
Investing in Youth: A Step in Breaking Generational Poverty

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” - Nelson Mandela

Since the inception of the Intern & Earn program, Santa Clara County has been equipping our CalWORKs, CalFresh, and foster care youth with essential tools to navigate the workforce. However, a crucial element is missing: education. It was this realization that drew attention to the case study in Santa Cruz County, where local resources effectively enhanced CalWORKs Employment Services (CWES) for youth. The CWES Youth Employment Program offers referrals to SmartHIRE and Sueños Youth Employment Program, each offering tailored services for youth. SmartHIRE receives referrals for in-school youth ages 16-18 or CalWORKs heads of households ages 18-24, while referrals to Sueños are for out-of-school youth ages 16-18 or CalWORKs heads of households ages 18-24. By adopting the educational components of Sueños and integrating them into the Santa Clara County Intern & Earn program, there's an opportunity to truly invest in disenfranchised youth and effect substantial change in breaking the cycle of generational poverty.

Santa Cruz County Perspective

Santa Cruz County CWES Youth Employment Program was initiated in October 2023. The program is structured with two distinct referral tracks to either SmartHIRE or Sueños, catering to youth within the CalWORKs assistance unit. The program aims to provide comprehensive support to both in-school and out-of-school youth. Marketing efforts are channeled towards parents during CWES Orientation sessions, with an estimated 30-40 families currently identified with eligible youth. Staff also distribute a flyer to parents promoting the program when eligible youth reach the ages of 16-18. Since the CWES Youth Employment Program's inception, no youth have engaged as of the present date, underscoring the early stages of implementation and outreach.

SmartHIRE

In-school youth are referred to SmartHIRE, offering subsidized employment opportunities during nights and weekends, aligned to minimize interference with school schedules. SmartHIRE is the subsidized employment program from the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County. Income earned through this program is exempt from eligibility and grant calculations. The subsidized employment is accompanied by a range of supportive services such as transportation assistance, interview/work attire provisions, and access to computers. This lessens the burden that youth may face if trying to gain employment on their own. Compliance with educational obligations is ensured through the requirement of work permits and the maintenance of good standing within their schools. The program is funded by

CalWORKs single allocation Expanded Subsidized Employment.

Sueños Youth Employment Program

Sueños ("dreams") Youth Employment Program is a Santa Cruz County Office of Education (SCCOE) program that serves the county's youth who face various challenges such as involvement in the justice system, foster care, pregnancy, or parenting responsibilities. Sueños serves both in-school and out-of-school youth, while the CWES Youth Employment Program only accepts referrals for out-of-school youth. Eligibility criteria comprise being low-income, ages 16-24, and meeting one or more additional conditions such as school dropout, basic skill deficiency, involvement in the justice system, homelessness, foster care, pregnancy/parenting, or disability. Sueños offers a comprehensive array of services encompassing tutoring, dropout recovery, work experience, occupational skills training, educational workforce preparation, leadership development, supportive services, adult mentoring, follow-up, guidance and counseling, financial literacy, entrepreneurial skills training, labor market services, and transition to post-secondary education. Recognizing the diverse needs of participants, Sueños allows each youth to allocate \$500 in support services that may be used towards their education. The program also offers practical experience opportunities through the Paid/Unpaid Work Experience program, including summer employment, pre-apprenticeship programs, internships, and on-the-job training.

Testimonials from participants underscore the program's impact on academic achievement and employment

prospects. As an example, the following quote was provided by the Sueños program to the author, from a 17-year old participant, Miguel:

“This program has provided me with the support I need to bring my grades up and be on track to graduate next year. It also gave me the opportunity to gain valuable work experience to be able to get a job with Watsonville Public Library. Thank you for your hard work and dedication.”

Upon program completion, case managers continue to monitor participants for an additional 12 months, contributing to the success of Sueños. Sueños is funded by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) from the federal Department of Labor.

Intern & Earn Program Overview

Initiated in the summer of 2016, Santa Clara County launched the Teen Works pilot program aimed at providing internships for CalWORKs and Foster Care youth. Initially restricted to placements within County sites, the original pilot program has transformed into the Intern & Earn Program, boasting a more inclusive platform. This program now caters to CalFresh youth, as well, and has broadened its scope to include internships within the private sector, offering opportunities for night and weekend positions. Originally created for summer engagement, the program has undergone expansion to meet the growing demands of youth, now offering cohorts two to three times annually. Participants are now able to work up to 30 hours per week over an eight-week cohort period.

Funding for CalWORKs youth is derived from the CalWORKs single allocation of Expanded Subsidized Employment, while resources for CalFresh and Foster Care youth stem from the Santa Clara County General Fund. However, amidst California's recent budgetary challenges and significant funding reductions, there is a looming threat to the program's sustainability, potentially resulting in decreased support for CalFresh youth and a reduction in cohort frequency to twice per year. Santa Clara County CalWORKs has a dedicated unit for the Intern & Earn program, consisting of 10 Employment Counselors and one Supervisor. With the reduction of cohort frequency, the Intern & Earn unit will have the capacity to absorb the proposed enhancements.

Proposed Enhancements to the Santa Clara Intern & Earn Program

Within fiscal constraints, there exists a strategic opportunity to pivot and strengthen the Santa Clara County SSA's Intern & Earn program. This can be achieved by integrating an educational component similar to the Sueños Youth Employment Program and by developing sustained engagement amongst youth year-round. The first two proposed enhancements, Workshops and Additional Supportive Services, are derived from the Sueños Youth Employment Program. The latter two, Assessment Training and Campus Tours, are personal recommendations that leverage existing resources within Santa Clara County. These proposed enhancements require minimal financial investment and comprise a multifaceted approach with:

- Workshops: Focusing on the significance of higher education, exploring various educational

pathways, and equipping youth with essential skills for college application processes.

