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Engaging Santa Cruz County Employers

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Abstract

This internship was completed at the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County (CAB), which is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping low-income at-risk youth and adults. The intern was fortunate to work with the Links2Work!, an Alcance program. Links2Work! helps individuals gain work experience and find linkages to employment. Currently, the biggest challenge is finding employment for those individuals impacted by the justice system. Their past histories have disqualified them from jobs. The intern's Capstone Project was to find fair chance employers in the county of Santa Cruz that will allow the organization to better serve job seekers and help them overcome the barrier of having a criminal record. The project consisted of warm and cold calls to inform employers about CAB, the intern's project, and educate them about the Fair Chance Act(2018). In addition, the intern increased employers knowledge by providing valuable information on incentives for employers who hire individuals from this target group. In the process, the intern was able to provide a list of employers to the agency who are willing to provide a second chance and end the cycle of recidivism.

Keywords: fair chance, employment, recidivism, community

About the Agency & Community

The Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, also known as CAB, is a local non profit organization that has been serving the community for 55 years. This organization has served more than 10,000 low income individuals and families. Their mission is to partner with the community to eliminate poverty and create social change through advocacy and essential services (CAB, 2021). The agency is focused on 4 pillars: Immigration, Employment, Housing, and Community Service. Their core values are equity, dignity and diversity, service as well as inclusion. According to an assessment completed by participants' in 2018, CAB identified 5 poverty-related needs. Some of the community's needs are housing, rent burden, barriers to accessing resources, health, discrimination, and inconsistent employment (CAB, 2018). ALCANCE, which is under the CAB umbrella, has become one of the biggest programs that focus on employment services. Some key services include basic needs and wellness assessments, resume writing, mock interviews, job placement and retention assistance.

Links2Work!, an ALCANCE program at CAB provides linkages to employment and community service to individuals that have been negatively impacted by drugs and/or alcohol. This 2-year grant assisted over 120 under-resourced and formerly incarcerated adults from 2019 to 2021. This information was retrieved from L2W! Progress Report Data. L2W! consist of collaborating with partners such as Santa Cruz County Mental Health, Janus, and the Public Defender. These wrap around services help these individuals overcome the barrier of having a criminal record. Jesusita Alcorcha, the L2W! Employer Placement Coordinator, provided case management assistance, held workshops on job readiness, developed road maps, created resumes

and practiced mock interviews with her clients. Jesusita had the tools to prepare individuals to get their power back into society and the workforce.

Problem Description

Opium and marijuana were criminalized in the early 1900's according to *A history of the Drug War*. These drugs have been used for many years for spiritual and medical purposes. Majority of the people who consumed them were black or chinese. By 1920, they were directed towards Mexicans and Latinos (Drug Policy Alliance, 2021). 50 years ago, President Nixon declared the War on Drugs which aimed to stop the use and distribution of drugs. In the video, *What is the War on Drugs*, Nixon criminalizes sellers and consmers with life sentences for minor drug offences. Doug McVay found that over one million people in the United States were arrested for drug law violations. 13.3% were drug sales (Doug McVay, 2020).

People with convictions such as a misderminor or felony face some of the most difficult challenges. Serviving a sentence for a conviction impacts many aspects of life especially when being released from prison. Individuals touched by the justice system have little to no employment opportunities which also impacts their families.

Contributing Factors

One policy barrier to employment is blanket bans. This is referred to as a type of blanket that automatically disqualifies people with criminal records from the opportunity of a vocational licence. Drug testing laws also affect employment. Courts support the employer's with the right to drug tests. Some of the reasons why employers drug tests are for the safety of others, insurance purposes and productivity. According to Uritox, 56% of employers still require job

candidates to take a drug test for pre employment purposes. Requirements such as drug testing may discourage previous substance abuse users in applying for jobs.

The communities needs are rising while “burgets are shrinking.” This phrase is used in articles created by the Santa Cruz county community. The L2W! program closed it’s doors to War on Drugs victims when the 2-year grant ended. The intern became aware, through a community partner, that Prison to Employment was the other only program assisting this group. Prison to Employment is offered only to formerly incarcerated women who are actively looking for employment. Prison to Employment has a limited amount of space for 17 women. Again, this program is only a temporary solution just like L2W!. There are still 8 million Californians with criminal convictions who continue to search for a second chance.

Local nonprofit organizatons are competing for funding for those facing discrimination and lack of resources such as mental health. The Public Health Department, for example, emphasises the importance of addressing mental health through different channels. There is a correlation between access to mental health and incarceration. The State of Mental Health in America, concluded that more than one million individuals in jails live with a mental health illness. People living with mental health illnesses became involced in the system for low-level offences.

