



Changes for Life

How an unprecedented collaboration
delivers rebirth to SCSEP participants,
agencies, communities

A publication of Senior Service America Inc.



Civic engagement at its best

Dear Reader,

It's hard to find a group of people more invisible to contemporary American society than low-income seniors. But in the following pages, I invite you to share in a new reality — where low-income, unemployed seniors have become vital resources for their community, providing needed services that tap into their individual experiences for the greater good of their community. No longer society's discards, these older workers have found new purpose, thanks to their involvement with a Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) in Modesto, California, part of Senior Service America Inc.'s network that administers the program for the U.S. Department of Labor. Participating seniors are bolstering their communities in myriad ways — from tutoring grade-school children to providing essential staffing for a new nonprofit organization — while learning critical skills that enable them to re-enter the job market. It's civic engagement at its best, and it's paying multiple dividends: to the individuals, to the agencies and to the communities they serve.

According to the Department of Labor, the purposes of SCSEP are “to foster and promote useful part-time opportunities in community service activities for unemployed low-income persons who are 55 years of age or older and who have poor employment prospects; to foster individual economic self-sufficiency; and to increase the number of older persons who may enjoy the benefits of unsubsidized employment in both the public and private sectors.”

I think you'll find something more in these stories, written by Ann Hurst, a California-based writer. At its best, SCSEP delivers new life.

I welcome your comments; please send them to me at sarmiento@ssa-i.org.

Anthony R. Sarmiento
President and Executive Director
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Senior Service America Inc.

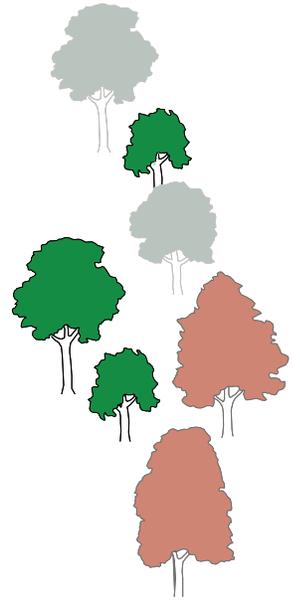
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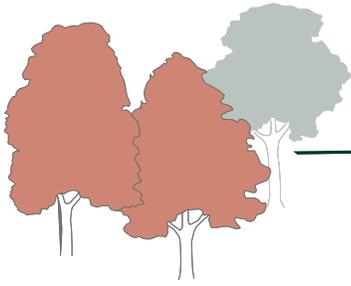
Changes for Life

Teresa Sullivan, the new executive director of the Alliance on Aging, was awash in the details of merging two nonprofit organizations when she picked up the telephone.

On the other end was Tony Sarmiento, executive director of Senior Service America Inc. (SSAI), the chief administrator of one of her grant programs. Her senior employment program was not on track to meet its goals, a serious matter that, if not remedied, could jeopardize funding. Immediately, Sullivan began reordering priorities, mentally calculating how to reshuffle limited resources. A week later, she

gave Sarmiento a plan to solve the problem. “Okaaaay,” he responded, and Sullivan knew she needed to ratchet up. New to senior employment services, she asked if he could recommend a model program. Yes, he replied, in Modesto, California, and he suggested a collaboration. Soon Sullivan would learn that Modesto not only had a model program, but it had developed a plan for the Alliance — a plan that could have profound implications not only for her agency, but for programs nationwide.

This is the story about that unprecedented collaboration. It’s also a story about leadership and possibility thinking. Ultimately, this is a story about life — and death.



“This exceeded my expectations, and I had huge expectations.”

Joanne Waters

It almost never happened. Before Teresa Sullivan assumed leadership of the Alliance, which is located in Monterey County on California’s central coast, Sarmiento told Joanne Waters that the Monterey office was struggling. Why, wondered Waters, executive director of Modesto’s exemplary Center for Senior Employment, who had recently served as an SSAI compliance officer for the Western region. Monterey County, with its diverse population and strong agricultural tradition, faced challenges similar to Modesto’s. But Modesto was on track to exceed goals for the sixth year in a row. Waters agreed to help and immediately began problem-solving with her staff, developing a list of everything that needed to be addressed, along with a project timeline. Not surprisingly, there was no budget and no new money to throw at the problem. But Waters had the one resource she has always counted on: the Senior Aides in her Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP). She turned the problem over to a carefully chosen team. In seven working days they returned with a plan, complete with supporting data.

The work was remarkable in its scope and vision. “This exceeded my expectations, and I had huge expectations,” Water says. “It was the best plan I had ever seen.”

Meanwhile, Sarmiento realized that he should give Monterey’s new executive director a chance to put her program on track. But the Modesto team was already cooking. Indeed, it was on fire, crackling with energy around an impressive plan of

action. It took Sarmiento a single visit to Modesto to appreciate the elevated stakes. Working gingerly in order to avoid understandable concerns over ownership, control, and regional jurisdictions, not to mention unintended messages to either the new executive director or the Modesto team, Sarmiento encouraged an inter-agency



Teresa Sullivan, executive director of Monterey’s Alliance on Aging, initially found the requirements of the Senior Community Service Employment Program daunting.

collaboration. Within weeks, the partnership began to show promise, and Sarmiento invited the group to present its work at SSAI’s annual conference. Modesto team members and both executive directors spoke enthusiastically about the collaboration. Few who heard them would have believed the individual journeys that brought team members to that room. For each of them, the Senior Aides program — and their individual encounters with Joanne Waters — had changed their lives.

The Monterey Alliance on Aging is one of 107 agencies in 23 states and the District of Columbia receiving federal funds to administer the Senior Community Service Employment Program under the auspices of Senior Service America Inc. Authorized by the Older Americans Act and funded through the Department of Labor, the program helps qualifying low-income older workers gain skills so that they can reenter the job market. With funding comes a requirement that specific goals will be met.

Monterey's Alliance must serve at least 66 qualified older workers annually and place 16 in unsubsidized jobs. (The slightly larger Modesto office must serve at least 71 and place 17 in jobs.)

Early in her tenure at the Alliance, Sullivan and her staff found the requirements daunting. Program participants must be paid minimum wage for a 20-hour work week, but federal funding does not stretch to meet California's higher minimum wage and Workers' Comp insurance costs. In addition, the region's long-stalled economy makes job placements particularly challenging. Yet, these difficulties evoke neither sympathy nor slack from funders. The goals must be met.

As a first step, Teresa Sullivan decided to visit Modesto. "I said, okay, if this woman's so good, I want to see what she is doing."

Barely four months earlier, Sullivan, 53, had assumed the top post at the Alliance after heading for three years

Monterey County's Ombudsman agency, which advocates on behalf of the frail elderly. She had a lot on her plate. She faced a steep learning curve with senior employment services and she found the merger of the two organizations all-consuming. And now, a Modesto-based agency 125 miles away had developed a plan for her area.

