

House Committee on Agriculture

September 13, 2016

Fresno Bridge Academy

Written Testimony

Reading and Beyond's Fresno Bridge Academy has demonstrated its ability to help families move from public assistance to self-reliance since 2010. In 2012, it partnered with the Fresno County Department of Social Services to focus primarily on SNAP beneficiaries (formerly food stamps, aka CalFresh in California). The need for services as described in this document has increased significantly since the start of the Great Recession. The SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program has served as our primary source of funding for delivery of services to help SNAP beneficiaries obtain employment, boost wages and transition to self-sufficiency.

Between May 2010 and December 2015, the Bridge Academy enrolled almost 1,200 families. As a result of being awarded a USDA grant to become one of ten nationwide SNAP E&T pilots to help inform public policy on how to increase wage income and self-sufficiency, recruitment has significantly accelerated. More than 1,500 families have already been enrolled in 2016 to participate in the pilot.

The Fresno Bridge Academy has been effective in employment placement and job retention among adults who are most in need. Since the Bridge Academy's launch in May 2010, more than 80 percent of participants have attained and retained new employment and/or significant wage progression. This success rate allows about 30 percent of families to achieve self-reliance by the time of graduation from the 18-month program.

The Fresno Bridge Academy has achieved high cost-effectiveness by partnering with organizations that provide an array of services needed by families to overcome barriers. The model is based on eight core principles:

- **DUAL-GENERATION THEORY OF CHANGE.** The entire family is enrolled –all the adults and children living in the home.
- **COMPREHENSIVE WRAP-AROUND SERVICES.** In addition to job training, assistance obtaining a GED and help with job placement, adults in the family are provided a wide range of life skills, and children in the family are mentored and tutored.
- **MENTORSHIP.** Every family is assigned a *Career and Family Navigator* who stays with the family from date of enrollment until program completion.
- **PLACE-BASED.** Bridge academies are located in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty to deliver services where people live.
- **INTEGRATED.** The FBA has achieved high cost-effectiveness by partnering with organizations that provide an array of services needed by families to overcome barriers. The FBA has a network of more than 175 service providers that offer a wide range of services to participating families. It has helped place its graduates with more than 200 employers.

- **JOBS WITH UPWARD MOBILITY.** The FBA subscribes to what it calls an “A-B-C” approach, helping heads-of-household obtain the education, training and life skills needed to get A job, then a Better job, then a Career.
- **EVIDENCE-BASED.** The effectiveness of FBA interventions has been validated by respected researchers from across the nation.
- **OUTCOMES-BASED.** The FBA rigorously measures income gains, job retention and attainment of self-reliance for its participating families, as well as program ROI for taxpayers.

The Fresno Bridge Academy is the first E&T Program in the nation to build a cost-benefit model that monetizes the social benefits of the interventions provided. A document providing a detailed description of the methodology used to determine ROI has been delivered to staff of the House Agricultural Committee. The model uses standard economic discount rate techniques; cohort comparison analysis; publicly available data on the benefits of certain interventions; and, reasoned assumptions about the causal effects of improved outcomes and how long impacts are expected to persist¹. As an illustration, for the FBA Class that graduated in March 2014, every \$1 spent on the program generated total benefit of \$22.28, with \$16.78 of the benefits going to the participating families and \$5.50 going to taxpayers.

The Fresno Bridge Academy is successful because of its commitment to research-based and evidence-based practices. The Fresno Bridge Academy components have been validated by researchers from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (2012). Four specific characteristics of successful workforce development programs were uncovered by these researchers, including the following: 1) providing support services and case management; 2) flexible programming and service delivery; 3) family engagement in programs; and 4) focusing on the quality of job placement.

Research conducted by *The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities* also supports the Fresno Bridge Academy model. These researchers conducted a scan of common characteristics across effective E&T programs or approaches, which include providing education or remediation to allow individuals with low educational levels to access industry-specific training programs; individualized, hands-on-work to build life-skills (setting goals, time management, making good decisions, stress management, etc.); and, provision of supportive services (transportation and flexible funds to help purchase items to help individuals work or look for work). All of these elements are embedded within the Fresno Bridge Academy model.

In a more recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014), researchers investigated the effectiveness of a “two-generation approach” (also known as “dual generation approach”) in helping families achieve economic self-reliance, which is the basis of the Fresno Bridge Academy model. Researchers discovered that some of the federal and state programs designed to help low-income families overcome their daily challenges operate in isolation from one another; and that these

¹ ROI assumptions (including Causal Percentage and Fadeout Factor) were determined based upon the review of ROI models and research studies which employed similar methods.

programs focused on either the children or parents, but not both. This study details the three key components of a two-generation strategy, all embedded within the Fresno Bridge Academy model: “1) Provide parents with multiple pathways to get family-supporting jobs and achieve financial stability; 2) Ensure access to high-quality early childhood education and enriching elementary school experiences; and, 3) Equip parents to better support their children socially and emotionally and to advocate for their kids’ education.”

