



**COVID-19 Recovery Pilot Programs for Opportunity Youth
 May 2021 to April 2022**

OVERVIEW

The City of San Antonio began its commitment to empowering opportunity youth—young people between the ages of 16 to 24 years old who are neither working nor in school—in February 2019 when the NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center began serving the community. In partnership with Goodwill Industries-San Antonio, Communities in Schools-San Antonio, as well as additional funding from the United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County, NXT Level has served almost 1,100 youth since its inception. The partners work together to support youth reach their personal, educational, and workforce goals.

According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, there was an estimated 34,000 opportunity youth in San Antonio when the NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center first opened its doors. By the summer of 2020, with the effects of COVID-19 on unemployment rates and high disconnection of youth in schools, the number had more than doubled to almost 75,000.

On May 20, 2021, City Council approved a mid-year budget adjustment allocating \$885,000 in the Department of Human Services (DHS) delegate agency funding to address the impact of COVID-19 on youth. Three city-wide providers already working with DHS to support opportunity youth were identified to expand their programming. With the assistance from the Aspen Institute, DHS’ children and youth success division instituted three pilot programs based on best practices from other communities who had successfully reduced the number of opportunity youth had implemented. More importantly, feedback from San Antonio youth was incorporated in the pilot programs that were gleaned from two studies undertaken by DHS to understand the unique needs of opportunity youth: “Where am I going to sleep? Where am I going to eat? The Lived Experiences of San Antonio-Bexar County Opportunity Youth” (Saenz, Bahena, Enriquez, Anzaldua, 2019) and “Empowering Youth to be the Writers of their Future” (2020).

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH PILOT PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Pilot Programs	Earn While You Learn	Employment Mentorship	High School to College Connection
Program Description	A high school equivalency, GED program that paid youth for meeting their goals.	An employment mentorship program to gain on-the-job training and professional skills to secure employment.	Phone and home visit outreach to students that did not enroll in intended post-high school plans or stopped attending college.

Pilot Programs	Earn While You Learn	Employment Mentorship	High School to College Connection
Agency Partners	Healy Murphy, NXT Level	Healy Murphy, NXT Level, R3 Student Outreach, San Antonio Chambers of Commerce	Communities in Schools, Alamo Colleges District, San Antonio ISD Foundation, NXT Level, cafécollege
Duration	May 2021 - April 2022	May 2021 to Aug 2021	June 2021 - April 2022
Target Population	17- to 24-year-olds seeking high school equivalency	18- to 24-year-olds not working and not in school who reside in Bexar County	Graduated high school students who did not have a graduation plan or did not attend local college of intent. Alamo College students on the verge of not receiving AlamoPROMISE scholarship due incomplete enrollment.
Funding	\$165,000	\$200,000	\$215,000
Funding Source	Delegate Agency Reserve Funding, General Fund		

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT MENTORSHIP PROGRAM PILOT PROGRAM

MISSION AND GOAL

The Employment Mentorship Program utilized data from the opportunity youth focus groups that informed the 2020 City of San Antonio's Department of Human Services study "Empowering Youth to be the Writers of their Future." The city found that professional development training was one of the most desired and requested resources requested by youth. R3 student outreach built the Youth Employment Mentorship program alongside their existing opportunity youth apprenticeships to support the workforce professional development needs identified in the study. R3 Student Outreach's goal was to ensure that twenty opportunity youth participants ages 18-24 would complete a fully funded, seven-week professional development internship program to secure future employment.

PROGRAMMING

Recruitment and Matching of Students and Employers

Healy Murphy Center administered the Employment Mentorship, and R3 Student Outreach coordinated programming. Twenty students out of two hundred applicants were selected through an application and interview process. Opportunity youth were recruited from referrals from the City of San Antonio NXT Level

Youth Opportunity Center and students from R3 Student Outreach. R3 worked with the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce and the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce to recruit business partners eager to train and provide a developmental internship with the resources to provide intentional training and mentorship. In student interviews, educational and workforce goals were discussed and identified to match appropriate workplace mentorship.

