

Grant to boost biotech \$1.1 million to fund 2 training programs for S.F. residents

- Pia Sarkar, Chronicle Staff Writer
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The National Science Foundation has awarded a \$1.1 million grant to train low-income residents in San Francisco for jobs in the biotechnology sector.

The money will be split between two programs largely benefiting African Americans and Latinos, many of whom were left out of the technology boom in the 1990s.

SFWorks, a nonprofit organization jointly created by the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, the Committee on Jobs and the United Way, will use \$500,000 from the grant to fund On-Ramp, a 10-week program that trains low-income residents for entry-level positions in biotech.

City College of San Francisco will get the remaining \$600,000 to continue its Bridge to Biotechnology program, which involves a semester of study in biotech, language and math.

Mayor Gavin Newsom announced the grant at a news conference Thursday as part of the city's larger efforts to become more friendly to the biotech industry as a whole. Newsom pointed out that more than 70 biotech companies have been conceived of by UCSF alone, but none of them have established themselves in the city.

"We've got all these buildings named after biotech companies, but no biotech," he said.

To boost efforts to attract and retain businesses in not just biotech but nanotech and life sciences, Newsom has formed an advisory committee led by San Francisco biotech financier Steve Burrill.

The mayor said that the city must also focus on making sure that jobs in these sectors get spread out to everyone, including residents in neighborhoods such as the Bayview district, where new companies will likely plant themselves someday.

"There is a great myth in biotech that it's just for Ph.D.s," Newsom said. But for every scientist who holds a Ph.D., there are five to seven lab technicians, he said. These are the types of jobs that On-Ramp and Bridge to Biotechnology hope to fill.

Theresa Feeley, executive director for SFWorks, said there are 80,000 bioscience jobs in the Bay Area. That figure is expected to grow to 120,000 by the end of this decade, leaving plenty of opportunity to employ a population that often is overlooked.

On-Ramp was created in November 2002 and is funded by philanthropic organizations. So far, 44 people

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have gone through the program. Almost all of them, 98 percent, subsequently enrolled in City College's Bridge to Biotechnology program while also working paid internships at biotech companies that they got through On-Ramp. Since then, 22 people have graduated, and 16 of them now work in bioscience. Eighteen people have enrolled in more classes at City College.

Feeley said the grant from the National Science Foundation will allow On-Ramp to sustain itself as well as more than double its enrollment.

The program gives priority to residents from the Bayview and Visitacion Valley neighborhoods. More than 50 percent of the people enrolled in On-Ramp receive public assistance and have a sixth- to ninth-grade level of skills in math and English.

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Page C - 1

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