

Suffolk County Legislature

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WELFARE TO WORK COMMISSION

of the Suffolk County Legislature
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September 18, 2019

TO: Members of the Suffolk County Legislature

RE: Report on the SWEP/SCCC Pilot

The Welfare to Work Commission of the Suffolk County Legislature is pleased to provide you with this report documenting a four-year pilot project to create an integrated-services hub at Suffolk County Community College through which Suffolk Works Employment Program (SWEP) clients could be placed at Suffolk County Community College (SCCC) where they would simultaneously attend classes, fulfill their work assignments and receive child care. This pilot grew out of a meeting that Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory hosted in 2014 at which he expressed his desire to increase SWEP client placements in educational settings which would provide them with a path to self-sufficiency, a desire also shared by the Commission.

The attached report indicates that the pilot did increase the number of SWEP clients participating in SCCC courses, however there were a number of systemic barriers to education and training that inhibited even more SWEP student placements. Paramount among these were the federal government's "work first" welfare regulations that permit only one year of education and training. The current low unemployment rate on Long Island also has been a deterrent because clients would prefer a paid work assignment – even at a low wage – to an educational assignment.

Nevertheless, education for SWEP clients remains a priority for the Commission, for the Suffolk County Department of Labor and for SCCC. The Commission will continue to encourage and monitor educational placements for SWEP clients.

Yours truly for the Commission,

Richard Koubek

Richard Koubek, Chair

Welfare to Work Commission of the Suffolk County Legislature

Report on the Suffolk Works Employment Program /Suffolk County Community College Pilot Program

This pilot originated in an August, 2014 meeting between members of the Welfare to Work Commission and Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory to discuss how more Suffolk Works Employment Program (SWEPP) clients receiving Public Assistance who are work eligible could be placed in educational settings that would lead to greater economic self-sufficiency. The Commission understood from the outset that this pilot would be hampered by federal regulations that have limitations on placing Public Assistance clients in educational activities.

Out of the August 2014 meeting came a Welfare to Work Commission pilot to create a consolidated-services hub at Suffolk County Community College (SCCC) through which SWEPP clients can simultaneously attend SCCC, receive child care at the SCCC child-care centers and be assigned their work experience at SCCC. The pilot was launched in the spring semester of 2015.

Over the four-year course of the pilot, enrollments of SWEPP clients in SCCC rose from 14 in 2014 before the pilot began to a peak of 32 in 2015. The number of SWEPP clients enrolled at SCCC has settled to about 21 in 2019, a 66 percent increase since 2014.

The pilot improved communication between the Suffolk County Department of Labor (SCDOL) that administers SWEPP and SCCC while it increased enrollments of SWEPP clients in SCCC, but the results fell short of expectations due to a number of barriers discussed below.

Child Care: One leg of the pilot was to provide SCCC child-care slots for SWEPP clients who attend SCCC while they are participating in work/study activities. The SCCC child-care centers set aside for the pilot eight of 45 child-care slots at the Ammerman Campus and eight of 48 slots at the Brentwood campus. The Commission was pleased at this excellent cooperation between SCCC and the pilot. However, over the course of the pilot, the Commission learned that SWEPP clients preferred child care in their own neighborhoods for convenience and because the SCCC child-care centers are closed during the summer and SCCC vacation periods.

Pilot Recruitment and Work Study Placement Procedures: Richard Krebs, Director of the Suffolk Works Program, oversees the pilot for the SCDOL. Mr. Krebs appointed a pilot coordinator at SCDOL. SCDOL staff and Welfare to Work Commission members developed a "Learn More/Earn More" flyer describing the pilot. All referrals of potential participants were channeled through the SWEPP program and upon approval of each client, he/she was referred to SCCC. Participation in the pilot was based on multiple criteria such as clients' reading level, highest level of education attained, academic records, previous college experience, career plans, etc.

Nina Leonhardt, Associate Dean for Continuing Education, initially coordinated the pilot for SCCC. Ms. Leonhardt oversaw non-credit placements and worked with SCDOL on Work Experience assignments at SCCC. Sylvia Comacho of SCCC coordinated credit Vocational Education and Work Experience placements. However, upon the retirements of both Ms. Leonhardt and Ms. Camacho, there were staff changes and staff openings at SCCC in 2017-2018 which slowed placements. These problems were eventually addressed by Arlene Jackson who was appointed as College Assistant Dean for Continuing Education in 2017. Following several meetings with Commission members in 2018, Tania Velasquez, SCCC Director of Career Services, was appointed to coordinate the pilot at all three SCCC campuses and a staff member was selected at each campus to oversee SWEP work placements. SCCC staff developed a flyer to encourage participation.