Youth Internship Stipends

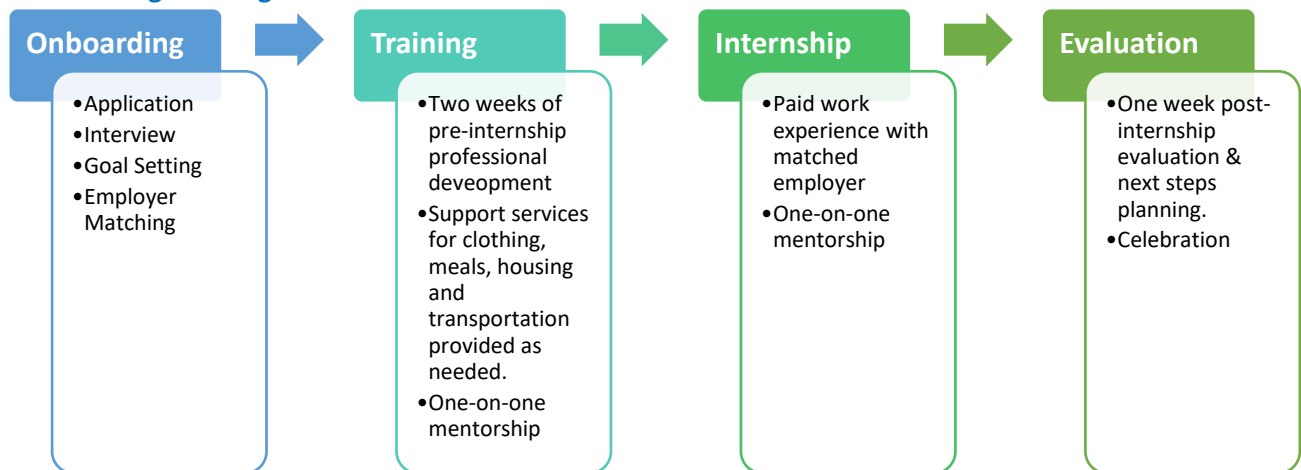
Most of the City of San Antonio funding was used to compensate participants at \$13 per hour for 40 hours a week for seven weeks. Students were paid to attend training, for the work with city-wide employers, and for their evaluation time to plan their next steps after completion of the internship.

Student Professional, Educational, and Wrap-Around Supports

R3 Student Outreach developed curriculum, support, and training with NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center and Our Lady of the Lake University from the needs identified for opportunity youth success and retention. The following supports were provided for internship development and success:

- 1) Matching process with vetted employers committed to supporting needs of opportunity youth
- 2) One-on-one mentorship
- 3) Workplace & business development training: ethics, corporate culture, professionalism
- 4) Technical training: Google suite, Microsoft teams, Office 365 & email etiquette
- 5) Career exploration development with LinkedIn, resume & cover letter lessons
- 6) Access to the San Antonio Food Bank and other resources to address barriers
- 7) Clothing and professional attire support
- 8) Technology & internet provided for classroom learning
- 9) Two weeks of pre-internship training

Student Programming



PROGRAM OUTCOMES

- **95%** completion of internship (only one student did not complete) by participants.
- **100%** of students received at least one job offer or pursued further education at R3 Student Outreach in technology certifications.
- **80%** of employers committed to hosting future job placements.

SUCCESS STORIES AND BEST PRACTICES

ELIMINATING HOMELESSNESS

Four homeless youth entered the program, and by graduation, each secured employment, and sustainable housing to live independently. By having a “one-stop-shop” to access resources, secure temporary housing until long-term housing was possible, and providing childcare along with incentivized learning, youth were able to focus on completing their professional development.

