
Providing Summer Employment for Underserved Youth

Youth Council: Solano County Youth Advisory Council

Element: Career Preparation

Function: Coordinating Youth Services

Subject: Serving Special Populations

The Challenge: When the WIA came into being, on July 1, 2001, it replaced the Job Training Partnership Act youth program, which was primarily summer-based and served about 600 youth in this suburban county. The Youth Advisory Council members saw that in order to offer any summer youth employment programs, they would have to find other partners and funding sources.

The Practice and the Evidence: The Council partnered with the Solano County Health and Social Services Department to create a summer employment program for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) dependents. The Youth Employment Program (YEP) serves approximately 45 youth each summer. They are placed in entry-level/trainee jobs across a range of fields, including county departments, facilities at Travis Air Force Base, animal shelters, and parks. YEP youth work four days a week for five hours a day, and attend a two-hour workshop each week; they receive minimum wage for these 22 hours.

“There’s a very big need for youth to have something positive to do in the summer, and we fill it with something that’s productive for the community and good for youth,” said Lynette Gray, Planning and Youth Development Manager. “We’re focused.” As Gray observed, the county gets a good return on its investment: “These youth are off the streets and spending their money.”

At the end of the summer, youth fill out a survey that rates their employment experience. The rate of positive responses at the end of the summer of 2003 was 85 percent. Even more concrete evidence of the program’s effectiveness is supplied by the test of ten work-related questions that is administered to youth before and after their work experience. (The questions, which are addressed in the weekly workshops, are very specific, such as, “Do you have a resume?” and “Do you know why you need a Social Security card?”) “It might look as though it’s a set-up, but the reality is that you’ve taught them, and the test is the instrument to show that they’ve learned it,” said Gray. “They do well.”

The Details: The Workforce Investment Board of Solano County, Inc. is a private non-profit that has a contract with the Solano County Health and Social Services (H&SS) Department to serve TANF/CalWorks welfare and foster youth. To get things going, Gray asked the County H&SS staff whether any funding was available for TANF dependents who needed a summer employment program.

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In return, the WIB and the Youth Advisory Council would establish work sites, do payroll for the youth, pay workers' compensation, and provide "World of Work" and "Life Skills" workshops that teach work-readiness skills and career exploration. "It's designed to complement WIA but with funding just from the county TANF system," Gray explains.

Start-up was slow because of the transition, and because simply going into the schools before they let out for the summer was no longer an option. Direct mail proved ineffective. The second year the county started outreach earlier, in late February, putting articles in a monthly newsletter called *Bridges* that is sent to all CalWORKs and aid recipients. "It's important to bring young people and parents in together to complete eligibility determination as early as possible, and then to keep the youth engaged by sending information till summer employment is ready," Gray notes.

Screening is intensive. Seventy-three percent of the candidates, of whom approximately 25 percent are foster youth, are basic-skills deficient. Staff carefully assesses skills, interests, and level of commitment, screening about ten youth for every one enrolled. "It's staff-intensive. And even if the young people don't stay in the program, they learn something through the screening process," says Gray.

The YEP program staff support participants in many innovative ways. They organize

- A pre-program Mini-Camp The week before starting work, youth spend four hours with staff learning basic work readiness skills: how to behave, to dress, to communicate. "Many of these young people do not have a role model at home who goes to work," Gray observed. Since the WIB's Youth Advisory Council cannot afford buses, "the young people need to make choices about how to get to work—that's part of readiness."
- Supervisor training Every work site has a primary and an alternate supervisor. Both have attended a two-hour training session, "so they know that they need to instruct the young people, watch them, check them, supervise them," Gray explained.
- Workshop presentations During the summer of 2003, a very seasoned case manager had all of the young people stand up during each weekly workshop to describe what they do and what they've learned from their supervisor since the previous week. For example, a young person working at the YMCA might have learned how to put chemicals in the pool. "These are not youth who have a lot of experience in even talking to adults," Gray noted. "We give them a script of what to ask their supervisor. Everything is planned to give them what they need to have the right answer at the end, to build confidence."
- An annual recognition ceremony Gray obtained a sizeable room, created certificates signed by the executive director, had plaques made for five outstanding participants, and lined up a keynote speaker. (In 2003 the speaker was a judge who was once on welfare.)

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During the first recognition ceremony, the executive director handed out the certificate to each young person, looking them in the eye and shaking their hands. “Some didn't know how to shake hands, so the next year we decided to teach them,” Gray commented. “These are not the stars who get recognition in public school. They're getting recognized because they worked hard and completed a program, and they're happy.” Participants leave with a portfolio that includes a resume, sample application, and, where possible, a letter of recommendation.

Another top priority has been pleasing funders. The program's funder has been the County, so at the end of each recognition ceremony, Gray makes short “success story” presentations to the subcommittee of the Health and Social Services Department.

Gray's advice is to plan and coordinate “and have a road map, if you will. Check in with yourself to make sure you're on track. If you have a deadline, you'd better stick to it.”

Breakthrough Moment: Gray was pleased with the wide range of services in the program, and confident that it would work. The successes of individual participants verified her thoughts about the program. Gray offered the following example. A young woman worked at the Medical Center at Travis AFB in Fairfield during the summer of 2003. She learned through her YEP work experience that she had a passion for helping people. As a result of her employment at the AFB, she has decided to join the United States Air Force after high school, and to seek an assignment as a medic to help her fellow soldiers.

Where to Go for More Information

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