



# GROWING FORWARD



## *Providing Work Experience Opportunities to Youth in the Borderplex Region*

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## Impetus

One of the many workforce programs Workforce Solutions Borderplex (WSB) oversees is connected to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). WSB's mandate is to provide TANF participants support as they prepare for the workforce through short-term training and job readiness programs. In 2020, WSB obtained authority to dedicate \$200,000 of TANF funds to support youth participants. Since the TANF Choices program has been historically underspent throughout the years, we used these additional funds towards the creation of a "Growing Forward" program for the youth population of the region. This was an allowable activity under TANF-Choices, which specifies that funding that has not been expended under regular program activities can be used towards other initiatives that qualify. Through the Growing Forward Program, youth participants ~~have been~~were placed at a supervised worksite developed for youth, which provides work experience suitable for individuals who would benefit from a hands-on learning environment.

## Program Goals

With the additional funds from TANF, WSB developed the idea to serve children of existing TANF adults, with career exploration and job readiness programs. Per federal TANF guidelines, there are additional purposes that funds can be utilized for:

- Purpose 2: to provide job separation services for needy youth; and
- Purpose 3: to prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies, such as programs that include supervised after-school programs

The idea for the Growing Forward program served both TANF 2 and TANF 3 purposes by providing a productive outlet and job-readiness services for these youth. The program aimed to serve low-income youth between 14 and 24 years of age. TWC's guidance for servicing low-income youth is defined as youth whose families are receiving any of the following means-tested benefits:

- Household receives TANF benefits;
- Household receives SNAP E&T benefits;
- Youth receives Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) benefits;
- Youth receives Medicaid benefits;
- Household receives subsidize public housing assistance;
- Household participates in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC);
- Youth receives free or reduced cost school lunch;
- Youth is eligible for, or enrolled in, WIOA youth services;

- Youth whose family income is 200 percent of or below the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines or the U.S. Department of Labor Lower Living Standard Income Level

Our goal was to place youth participants in a paid, employment experience, primarily provided through private sector employers, intended to lead to employment or a return to an educational setting. The job placements were structured to offer participants hands-on training while working, soft skills, opportunities for permanent employment, mentoring, and exposure to educational resources that support participants' short- and long-term employment goals.

The program aimed to provide job readiness for youth populations with the most need in the region. As part of WSB's family-centered approach, we believe it is important to support the needs of the entire family as much as possible with our resources, and not only the direct client. Our ability to use TANF funds to directly serve youth provided an opportunity to connect those children to our traditional WIOA youth programs, such as temporary work-experience.

### **Funding Sources**

WSB dedicated \$200,000 toward serving 65 TANF work-ready youth into temporary work experience assignments. Many members of the youth population are eager to gain work experience and were eager to commit to this program. We collaborated with the Pride Center as well as local schools to engage with youth and spread the word about these opportunities. WSB then placed individuals into jobs among various industries including customer service, retail, restaurant, banking, and administration within the entire service area including rural counties. At the end of their temporary work assignment, many participants received full-time job offers which was a goal of the program. Employers often want to continue working with the youth.

As we began to enroll participants into work-experience assignments, it became apparent that the youth needed additional support to take advantage of the opportunity. Aside from job readiness courses, we also provided 54 participants with funds for transportation, work attire, and utility assistance to alleviate some pressure from the family budget.

### **Program Challenges**

The Growing Forward Initiative was launched in Summer 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting an array of challenges. The school year began virtually, and many families were faced with several variables to juggle at once. Several youth participants were unable to maintain their temporary work assignments and dropped from the program to support their family's ~~sy~~ ~~with~~ other needs. Thus, it is important for us to develop and consistently provide support services to maintain

long-term engagement and success. We have strengthened our case-management to be more intensive and added incentives to keep participants engaged.

Additionally, we learned that there is a strong need for effective communication between staff and the different programs involved in the execution of this initiative. From the expedited eligibility evaluation performed virtually and in person, to the warm hand off to the Case Managers for intake, to the final step of referrals to the Employment Services team for internship/work experience placement, the flow of services allowed for efficient and effective engagement and participation for our participants and our employer community.

### Outcomes and Successes

This initiative's planned outcomes are twofold: to help low-income youth participants enter the labor market by acquiring work experience and enhancing connections to employers, and to provide a strong incentive for employers to hire and train low-income youth for an occupation not requiring classroom-based training. Given our current circumstances this initiative ~~will~~ helped contribute to our community during these unprecedented times. The following list outlines the specific outcomes for the 2020 Fiscal Year:

- Pay range remained between \$9 - \$12 per hour for participants, depending on occupation
- 132 participants registered for Growing Forward initiative
- 6 participants were referred, but did not participate in Growing Forward initiative
- 126 participants were placed in Paid Work Experience
- 32 Worksites participated in the Growing Forward Initiative
- 79 participants completed Paid Work Experience
- 23 participants were offered permanent employment

These participants were able to engage in their first work experience with the help of trained staff, ~~coaching-to-coach~~ them along the way with soft skills development. The Growing Forward Initiative was able to assist with over \$42,000 in support services for essential needs for our participants. Businesses and Organizations in the community that were experiencing a staffing crises also felt supported by WSB and were proud to be a part of this initiative.

Furthermore, feedback for the program was positive from both participants and employers. Worksites reported that during uncertain times, partnering with Workforce Solutions Borderplex has re-ignited a sense of hope in the community and their willingness to serve and suit up to work. Worksites, especially in the rural area, were extremely grateful to have the opportunity of hosting young adults in a time of staffing need. Worksites that the youth participants demonstrated strong initiative, responsiveness, and willingness to learn and adapt to the current environment. Participants reported to WSB Employment and Case Management staff that they were ~~care~~ appreciative of having the opportunity to work in an industry of their choosing.

Finally, participants stated that they learned about work responsibilities, time management, and workplace etiquette. They felt that without the help of the Growing Forward Initiative they would have never had the opportunity to gain transferrable skills for their next opportunities. They reported feeling supported throughout their weeks/months of employment and cannot wait to participate again.

### **About Workforce Solutions Borderplex**

Workforce Solutions Borderplex (WSB) is the public workforce system in the six-county Borderplex region that assists employers in finding quality employees, and training individuals with the skills necessary to thrive in the workplace. We administer a broad range of programs and services to effectively address local workforce issues. Workforce Solutions also establishes partnerships with various stakeholders within the region to improve education, employment, and economic development. Our organization aims to provide skilled workers for employers by advancing education, employment, entrepreneurship, and economic development opportunities in support of global competitiveness and regional prosperity. Ultimately, we are interested in empowering the most dynamic workforce to achieve global competitiveness and regional prosperity.