MEETING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL NEEDS AND BUILDING CONFIDENCE

One candidate who was offered a long-term employment opportunity after the apprenticeship attributed their success three areas: having the one-on-one mentorship to build self-confidence, pre-internship training for on-the-job preparation, and learning how to navigate professional office settings.

FINANCIAL LITERACY AND LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

Two candidates had children needing support with primary resources. After attending financial literacy professional development and securing employment, each could access and provide essential resources to their families. Candidates attributed success to learning how to budget, set up a bank account and manage household finances while working. The time to process and build goals in one-on-one mentorship supported the candidates in becoming self-sufficient with their resources to meet goals.

EARN WHILE YOU LEARN PILOT PROGRAM

MISSION AND GOAL

Healy Murphy Center's holistic, individualized approach to education earned it the distinction of being the **first accredited alternative education program** in Texas. The Earn While You Learn program at Healy Murphy aimed to support twenty-five opportunity youth to achieve their high school equivalency diploma (GED). The program exceeded its initial goals and awarded thirty-seven GEDs to former opportunity youth. Using best practices for student retention, DHS' children and youth success division added stipends to support young adults as they studied and took the GED exams.

PROGRAMMING

The Healy Murphy Center administered and provided programming for the Earn While You Learn pilot. Referrals recruited students from city-wide agencies, school districts, and the City of San Antonio NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center.

Student Educational, Wrap-Around and Professional Supports

Students who have had difficulty succeeding in a traditional school environment have received one-on-one attention, individualized curriculum, counseling, childcare, and health services for success in school and life on-site at Healy Murphy. The GED teacher and Healy Murphy team coached and connected students to resources, including childcare, a licensed health clinic with a nurse practitioner, parenting classes, counseling with a licensed professional, an on-site gym, and daily meals. Youth were able to attend in person or virtually for their pre-testing lessons. Participants were referred to NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center or city-wide agencies to support post-secondary education or workforce goals.

Student Programming

All students were required to take an initial GED pre-test for a baseline assessment to provide one-on-one tutoring and support. Developmentally appropriate academic work was assigned to help pass the GED exam based on results from the evaluation.

Youth Earn While You Learn Stipends

Due to existing on-site wrap-around services, the site was able to devote city funding to incentivizing existing GED lessons and testing. Youth were able to receive a total compensation of \$3,069 for pre-testing, GED testing, and a final bonus for meeting educational goals.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

- **100%** of applicants were admitted into the program.
- **40%** of participants received their GED in an average of 59 days.
 - GED completion rate more than doubled compared to outcomes without a stipend.

SUCCESS STORIES AND BEST PRACTICES

GED TO COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

Four participants withdrew from their traditional high school model due to poor attendance. All completed their GED and are now enrolled in college. Participants attributed success to having an intentional focus on meeting their goals. Wrap-around services, childcare, meals, and the stipend allowed the participants to work at their own pace, meet the needs of their families and earn income at a higher rate than most hourly jobs.

INVESTMENT AND FINANCIAL SECURITY

Participants attributed success to seeing that goals were attainable with personal, professional, educational, and social support. A single mother completed her GED testing on time and saved the money earned from the program to buy a car to attend college. The student was able to gain financial literacy support, set up a bank account, and build her home infrastructure to support further education. Overall, with the one-on-one support and coaching, the youth wanted to invest their stipends in supporting immediate basic needs and long-term goals. Additionally, funding was provided weekly, allowing for immediate financial stability and the ability to move forward without worrying about income.

CHILDCARE SUPPORT

A stay-at-home mother with three children could participate with access to childcare provided at no cost at Healy Murphy. She enrolled at St. Philips after completing her GED. Healy Murphy will continue to provide childcare for the duration of college, allowing her to meet her post-secondary goals. The school's mission is to support parenting youth, to have childcare while pursuing high school equivalency, and into college. The stability for the parent and the child provides developmental success for the entire family.

