



Work, Work, Work: Employment Programs and Resources

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speakers from a variety of backgrounds, including the U.S. Department of Labor and non-profit programs throughout the Bay Area. Moderator Cynthia Nagendra, Staff Lawyer at HomeBase, led a conversation between Gail Johnson of the Sequoia Community Corps; Wei Hsieh, Recruitment Director of the California Conservation Corps; Deon Price, Youth Career Transition Instructor for Job Corps Treasure Island; Jay Leonhardy, Program Coordinator for YouthWORKS in Richmond, CA; Ingrid Nyberg of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration; and Brandon Franklin, a youth representative and member of the Bridging the Gaps Youth Advisory Committee. The presenters spoke about the individual programs they oversee, common barriers youth face when accessing employment, and the most effective strategies for overcoming those barriers. Mr. Franklin’s discussion of his experiences growing up in a low-income household in San Francisco and the importance of job readiness for a successful transition to adulthood added a welcome youthful perspective.

Real Work Experience for Youth

While the job market remains dreary, employment programs cast a light of hope for youth struggling for stability and self-sufficiency. One of the most exciting topics discussed by the presenters representing local youth employment programs was the ability for program participants to get real workplace experience in a variety of employment fields.

“At the Sequoia Community Corps,” Ms. Johnson noted, “participants have the opportunity

to do cementing and construction work, learn about weatherizing homes and maximizing electricity efficiency, and engage in park development and forestry services.” Similarly, “With the California Conservation Corps,” Mr. Hsieh explained, “participants are responsible for responding to natural disasters and threats to the environment, and engage in meaningful employment that revolves around protecting and conserving the state’s natural resources.” The motto of the Conservation Corps is “hard work, low pay, miserable conditions, and more!” and each year there are over three million participants throughout California.

At Richmond YouthWORKS, participants are linked with local employers in the community, such as pet groomers and family resource centers, and have a wide range of placement opportunities. According to Mr. Leonhardy, in 2009 704 participants found work through the program, and they made up to \$1,000 over the course of the summer program. The YouthWORKS program is the second largest employment program in the United States, and thrives on community partnerships with businesses and local government bodies.

Mr. Price of the Treasure Island Job Corps, emphasized the sheer number of training prospects that are offered to Corps participants. Those enrolled in the program have a chance to develop their skills as chefs, master office-related skills and construction techniques, or learn how to work in the security services sector. Mr. Price emphasized, however, that an employment program “must go beyond teaching a trade to participants. Instead, the program “must help participants develop educational skills, and become self-sufficient and independent” so they can experience long-term success after their enrollment is complete.

Participant Backgrounds

Presenters also discussed to whom they looked when recruiting participants for their programs. “Finding appropriate participants can be a major concern in maintaining a smoothly-running program,” said Mr. Leonhardy, noting that “sometimes we deal with unresponsive and stubborn participants.” Mr. Leonhardy said that such problems can be alleviated in part by rewarding good behavior, however, and such rewards might include gift cards, backpacks, school supplies, and group dinners.

Richmond YouthWORKS only accepts participants who have a GPA lower than a 2.0., and the majority of program participants tend to be African American. Participants in the California Conservation Corps also must meet a certain set of requirements. As Mr. Hsieh explained, “They need valid state IDs and a social security card, must be between 18 and 25, and cannot have any major felony convictions.” Mr. Hsieh noted that 5% of those in the Corps are homeless.

Education

One of the core components of youth-oriented work programs is helping participants achieve academic excellence. Many of the panelists discussed how their program helps youth enrollees obtain their degrees or GEDs, or even move on to college.

At the Sequoia Community Corps, Ms. Johnson pointed out that many of the participants in her program do not have high school degrees or GEDs, and that they “strive to obtain these during the course of the program while receiving abundant help along the way.” According to Ms. Johnson, one of the most exciting features of the Sequoia Community Corps program is its dynamic nature. Whether or not a participant has a high

school diploma is taken into consideration in formulating their work schedules. “Many students will work for one week, and then take classes the next, with a schedule that alternates between the two until the student can obtain his or her degree and is able to work full-time,” Ms. Johnson explained. This structure helps facilitate a strong work ethic and enhance the participant’s employment prospects.

