

Training the Next Generation of Climate Leaders

Since 2010, Alameda County has hosted 36 recent college graduates for ten-month service-learning fellowships in climate protection to address climate change and promote sustainability careers.

Challenge: We identified three challenges that could be best addressed together. First, Alameda County had joined other global leaders in pursuing ambitious greenhouse gas reduction targets. To complete the 80 actions in our ten-year action plan (adopted by our Board of Supervisors in 2010) to reduce our own emissions – and to lead regionally through education and technology demonstrations – we needed assistance. Creating multiple new staff positions was not an option, particularly given the economic downturn. Second, Millennials were not considering government as an option for a career with the social and environmental impact they seek, when we need the best and brightest more than ever. Third, diversity in environmental careers is crucial, yet it was difficult for young people to enter the field with limited experience.

Innovative Solution: Alameda County got behind the formation of a new program called Climate Corps. Staff from the County Sustainability Office accompanied program leads Bay Area Community Resources and Strategic Energy Innovations (SEI) to Sacramento to make the case for funding to the State of California. We testified to the immediate need for cost-effective on-site support for often understaffed agencies tasked with addressing climate change – and to the long-term benefit of training the next generation of climate change professionals on hands-on projects while providing them a stipend and support to launch their careers. The State found the concept and partners compelling, and Climate Corps launched as an AmeriCorps program in the fall of 2010 (and transitioned to a fellowship model run by SEI in 2013). Alameda County has received 54,000 hours of service from fellows who have launched regional efforts like collaborative renewable energy procurement; supported low-income residents by installing home energy-saving devices; facilitated cross-agency climate action teams; identified greener purchasing options; installed advanced battery systems; and designed employee programs such as green event certification, carpool promotion, bike fleet, and commuter shuttles.

To supplement the initial week-long orientation and monthly one-day trainings offered by SEI, we developed a robust in-house curriculum to help our cohort achieve strong results and position themselves for their next career move. Our orientation over the first two months includes about 40 modules of content on our county, project management, and workplace skills. Some favorite activities include a workshop on what is unique about working in local government, project work plan development, community-based social marketing training, elevator pitch introductions, “Words of Wisdom” with alumni fellows, and StrengthsFinder assessment. We conduct a post-orientation survey and end-of-year survey and conversation to hear how we can better help the next group achieve project and personal goals.

At our site, professional development continues throughout the year with supplemental workshops on specific skills such as infographic design or qualitative research. Fellows often lead these sessions, sometimes for groups of County staff or the full Climate Corps cohort of more than 40 fellows from all sites. Fellows are supported to participate in County

innovation initiatives such as internal hackathons, to attend conferences and webinars, and to give brown bag talks on sustainability topics. They are given the option to receive midway and closing 360-degree reviews of anonymous input from colleagues and partners about what they are doing well and areas to consider adjusting. To support fellows in their careers, we offer an effective job hunting workshop series covering finding job leads, writing résumés and cover letters, interviewing, and salary negotiation; it includes a résumé roundtable and mock interview day for real-time feedback.

Originality: Climate Corps began as the first AmeriCorps program that had the mission of supporting local governments and community organizations to address climate change, and Alameda County was a key initial supporter. Alameda County has hosted 36 fellows, more than any other site. According to SEI, “Alameda County has been our leading partner site by consistently hosting many fellows in a range of sustainability focus areas. Alameda County staff set the standard for what it means to be a good site supervisor to fellows.” We truly invest in the futures of the fellows who serve with us.

The climate protection programs implemented by Climate Corps fellows have been nationally recognized, shared at conferences and webinars, and replicated by other organizations. As one example, five fellows have worked on the NACo Achievement Award-winning Green Child Care Program, the nation’s only public agency program providing recycling and waste reduction support and education for early child care and education providers.

Cost Effectiveness: The average direct local match per fellow has been \$21,500 (partly covered by outside grants); this match enables SEI to provide services like fellow recruitment and contributes to the fellows’ living stipend. It would not have been possible to achieve the same results on this budget by hiring staff, as salary and overhead would have cost several times the match per person. Nor would part-time interns have had the savvy, skills, or time. In addition, each project creates savings. One fellow’s electrical vehicle project is saving the County \$12,000 per year by avoiding high time-of-use energy fees; expanding recycling and compost collection has reduced waste costs \$22,000 per year.

Results: Project results exceeded expectations. The five fellows who ran the Green Child Care Program reached 118 preschools and child care programs, educated 4,400 children and 900 staff, and diverted 645 tons of waste from landfills. Six fellows rolled out expanded composting and recycling to 55 county facilities, working with a waste hauler and training janitors and employees. One fellow’s ground-breaking supply chain report analyzed over \$700 million in County spending for climate impacts to determine where to focus efforts; an EPA-led coalition then posted our resulting guidance. A fellow developed design requirements to ensure new buildings include features that support our green cleaning program. Fellows doing employee outreach regularly achieve campaign results like engaging 700 employees in clean commutes.

Their experience launched alumni into great jobs. Eighty-five percent of alumni work in public service, sustainability non-profits, social enterprises, or environmentally-focused companies. The remainder are pursuing advanced degrees.

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