

## **New San Jose job program brings hope to workers displaced by COVID-19**

By [Lorraine Gabbert](#) | November 5, 2020



Job training in HVAC is offered through the San Jose CARES WEX program. Photo by Lorraine Gabbert.

Angellina Duran was scheduling appointments for a cardiologist prior to the pandemic. Things started to fall apart when she and her stepfather came down with COVID-19.

Her stepfather, who was her primary childcare provider, was in the hospital for several weeks fighting for his life. He returned in a weakened state. After she recovered from COVID-19, Duran returned to work, but between the poor health of her stepfather and the start of distance learning, she had to resign.

In March and April, about 619,500 people in the Bay Area like Duran lost their employment due to COVID-19 and only a third of those jobs have been recovered.

In response, the San Jose Office of Economic Development harnessed more than \$2.4 million of its CARES Act funding to initiate [San Jose CARES WEX](#), a work experience

program for individuals who experienced job loss or other impacts related to COVID-19..The program will run through Dec. 30.

San Jose partnered with the workforce group Santa Clara County COVID-19 Bridge to Recovery to run the program. Bridge to Recovery founder Michael Mancini designed the program to train people in new industries and offer paid on-the-job learning.

To qualify for San Jose CARES WEX, participants have to be at least 18 years old, work legally in the United States, reside in San Jose and have been impacted by COVID-19. The majority of applicants come from low-income brackets.

Those accepted into the program have two options: taking occupational training sessions resulting in certification or being matched to a job.

Classes in health care, security, machine operations, warehousing, business and more are offered virtually through community colleges. The work option provides employment for up to 10 weeks, with wages of up to \$20 an hour.

Each of the 175 people participating in the program receive supportive services of \$2,500 for rental assistance, utilities, childcare, transportation, food and essentials.

Duran is learning to become a medical assistant, taking virtual classes alongside her children. She said if it weren't for financial aid from the program, her cellphone and internet service would have been shut off.

"Thank God for this program," Duran said. "Now I have hope again."

Marvin Arcia worked as a game master for an escape room business. When the pandemic hit, the business closed. Arcia knew it would be one of the last places to reopen as it required people to gather in small spaces indoors and might go bankrupt. He had no idea how he'd make ends meet.

Now, he's learning to work in IT support through the program.

"This field is growing. It gives me a sense of security and something to look forward to," Arcia said.

George Toscano had a thriving handyman business and planned to become a general contractor. During the pandemic, his business slowed to the point where he couldn't pay his bills.

He is taking HVAC classes and said it will provide him with a good, solid foundation.

"Before, I felt like I was jumping into a pool and didn't know how to swim," Toscano said. "This program gave me a life jacket and equipped me for my future."

Toscano said he appreciates that his instructor follows COVID-19 safety protocols. "They take our temperatures, and masks are required as well as social distancing," Toscano said. "Exposure was my biggest fear. My life is not worth the risk."

Goodwill of Silicon Valley, as a city contractor, does case management for each client, helping them choose a path.

Monique Melchor, executive director for work2future, manages the program for the city. Her staff reaches out to businesses for job placement. Melchor said some of the employers expressed an interest in hiring people permanently after the program ends.

"When we hear success stories ... we remember why we're doing this work," Melchor said.

Mancini, who also serves as director of economic development services of Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County, convened workforce leaders to get people back to work.

"I implored the group to start designing a better workforce system to disrupt poverty," Mancini said. "What evolved was a powerful movement of community leaders that came together to respond to the disaster for communities in need, especially communities of color."

San Jose CARES WEX funding must be spent by the end of the year. However, Bridge to Recovery will continue working as a collaborative to provide jobs for those in the program and the community.

"It's a community response to the disaster we face," said Mancini. "It should give people hope that our community leaders are standing up to plan for a better, more equitable future. The Bridge to Recovery aims to be a bridge to hope."

Jennifer Costanza, a case worker at Goodwill, said the program trains people in industries that will continue to grow.

"When they get the first phone call, many of them are feeling lost and depressed," Costanza said. "But when we start explaining how we can assist them not only financially, but also to learn new skills, they become a little bit more hopeful. Once they start, they feel productive and regain a sense of self-worth."

To learn more about the program, [click here](#).

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