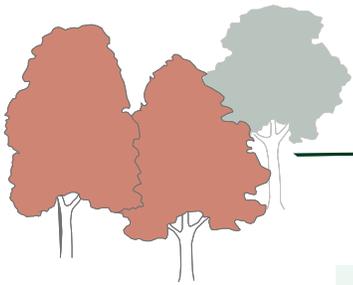
"I wasn't sure how to react to that," she confesses. She turned to Dick Becker, a trusted member of her Ombudsman board, who accompanied her on the trip to Modesto. When SSAI chief Sarmiento casually asked, "What can we do to help?" Becker gained instant clarity, recalling: "This is the prelude to having the roof come down on your head." Indeed, recounts Sullivan, despite Sarmiento's casual demeanor, the first 45 minutes of the meeting were "a little tense." And yet, she could clearly see a difference in the agencies.



Joanne Waters, executive director of Monterey's Center for Senior Employment, turned to the one resource she always counted on: the Senior Aides in the SCSEP program.

"We were solicitous, and we had low standards and low expectations. . . . But we loved them to death."

Teresa Sullivan



“We talked the talk, but we didn’t walk it. Somehow we didn’t get it.”

Teresa Sullivan

“As soon as I walked into Joanne’s office, I could feel the energy.” It felt dynamic, with everyone busy, interacting, purposeful, and looking professional, the men wearing ties and women in business attire. “I

thought she had a large staff. It turned out they were all Senior Aides.”

It was much different from her office, where Senior Aides were given small, mostly clerical chores. “We were solicitous, and we had low standards and low expectations. We didn’t give the Senior Aides any validation; we gave them no meaningful training, and we didn’t include them in staff meetings. But we loved them to death.”

The realization dawned painfully, since advocating on behalf of older citizens has been in Sullivan’s blood — and professional life — for years. “We talked the talk, but we didn’t walk it. Somehow, we didn’t get it.”



“If this woman’s so good, I want to see what she is doing,” Sullivan (right) said.

Each member of the Modesto team was selected because of a special quality that Joanne Waters calls their “shine.” David Rivera, because he had grown up in Salinas and knew it well; Carol Williamson, for her organizational and marketing skills; Art Allen and Stewart Hester, for their sales and business acumen; David McKee, for his technical aptitude and experience in the corporate sector; Jerry Bell, for his office skills; Debra Christenson, for her affinity for documentation and compliance requirements, among them. Says Waters: “These folks agreed: ‘I can do this and I can do this well.’”

Waters laid out the ground rules. “There is no ego. There is no leader, because a team is one. We join hands.”

The youngest of those hands is a 45-year-old staff member; the oldest 70-plus. Seven are high school graduates, including two who received their GEDs late in life; two are college graduates, and one has a master’s degree. There are eight men, four women. Four are veterans, four are bilingual, several are trilingual. Half had exemplary work records, two had felony convictions. More than half have physical disabilities, and almost all have been divorced.

Each member had a particular responsibility. While Waters shared the challenge, she did not direct the

solution. “You figure it out,” she would say — along with a clear, confident message that the team would be successful.

Team members gathered an abundance of information about Monterey and Salinas, as well as comparative information about Modesto to guide their thinking. They hit the library and prowled the Internet, gathering demographic data and other resource information. They compiled a list of 130 nonprofit organizations that could be potential host agencies providing on-the-job training.

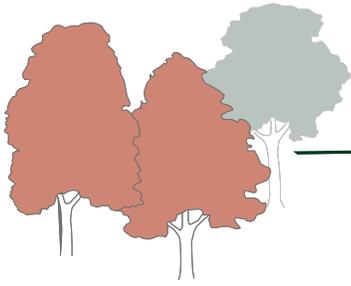
They developed a list of more than 1,000 prospective employers, another list of political leaders and media contacts. One member with an unlimited long-distance calling plan placed more than 100 calls to Salinas, making appointments with nonprofit organizations and businesses that expressed willingness to consider hiring older workers. They addressed recruitment and orientation needs, and drafted brochures in English and Spanish.

Changes began from the moment the Modesto team arrived in Monterey. “It was not clear if they were staff or aides,” Sullivan recalls. “Everyone was amazed they were all working on the same level.”

“I want to be just like you,” one Monterey Senior Aide told a Modesto team member. “Well, I am a Senior Aide, just like yourself,” the Modesto visitor gently replied.

“It was not clear if they were staff or aides. Everyone was amazed they were all working on the same level.”

Teresa Sullivan



Four years ago, Jerry Bell met Joanne Waters at Modesto's One-Stop Center for senior employment. He was 57, consumed with self-doubt, and surviving — barely — on disability insurance following an illness. He needed work. “But where could I go?” He felt old, defeated, useless. “He spent the first few minutes telling me how dead he was,” Waters recalls. “Okay, it’ll be a little different here,” she told him.

Bell credits Waters for pulling him out of his black hole, when he feared failure so much that he was afraid to try anything new. “You’re in a training facility,” she would remind him, and mistakes are part of learning. He began to accept her challenges. “I learned I had capabilities I didn’t know I had,” he says during a lunch break in Monterey, his voice animated and upbeat.

His self-doubt persisted, despite his successes. “He felt like we had ripped his heart out and thrown it down the toilet when we transitioned him (to a new program),” Waters recalls. “We were going to send him to Prime Time, our employment department, and he was going to start to do some interviews. He said, ‘I can’t do that. Noooooo.’”

Waters responded: “You can do this.”

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes.”

And then it was time to learn computer skills. The scenario continued, with Bell protesting “I can’t do that,” and Waters responding, “Oh, yes, you can.” He went, discovered he liked it, and more importantly, he discovered he was good at it. Within two weeks, he was assisting the instructor. “All the indicators were there,” Waters recalls. “He had transferable skills, but he just didn’t know that.”



“I learned I had capabilities I didn’t know I had,” says Jerry Bell.

“Then, we pulled the rug right out from under him.” It was time for Jerry to go to a new training program, this time off-site. “Oh, my god, I ripped out his heart again and threw it down the other toilet. He thought he was being sent away. “We said ‘No, no, no, this is a promotion, and only the best get to go.’”

Finally, he saw the light. “I went through so many light bulbs,” Bell

“Now, I have purpose. I feel fabulous.”

Jerry Bell
Modesto Senior Aide

says. “I was turning them off as fast as Joanne was turning them on. I was unscrewing them.”

“We told you we wouldn’t let you get comfortable,” Waters reminds him, because then he would stop progressing. “One day, Jerry said he wanted to learn some accounting. I said, ‘Good, you’re going to learn how to do Workers’ Comp.’” Now, Waters says, he could teach it.

Jerry Bell types 65 words per minute. He works on grant writing, some accounting and lots of program documentation, and he continues to train to be an office administrative assistant. He is a budding evangelist on behalf of unleashing the potential in older people. “It’s incredible. There is no limit to anyone,” he is quick to say.

“How do you know if someone can do something unless you give it to them and let them try it out?” challenges Joanne Waters, explaining her work style. “You’ve got to give it to them and you’ve got to stand back. If you fall, I am going to let you. I’m even going to let you skin your knees. But I am never going to let you drown. That is how you learn.”

Bell jumps in with enthusiastic affirmation. “That first time you think, ‘I don’t have a life preserver.’ But you find out, yes, you do.”

