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COMMUNITY VOICES: Giving certain individuals a second chance at greatness

By Endee Grijalva
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Imagine sitting in your car in the dead of night, afraid to fall asleep because the moment you do, your whole world could change. Keep in mind, you are not alone in this darkness. You are responsible for the lives of others and those lives are asleep in the back seat of the only roof over your heads.

Your only hope and prayer in this very moment is that you all make it safely through the night. Making it through another night with a brave face on for your precious babies, who have no idea that this is not the life you wanted for them.

This is the raw, unspoken reality for countless in our community who face homelessness.

On any given day, nearly 130,000 Californians experience homelessness. On a single night in California in 2018, 36,361 unaccompanied youth were counted as homeless. Bakersfield College is sensitive to, and aware of, the homeless crisis spreading throughout Kern County. As an institution, BC is determined to be part of the solution in combating homelessness through its innovative and community-based efforts, bringing the Bakersfield College Homeless Initiative to the forefront with the concept of the Homeless to a Job Pilot launch in January called Project HireUp.

Bakersfield College launched cohort 1 of the Homeless HireUp Project pilot. During this six-month pilot period, 24 student participants will complete a series of steps including orientation, instruction and intrusive continuum of care and job development. The goal of this six-month trial will allow for a seamless transition to employment and eventually self-sufficiency upon completing the program.

This project is piloting the use of strategically designed career development career preparation noncredit curriculum developed with a cohort of 24 individuals. Participants have been pre-identified by our key partners, The Mission at Kern County, the Bakersfield Homeless Center and City Serve, who are providing additional supportive services for student participants directly on site with BC.

Student participants will complete the Career Development Career Preparation certificate and then participate in job development and employment readiness preparation on campus to ensure successful transitions to employment. Adventist Health and Stria stand to be ideal key partners to bring this project to its full capacity. By providing internship and employment opportunities for cohort participants, Project HireUp: Homeless to a Job in six months can become a successful model for the city.

Through various innovative approaches, personal and professional engagement opportunities were purposely stitched into the design of the pilot throughout programming. One such example of this artwork was an event woven into the halfway point of the program. A setting where industry and education met face-to-face was at a meet and greet luncheon held on Feb. 10 at BC's Launchpad. In the conversations following the event, BC staff and the representatives from the project's industry partners marveled at the students' transformation after just three weeks into the program.

At this point in the program, there is no doubt that the cohort has surpassed the project's expectations in all aspects. That said, the ultimate goal of Project HireUp is to shift the conversation on the nationwide homelessness crisis by demonstrating that in order to work towards the eradication of homeless, we must come together as a community to invest in the resources that will ensure the safety, health and overall well-being of all. This design has even paved the way for single mothers and fathers to reunite with their children, ending broken generational cycles. As a result of HireUp, several students within the cohort have decided to pursue an associate's degree, with one cohort member currently enrolled in BC courses leading to a bachelor's degree in industrial automation.

In the end, education is the game changer that leads to self-sufficiency, shattering the glass ceiling and no longer feeling like an unseen barrier. Remember, education is a gift that no one can take from you. BC is committed to ensuring educational accessibility by eliminating barriers through innovative, human-centered programming until our community is healed from the "crisis" today and every day moving forward because, after all, #WeAreBC.

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