

# Program helps people get on career track

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STAFF WRITER

Sunni Duncan wanted to start studying to be a probation officer a year ago, but as a single mother of two on welfare, she couldn't afford the gas to get to school.

That all changed this month. The 37-year-old Seacliff woman was accepted into Greater Avenues for Independence, a government program that gives welfare recipients extra money for child care and transportation so they can attend job training programs.

Duncan is studying at Cabrillo College to be a probation officer, and she's excited about it.

"I'll get up and go, 'Yeah!'" about the new direction in her life, said Duncan, whose last job was five years ago as a non-union dry wall hanger. She

earned a maximum of \$220 a week, when there was work, at piece rate.

If Duncan hadn't been excited about her new training, she wouldn't have been accepted for the GAIN funds.

There's a GAIN program in every county in California; Santa Cruz is the only one that makes the program voluntary. That approach allows clients to point toward career training, rather than to take any job they can find to avoid getting kicked off welfare, local officials say.

"Our clients are making an average of \$8 an hour (at their first jobs after training), compared to the state average of \$5 to \$6 an hour," said Margaret Fabrizio, chairwoman of the county Women's Commission Subcommittee subcommittee on GAIN.

Fabrizio and Duncan made their comments at a press conference yesterday after presenting their "report card" on GAIN to county supervisors.

Fabrizio and others involved with the program want people to know the voluntary approach works, and supervisors agreed to send letters to other counties.

"We hope Sacramento will listen," Fabrizio said.

GAIN serves about 200 people at a time in Santa Cruz County, and the vast majority of participants are single mothers. Recipients are eligible for the child-care and transportation funding for up to two years.

Some GAIN recipients have gone into non-traditional jobs. One was Hillary Heinegg, who arrived for the press conference in the cement truck she drives for Granite Rock in Santa Cruz.

GAIN has a \$1 million budget, of which \$141,000 comes from the county and the remainder from the state and federal governments. The program had been expanding in recent years, but funding was reduced slightly last year.

"Some other counties are cutting off people in the middle of training," Fabrizio said. Santa Cruz GAIN won't cut anybody's allocations off, Fabrizio said, instead opting to freeze enrollment.

New clients are accepted only as graduates leave the program.

There are about 1,200 people on welfare eligible for GAIN, said Bill Finney, program administrator. The voluntary policy may miss a few people who are capable of working but not willing, he acknowledged, but he believes that number is few.



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'Yeah!'"

—Sunni Duncan  
Job trainee