Adds Waters: “But you don’t need to have it around your neck.”

“No, you don’t,” Bell says. “You’ve just got to know it’s there. Pretty soon, you wade out in the water and you go, ‘Oh, it’s not so bad.’ Then you get a little bit deeper... up to your knees. Then... your waist. Then up to your neck. And you might say, ‘This is nice water.’ Just take it one day at a time.”

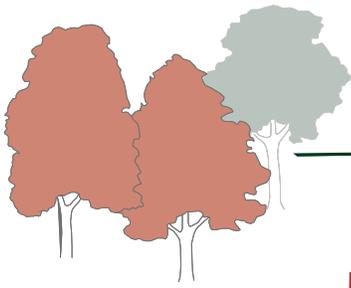
“Now I’ve learned that there’s nothing that is beyond me that I can’t do. I am open to new things now, and I know I can.”

“How do you know if someone can do something unless you give it to them and let them try it out?”

Joanne Waters

He is eager to share his story with others, especially older workers daunted by life’s challenges. “Don’t be afraid to make changes,” he urges. Trying new things is a pathway to self worth. “Now, I have purpose,” says Bell. “I feel fabulous.”





To fellow Modesto team member Sanford (Sandy) Friedman, Jerry Bell is a star. Friedman, 67, moved to Modesto from Petaluma in December, bringing with him a resume rich in experiences. He has owned a business with 100-plus employees, coached football at two junior colleges, and worked in state government both as an aide to a senator and as a legislative analyst for a high-profile nonprofit organization. He has a record of accomplishment, including helping to design federal anti-crime legislation, work that took him to the Clinton White House.

But a medical disability drastically changed his circumstance. He ended up trying to survive on Social Security income, which wasn't enough despite his frugality. His resume became a burden, as he repeatedly heard from prospective employers that he was over-qualified. He qualified for SSAI's program, which will pay him minimum wage (\$6.75 an hour in California) while he works as a Senior Aide. Humbling? Perhaps. But Friedman looks at it another way. "I find it extremely rewarding, and I also find it extremely exciting."

He sees more than a program that helps older workers find employment. He sees older workers — like Jerry Bell — coming back to life. "What a marvel! It was all within. Did he ever have the opportunity in his life to let it out?"

"That's what this center does. It gives you an opportunity. You may be someone who never had an opportunity to finish high school. Through this center you can get a GED, an important requirement for many jobs. Through this center you can get computer skills, and that step you might have needed to get that job that you need to survive."

Friedman works on the center's payroll and assists with the accounting.

Having worked as an advocate much of his life, this work on behalf of seniors resonates deeply with him. "In truth, when you are 45, you never know what will happen tomorrow. "That's what happened to me. My health — it took everything I had. Here I am. I graduated from college. I had lots and lots of money at one time. But that doesn't mean that life can't step in.

"That's why you can't be judgmental about seniors and what put them in the situation that they are in. What is more important is: 'What can I do to enable you to succeed in your life now that you are older? What do you need to get that job? What do you need in order to be able to survive? How can we help you?'" That philosophy, Friedman believes, is the foundation of Modesto's Senior Aides program. "This program is a marvelous confirmation. I am very proud to be here and to be partaking in any way that I can help. Even for \$6.75 an hour."



Modesto Senior Aides Sandy Friedman (left) and Jerry Bell confer with fellow team members.



Debra Christenson loves the paperwork — payroll, Workers’ Comp and other documentation projects — the sort that makes most folks’ eyes glaze over. When the new re-certification requirements came out, she practiced on her own time, using 10 variations just to make sure she fully understood how to do it. She completed the entire process for Monterey in a single day, an impressive feat.

Debra Christenson had never worked a day in her life when she was referred to the Modesto center as part of a Welfare-to-Work program six years ago. She was a self-described mess: 38 years old, mother of two sons, a recovering drug addict. She had dropped out of high school in her junior year. “I couldn’t turn on a computer, I couldn’t answer the phone, I didn’t know how to dress.” But she carried plenty of attitude. “Joanne (Waters) saw right through me.” Before long, she says, “I was sitting there crying, telling her my story.” It was the first time Debra had ever revealed her painful past and ongoing struggles. Waters

accepted her, and became a staunch advocate. “Joanne saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself. It’s like with the seniors. She gave me a chance.”

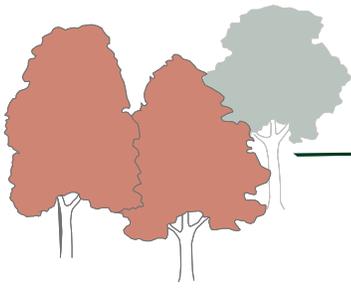
After two years of proving herself, she was offered a staff position, first in home supportive services, later as a caseworker. Since January, she has also handled CSE’s payroll. In return, Christenson, who has been drug-free for six-and-one-half years, is fiercely loyal. “There’s nothing she’ll ask me to do that I won’t do for her or the seniors.” Other teammates express similar sentiments. “Joanne saved my life — in more ways than one.” In return, Debra Christenson, like the others, vows to go the extra mile. “We’re going to work ’til we drop dead — or until everybody has a job.”

Ironically, the teamwork has taught the group a surprising lesson. “We learn not to value independence too much, but to learn to be interdependent,” says Waters. “No one can do everything. You need a team effort.”

Adds Christenson. “We’re like a good salad. A little of this, a little of that.”

“We’re going to work ’til we drop dead — or until everybody has a job.”

Debra Christenson
Modesto team member



David Rivera, 56, grew up working the fields in Salinas, the nation's salad bowl. From picking prunes in Gilroy, strawberries in Salinas to cucumbers in Watsonville, he and his family were part of Central California's farm labor force. As an adult, he moved away as he followed various non-agricultural opportunities — to Napa, San Diego and Mexico. Three years ago, he and his wife moved to Modesto to be close to his eight-year-old granddaughter, Daisy, who was battling leukemia, leaving their house and all their possessions behind.

He was unprepared to find the job market impenetrable. "After all my years that I worked, and now I am running into this." It's been a powerful lesson: "You may have this good job now, but how long are you going to keep it? What are you going to do 30, 40 years from now?"

His knowledge of Salinas made him a natural for the team. Two of his brothers are pastors there, and David, a pastor himself in the Apostolic Assembly Church, can open doors just by telling the right folks about the needs and what Monterey's Alliance on Aging is trying to accomplish. His job is to

find prospective employers. "There are employers with jobs that prefer a senior, someone who is reliable, responsible, someone who already has the training and can do the work."

His work on the team has changed his life. Now, instead of going home at night and watching television, he is bursting with things to share with his wife. "This is so exciting. I feel it in here," he says, his hand touching his heart. "My life is coming back. The second wind."

"My life is coming back. The second wind."

David Rivera
Modesto Senior Aide

Today, he is fully engaged by his work, and it shows — in his body language, in his words, and most importantly, in his eyes. "If I could go back and start all over, I would like to do what I am doing now. I'd like to just back up and start over with seniors. Hey, we can do it, and we'll do it together."