Consequences

CAB has identified high rates of unemployment in their 2017 survey. One of the reasons most individuals are unemployed is for previous convictions. This results in financial strain and rent burden. Nearly 1 in 3 people who were homeless were also unemployed (CAB, 2017). Similarly, the National Low Income Housing Coalition, found out that ex offenders are 10 times

more likely to become homeless (Couloute, 2018). The number of unhoused individuals has increased since 2017. In a more recent study, *The State of Homelessness* article concluded 79.3 per 10,000 residents were homeless (2021). Inconsistent funding towards programs for the homeless has made it extremely difficult for organizations, such as Housing Matters and SCC Housing for Health Division, to keep a long-term strategic plan. Unhoused individuals and families rely heavily on programs to survive as this is one of the basic human needs. These organizations provide basic hygiene like toiletries, access to warm showers, and temporary shelter. Research shows that people who are unemployed and homeless recividate.

Recidivism is a person's tendency to relapse into a previous behavior. People who lack work experience and skills are often turned down by employers. The intern's Fair Chance Also Known as “Second Chance” project summarized that more than half of the employers she interviewed were hesitant to hire individuals with either a misdemeanor or felony. After collecting the employer survey, the intern found out that violence in a workplace, theft, and little work experience were the employers top 3 concerns. Due to the limited job opportunities, this group tends to relapses and ultimately recividate.

Problem Model

| Contributing Factors | Problem | Consequences |
|---------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Employment discrimination | War on Drugs (people with convictions) do not get employment opportunities | Unemployment |
| Lack of needed services | | Homelessness |
| Mental Health | | Relapse and ultimately recividate. |

Capstone Project Description and Justification

2021 Capstone

The intern created a script to guide her to schedule interviews with the hiring managers. She conducted warm and cold calls with Santa Cruz County Employers. She also put together a powerpoint presentation of the agency and the Capstone project in both English and Spanish. This is a visual for those who chose to be interviewed via Zoom. The intern's project was affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, Therefore, she attempted to interview as many employers as possible. By the end of the project the intern will provide a list of employers to the agency to use as a tool to connect clients to jobs. An excel spreadsheet was submitted to the agency with 156 employers that were called more than once throughout the year of her internship. The spreadsheet includes the hiring manager information as well as employers that are not interested in giving opportunities. This project allows the organization to better serve job seekers and help them learn ways to overcome the barrier of having a criminal record.

Project Purpose

Links2Work!, an ALCANCE program, focuses on Adults with histories that have been negatively impacted by drugs and/or alcohol. These individuals are actively looking for employment. L2W! is composed of different elements that help clients with creating a resume, practice mock interviews along with a budget of \$200 per client. These funds are meant to pay for transportation or interview clothing. Mentally preparing clients to go back to the workforce is challenging because they need to overcome the barrier of having a criminal record.

The Fair Chance Act of 2018 prohibits employers of 5 or more employees to disclose whether they have been convicted of a felony. The intern's Fair Chance project is a tool used to

connect War on Drugs individuals to find employment. The intern's list consists of 14 employers who she conducted interviews with. The agency was given the business information, the hiring manager or owner interviewed and their contact information. Most importantly, she gathered information on who is a fair chance employer, who is open to give opportunities and also those who are not interested. One of the goals is to have clients referred to employers who can restore hope and minimize the cycle of recidivism.

Project Justification

Society has created a stigma around those who are substance abuse users. Former president, Nixon, categorized them as the "War on Drugs" population which created mass incarceration for consumers and low-level sales. Once offenders are released from prisons they are affected by their records which push away employment opportunities. This has been historically one form of discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping towards this target group. The community continues to see these discrepancies, which is how the L2W! Program came to exist. The quarterly reports from the agency concluded that one of their community's biggest obstacles was gaining and obtaining employment (CAB, 2018). The intern then created a plan to bring awareness to employers about the Fair Chance Act. The intern educated hiring managers on possible tax incentives and bonding programs for businesses hiring someone in a target group.

Project Implementation

CAB is a member of 3 local Chambers of Commerce, which helped the intern in creating a list of employers. The strategy was to approach employers by warm and cold calls. The intern created a script with her mentor to guide her through the conversation with an employer. In the script she states about the program, its mission, and a summary about the intern's project in

finding second chance employers. As a result of the Coronavirus outbreak, all outreach methods were completed over the phone, zoom, or via email. Once the intern connected with the person making the hiring decisions she educated them on the Fair Chance Act, its population, and incentives for businesses who provide a second chance. Most importantly, the intern created 12 questions at the end of the interview to measure the outcomes of her project. The questionnaire revolved around their business hiring requirements, thoughts on this target group as well as finding what would encourage employers to hire people with a conviction. Once the mentor and intern analyzed the outcomes from employers they determined ways to better assist Jesusita's clients. Hiring decisions are a major investment for employers to make. Therefore, Jesusita focused on building resumes for her clients, practiced mock interviews and created workshops on how to "Gain Your Power Back." The intern, on the other hand, focused on connecting client's to community resources. For example, if a client was interested in Alcoholics Anonymous she would become knowledgeable about the program and search for a phone number and location.