ALL ARE WELCOME

All applicants were admitted into the program if basic eligibility criteria of age, residency, and, if under 18, high school withdrawal papers were met. These transparent educational goals met students where they were at and the ability to set a self-paced schedule. Students only began testing when ready by completing the pre-test benchmarks. The 100% acceptance and coaching model based on pre-testing results provided confidence to participants. Regardless of pre-test results, admission allowed the center to serve more vulnerable youth and provide strategic referrals for youth unable to meet their initial GED goals.

HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE CONNECTION PILOT PROGRAM

MISSION AND GOAL

Due to the impact of COVID-19, school districts in San Antonio saw enrollment rates drop between the class of 2019 and the class of 2020. The High School to College Connection Pilot program was launched to reconnect with students through phone calls, texts, school visits, and home visits to understand and support high school graduates to re-engage and achieve post-secondary educational goals. The pilot was developed to increase the percentage of recent high school graduates attending college.

PROGRAMMING

Communities in Schools was the lead organization for the pilot. Other partners included the San Antonio ISD Foundation, Alamo Colleges District, NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center and cafécollege.

Student Recruitment and Eligibility

SAISD Post-Secondary Initiatives Students

- 1) **2,800** SAISD high school class of 2020 and 2021 alumni who:
 - a. registered for and did not attend community or local college of intent.
 - b. did not have a graduation plan.
 - c. started, but did not complete their local college application.

Alamo Colleges District Students

- 2) **949** fall 2020 First Time in College (FTIC) ACD students that did not enroll Fall 2021
- 3) **117** AlamoPROMISE recipients needing to complete enrollment
- 4) **917** students eligible for up to 5 Free Credit hours of Spring 2022 enrollment at Palo Alto College via Spring Enrollment Incentive Award
 - a. Students were on the verge of being “stop-outs”--meaning non-continuous enrollment for over a year.
 - b. Students were eligible if:
 - i. registered during Fall 2020 and/or Spring 2021;
 - ii. did not register for Fall 2021;
 - iii. in good academic standing;

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

- **Over 2,500** youth were reached via phone call, home visit, school visit or text message.
- **46%** of youth developed an educational or workforce plan after outreach from the pilot.
- **20%** of youth were referred to case-management services at NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center to receive targeted coaching to reach their goals after navigators assessed high-need of support for youth.
- **1 out of every 5 students** reached enrolled for Spring Flex II 2022 at Alamo Colleges.
 - Although the enrollment number is not large; it’s a significant endeavor for a student that has been out of college for a full year. These students were almost “stop outs” and Flex II is not the typical start term for most students.

SUCCESS STORIES AND BEST PRACTICES

INCREASED YOUTH INTEREST

While SAISD Navigators and Alamo Colleges Outreach Coordinators had significant caseloads, outreach increased by word of mouth among students. Students shared contact information with other youth, adding to initial numbers and growing interest in getting support. Youth shared that having a one-stop-contact to ask questions and clarify the next steps in enrollment grew sense of belonging, a desire to continue educational pathways, and a safe space to explore new goals.

WARM HANDOFF FOR REFERRALS AND EDUCATIONAL PROCEDURES

SAISD Navigators formed relationships with enrollment staff at Alamo Colleges to attend enrollment meetings with students resulting in increased successful enrollment. Students shared that the Navigators supported them in knowing what questions to ask, creating checklists to track progress, providing emotional and logistical support when barriers arose, and made the experience, as one youth stated, “more warm and real. You know, like I belonged and could do this. I knew names of people to ask for help.”

SUPPORT TO NAVIGATE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS

A first-generation college student had not enrolled because of transportation and frustration with the enrollment process. In only one meeting, the student submitted outstanding vaccinations, verified residency, took a placement test, and completed the financial aid process. Two more appointments with the student’s navigator, and the student was able to enroll fully. Students remarked that having a navigator or outreach coordinator sped up enrollment processes, made the systems easier to navigate, and provided clear accountability to keep moving forward.