Early this year, Carol Williamson questioned whether she would be able to work again. Her medical issues had taken a lot out of her. “I had lost who I think I am.” In March she met Joanne Waters, who asked her to describe the perfect job. Williamson wanted to set up workshops that would help people, she said. She had experience running businesses, including nonprofit organizations. “I like to start things, get them going, and then I move on to other things,” she says with a lilting laugh. “I like training more than anything.”

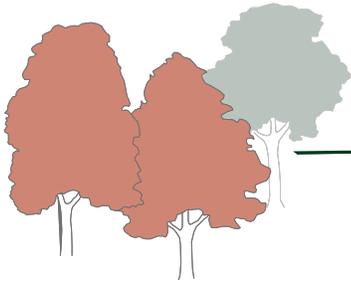
“She allowed me to use my experience and creativity to solve the problems.... She restored me to thinking I had the same value I’d had in the past.”

Carol Williamson
Modesto Senior Aide

She’s had her share of hard knocks, beginning at an early age. She married at 15, had four daughters by the age of 20, and finished college when she was 30, thanks to teachers who convinced her that she could do whatever she put her mind to. “I’ve always been a champion for the underdog.” Waters immediately put her on the team. Carol was delighted, and determined to please. “How do you want this done?” she’d ask Waters, who’d reply, “I don’t know. You figure it out.” Williamson was amazed. “She allowed me to use my experience and creativity to solve the problems.” It was an enormous gift: “She restored me to thinking I had the same value I’d had in the past.”

Williamson, an engaging woman with striking blue eyes and a ready smile, speaks with a gentle voice that exudes confidence. “I’m no longer feeling worthless,” she says. “I had to figure out who I was and put value on being, rather than on doing. That’s been a process.”





“What we’re doing is saving seniors’ lives. Every senior that you can pull out of an economic bottom and help to survive is most important.”

Sandy Friedman
Modesto Senior Aide

Jerry Bell, Sandy Friedman, Debra Christenson, David Rivera and Carol Williamson are among the team members who spoke at SSAI’s conference in New Orleans. The team has borne out what Waters has long believed. While program leaders may feel they have an impossible job, with many rules and regulations and not nearly enough money, Waters believes resources exist “if only we can see them.”

“These people are your resources,” she insists. The Senior Aides in Modesto, well-versed and well-integrated into the work of the Center for Senior Employment, understand at a visceral level the importance of a successful program in Monterey, since funding decisions consider whether goals are achieved in the entire state. “They understood the need for us to be unified was real,” she told fellow directors in New Orleans. Because of the competitive nature of funding, Waters believes continued financial support will depend on strong SSAI programs nationwide. “This was not just about Modesto or the state of California, but all people across the United States.”

When the team completed its initial report and developed a plan of action for Monterey, even Waters, a longtime advocate for older workers, was humbled. “It showed me we have underestimated every individual, because we had labeled them ‘poor,’ we had labeled them ‘less than.’ We had not given them credit. We need to take this work and put it to work. For every Senior Aide

or potential Senior Aide, they are showing what they can do.”

Skeptics abound. Even chief administrator Sarmiento, a 25-year veteran of employment training, paid a special visit to Modesto and talked with every member to satisfy his concerns and make sure the team had not been specially recruited. Team members bristle at suggestions that they are ringers, rather than representatives of a SCSEP program. “Is this team exceptional?” its newest member, Stewart Hester, asks and answers: “No way. From Bangor, Maine, to Fairchild, Alaska, we’re no different than seniors anywhere.”

With one exception: They’ve been asked to help solve a problem that they fully understand. Team member Sandy Friedman gets to the essence: “What we’re doing is saving seniors’ lives.”

He’s dead serious. “Every senior that you can pull out of an economic bottom and help to survive is most important. It’s not getting easier for seniors. We’ve got seniors with full life experiences that can be utilized in the workplace. But along the way life — often an illness or divorce that depleted financial reserves — got in the way. “Pick them up and give them a possibility and a helping hand to survive. That is what this is about.”

Monterey’s Teresa Sullivan appreciates their intervention. From the first encounter, they have made a difference, she says, throwing the gauntlet to fellow directors: “If these folks have been able to do all this, why can’t we?”

In the beginning, the Modesto team focused on identifying “seeds” in Monterey — the Senior Aides who would be their counterparts. They planned to work closely with the seeds, sharing knowledge about all aspects of the program — clarifying Department of Labor rules and regulations, ensuring that qualified older workers as well as prospective employers know about the program, and developing meaningful training opportunities, including partnerships with nonprofit organizations that could offer temporary on-the-job training.

No longer would the work of the Monterey agency be the sole responsibility of a few staff members in a hierarchical organization. Instead, the Senior Aides would be engaged in work that ultimately would benefit themselves, while gaining valuable job skills. Rather than being on the receiving end of well-intentioned services, they would help deliver them. And they would work as a team.

One episode stands out in Alliance director Sullivan’s mind as exemplary of the way the Modesto organization operates. During one of the first visits, a team member had a medical emergency, later diagnosed as a mild heart attack. With characteristic candor, Sullivan says her first reaction would have been solicitous and maternal, something along the

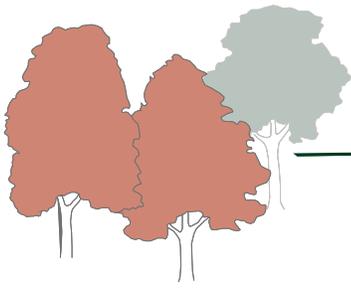
lines of “I’ve got to get them home, and I’ve got to take care of this.”

“Her approach was
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together; we’re going
to figure this out
together and we’re
staying here.’”

Teresa Sullivan

Joanne Waters’ response was different. First, she asked if any of the team members objected to spending the night. None did. They waited together for hours at the hospital until they received the doctor’s assurance that the situation had stabilized. Then they went to a nearby store, bought little grooming kits with toothbrushes (and shaving kits for the men), and then checked into a local hotel. “Her approach was ‘We’re all in this together; we’re going to figure this out together and we’re staying here,’” Sullivan says. “If there’s not a more graphic example of what they do and what we (as leaders) need to do, it was that.”

“We’re a team,” underscores Jerry Bell. “We weren’t going to leave him.”



A few weeks later, Dianne Spencer felt stymied in her job hunt and called the One-Stop Career Center in Monterey County. Her economic circumstances had changed drastically with her divorce, and even though she had taken classes to learn new office skills, she was painfully focused on the many skills she lacked when she arrived for her appointment at the Alliance office.

She sits at the conference table with Monterey's interim program director Margaret Baldwin and Modesto's Joanne Waters, unaware that the two embody the new collaboration at work. Within a few minutes, Waters outlines a job at the Alliance's main office. It speaks directly to Spencer's heart. "You'll not be asking what to do next," Waters says. "We need a lead person, a person who is a self-starter.... You can create your own system." Waters clearly has paid attention to Spencer's experience and interests. "It'll be a huge challenge, but not to you. You have the ability to do this — and then some."

