transformed her life. She was enrolled in the San Jose State Guardian Scholars, a program designed specifically for youth in foster care or who may have aged out of foster care. After completion of her internship in 2018, Alicia was hired as a part-time employee with one of the partner county agencies. Alicia hopes to be hired full-time in a field that supports children in foster care. With several competing demands for scarce resources, many economies do not often fully realize the critical role youth play in driving the economy. Today, building a strong foundation requires investments in programs designed for youth engagement

and empowerment, thereby advancing socio-economic development. Youth education and employment programs are a smart investment, and this has been demonstrated through the Intern and Earn program in Santa Clara County.

I was particularly drawn to this case study with a strong belief that it connects directly with Santa Cruz County's Sueños program and its mission to develop the gifts our youth are endowed with. Equipping the younger generation to build relevant job skills and work readiness while earning an income can potentially encourage them to complete their education and motivate them to see "the impossibilities becoming possible" to reduce generational poverty and homelessness.

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“We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.”

- Franklin D. Roosevelt

Introduction

Formerly known as Teen Works, the Intern and Earn program was created to decrease the effects of generational poverty by giving low-income and resource disadvantaged young people employment opportunities to foster wellbeing, workplace experience, and career exposure. Participants aged 16-24 are referred from the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs), CalFresh, and foster care programs, and receive internship placements in county agencies, community-based organizations, and private enterprises to learn skills and receive mentorship.

Background

The Intern and Earn program was initially piloted to meet the growing needs of children of parents who are on aid programs in Santa Clara County since previous programs had been shut down due to budget constraints. Recipients of CalWORKs provided the initial backbone of services under this program as it was determined that there was quicker accessibility to recipients and funding sources. The core aim of this program redesign was to address the inequities that exist among the minority population in Santa Clara by targeting the youth as an underserved population.

CalWORKs, the local version of the federal program known as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), offers eligible

families with minor-aged child(ren) job preparedness services, cash, and other benefits (CDSS, 2019b), whereas CalFresh (federally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and often referred to as “food stamps”) provides eligible families and persons with no time-on-aid limit. Assessment of the program saw a potential to include CalWORKs eligible youth aged 16-18, CalFresh youth 18-21, and foster care youth aged 18-24.

Evolution of the Intern and Earn Program

The original Intern and Earn program started in the summer of 2016 with 178 CalWORKs-eligible underserved youth who signed up for a meaningful paid work experience internship. The six-week internship paid \$15 per hour for 20 hours of work per week. Out of the 202 youth who applied, 178 secured an internship placement, and 160 (90%) completed their full summer internship. The initial positions were funded by CalWORKs Expanded Subsidized Employment (ESE) dollars, so only CalWORKs Connect youth could participate. By the second year, foster care youth were integrated into the program, and in year three, the program expanded again to include CalFresh-eligible youth as an effort to expand the program’s reach to include other low-income youth in Santa Clara. By year four, the internship was extended to eight weeks, working 30 hours per week and earning \$16 an hour. The increased hours and earnings were to match the increase in the cost-of-living allowances in the County (County of Santa Clara, 2019).

Income earned by the youth typically was excluded from household income calculations, and as a result, helped families maintain their current public assistance grants while bringing in additional income for the household. In-school participants were given an opportunity to earn income while school was out of session in the summer months, and the program provided the out-of-school participants an avenue to gain permanent or temporary employment. The Intern and Earn program currently run four cohorts throughout the year, giving additional flexibility and times for more youth to participate.

Outreach is provided by Intern and Earn program staff via text messages, phone calls, postcards, emails, and posters. Upon application completion and onboarding, youth are then transitioned for case management and support. Case management involves continuous assessment of the youth's career goals and determination of potential worksites that will fit within their interest. Flexibility is allowed here as circumstances vary from person to person. Intern and Earn program staff leverage existing relationships with community-based organizations (CBOs), private businesses, and inter-agency offices to match the eligible youth with internship opportunities. In many instances, location and distance to the worksite influence internship selection. Each worksite negotiates and establishes the number of interns to be accepted and further sets a level of expectation for coaching to be provided.