Assessment Plan

The assessment plan was measured through 14 Santa Cruz county employer responses. This intern's survey was made up of multiple choice and open ended questions. To get detailed responses the intern asked questions like "what are your top 3 concerns of hiring people with a conviction?" If not, would you hire them if you were told there are tax credit or bonding programs that will protect your business. These were some of the 12 questions that were discussed with the hiring manager. Overall the outcome measured the employer's previous knowledge. The intern also expanded employers' awareness of Fair Chance employment. .

Expected Outcomes

The Capstone project started in August 2020 and ended September 2021. Throughout the year, this mentor and intern established deadlines that had to be met. After getting her results from the project she was able to implement what she learned to the Links2Work program. For months, in the remaining year of 2020, she searched for information regarding the problem CAB identified, which was the lack of employment opportunities among people with convictions. Convictions such as misdemeanors or felonies not only affect the person but their families. The goal was to connect employers with clients and vice versa. The intern's project was created to build relationships with the community and connect with business. Providing job opportunities to clients restore hope for their future.

Project Results

The intern began her internship during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Coronavirus outbreak changed her field internship experience. There were drastic changes in a short amount of time. For example, the agency and the intern learned to adapt quickly through other means of communication like Zoom . As a result, interning at the site was put on hold, but the intern managed to start her Senior Capstone Project. Jesusita and the intern set the goal of interviewing 20 employers from September 2020 to October 2021. Little did they know, COVID-19 impacted employees, employers and the way people interact with eachother. On one occassion people closed down their businesses temporarily while others closed their doors permanently. The intern and mentor bainstored how to overcome communication barriers with employers. The best way to connect with the hiring managers was through email, Zoom, or by phone. By the end of October 2021, the intern contacted a total of 68 employers more than once. These employers

were all located within Santa Cruz County. After multiple attempts to reach employers 14 scheduled interviews. Although we did not reach the original goal it was an accomplishment. The intern created a fact sheet of the social problem and processed it in executing her project. A flyer, list of employers and questionnaires was submitted to the Director of the program.

Conclusion & Recommendations

In collaboration with CAB's partners this intern gained knowledge on cross-cultural competence and became trauma informed. Collaborating with other organizations was key in getting to know the population and knocking down barriers. The Santa Cruz Mental Health Department and Public Defender's office worked closely with Links2Work!. Together they were able to influence mutual client's reach their full potential. To reach this process L2W! had to equip tools for these individuals to use. The agency implemented workshops on interviewing, resumes, provided bus passes, and interview clothing.. Although the War on Drugs policies continue to box people in the cycle of recidivism the intern manages to provide an ongoing project. The list of 14 employers can be updated by future interns. Fair Chance employment policies may change with time. Therefore it is crucial to continue to bring awareness about the ongoing issue of employment discrimination within people with convictions. All in all, the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County mission is to "partner with the community to eliminate poverty and create social change through advocacy and essential services"

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

| Activities | Deliverables | Timeline/Deadlines | Supporting Staff |
|--|--|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Organize meeting with mentor | Ongoing check-ins with mentor and Alcance Director for suggestions for Capstone Project. Provide guidance as needed. | August 2020-December 2021 | Jesuista Alcorcha Maria Rodriguez |
| Create a script | The script is not read word by word but helpful to have handy. | August-September 2020 | Jesusita Alcorcha |
| Create a list of employers in the Santa Cruz County Area | Add up to 20 employers and their hiring managers info. | September-October 2020 | Jesusita Alcorcha |
| Provide an excel spreadsheet with my day to day progress | This excel should be updated as needed. My mentor and director will check the spreadsheet to view progress. | September 2020-December 2021 | Jesusita Alcorcha Maria Rodriguez |
| Warm and cold calling | Phone businesses and exchange contact information such as email, ext. numbers, etc. | October 2020-July 2021 | Jesusita Alcorcha Maria Rodriguez |
| Research the Fair Chance Act | Gather data from the web and/or community partners | August 2020-December 2021 | Jesusita Alcorcha |
| Create visuals | Create powerpoint presentations for those employers who would like to meet via zoom. | November 2020-July 2021 | Jesusita Alcorcha |
| Conducts 1-on-1 interviews | Provide a minimum of 13 questions to ask employers at the interview. No leading questions to avoid general yes or no answers. | Jan21-Dec2021 | Jesusita Alcorcha |
| Gather both fair chance and non-fair chance employers | Present both list and present my project to CAB | September 2020-November 2021 | Maria Rodriguez |
| Create a fact sheet | Create a flyer for the CAB that summarizes my Capstone Project. This consists of both research and personal data gathered from employers. Present to the mentor and director of the program. | November-December 2021 | Maria Rodriguez |

