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UNIQUE ALAMEDA COUNTY FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM BRINGS NEW HOPE AND OPPORTUNITY TO YOUNG ADULTS TRANSITIONING FROM FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

Eighteen young adults on Friday celebrated their graduation from a unique Alameda County program that offers internships and mentorship opportunities to people transitioning to independence from the foster care system.

The graduates were all local residents aged 18 to 24 who spent the past six months working in a wide range of jobs for Alameda County as part of the County's New Beginnings Fellowship Program. The fellowships provide interns with valuable on the job experience with County departments, and sets up each participant with County managers who serve as mentors to help them visualize their career goals and articulate plans on how to achieve them.

"They came up with the right name for this program because, for me, it really has been a New Beginning," said Arthur Savangsy, who is transitioning to independence after living in a group home outside the Bay Area. "This program has helped me get the confidence to go after what I want and it has put me in contact with people who can help me get there."

The uplifting ceremony in the chambers of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors in Oakland included a traditional passing of diplomas and photographs featuring graduates with proud families and friends. It began with short speeches by each of the graduates, who repeatedly referred to fellow interns as a "family" they have come to count on – and a support network that has helped boost their confidence about seizing opportunities that await them in adulthood.

"I can open up to you," graduate Miranda McGee told her fellow graduates while wiping away tears. "And I'm a person who usually doesn't open up to anybody."

This was the third straight year that Alameda County has sponsored the fellowship program, which brings interns paid employment this year in 12 County departments. . The program is provided in partnership with Beyond Emancipation, an Oakland-based nonprofit that serves current and former foster youth from throughout Alameda County with the transition to independence and adulthood. For the first time, this year's program was expanded from two to six months to offer participants more time to refine job skills, to network and to build relationships with mentors within the County organization.

The fellowship program is a staple of the County's New Beginnings program, which serves at-risk youth from throughout the County in a number of ways – always with an eye on expanding their confidence and improving their options as they find their feet as adults.

The program was launched by County Administrator Susan S. Muranishi, with the full support of the Board of Supervisors and the County's elected and appointment department heads. It began more than five years ago with the establishment of several Fresh Start Cafes in County buildings in Oakland, Castro Valley, and San Leandro. The cafes, which recently expanded with the establishment of a new Café at the REACH Ashland Youth Center, provide paid jobs to youth who have had contact with the juvenile justice and foster care systems. Each job includes specialized job skills training to expand each employee's future employment options.

Remarks at Friday's graduation ceremony touched frequently on the overarching goals of New Beginnings, as graduate after graduate spoke about new feelings of confidence, of lives turned around and of confidence about the future.

However, County workers who served as supervisors to the fellowship graduates said the benefits of the program did not flow in a single direction. Several spoke of the energy, intelligence and work ethic that the fellows brought to the job – dynamics appreciated by County workers at all levels of experience.

Mykeisha Lewis, a probation supervisor at the Juvenile Justice Center in San Leandro, admitted that some staff had a lukewarm reaction when they were told six months ago that two New Beginnings fellows were coming on board.

"When you are busy at your job every day it is very easy to feel that you just don't have time to be teaching an intern," she said. "Then one day you see your intern showing your employees what to do – and you come to appreciate how valuable these interns can be."