Throughout the eight-week program, participants receive in-house coaching from program staff during the first week of orientation. They are taught career-building

skills and workplace ethics, among other relevant topics. This orientation serves as an important step because it guides the intern's expectations as they begin to work at their various work sites. Interns perform clerical tasks, provide customer service, serve as lobby greeters, and support almost any County function. So far, over 1,300 youth have participated across over 250 worksites, earning nearly \$3.8 million and providing over 240,000 hours of community service.

Cost and Fiscal Implications

CalWORKs-eligible youth cost allocation comes from ESE dollars. CalFresh and foster care participant costs are paid from a Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors approved General Fund allocation. As of 2022, the cost per placement is \$4,200 (i.e., \$17.50 per hour, 30 hours per week, for eight weeks). An additional 17% allocation of the total budget is used to cover staffing and indirect costs. There are currently ten full-time equivalency (FTE) staff allocated to the Intern and Earn program. Staff roles crossed over from supporting CalWORKs adults to expanding these services for eligible youth.

Survey

The Santa Clara County Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) surveyed 20 interns and six employers for the 2021-2022 winter cohort. Both interns and employers rated the program as highly effective. However, it did require consistent monitoring and follow-up from Employment Counselors and the setting of realistic and appropriate expectations among the employers

The table below shows the data of the youth who completed the program in 2019.

PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS			DEMOGRAPHICS		
CalWORKs	243	47%	MALE	210	41
CalFresh program	120	23%	FEMALE	304	59
Foster Care	151	29%			
	514	100%		514	100%
COMPLETION RATE			WORKSITE TYPES		
CalWORKs		91%	Non-Profits	378	54%
CalFresh program		97%	Public Agencies	165	32%
Foster Care		77%	Private businesses	71	14%
		100%		514	100%

(Source: Santa Clara Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE), Santa Clara County, 2019)

Completion rate numbers indicated that CalFresh participants were the most work-ready participants and there was a greater need for engagement with foster care participants. This led to the development of Intern and Earn 2.0 in 2021, a six-month program tailored to foster care youth that allows employers to develop participants to fully integrate into the workforce.

Challenges

The capacity for employers to coach and supervise interns was one of the key challenges of the program. Consistent engagement with employers before, during, and after a cohort has been shown to improve ways to address this challenge. Location, family needs, and motivation were key drivers in ensuring youth stay throughout the program. Despite these challenges, the program seeks to improve by increasing

worksite capacity through engagement, increasing intern numbers annually, and developing proactive outreach programs.

Why Do We Care?

There has been a steady national decline in labor activity among youth aged 25 and under since the beginning of the century (Child Trends, 2019). Notably, there exist inequities in employment rates for non-white youth living in low-income areas with failing public school systems. Today's competitive economy shows a massive job exodus of the baby boomer generation aged 57-75. Combined, these factors may result in an inadequate supply of labor for specific current and future work opportunities. A strategy for transition requires the development of specialized training and mentorship programs to prepare the future generation to fill these soon-to-be-vacant positions. In Santa Cruz,

the Sueños program provides an answer to address this looming gap and address inequities that exist in the makeup of the county workforce.

Connecting the Dots in Santa Cruz County - SUEÑOS (To Dream)

The Santa Cruz County Workforce Development Board (WDB) provides an ecosystem that drives core activities to create a robust integrated system for youth development and engagement. The WDB oversees the implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for youth participants in the County of Santa Cruz.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 is landmark legislation that sought to improve and reinforce the Country's workforce system by providing Americans, including youth faced with unique barriers to self-sufficiency, with high-quality jobs. The core of this model emphasizes a multi-system integration approach, such as shared evaluations, case management systems, and personnel cross-training of recipients to benefit from the myriad of resources offered by the WDB.

