



Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission

Helping people. Changing lives.

change



Feature Story

Summer Youth Employment Program

Learn & Earn

Quarterly Newsletter
volume 7

EOC is an integral catalyst of positive change in our community. We are helping people and changing lives through various events and services.

EOC continues to explore new ways to inspire change and make our community a better place. In just the past few months EOC has been responsible for instituting real change.

in this issue

Learn and Earn

The Summer Youth Employment Program is giving young men and women the opportunity to build their resume, confidence and career skills, one job at a time. The program, made possible by American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds to the Fresno County Workforce Investment Board (WIB), is providing summer work experience to 2,700 young Fresno residents.

Food Aid Gives Hope

Thousands of families in western Fresno County are unemployed, hungry, and some, at the brink of losing their homes. Fresno County EOC helped take a load off these families' shoulders and gave them a glimmer of hope during our food distributions.

Therapeutic Theater

Although it was the play that brought this special group together, it was a common theme that bonded them as friends. Learn about a young group of actors struggling with homelessness.





from the executive director

Like thousands of cities throughout the nation, the ailing economic climate continues to plague our Valley communities. Companies that were once household names have shut their doors or downsized, adding to Fresno County's already high unemployment rate.

As people scramble to find work, Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission, together with Fresno County Workforce Investment Board with funding from President Obama's 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, is putting America's future, our youth, to work. The Summer Youth Employment Program is giving thousands of at-risk youth and young adults an opportunity they otherwise may not have had in today's competitive market – a chance to learn work skills and earn a pay check. Read "Learn and Earn" to find out more about this 6-week employment and training program and discover how it is helping transform the life of a young man who simply needed a second chance to succeed.

The lack of water to the western Fresno County's farming communities has devastated once rich agricultural land and the people who once toiled those fields. Families are desperately searching for ways to earn an income in order to provide basic necessities. Between March and June, EOC hosted multiple food distributions in the communities of Mendota, Firebaugh, San Joaquin, and Huron. These food distributions were made possible by financial donations made to the EOC Crisis

Relief Fund. In "Food Aid Gives Hope," learn about the food distributions, the types of foods provided to struggling families, and meet a family who benefited from the generosity of others.

This edition of Change ends on a happier note. Earlier this year, a group of young men and women presented the first ever play, a modern day version of *Romeo and Juliet*, through EOC Sanctuary Youth Center for Cultural Arts. For many, this may not seem to be a big feat; but, to a group of youth and young adults who are homeless or were once homeless, being part of the production and the close-knit cast – a family, of sorts – was the experience of a lifetime. Learn about the program, some of its cast members and the trials and tribulations they have faced in "Therapeutic Theater."

As always, I thank you for supporting EOC and our mission of helping people change and better their lives one step at a time. We could not do the good we do without your support.

Best wishes,

Roger Palomino

Learn & Earn



For many, this will be the summer in which they held their first job; to others it will be the summer that gave them the opportunity to start anew.

Efrain Gonzalez makes copies for an employment and training workshop.

The Summer Youth Employment Program is giving at-risk young men and women, like Efrain Gonzalez, the chance to learn or enhance their work skills while earning a pay check.

Gonzalez, a program participant, admits he wasn't headed in the right direction and knew things needed to change. "I ran away from my foster homes, lived on the streets, and had a few run-ins with the law," he says. "I hung out with the wrong crowd after I was released from boot camp ... I realized it was time for me to do something with my life." Gonzalez says it was his foster dad who recommended he seek assistance from EOC. Within days of that conversation, the 19-year-old started looking for programs that could help place

him on the right track; he found the Summer Youth Employment Program.

The six-week summer employment and training program is providing low-income youth and young adults, ages 14 – 24 years, with paid work experience. "This program was created with the intention of giving youth who are facing multiple barriers the opportunity to get hired for their first job or get back on their feet," says Patrick Turner, EOC Employment and Training Program Development Specialist. Participants are all low-income individuals living in Fresno County who may be parenting, in danger of dropping out of high school, homeless, or children of farmworkers. "This is an ideal way for them to get 'real world' experience while

learning valuable work skills; it's a chance for them to be engaged in their community and network with professionals who, down the road, may become mentors," he adds.

