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BAY CITY GROUPS LINK UP TO TRAIN WORKERS FOR LEGAL CAREERS

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Providing training, supportive services and a career path for entry-level workers and former welfare recipients employed in law offices is the purpose of a new partnership that has sprung up in San Francisco.

The Legal Skills Training & Advancement Resources program builds upon the Legal Employment Action Program, which has been training low-income individuals and welfare recipients for jobs in legal services since 1998. Legal STAR is a pilot program for a handful of LEAP graduates, but officials envision that it will ultimately be broadened to all entry-level workers in the law profession.

Legal STAR gives individuals who've achieved one level of success, in LEAP, "the opportunity to hone their skills and move up to the next level and increase their wages and upward mobility," said Abby Snay, executive director of Jewish Vocational Services of San Francisco, which is providing the training.

The Legal STAR curriculum consists of six modules of varying lengths and focuses and take place over three months, two days a week, from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. The first module takes 14 hours and involves preparation for Microsoft Office Specialist certification and keyboarding practice. The second module, also 14 hours long, comprises office communications skills, including reading, writing, spelling and introducing participants to the National Association of Legal Secretaries professional certification.

Career development takes eight hours and introduces individuals to career counseling to assist them in developing career plans. Workplace intelligence is a six-hour module on understanding the law office environment and building social networking skills. A fifth, four-hour session teaches participants about personal financial goals, money management and taxes, and the final module, professional empowerment, helps participants identify and apply personal empowerment techniques.

Participants also attend a four-hour meeting with a career counselor and their employer to explore available employment opportunities, needed skills and then develop an individualized career plan. Employers provide their workers paid leave for an hour each morning and participants contribute an hour of their own time each morning, as well as two Saturdays during the training.

Legal LEAP

The handful of participants are graduates of LEAP, an eight-week program to train previously employed welfare recipients to work in the legal profession. The program was established by the Bar Association of San Francisco's Volunteer Legal Services Program, which provides free legal aid to low-income and disadvantaged people.

JVS has been a partner since 2001 and has been operating the program for the past two years providing classroom training in occupational skills, basic literacy and mathematics and soft skills and then placing those participants in an eight-week closely supervised law office internship.

Participants are recruited through JVS' network of community-based organizations, housing agencies and the local Department of Human Services.

Participants are screened with the Test of Adult Basic Education and given basic skills instruction. They also learn word processing, legal terminology, and soft skills, after which they take on a three-month, three-day-a-week internship with a law firm and spend the other two days in the classroom. JVS also coordinates speakers from law firms who discuss different types of occupations within the industry.

Throughout the program there is intensive case management with penalties, including termination for poor attendance, and on-site job coaching as necessary, said Jodie Stein, LEAP and Legal STAR program coordinator for JVS.

Job coaches typically help participants learn some office skills and procedures while JVS works with participants' immediate supervisors, teaching them to give participants immediate feedback and reinforcement, she added.

90 Graduates

Approximately 90 individuals have graduated since 1998 and about 30 since JVS came aboard two years ago. Graduates are earning an average of \$14 an hour with full health benefits. One individual, now employed as a legal secretary, earns about \$18.25 an hour. Most graduates with basic computer and administrative skills, however, are earning \$11.50 to \$12 an hour performing office and conference planning duties, said Stein.

LEAP received \$293,000 from the San Francisco Private Industry Council for a two-year period, which is supplemented by some foundation money. It is "an expensive, staff intensive program," but shows results with earnings and placements, said Stein.

Snay said she hears employers all the time say they are "willing to take some risks and provide workers hard skills training," but employers need jobseekers with good soft skills.

San Francisco Works, which brings together workers, employers and training providers, is playing the "traditional role" of an intermediary organization.

It is helping coordinate a consultant to research career pathways, providing funding, staffing the planning process and organizing focus groups of employers and low-income and incumbent workers to identify the skills needs of both groups, said Theresa Feeley, executive director.

Legal STARS is consistent with the industry-focused and employer-led training model promoted by SFWorks and other intermediaries, she added.

Legal services is an industry with growth opportunities for individuals without a four-year college degree. File clerks and paralegals are common in law firms, but there are other positions that the program is trying to identify.

Feeley pointed to the scheduling of classes in the morning as a "creative" aspect of the program's design. Participants, mostly women with children, find it easier to attend training before work, rather than try to juggle transportation and hard-to-find evening child care after work.

Since law firms usually support their attorneys' continuing legal education, it makes sense for them to assist their entry-level workers. In return, the participants acquire a sense of obligation toward their employers for the extra benefit, said Feeley.