Spencer straightens her rounded shoulders and lifts her gaze from the table as Waters and Baldwin explain the Senior Aides program: She must continue to apply for jobs; the program requires 10 efforts weekly. "When we lose you, we'll be sad, but you'll have something better than what we can give you," Baldwin

explains. A job interview offers no guarantee of an offer, Waters adds. "But the law of probability tells us the more no's we get, the quicker we'll get to yes."

With each interview, Spencer should consider whether the job is one she would like. Meanwhile, as a Senior Aide, she will have a custom program. "You must remember that the program is centered around what is best for you."

"Lucky me," Spencer says, smiling. "That's a first for me."

Energized for the moment, Spencer confesses her concern about her age. "As I get older, knowing someone younger has replaced you in two jobs. ... Her voice trails off. "They really want younger people."

"Do you believe that?" Waters asks.

"Yes," Spencer replies.

"How old are you?" Waters asks.

"Fifty nine."

Waters leans toward her, repeating her question and lightly tapping her index finger on her own right temple. "How old are you?"

Spencer looks puzzled for a moment, but then understands. "Well, I feel like I'm only 18." Her voice is thin now, tentative.

Waters again taps her temple. "So, you're 18 right here."

“I don’t feel older,” Spencer says, but I can’t climb the ladder.”

“Do you need to?”

“No.”

“But can you always get the job done?”

Spencer nods.

“From this day forward, I want you to be 18,” Waters says. “Talk 18. Be 18. That’s the real place you’re at. Maybe your body is telling you something else. Don’t listen.” We all label ourselves, she continues. “We’re walking around like we’re 200. That’s not going to work. Whatever you put out, you become it.” But we should be focusing on our self, she continues, and she reinforces Spencer’s view of herself at 18. “Let’s just move in that direction. Walk with that. Talk with that. Be at ease with that.” In the end, she adds, “It’s all about you.”

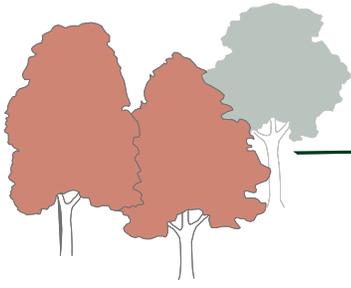
Says Spencer: “It sounds so great.” Smiling, she leaves the conference room to join Debra Christenson, the team member from Modesto who’ll teach her about documentation requirements. A few hours later, Jerry Bell compliments the system she already has devised and muses about challenges ahead.

“It’s okay to make mistakes,” he says reassuringly, repeating the words that Joanne Waters put in his ear a few years earlier. Dianne Spencer listens intently, and her lips relax into a new smile. She bears only slight resemblance to the woman who arrived seeking help just a few hours earlier.

The Waters’ Philosophy

10 tips for SCSEP directors

- 1. Run a client-centered program.**
- 2. Don’t waste energy fighting bureaucracy, but do take time to understand what’s required and why.** Share that information with all program participants.
- 3. Share the load. Encourage teamwork.**
- 4. Focus on solving problems and serving your participants; don’t let “process” drive you.** Use existing resources creatively; leverage your assets. Know that it is possible to balance community service, dwindling financial resources, and still meet the goals. Avoid paralysis by analysis. Focus discussions on progress, not blame.
- 5. Be proactive, not reactive.**
- 6. Plan. Have a back-up plan.**
- 7. Get to know program participants and their aspirations.** The Individual Employment Plan (IEP) should drive everything. The goal should be to find a good fit between goals of the participant and needs of the host agency.
- 8. Determine your program based on the kinds of labor your area needs.** Base your training on the needs of the participants and the employers. GED, ESL and computer skills should be basics.
- 9. Make monthly meetings with Senior Aides interactive, informative and mandatory.** (“You can’t ask people to be in a program if they don’t know what it is.”)
- 10. Be inclusive.** (“If someone is excluded, the message is: You are not important enough to be here; you don’t have enough to offer.”)



“Gone are the days when you are stuck in an office and all you do is stuff envelopes.”

Joanne Waters

About 10 weeks after the collaboration began, Joanne Waters stands before a group of 36 men and women in Monterey. “Ever seen this?” she asks, and she holds up a notebook holding last year’s regulations for the SCSEP program. No one bites.

Then she holds up a much thicker book, the revised regulations for the new fiscal year. “Let’s look at what we need to be doing so this program remains strong and solid and keeps helping other seniors.”

Her voice is warm and welcoming in the chilly room, its 60-something temperature betraying its usual function as a television production studio, located just down the hall from the Alliance’s main office. Waters is dressed casually in Lycra-like jersey, wearing slightly flared pants, a modest-scooped tee shirt



“Ever seen this?” Waters asks Monterey Senior Aides, displaying last year’s SCSEP guidelines.

topped with a hip-length sweater jacket, and sensible, low-heeled black pumps. She stands at the juncture of two walls draped ceiling-to-floor with a grayish, cream-colored padding. She invites introductions. Most are women, who describe their affiliation with the Alliance from “brand new” to “forever.”

Waters engages the group in conversation, opening with an interactive explanation of the federal program, from its legislative roots (dating back to the 1960s War on Poverty), to the recent changes in the Older Americans Act, which have precipitated the latest changes in program requirements, to the funding chain.

The program, they learn, is funded by the Department of Labor, administered nationally by Senior Service America Inc., which has provided a grant of about \$250,000 to Monterey County’s Alliance on Aging, which administers it locally. “Where does the buck stop?” she asks. “Here,” is the answer she seeks, extending her arms to embrace the audience. “Why? Because you’re the taxpayers.” And it’s the taxpayers that have demanded improved accountability, which has led to the new requirements. She’s cheerful and upbeat as she explains the “good news:” The Monterey program is about to get “back on track.”

“We think you need to know what (is required) and why.”

With leading questions, she pulls the group through an understanding of the program’s requirements and the

changes ahead. “I’m not a bureaucrat, but I believe it’s important for people in a program to understand why someone’s asking you to do things that may seem bizarre, because you’ve never done them before.” She tells them they now will gather monthly for mandatory meetings, which will include lots of information about job-related issues and job possibilities. In addition, the Alliance will provide real training opportunities at host agencies.

“Gone are the days when you are stuck in an office and all you do is stuff envelopes.” Scattered applause and a lively buzz fill the room as the audience members register their approval and share personal stories about days filled with mindless tasks rather than meaningful training. Waters mentions a recent meeting with prospective host agencies, which will provide on-the-job training opportunities, and assures the audience: “Once the host agencies

understood the program, they were very supportive.”

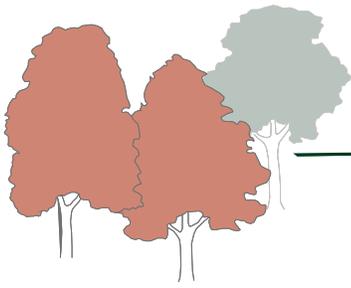
As part of an effort to increase accountability, this year’s evaluations will include all key parties, she continues. Senior Aides will be asked to evaluate the services they are receiving: “Are you getting things of value?” Host agencies will be asked: “Are your Senior Aides adding value? Are they well trained? Would you do it again?” And employers will be asked: “How well is the Senior Aide doing on the job? Are you happy with the employee? Would you do it again?”