The young employees were placed in entry level positions within the private sector, nonprofits, and government organizations throughout the county; they work 20 to 40 hours weekly and earn minimum wage. Prior to being placed, each participant undergoes a basic skills and career assessment, and attends a mandatory Work Readiness Workshop designed to teach soft skills, effective work habits and worksite behaviors such as attendance, punctuality, appearance, communication and teamwork skills.

Gonzalez was placed in EOC's Employment and Training Office and is working as an Office Assistant. "I love it!" exclaims the 19-year-old. "I've learned how to answer multiple phone lines, file, input data into the computer system ... all your basic office work. Best of all," he says, "my job lets me interact with other youth who are in the same shoes I once walked in."

As part of his life changing efforts, Gonzalez has also returned to school. He enrolled in Fresno City College this summer and used some of his earning to pay school fees and purchase books. "If I have a little extra cash," he says optimistically, "I'd like to get my driver's license and buy a car at the end of the summer." At the end of the six-week program, Gonzalez hopes to have the experience and knowledge necessary to be hired full-time as an Office Assistant.



Midway through the program, Gonzalez feels confident using work skills he has gained.



The Fresno County Workforce Investment Board (WIB) disbursed ARRA funds received for the Summer Youth Employment Program to its current youth providers in accordance with the regions that each provider serves. EOC, as the provider of youth services in the Fresno Unified and Central Unified school districts and the Incarcerated Youth Program, was apportioned to serve 947, 14-18 year-olds from those sources. Local WIB staff has greatly assisted its providers with technical assistance and developing employment opportunities throughout the county.

Food Aid Gives Hope



Hope comes in different shapes and sizes. To thousands of western Fresno County families, hope came in the form of various nutritional elements.

Residents of San Joaquin line up eight hours before the distribution is scheduled to begin.

Thanks to generous contributions to EOC's Crisis Relief Fund, our Agency was able to distribute more than five-thousand boxes of food to needy families residing in the communities of Cantua Creek, Firebaugh, Huron, Mendota, San Joaquin, Three Rocks, and Tranquility.

"These families were gravely affected by the water crisis. They are farm workers; water is essential to their livelihood," explains EOC Rural Liaison Gabriela Romero. "The lack of water to the west side left thousands unemployed. With little to no money in their pockets, these families were forced to make huge sacrifices. They had to choose between paying the rent, eating, or forgoing basic

necessities." She adds, "Men and women approached me during our food distributions, thanked me and said they were forever appreciative of EOC for providing food to feed their families."

One such person was Mendota resident Maria Rodriguez*. Cradling her now 3-month-old son, the Salvadorian immigrant recalls, "Between January and April, my husband – who works the field – only worked a total of 14 days. Our spirits, money, and food were low. These food distributions spared us from going hungry and let us use the little money we did have to pay the rent."

Rodriguez's story is not unique. Thousands of western Fresno County families also found themselves in the same predicament – without work, without food, and struggling to make ends meet. "Families are doing what they can to survive," says Romero. "Instead of buying new diapers for their children, mothers are washing and recycling their infant's used diapers ... it's either new diapers or food!"

The need was evident at every food distribution. Several people lined-up eight hours before the distribution was scheduled to begin; dozens were turned away. "It broke my heart to know that some people were standing in line for hours to get a box of food and even then, some left empty handed," exclaims Romero. Depending on food items available for purchase at the Community Food Bank and special donations made by local businesses or individuals, on average each food box contained 2.5 pounds of macaroni, beans, and rice; poultry; ground turkey; juice; chicken bouillon; chili powder; mayonnaise; cereal; snacks; and fresh vegetables.

"We don't know how we'll manage once the food distributions end," says Rodriguez. "But, my family and neighbors are extremely grateful to EOC, to those who made financial contributions and funded the distributions, and to the volunteers who spent endless hours distributing food."

*Name has been changed



Aid to western Fresno County families was made possible by corporate and individual donations to EOC's Crisis Relief Fund. Established in 2008, EOC's Crisis Relief Fund helps Fresno County residents affected by natural disasters. It is operated by EOC and counseled by an advisory committee comprised of concerned citizens and city officials from impacted communities.