In partnership with the Santa Cruz Office of Education (COE), the WDB created the Sueños Youth Employment Services program. This fully WIOA-funded program offers youth an opportunity to set attainable career or educational goals and connect them to resources and mentoring support services. Eligibility for this program requires youth to be In-School-Youth (ISY) aged 14-21, low-income, and reside in South Santa Cruz County approved zip codes or an Out-of-School Youth (OSY) aged 16-24 who meet one or more of a list

of specific workforce barriers as listed in the WIOA Youth Eligibility Policy. Both ISY and OSY must meet federal requirements for workforce eligibility. Sueños ("dreams" in Spanish) currently provides services for 125 youth county-wide annually. Work experience specialists with the COE, provide individualized objective assessments on career interest and work readiness. Like the Intern and Earn program, Sueños partners with County programs and non-profits as worksites for youth. ISY can work up to 150 total hours earning \$14.50 per hour, and OSY can work up to 250 hours earning \$15.50 per hour, and receive incentives for fully completing the program. The WIOA Youth Incentive Policy (WDB Policy Memorandum 19-03) provides up to \$600 per participant youth to achieve certain milestones. For instance, youth who complete the four-week Career Cluster Academy get paid \$150. The Career Cluster Academy focuses on subject matter experts to provide various career workshops like financial literacy and entrepreneurship. The policy further makes provision for supportive services funding up to \$500 based on assessed needs, including transportation, childcare, and clothing.

With an over 80% completion rate annually, program leaders have identified ongoing programmatic challenges. These include the exclusion of undocumented immigrants, the legal residency documentation requirements, and the fact that some youth in larger families have been unable to meet eligibility requirements because the total family income exceeds the maximum household eligibility income. Youth that exit the program mostly leave due to relocation, work, and family commitments.

Recommendations And Implications for Santa Cruz County

With a similar philosophy to the Intern and Earn program, youth engagement remains the key focus while developing pathways to education and careers. Likewise, both programs are also presented with similar challenges, especially in system integration and worksite partnerships. The following recommendations address the most essential drivers to program success and improved youth engagement in the Sueños program.

Building Blocks on Co-Enrollment with CalWORKs Employment Services

CalWORKs Employment Services (CWES), is an employment and training program for recipients of CalWORKs cash assistance. In Santa Cruz County, the Employment & Training Specialists (ETS) refer the participant to several contracted partner agencies that provide additional services to the household. Co-enrollment in WIOA and CWES is a strategic model designed to allow leveraging of funding, take full advantage of resources, and eventually meet the participant's employment goals. A review of the co-enrollment activities within CWES showed a focus on adult-only referral services. Sueños struggles to meet the targeted 125 youth participation rate as there is minimal engagement within the co-enrollment network. As of April 2022, there are an estimated 280 eligible CalWORKs youth and 2,564 CalFresh potential beneficiaries who can be connected through co-enrollment (Santa Cruz County, HSD 2022). Furthermore, Sueños and CWES program staff, as well as contractual partners, can develop strategies to link disparate processes

and systems to improve youth engagement success. Making this recommendation a requirement will provide a holistic approach to creating a well-oiled, coordinated care system for households. Feasibility in the medium term is possible by leveraging this system to ensure all eligible youth are referred to Sueños.

Community and Inter-Agency Partnerships

Building relationships with other internal agencies and community-based organizations with a shared goal in mind is vital to creating and sustaining a robust youth workforce program. Sueños program staff indicated that many community partners, especially in the Health Services sector, prefer older youth as they are deemed more work-ready which leaves 16-17 year-olds without the same opportunity. Recognizing that the youth come with unique barriers should be included in decisions and policymaking. This is achievable through an engaged and informed employer landscape. Employers will recognize the value of this program more if they have been engaged and see the alignment of the success of this program in their business model. Investments in youth benefit the whole community, helping employers see a greater impact of their participation.

Currently, county agency internship matches are only within the Employment and Benefits Service Division (EBSD) division. There is potential for placement of youth in other county departments and divisions, including the Health Service Agency (HSA) and other divisions within the Human Services Department, such as Housing for Health and Family and

Children Services. In addressing foster care youth participation, Sueños can connect to college-funded programs like Cabrillo Guardian Scholars and the University of California, Santa Cruz Underground Scholars, where incentives can be provided to eligible youth to sign up. These programs provide a safe place to study and scholarship opportunities for students who are in or have been in foster care. I have already started the engagement by proactively connecting the Sueños program to Cabrillo Guardian scholars.

