

Breaking the cycle of poverty: Cambridge housing program prepares young residents for college

By Alison Kuznitz Globe Correspondent, September 8, 2019, 7:45 p.m.



Jeremy Duval, a freshman at Northeastern, is a participant in the Work Force program, which provides academic counseling from eighth grade to sophomore year of college. (ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

CAMBRIDGE - Rafael Salas, an incoming freshman at Westfield State University, dreams of the day when he can help his family leave public housing.

In middle school, when he began attending a youth development program run through the Cambridge Housing Authority, Salas said he already knew his place in society: a "low-income black man."

His family of immigrants never expected him to attend college: Salas's father had been deported to his native Mexico, and his mother, who is from Haiti, struggled with mental illness.

But the Work Force program taught Salas to envision loftier goals, including earning a bachelor's degree in economics or sociology.

"It's the backbone of my success," says Salas, 18, who lives in the Washington Elms complex in East Cambridge. "We're trying not to go back to the projects."

Designed to break the cycle of poverty, Work Force coordinates early-life interventions to ensure that graduating from high school and college, and eventually, finding full-time employment is attainable for about 280 young participants, all of whom live in Cambridge's subsidized housing.

The comprehensive program spans seven years, from eighth grade to sophomore year of college. Students attend after-school workshops at least once a week with "teacher-counselors," whose lesson plans include maintaining healthy relationships, preparing for college, and building financial literacy. During summer break, participants can attend SAT prep courses, where they improve their score by an average of 160 points.

Over the years, their classmates and teachers become akin to extended family, trusted people who will be there for them at a moment's notice to hear their confidences, their questions, and their expressions of anger.

"When you are living in poverty, you have so many challenges that are out of your control," said Kambiz Maali, deputy director of Resident Services at the Cambridge Housing Authority. "We have to break those barriers down for our students."

More than 90 percent of participants enroll in college and the vast majority goes on to earn their diploma, according to the housing authority. Within six years after graduating high school, nearly two-thirds of alumni no longer live in public housing, signaling a powerful metric of self-sufficiency.

The program receives funding from Bank of America, Google, and Harvard University, among other public and private donors, according to its website.

V. Scott Solberg, a Boston University professor who specializes in career development research, said Work Force seems to incorporate key curriculum components, including goal setting and conflict resolution, to help underresourced youth thrive despite their difficult environment.

“It’s going in the right direction,” Solberg said in a recent phone interview. “If you’re getting two-thirds of people shifted out of public housing, this is major. This is a big deal.”

In recent years, Work Force — which has gradually evolved from its origins in 1984 —hired a career development specialist and alumni coach to ease the transition to adulthood. The housing authority also launched a separate program, called This Way Ahead, through which participants ages 16 to 24 intern every summer at local Gap, Old Navy, and Banana Republic stores. This summer about 70 interns went through the program, learning about employee accountability and customer service through intensive job training.

“It’s amazing; you’re just watching them blossom,” said Carmen Blyden, director of Work Force. “Overall, no matter what path students choose, we know we’ve made a very big impact on their lives.”

Jeremy Duval, 19, who is attending Northeastern University, said Work Force has been a constant, soothing presence in his life. When his home burned in 2016, the program launched a fund-raiser to support Duval and his single mother, an immigrant from Haiti.

Duval said his teacher-counselor also served as a staunch reference as he secured a full-ride scholarship that supports first-generation college students at Northeastern. “Work Force teaches me to strive and to reach for my full potential,” Duval said during an interview in East Cambridge at one of the program’s four offices in the city. “Knowing that I have the support is amazing.”

John Lindamood, director of Resident Services at the Cambridge Housing Authority, credits the program’s success to its deep-rooted relationships with families. Teachers guide parents in filling out financial-aid forms, a critical part of the college application process, which may induce culture shock to those who grew up in other countries, Lindamood said.

Equally important, Lindamood said, is the program’s partnership with the students’ schools. By gaining access to report cards, in addition to teachers and guidance counselors, Work Force administrators can pinpoint emerging problems before they grow.

In 10th grade, Work Force students open a bank account as a real-world exercise into saving and budgeting money. The program resembles a real-world job, with different responsibilities linked to financial incentives, Blyden said. For example, 10th-graders will get paid \$25 per semester if they attend and participate in at least 85 percent of workshops.

The goal, Blyden said, is to save up to \$1,500, which private donors will match, giving students \$3,000 to spend on laptops, textbooks, and other supplies for their undergraduate careers. By 11th grade, the incentives increase, Blyden said, as does the program’s emphasis on college readiness.

Salas said his favorite Work Force memory is from last spring, when participants visited historically black colleges and universities in Philadelphia. That experience, combined with a summer job at Harvard Medical School, proved to Salas he belonged in an academic setting.

“It’s very necessary we start [Work Force] in eighth grade; we really needed it,” Salas said as he explained the program’s reverberating influence. “I never questioned quitting . . . I know I don’t have to question their loyalty ever.”

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