Tax-deductible financial contributions can be made: online at www.eoccrisisrelieffund.org; by phone at 559.263.1030; or by mail through check or money orders payable to Crisis Relief Fund to EOC Crisis Relief Fund, 1920 Mariposa Mall, Suite 310, Fresno, CA 93721. Monies raised will help pay for food dispensed at local food distributions or other needs deemed necessary by a community advisory board.



Volunteers assemble hundreds of boxes to be distributed during EOC's food distributions in western Fresno County.



Therapeutic Theater

Shiny and colorful playbills were distributed while ushers escorted patrons to their seats. The Sanctuary Theater darkened and a spotlight illuminated center stage.

(L to R) Anthony Tadeo, Dezi Vinson, and Brad Harris run through their lines during dress rehearsal.

Before the audience, stood members of the Montague and Capulet families engaged in a street brawl. William Shakespeare's classic love story, *Romeo and Juliet*, was brought to life and retold with a modern twist by a most unlikely ensemble – homeless or once homeless youth participating in our Sanctuary Youth Services programs.

The play, the first production presented by the recently established EOC Sanctuary Youth Center for Cultural Arts, gave homeless youth and young adults the opportunity to forget their woes – if even for a few hours – and experience something new and different; in this case, the performing arts. "Given my current situation," expresses 22-year-old Jess Moreno who played the role of Tybalt, "this production took me off the streets, gave me a safe place to hang out, introduced

me to a new group of friends, and gave me the chance to explore what has now become a new passion – acting! I couldn't have asked for a better opportunity to come my way!"

The process began in early spring when the play's director and drama coach, Eric Day, started the audition process. Day, who is also the co-founder of Artists Repertory Theater and The Woodward Shakespeare Festival, says, "I saw so much raw talent and potential in these youngsters. I knew that with a little coaching and a lot of work these actors would be shining stars. And you know what? They were amazing! I think some may have even surprised themselves."

The role of Romeo went to Buchanan High School graduate Anthony Tadeo.

"I was 17 years-old when I left home, and have been couch surfing ever since. I knew I was homeless when I did not have anywhere to sleep," says the 19-year-old. He adds, "This production gave me the chance to get back into theatre and be a part of something I really enjoy doing. It gave me a place to go and occupy my time as well as my thoughts; not to mention, I met a great group of people!" Tadeo is now stable and thriving; he has found a home with a loving couple who have become great friends and mentors.

Other cast members credit the theatre program for helping them leave the streets, avoid trouble, and pursue personal goals. "I wanted to do this play to show people that no matter where you come from you can make a difference in your life," says former foster youth Eric Cole. "The road has been difficult ... but it has not been, is not, and will not be an excuse for me to give up," adds the 19-year-old. Cole, who played Gregory, carries a portfolio of the awards he has received including a certificate of academic achievement for holding a 3.5 – 3.9 GPA in high school. Cole has found refuge in a transitional living program and continues to peruse his education through courses at Fresno Adult School.

After weeks of grueling rehearsals, Tadeo, Cole and the entire cast – including Sanctuary Youth Services staff – performed for nearly 300 guests over a three-day production period. On the last night of the performance, the entire cast and crew received red roses, warm hugs, and best wishes for a job well-done. "My fellow cast mates, Mr.

Day, and EOC's staff have become a second family to me," says Cole. "I'm sad it's over ... but am looking forward to participating in future productions."



Tybalt, played by Jess Moreno, and Mercutio, interpreted by Brad Harris, lie dead after a fight scene.



Established in 2008, EOC Sanctuary Youth Center for Cultural Arts offers performing arts programs to runaway, homeless, and transient clients, ages 11 - 21 years, residing in our Sanctuary Youth Shelter or Transitional Living Centers, or served by our street outreach program. The program will further benefit the economic and educational needs of EOC's Transitional Living Center participants, who will be offered apprenticeships in operating equipment, security, ticket sales, and stage set-up/break-down. EOC Sanctuary Youth Center for Cultural Arts is sponsored by Fresno Arts Council, Fresno Regional Foundation, and the Bonner Family Foundation.