Achieving Maximum Impact Through Leveraging Of Funds

The Expanded Subsidized Employment (ESE) program was created under California Assembly Bill 74 (Chapter 21, Salutes of 2013) to expand subsidized employment opportunities for CalWORKs recipients. This funding allowed counties to develop training and employment opportunities for recipients. ESE can only be used for CWES recipients; however, co-enrollment allows recipients to leverage CWES and WIOA funding. WIOA does not include the same restrictions as ESE, and eligible CalFresh and foster youth can access these funds. Utilizing these funds strategically allows for a better opportunity to maximize the allocation of the grant dollars for direct service delivery. The annual budget for Sueños is \$800,000, with five FTEs serving 125 youth annually. \$600,000 is allocated for OSY youth, of which \$134,000 is allocated for work experience wages. For ISY youth, \$200,000 is allocated, of which \$45,000 is allocated for work experience wages. Should the recommendation on co-enrollment be developed and implemented, there can be an increase in enrollment to 200 youth annually. This increase may need additional staff support, but in the short term, we can leverage existing staff capacity. Time

studies of existing staff to specific ESE codes and dollars could be leveraged to pay for wage subsidies for the interns as well as program administration costs, expanding the total dollars available for the program. Drawing funding to increase program participation and time studying accurately can potentially support additional staff. Further research is needed to explore allowable increases in program allocations and participation metrics under WIOA funding.

Integrating Youth Employment into the Housing for Health System Evaluation Contract

Santa Cruz County has partnered with Applied Survey Research (ASR), a research and evaluation firm, to oversee the Point-in-Time Count (PIT) of persons experiencing homelessness in the county annually. The county seeks to have ASR carry out an annual assessment of the Housing for Health housing and supportive services system, utilizing persons with lived experience as community research associates. Developing the contract framework to include hiring Sueños, CalWORKs, and CalFresh-eligible youth as community research assistants is recommended. Funding for this contract has already been earmarked, making this recommendation feasible in the medium term for the next fiscal year. As determined by the County and ASR, interns can earn up to \$20 an hour working 20 hours per week. Evaluators will be required to report to the Housing for Health Policy Board every quarter. Secondly, the interns can also participate in the PIT count as peer navigators and earn income throughout the count and survey period. There will be no internal staffing requirement as program development and activities will be contracted out to ASR.

Providing Pathways to Connect

Youth Experiencing Homelessness to the Sueños Program

In addressing challenges in connecting with homeless youth, Sueños can participate in the existing quarterly Homeless Youth Connect meetings. This meeting is made up of partners of the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) and can suggest insight to develop referrals and communications with eligible youth. Further research is needed to look into data matching within HSD across systems, which can provide useful ways to present shared data with Sueños

Additional Considerations

Additional considerations will include the development of a county-wide resource guide with paid and unpaid internships, work experience, and job opportunities for youth. Often, some providers, parents, and youth are unaware of the full scale of resource opportunities that exist for our local youth (especially for those not eligible under WIOA). This can be achieved through a partnership with United Way / 211(a comprehensive referral and information service for the County of Santa Cruz). Another area to consider is pathways to include undocumented immigrant youth to integrate into the Sueños program. Further research will include working with the Community Action Board (CAB) and Santa Cruz Immigration project to understand the population and identify flexible funding and referrals to the program.

Conclusion

Santa Clara's Intern and Earn model offers numerous opportunities for like-minded

county agencies. The story of Alicia demonstrates how the tenets of their program can indeed transform the lives of our future leaders and workforce. For an agency such as the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department, commitment to piloting recommendations for the Sueños' significant success will be determined by the depth of employer-intern engagement, a structured process for enrollment, and a commitment to allocating funding towards youth empowerment and engagement with utmost dedication. Its impact should be measured not just by placement outcomes but rather as a function of attainment of relevant job skills and its ability to land an intern into the labor market with improved wages. Commitment from employers and agency personnel will be needed to employ a more trauma-informed approach to intern assessment and worksite matching while providing valuable work experience needed to attain employment.

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