At the California Conservation Corps, Mr. Hsieh stated that the program is composed in part of partnerships with charter schools and education providers. “Participants in the Corps are also offered a variety of scholarship opportunities, and are encouraged to attend community colleges or apply to four-year universities,” he said. Similarly, at Richmond YouthWORKS, program participants receive help obtaining their GED, have access to tutoring services, and can receive information and assistance to help them apply to college. Mr. Price indicated that the Treasure Island Jobs Corps offers an English language program, along with academic training for developing verbal and mathematic skills.

Additional Support for Youth

In addition to providing employment and vocational training to participants, many programs also offer other kinds of support to participating youth. According to Mr. Leonhardy, participants of the program are offered dental and health care assistance. At the Sequoia Community Corps, Ms. Johnson said “youth are connected with health and housing programs, such as Section 8, and the program assists foster youth in the transition from foster youth housing to independent living.” Similarly, Mr. Hsieh stated that California Conservation Corps members receive help with obtaining life insurance coverage.

Funding For Employment Programs

One of the most challenging obstacles facing employment programs is finding a viable source of funding. Ms. Nyberg spoke about the expansive role that the federal government plays in funding employment programs and helping youth find work. She discussed in particular the Workforce Investment Act and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and emphasized their importance in providing grant money to workforce and education programs for young people between 14 and 25 years old. Instead of delving deep into the details of each grant opportunity, Ms. Nyberg invited the audience to visit doleta.gov/youth_services and doleta.gov/grants/find_grants.cfm in order to learn more about the individual grant programs currently being offered, and their associated application processes and grantee requirements.

Speaking after Ms. Nyberg, and providing some real-world wisdom regarding federal funding programs, Mr. Leonhardy noted that applying for and receiving federal funding can be complicated and time-consuming. According to Mr. Leonhardy, one of the greatest difficulties facing employment programs is the amount of time and resources that can be taken up by the documentation and reporting requirements that must be met in order to access federal funding. He spoke at length about how much time it can take to register each individual program participant. “It is best if an agency can find alternative forms of funding that are faster and easier to obtain, such as donations or community grants,” Mr. Leonhardy suggested. He added that unfortunately it is not uncommon for an organization to lose funding and have to disband due to delays in receiving federal assistance.

Federal Programs Targeting Youth

Although the difficulty in accessing federal funding is a point of contention for some agencies, the important role of the federal government in the fight against homelessness cannot be ignored. Ms. Nyberg detailed the Work Opportunity Tax Credit offered by the U.S. Department of Labor, which incentivizes and supports those businesses that hire individuals who face employment barriers. This includes at-risk youth between 16 and 24 who do not regularly attend school, are not readily employable, and lack basic skills. “The DOL also provides some funding to programs that support ex-offenders in their efforts to find stable employment,” Ms. Nyberg said, and in her discussion noted the tailoring of funding opportunities to meet specific needs.

Ms. Nyberg also discussed the YouthBuild program, an alternative education program intended to “provide disadvantaged youth with the ability to engage in meaningful employment and develop leadership skills.” Ms. Nyberg noted that YouthBuild employment projects vary and that a common work experience for participants is in the field of construction. She also provided a brief description of federally funded One-Stop Centers, which offer a “single service menu for all.” At these centers, youth can receive assistance with approaching a variety of conveniently coordinated services, such as schools, public housing authorities, juvenile justice systems, and neighborhood centers.

First-Hand Youth Experience

Brandon Franklin, a young San Francisco native, discussed his experiences with employment services, and what it was like growing up in a low-income household. His narrative provided a context for viewers to comprehend the real world implications of

employment programs for homeless and at-risk youth, and the important role they play. Franklin also highlighted the importance of community organizations aimed at helping youths, and the “incredible value that comes along with a strong, competitive resume.” As a participant in numerous youth employment and education programs, Mr. Franklin’s presentation offered audience members a chance to see how training programs can have a positive impact on youth in need.