- **Additional Supportive Services:** Providing financial assistance for participating youth to alleviate the burden of college application fees.
- **Assessment Testing:** Implementing assessment testing through Choices 360 to assist youth in identifying their strengths and aligning them with suitable educational pursuits.
- **Campus Tours:** Collaborating with community college liaison to organize campus tours, fostering awareness and interest among youth.

Workshops:

Workshops are a pivotal aspect of the Intern & Earn program. Currently, Employment Counselors create a variety of workshops in Canva to develop visually engaging materials for program onboarding. This existing expertise can be utilized in the creation of educational workshops.

The educational workshops can cover a range of topics vital for youth pursuing higher education, including the significance of secondary education, guidance on navigating the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process, invaluable tips for creating compelling personal statements, and essential insights into overcoming the barriers associated with college applications. Leveraging the county's existing resources, such as the LinkedIn Learning platform, allows counselors to create individualized learning paths for youth interested in career exploration.

These enhancements incur minimal costs, including a \$120 annual licensing fee for Canva. Currently, the county has an existing contract with LinkedIn Learning so no additional cost will be incurred. This allows Santa Clara County to seamlessly integrate educational workshops into the Intern & Earn program, enriching the educational journey of youth participants.

Additional Support Services:

Financial constraints represent a significant barrier preventing low-income students from pursuing higher education, often serving as the primary reason why they opt not to apply to college. The application fees for institutions such as the California State University (CSU) system, University of California (UC) campuses, and private universities can range from \$70 to \$90 per application, posing a considerable burden for low-income youth. While fee waivers are available for some universities, the limited availability of these waivers increases competition among applicants, further deterring low-income students from applying.

To address this challenge, the proposal is to eliminate the financial barrier by offering a single allocation of up to \$250 in support services per youth interested in applying to college. Eligibility for this support service would be conditional upon participation or enrollment in the Intern & Earn program. By providing financial assistance, youth can submit applications to at least two colleges without concern for the application fees, thus alleviating a significant source of stress and facilitating access to higher education.

Funding for this proposal will be sourced from the CalWORKs single allocation for CalWORKs youth and the Santa Clara

County General Fund for Foster Care youth. The estimated maximum cost for supporting Foster Care youth is \$25,000, while the cost for CalWORKs youth is projected to be \$68,500 per year. These estimates are based on the current allotments for CalWORKs and CalFresh youth in the Intern & Earn program. By removing this barrier, we will empower students to pursue higher education, thereby unlocking pathways to a brighter and more promising future.

Assessment Testing:

Santa Clara County currently offers assessment testing through Choices 360, a valuable resource for CalWORKs participants seeking guidance in career exploration or educational pursuits. Employment Counselors in the Assessment unit currently administer this web-based application in person. By extending this service to Intern & Earn program participants, youth are offered the opportunity to gain valuable insights into their strengths and aptitudes, aiding them in making informed decisions about their educational and career pathways.

To facilitate the integration of assessment testing into the Intern & Earn program, the Santa Clara County CalWORKs Assessment unit can proctor the testing and interpret the results. Testing can be done in small groups so no additional staff will be needed with minimal impact on the Assessment unit. This ensures that youth receive personalized guidance based on their individual strengths and interests.

The implementation of assessment testing within the Intern & Earn program does not necessitate additional funding. The county already allocates funding to support Choices 360 for the adult population, thus allowing

the extension of its benefits to our youth participants. By leveraging existing resources and expertise, Intern & Earn program participants can be empowered to make well-informed decisions about their educational and professional futures.

Campus Tours:

Santa Clara County currently maintains contracts and liaisons with all community colleges within the county. Enrollment rates at these community colleges are relatively low. Recognizing this opportunity for collaboration, the proposal is to leverage existing partnerships to organize campus tours for Intern & Earn participants.

Working with college liaisons, the aim is to facilitate campus tours for youth participants, offering them direct exposure to the benefits of attending a community college. Tours will be coordinated by Intern & Earn Employment Counselors and our school liaisons. Youth would coordinate their own transportation so no additional funding would be required. These tours not only provide valuable insights into the academic and extracurricular offerings available but also highlight the diverse opportunities for personal and professional growth within a community college setting.

This collaborative effort benefits both parties involved. Youth participants gain invaluable exposure to post-secondary education options, while college liaisons have the opportunity to engage with an active audience who may express interest in attending their school. This initiative incurs no additional costs for Santa Clara County, as it leverages existing resources and partnerships.

Investing in Youth Education: A Strategic Imperative

Investing in youth education is a crucial step in addressing the challenges faced by CalWORKs and Foster Care youth, who grapple with low income, heightened risks of violence, food scarcity, and homelessness. Rather than debating the rationale behind such investment, the focus should pivot towards effective strategies for implementation.

One pathway that can make a difference between a lifetime of poverty and a secure economic future is higher education. According to the Institute of Higher Education Policy, “It is often education that breaks generational cycles of poverty.”¹

Recognizing this, Santa Clara County must play an active role in providing avenues for educational advancement within the existing Intern & Earn program. By integrating educational components, youth are empowered to overcome systemic barriers, paving the way for stability and a brighter future.

Conclusion

Drawing inspiration from successful models such as Santa Cruz County's Sueños program, which emphasizes wraparound services centered on education and workforce preparation, introducing educational support into the Intern & Earn program holds the promise of transformative impact. With minimal investments in adding education in the Intern & Earn program, Santa Clara County can support and empower low-income youth to overcome adversity and have a pathway to a promising tomorrow.

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