Once a Senior Aide has been placed in a permanent, unsubsidized job, the Alliance will keep track for a year, she says. “While it seems intrusive, actually it’s important. Our job is to make sure the employer delivers on his promise. We set the stage with the employer. Help us to help you.”

The Waters’ Philosophy

Advice for Senior Aides

Rules and regulations are there not to drive you crazy, but to ensure accountability to all concerned parties, not the least of whom is the taxpayer, who is funding the program. “That taxpayer is us.”



And then she drops the bombshell: Everyone must initiate 10 job searches each week. The group acts thunderstruck, with outbursts erupting in pockets across the room. One by one, Waters invites comment. And then she responds — directly, firmly. “Here’s the deal,” she begins. The Alliance’s responsibility is to make sure that people get jobs. “Some of us think we’re talking about someone else,” she says calmly. “That’s a fallacy.”

She stands alone in front of the room. Behind her the wall padding seems to absorb the hurled hostilities. She is unruffled, neither daunted nor dissuaded. “The goal of the program is to help you find a job,” she says matter-of-factly. “So why are you fighting?” If a person really looks hard for a job, they will get 10 no’s before they get a yes, she says. “That’s the statistic.”

“What are you doing to yourself if you are not willing to invest in yourself?”

Dianne Spencer, who has been working closely with the Modesto team on compliance issues for a month, jumps into the fray, telling about the important assistance provided by the team. “These people from Modesto have given their lives for us. They have figured it out. We owe them an incredible debt of gratitude. I believe in them, and I

believe they know what they are doing.”

Soon, the meeting wraps up, and Sullivan and Waters compare notes. The meeting, they agree, was important — a breakthrough even — and a critical step toward bridging understanding about the program and the changes underway.

A few minutes later, Waters addresses representatives of nonprofit and government agencies that will provide up to two years of on-the-job training for Senior Aides. Once again, Waters presents a summary of the new regulations and the reasons behind them. They are intended to encourage more people to be served, more people getting jobs, and more accountable service, she says.

She talks about the importance of host agencies being creative about meeting their own needs while providing meaningful training opportunities for Senior Aides. “We want a two-way street,” she tells them, where host agencies can benefit from SCSEP-funded workers, who in turn can gain important job skills.

The representatives from the host agencies show interest and enthusiasm. Asks one: “Is it possible to have more than one Senior Aide?”

Oh, yes.

From the first interactions, Monterey Senior Aides have been taking on new things, learning new ways.

Within the first three months of the partnership, the Alliance has ramped up in every area. It is enrolling new Senior Aides, developing current resumes and individual employment plans, the document intended to identify each person's goals and training needs. The plan is the cornerstone of the program, and new regulations require that it be assessed and updated at least twice a year.

The most significant change is a philosophical shift, Sullivan says. "We've got seniors coming in the door. We must assume that we can place them, rather than assume that we cannot, and we must give them the resources. If you have a mindset that you're not going to be able to place these people, you're not going to be able to put much energy into recruiting employers and offering training."

Several of Monterey's Senior Aides have won staff positions. Dianne Spencer has been named the Senior Aides program assistant, and Tony Jimenez is a job developer, recruiting employers in the Salinas area. Two others share a receptionist position.



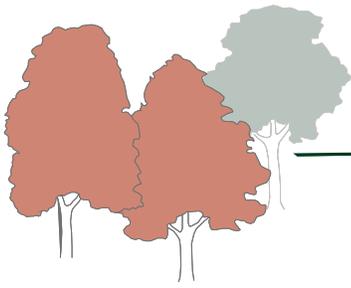
Tony Jimenez, a Monterey Senior Aide, is now a staff member working on job development.

The next step is to beef up training. Coming soon are English classes, care-giver classes, computer training and GED classes, enabling participants to receive a high-school equivalent diploma.

For the first time, Monterey Senior Aides have begun to request training. To Sullivan, the message from program participants is clear. "Let me be part of this. Let me show you what I can do."

"If you have a mindset that you're not going to be able to place these people, you're not going to be able to put much energy into recruiting employers and offering training."

Teresa Sullivan



Change is slow and occasionally difficult. Before the collaboration, the atmosphere at the Alliance was “easy going, nice and comfy,” as Senior Aide Doris Blankenship put it. “Now it’s not comfy.”

Those with limited skills feel stress. Most available jobs require office skills, especially computer proficiency, and placement is difficult. The training will help.



Understanding the reasons behind job-search requirements has helped ease the tension, Monterey Senior Aide Doris Blankenship says.

Meanwhile, Monterey’s “seeds” are working the territory, spreading the word about the program and trying to match aides with jobs. Three Senior Aides now work part-time in the Alliance’s Salinas office alongside

the area’s One-Stop Career Center. Salinas, located in the heart of the county’s agricultural industry, is the prime target for the Alliance’s future efforts.

Director Sullivan, a third-generation Salinas Valley resident, believes that aging farmworkers, who have done backbreaking work all their lives, critically need senior employment services. Testament to that is Inez Mitchell, 76, who has spent most of her life working in the harvest fields and packing plants. She recently was hired at Prunedale’s Senior Center after having served as a Senior Aide. Betsy Butterfield, the director, couldn’t bear to lose her when her two-year assignment to the host agency was up and offered her a permanent position. For Mitchell and for Sullivan, it was an important affirmation.

Monterey County’s Senior Aides met in July at the now-monthly meetings, and heard again about program expectations and job possibilities. Once again, Joanne Waters walked through the program, patiently explaining the whats and the whys. This time, no one voiced objections to the job-search requirements. “Now people understand it,” Senior Aide Doris Blankenship says. That’s just as Waters predicted. Resistance arises because people don’t understand. “You’ve got to paint the picture so they can see it.”

Shortly after the collaboration began to show results, SSAI's executive director Sarmiento invited Waters to assist other agencies, three in California and one in Tennessee.

The latter challenge is a bit different: The staff and participants are reeling from the unexpected death of a beloved colleague, who collapsed in front of them at a holiday party. Waters had begun to form a team to research what kind of assistance might be needed. Several Senior Aides in Modesto are ministers, and Carol Williamson had begun to research grief therapy.

And then, seemingly without warning, Modesto's documentation whiz Debra Christenson died after a short illness. It came as a shock to most: Debra, who had worked hard to get her life back on track and who had worked tirelessly in both Modesto and Monterey. Debra, who had overcome a debilitating drug habit and who was so proud of being drug-free for more than six years. Debra, who just a month before had vowed "to work 'til we drop dead — or until everybody has a job." Debra, just 45 years old, was gone.

For two days, everyone in the Modesto office met in grief counseling and in small groups, and they planned a memorial service. The Senior Aides talked about the things each of them most would like

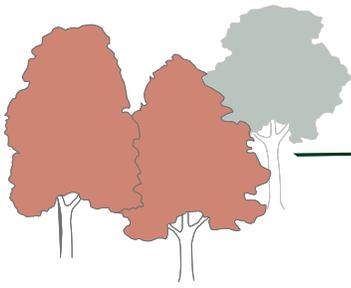
to have at their own services, and all of that — not just bits and pieces — all of it was reflected at Debra's service.