There is high demand for paid SCCC Work Study assignments and a waiting list for these placements that prioritizes matriculated SCCC students. SWEP clients tend to be assigned to *unpaid* Work Experience placements which are not as desirable. SCCC does not have sufficient on-site work placements to meet the demand and needs of its students, including SWEP clients. While the Commission explored the possibility of securing County funding to create more work sites, it was learned that these work sites are federally funded and that current funding is not sufficient to meet the demand for work/study.

Impediments to SWEP Educational Placements: SCDOL was fully committed to the success of the SCCC pilot. One staff member, Larry Meneses, is charged with tracking and informally case managing students placed in SCCC and other educational settings. William Forman, a SWEP Employment Counselor and Worksite Unit Supervisor, is also committed to placing SWEP clients in educational settings linked to work sites, such as the SCCC pilot. All SWEP counselors encourage clients to choose education as a path out of poverty and toward self-sufficiency.

In total, only about 80 of some 2,000 work-eligible SWEP clients are placed in educational settings, of whom about 20 are in SCCC. Of the 20 SCCC students, eight study and work at SCCC and the remainder have off-campus job placements while they pursue courses at SCCC.

In addition to SCCC, SWEP clients have been placed in these Vocational/Educational training settings:

- Eastern Suffolk BOCES
- Commercial driver's schools
- Hunter Business School
- SUNY Stony Brook
- St. Joseph's College
- SUNY Old Westbury
- CUNY City College
- New York University
- LI EOC

As the SCCC pilot unfolded, Commission members found these impediments to placing SWEP clients in a SCCC educational setting:

1. Federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Family (TANF) regulations permit only one year of Vocational Training as a countable activity. Other educational activities require being paired with employment or a work experience activity. Since the 1996 federal “welfare reform” law was adopted, TANF has been primarily a “work-first, not an educational program, with the goal of reducing Public Assistance caseloads, not reducing poverty and encouraging self-sufficiency in Public Assistance recipients. In short, *federal TANF regulations prioritize work placements – even in low-wage, unskilled jobs – rather than education or Vocational Training.* In addition, educational assignments must be career oriented in demand occupations, not general liberal arts courses. SWEP staff made extra efforts to juggle countable activities so that clients could enroll in SCCC courses, such as liberal arts or other non-demand occupational programs. Their efforts were made difficult by TANF work rules, such as:
 - Requiring students to remain in a work assignment during college breaks such as spring recess. SWEP staff may waive this rule but suffer a net loss in their TANF participation rate during these vacation periods.
 - Requiring students to be accountable for submitting a monthly signed attendance record.
2. SWEP clients must pay for their own tuition, although financial aid for tuition is available.
3. Many SWEP clients lack the basic educational prerequisites, such as reading levels or High School Equivalency Diploma, to qualify for SCCC enrollment.
4. Many work-eligible SWEP clients suffer from mental-health and substance-abuse disorders that prevent them from pursuing education and training.
5. Many SWEP clients had negative educational experiences in grades K-12 and do not wish to be placed in an educational setting.
6. With a Long Island unemployment rate below 4 percent, many SWEP clients prefer an immediate job placement and to work while attending SCCC rather than receiving Public Assistance.

Eastern Suffolk BOCES-Family Service League Career Pathways Program: Eastern Suffolk BOCES, Family Service League of Long Island, Suffolk County Department of Social Services, Suffolk County Department of Labor and the Childcare Council of Suffolk County have partnered in a similar project to encourage SWEP clients to engage in work and study. The Career Pathways Program prepares individuals to complete the requirements to earn a High School Equivalency Diploma. Courses of study infuse contextualized learning, career preparation and skills achievement into daily lessons. A strong emphasis is placed on vocational soft skills by incorporating a work-based learning component. During this experience, students develop computer literacy skills, learn appropriate work habits and safety protocols in addition to viable job skills.

SWEP clients receive their work assignments at Family Service League, engaging in activities related to business, hospitality and facilities maintenance careers. During the 2018-2019 School Year, 46 SWEP clients participated in this program of whom:

- 11 made an educational functioning level gain (e.g., moving up from one reading level to a higher level)
- 32 participated in Employability Workshops
- 4 completed a Career training Program
- 4 transitioned to a Literacy/Basic Education Program
- 1 was accepted to SCCC

Conclusion: The Welfare to Work Commission will continue to monitor the pilot objectives of placing SWEP clients in educational settings that also fulfill their work requirements. The Commission believes, as does the Presiding Officer, that education is the best path out of poverty and toward self-sufficiency for people receiving Public Assistance. However, as documented above, the federal TANF work requirements emphasize “work first” and have regulatory impediments such as a one-year allowable Vocational Education Assignment that discourage SWEP clients from seeking or being placed in education and training. In addition, the current low-unemployment rate on Long Island which has many opportunities for paid employment along with clients’ lack of educational prerequisites or interest in education are also deterrents to placing more SWEP clients in education and training.

Respectfully submitted,

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