Due to the success of the model, the Fresno Bridge Academy was selected as one of ten national SNAP E&T pilots to significantly scale-up services and test innovative strategies that may speed the process of families attaining self-reliance. The Fresno Bridge Academy has been expanded from three to nine sites and will now be able to serve more than 2,000 additional families. The Pilot Program targets work registrants in specific urban and rural populations of Fresno County that are comparable to those of the neediest counties in California; moreover, these areas exhibit both a high rate of poverty (more than 20%) and unemployment (more than 8%).

The Fresno Bridge Academy’s SNAP E & T Pilot Program builds on the traditional Bridge Academy Model, adding the following interventions:

1. **Wage subsidies.** Although we only offer wage subsidies for employers willing to hire the hardest to employ, or to employers offering premium wages, we thought the program would benefit by having some ability to compete with the TANF program, which offers wage subsidies.
2. **Education Navigators.** Many of the people we serve do not have high school diplomas or GED’s. We have found that traditional GED programs are too slow and impersonal. We have an in-house, highly individualized program that enables our participants to get their GED’s much faster. And those same navigators help support the vocational training of our participants.
3. **Incentives.** The Bridge Academy is an entirely voluntary program. SNAP beneficiaries are not required to enroll and don’t have to remain enrolled for 18 months. We find that participants will sometimes want to drop out of the program after they have been placed in a job. We want them to stay enrolled, so we offer them a small cash benefit payable only if they complete the 18-month program. And we offer them a small cash benefit for every unit of instruction they complete to continue to upgrade their skills after they have been placed in employment.

The program conducts an in-depth assessment to determine the participant’s appropriate “pathway” or case plan and potential family needs that may be a barrier to sustained employment. Once the participant’s case plan has been developed they will be placed in one or more (typically more) of the following activities:

1. Education –
 - a. Academic support geared to assist participants in obtaining their GED or High School Diploma and/or Associate's or Bachelor's Degree.
 - b. Structured activities designed to improve language proficiency, math and reading skills, digital literacy, test taking skills, and other subjects depending on the needs of the participants.
2. Job Training –
 - a. Following an assessment process, participants are enrolled in vocational training suited to their aptitudes and interests and for jobs that are available in the local economy.
3. Job Search –
 - a. Group and one-on-one soft skills development including resume preparation, cover letter writing, interviewing strategies, up-to-date job search techniques, etc.;
 - b. Direct assistance with job search and applications including identifying best company and positions matches based on their hard skills and interests.
4. Wraparound Services –
 - a. On-going case management conducted by Career/Family Navigators.
 - b. Additional topics to be addressed: nutrition, health, civic engagement, parenting, housing, Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), financial literacy, and financial management.
 - c. Resolution of various employment barriers including; childcare, transportation, clothing, tools, work licenses, housing, and enrollment among others.
 - d. Mentoring and tutoring of children, particularly to help them read and do math at grade level, get exposure to the arts, and show up for class.
5. Subsidized Employment –
 - a. Subsidized employment will be provided to approximately 1/3 of participants to encourage employers to hire the hardest to hire SNAP recipients, or to employers offering premium wages.

In order to enhance upward mobility of participants, the pilot program will partner with training organizations to offer more career ladder programs in the evenings and weekends. A partnership with the Fresno County Economic Development Corporation is in place to assist in placing participants in high-wage, high-demand occupations in high-growth industry clusters. Participants will be offered incentives to continue to upgrade their skills after first employment. The program will provide one-year retention monitoring to ensure sustainability of outcomes and participants will be provided incentives to retain contact with Career & Family Navigators.

The Pilot participants are being recruited and enrolled over a period of 18 months that started in late January, 2016, and families will remain enrolled for approximately 18 months, with total Pilot duration of 36 months. In accordance with a protocol developed with Mathematica, the program evaluator contracted by the USDA Food and Nutrition Services Agency, participants are assigned to one of three groups:

- One group will receive the standard Bridge Academy services;
- The second group will receive the enhanced services described above; and
- The third group will receive no services.

Outcomes will be evaluated against a similarly sized control group with comparable demographic characteristics. The Fresno Bridge Academy's SNAP E&T Pilot Program is aimed at overcoming past obstacles to attainment of self-reliance and at heightening the program's ability to achieve two overarching goals: 1) Participants are self-reliant and no longer receiving SNAP benefits, and 2) Family quality of life has improved. Specifically, the primary goals of the pilot program are as follows:

- Replicability will be demonstrated by expanding to six urban neighborhoods and three rural communities in Fresno County.
- At least 75% of the participants in the program will obtain and retain employment or receive wage increases at least 50% higher than the then-current rate of inflation;
- At least 45% of the participants will achieve self-reliance and will no longer be eligible for receipt of SNAP benefits; and
- The pilot will produce a minimum 4 to 1 return on investment to taxpayers, i.e. for every \$1 of taxpayer funds expended, the pilot will produce a verifiable reduction of \$4 in taxpayer outlays for SNAP benefits and an increase in the income taxes paid by the program participants.