About 75 friends and colleagues gathered at David Rivera's Apostolic Assembly Church to pay tribute in their own special ways — through songs and prayers, a poem, a favorite food, fond farewells, and finally pink balloons, Debra's favorite color, released to soar with the wind. Up and away they went, some bouncing on the pebble-topped parking lot, some dancing from the church's eaves through utility wires before catching the wind that would launch them skyward. Debra, they knew, would have been honored by the turnout, which Senior Aides pronounced very fitting.

The service and the reception afterward represented a multicultural conglomeration of heartfelt giving. By week's end, tears gave way to fond memories.

Carol Williamson, who had roomed with Christenson during the New Orleans trip, praised her courage, dedication and constant giving, even in death. Now, as it turns out, the team has real-life experience dealing with grief. Now, team members say, they will truly be ready to help their Tennessee counterparts.

"Good things come out of bad every time," Joanne Waters says. "It doesn't ever not."



Early in the game, by every measure, the collaboration is paying off. Sullivan and board member Becker call it

a godsend, saying they were so new to the Alliance, they didn't even realize the program was off-track, and they heap gratitude onto Waters and the Modesto team. "Their involvement has galvanized us to make changes in the program," Sullivan says. "Now we understand it and how it is supposed to work."

"We are a work in progress," Sullivan says. "Every day we get closer." Ultimately, success depends on effective job placements. That's been the focus of Modesto team member David McKee, 58. In the process, he's learned a lot about employability — and himself.

McKee arrived at the Modesto Center after working for nearly 24 years at a technology firm in Silicon Valley. Perhaps getting laid off was a blessing; his daily commute was horrendous, but severance was a heck of a way to cap his career. "I had a lot of emotional issues I had to take care of. It wasn't easy."

He credits Joanne Waters with helping him find his way. "I was working with blinders on. A lot has to do with attitude. I had to understand that before I could move forward."

He's grateful for his experiences with the Modesto Center, where he developed his skills working with

people. "I feel I have achieved more in the last six months than in (the previous) 23 years. Before, I was just dealing with tech, not with the future."



Cecilia Falcon tells fellow Monterey Senior Aides that she has enrolled in GED classes.

He works as a Senior Aide in the mornings and attends classes in the afternoon. He's been scrupulous about job searching, undertaking at least 10 each week. Job searching requires more than just looking in a newspaper, he says. "It takes a lot of effort. This is a job, something you have to work at. Those who are persistent are the ones who get the jobs. You have to stay with it."

Thanks to his work at the center, he has landed a good position in a nearby school district. "People who want to achieve success, you can't let failure stop you."

"I was working with blinders on. A lot has to do with attitude. I had to understand that before I could move forward."

David McKee
Modesto Senior Aide

More and more older workers will re-enter the job market as Baby Boomers age, and successful senior employment services will become critically important. Currently, funding only provides services for a small percentage of eligible and needy individuals. Which begs the question: Is Waters' program scaleable? Can it be duplicated? And should it be? Says SSAI chief Sarmiento: "If more of the 107 subgrantees incorporated more of the elements as Joanne does, I'd declare victory."

Some observers believe Waters' success comes because she controls all the key senior employment services in her region, including the One-Stop employment center, and therefore has a rich array of resources to leverage as she seeks to meet the needs of the clients as well as the requirements of all the programs. Others say her listening ability and willingness to empower others uniquely shapes her success. Denise Wallace, SCSEP specialist for California's Department of Aging, suggests an additional fundamental factor. "She believes in them," says Wallace. "She believes in them so much. This is a big deal with older worker programs."

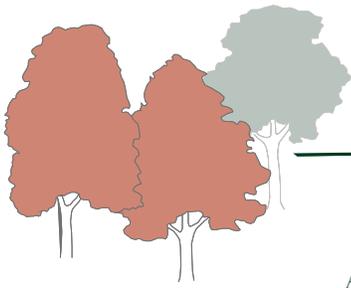
Research suggests that more is at stake than economic relief achievable through successful employment. Recent studies of older people conclude that engagement leads to improved life satisfaction and improved sense of self. Research also indicates that people in groups are

more likely to engage, suggesting that teamwork offers additional benefits for participants.

Preliminary research for SSAI by Dr. Ron Aday and Gayle Kehoe of Middle Tennessee State University indicates that the Modesto workers are benefiting from increased self-esteem, greater confidence in their skills, and a sense of being in control of their lives, all important indicators of good mental health. In addition, the importance of empowerment is apparent in qualitative responses, Kehoe notes. As one Modesto participant said: "It has made me realize that I have something to contribute in spite of my age."

To Waters, the changes apparent in team members and their Monterey counterparts are a natural result of regarding people as valuable resources engaged in meaningful work. "These are not the same people who came here six to eight weeks ago," Sullivan affirmed early in the collaboration. "Joanne has set the stage," she says, "This is why you have the magic that you have with people who otherwise would have been disenfranchised. They have this new start and an opportunity to bring out the best in themselves."

Waters is convinced the program is scaleable, as long as Senior Aides are trusted and empowered. She plans to involve Monterey seeds with the Modesto team to carry the work model to the other California agencies that she has been asked to assist, and she's confident that the results, measured by enrollment and placement numbers, will be strong.



A positive outcome, she believes, could profoundly change the way federal funding for senior employment programs works, change how older workers are perceived, and

indeed, grant new life to thousands of older workers.

“This is a national issue and these people know it.

The Waters’ Philosophy

5 tips for host agencies

- 1. Be creative.** (“You have the opportunity to provide training and, at the same time, come up with the work force that your agency needs.”)
- 2. Don’t drown in bureaucratic requirements.** Focus on real job training opportunities your organization might offer, and write complete job descriptions to enable a good match.
- 3. Understand that every host agency site is a training site.** (“You want Senior Aides feeling just a bit uncomfortable so there’s growth. If they are not feeling that, then there’s no growth.”)
- 4. Keep a drug-free workplace. Don’t ignore signs of abuse.** (“Sometimes those are barriers to getting a job. We want to help people get the help they need so this madness can end for them.”)
- 5. Our partnership is important.** (“We truly want to take your hand and find more ways that we can be successful together.”)

Resourceful, results-oriented E.D. tells Senior Aides:

“We’re here for you”

‘Don’t wait for your ship to come in. Swim out to it.’

— Wall poster, Center for Senior Employment, Modesto, California



Years ago as a twenty-something student, Joanne Waters spent three months on a Navajo Indian reservation in Arizona. One day she was sent out into the arid land and told to find the water. “What water?’ she asked. “There’s no water here.”

But there was, she soon learned, along with a powerful life lesson: “There is beauty in everything. You just need to know how to look.”

Many who know her through the Center for Senior Employment in Modesto, where she is executive director, would say she finds it daily in her work, and client after client credits her for restoring them to life.