CONCLUSION

Currently, roughly 4.6 million Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 are not working and not in school. These opportunity youth will live a lifetime with lower earnings and social isolation than their peers. Additionally, once youth have experienced a disconnection from school or sustainable employment, only 1% will “ever earn an Associate’s degree or higher, compared to 36% of the general population” (Aspen Community Solutions, 2022).

In San Antonio, the reconnection of youth is a critical issue knowing that COVID-19 continues to disrupt economic stability and has more than doubled the population of opportunity youth. The pilot programs described in this report are a start to building a future where we create sustainable San Antonio solutions to eliminate our youth’s social and economic problems. Moving forward, The City of San Antonio can expand the best practices of the pilot programs in the ways that follow.

EXPANDED OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT

While each pilot included almost every district of San Antonio, the City remains committed to serving the most vulnerable youth populations with the lowest post-secondary success rates. Moving forward with each of the pilots should include intentional outreach with more school districts, especially those identified with high poverty index and schools with the highest disengagement due to COVID-19.

EMPLOYMENT MENTORSHIP SUSTAINABILITY AND EQUITY

The Employment Mentorship Pilot was successful on a smaller scale with the ability to provide one-on-one mentorship during the seven-week internship. Additionally, DHS recommends expanding the mentorship component beyond the training, partnering with agencies such as Workforce Solutions Alamo for strategic case management, and access to more employers who are versed in supporting opportunity youth.

Currently, DHS' children and youth success division administers summer employment internships for youth in college through the Ambassador Program and funds several high school internship programs. A permanent funding source should be created for non-traditional youth with vetted employers that can provide strategic mentorship and professional development components.

BASIC NEEDS SUPPORT

The success with the pilots was through an intentional selection of agencies that provide critical on-site wrap-around supports such as childcare, access to food, clothing, technology, internet, counseling, and healthcare. For the agencies that did not have wrap-around support on-site, strategic partnerships, including navigators and college coordinators training, were led by licensed social workers. Additionally, the outreach team members utilized case-management services at NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center for a warm hand-off referral. Moving forward, agencies seeking to support opportunity youth must have on-site access or a willingness to partner with a local agency to help referrals to basic needs.

TIMELY, INCENTIVIZED TRAINING

The increased completion rate of Earn While You Learn and the Employment Mentorship was primarily attributed to fair wages above typical hourly work received *weekly* by participants to support immediate financial needs. The funding from DHS allowed money to go directly to youth to meet goals without having to find additional work to support their situations. Additionally, agencies covered all onboarding, applications, and testing fees so that youth would not begin the program in a financial deficit.

DECREASE CASELOADS FOR IMPACTFUL SUPPORT

Expansion of program funding should include more personnel to increase outreach capacity and better support the extensive time needed for following up and callbacks. The data showed that one out of five students enrolled in college when personal contact was made.

STREAMLINE AND STANDARDIZE DATA COLLECTION FOR TRACKING AND MEASUREMENT

Measuring the impact of the pilots was no small feat. City-wide agencies use different (and sometimes multiple) data systems, data norms, and identification numbers for student tracking. The City must lead in creating universal student identification numbers used by each agency to measure and identify the city-wide impact on our youth. Additionally, universal adoption of Census demographic parameters will support accurate and timely data analysis to track, evaluate and adapt the critical work to serve our City's youth.

CHAMPIONS WHO CARE

In conclusion, each pilot showed the impact of one-on-one support--from mentorship to phone calls to home visits. As the city continues to face labor market shortages, intentional staffing and caseload management are critical components to ensure youth recovery from the economic hardships caused by the pandemic. Additionally, funding to market programs to students is needed to increase recruitment and outreach efforts to youth in need of services. By utilizing intentional marketing techniques and providing one-on-one case management, San Antonio will see a greater outreach and will benefit from its students' successes.

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