Waters, 54, is practical, productive and resourceful, and she’s committed to the mission: helping older workers find jobs. At 5 feet 3 inches, she is compact as her plain-spoken truths.

While no apologist for bureaucracy, she embraces the spirit of program requirements, and she is intent on sharing not only the whats, but the whys.

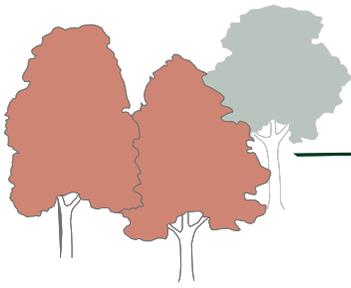
While counterparts may fret about increasing demands and decreasing financial resources, Waters keeps her focus on leveraging her resources to meet client needs.

The SCSEP program is one of 21 federal and state programs that she administers. For six consecutive years, she has exceeded enrollment and placement goals, landing hers among the top-performing senior employment agencies in the nation. How does she do it?

“You have to run everything like a business, because you can’t do good work when you have no resources,” she says. “But there are things that you can do that don’t cost much money.”

The most important resource, she believes, is the people. She makes a point to talk with each new Senior Aide daily for the first three days. (“If I don’t care enough to know who they are, how can I do my job?”)

She probes to find particular expertise, interests or transferable skills, which inform her recommendations about training and placement. Training is critical, and at least 25 percent of her participants are in training programs at all times. Everyone gets computer training.



She works hard to play to clients' strengths and engage them as contributing members of CSE's mission. She has flattened the hierarchical lines in her organization and takes a team approach, complete with a handful of guiding principles:

- **Respect all people who come into the office.**
- **Park ego at the door. Everyone must be a team player.**
- **We are all in this together. Let's figure it out.**

She believes in collaboration and utilizing everyone's expertise. She wants to see results and believes that people who understand a problem can work together and find a solution. Along the way, clients say, she delivers a precious reward: Trust and the restoration of self worth.

From the time she became executive director nearly seven years ago, moving from an organization that focused on disabled adults, Waters has been determined to utilize the abilities of Senior Aides. Gone are the days when they are "just a Senior Aide," as one staff member once put it.

Waters had a toxic reaction. "Excuuuuuse me. And what does that mean?" she pounces, recounting the offense as if it had just occurred. "Are they some kind of subset?"

The person who made that statement doesn't work for me any more. If you don't have any respect for the people you are serving, if you can't find value in what you are doing, then what are you doing here?"

"You may not like what you are going to hear from me, but it's going to be the truth."

Her voice rises in outrage. "By the time they come to our doors, our folks need so much help. They are beat up, they are looking for help and we need to provide that help."

For nearly all of her professional life, she has worked in human resources. After graduating from California State University-Bakersfield with a degree in public administration, she worked for 10 years at a large corporation in San Francisco, training employees and doing a lot of listening as part of a group looking for efficiencies and why things didn't work.

One of few women in the workplace, she learned to pave her own way, regardless of bumps in the road.

"What are we going to learn from you, little girlie," she remembers being chided early on. "Maybe nothing. Maybe everything," she replied.

Her formative years growing up on a farm in Fresno shaped her fundamental values. “No matter what day it is, the cow has to be fed.” She buys few excuses. “Whether you’re a guy or a girl, you still have to get the job done.” And she does.

If there’s a resource she needs, she’ll develop it, just as she did when she needed someone to teach a computer class. Her prospect was a Senior Aide who had spent his life driving a truck; he hadn’t had a day of computer training in his life. “He told me, ‘I can’t do computer work.’

“I said, ‘Oh, yes, you can. You get in that truck and you drive to all those strange cities, and you get that truck parked in one spot, don’t you? You go to places you don’t know, huh? You’ve got guts.’” She also saw analytical ability and strong people skills in his long-haul trucking experience. “So you can do this.”

Similarly with English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Job placement generally requires good English language skills and a GED (high school diploma equivalent).

“Well, how were we going to get that? There is no money. We figured we knew a couple people who’d been English instructors in different countries. We pulled them in and asked, ‘Do you think you could teach a couple classes in ESL?’”

Yes, they replied. “And then we told them the students were all Spanish speakers.”

“Oh, no, I can’t teach that.”

“Well, can you just give it a try?”

They agreed. “What happened was astronomical. The person who didn’t believe he could teach these adults now became the biggest proponent. He started learning their language!”

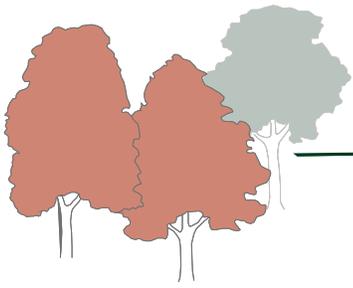
In order to give the English learners sufficient conversational practice, she moved them to her Wisdom Works program, which puts older workers in primary-grade classrooms to assist children with English and reading skills.

“I had two people who’d never had one day of schooling ever in their whole lives, who have learned English and gotten their GEDs. People, when you give them opportunity and they know you believe in them, will do what they need to do.”

The aides get high marks from key school administrators, who welcome the additional attention for at-risk students.

To Waters, resourcefulness in training and placing prospective older workers goes with the territory. There’s no other option. “Are you just going to let them die?”

“You have everything to gain — and nothing to lose.”



She holds mandatory monthly meetings with her Senior Aides, which are important for bonding and social networking as well as for communicating information. The meetings are interactive, spirited, and rich in content.

She makes a point of providing details about the program. “You can’t ask people to be in a program if they don’t know what it is.”

As a manager, she takes seriously the training requirements and keeps adding new challenges. “I’m not going to let you get comfortable.” Using metaphors her audience can relate to, she likens the experience to wearing new under garments.

“When you first put that underwear on, it feels tight. But keep wearing it, and after a while that elastic feels good.”

Similarly in training: After a while, there is learning, but it won’t be confined to the subject at hand. “You’ll learn about who you are. It won’t be about me. It’ll be about you.” That’s central to her approach. “We’re here for you,” she tells each client. “I can’t go on this ride if you don’t want to. It’s your choice.”

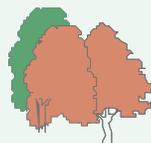
One after another, program participants say Waters’ trust has saved their life.

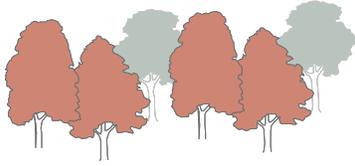
“When you have worth, there isn’t much you can’t conquer.”

“It’s healing your soul and putting you back to who you are,” Waters says quietly. “These are all things that give people a feeling of worth. When you have worth, there isn’t much you can’t conquer.”

In the end, Waters’ approach to leadership boils down to this: “Just be a damn good person. Treat people like you want to be treated. Be honest with people. Tell the truth, even if it’s the painful truth. My folks know you may not like what you are going to hear from me, but it’s going to be the truth.”

One might say that Joanne Waters is still looking for the life-giving water, as she did on that reservation nearly 30 years ago, and she’s determined to find it. Here’s the bottom line: “This is a training site. This will always be a training site. And we will all — all of us — be learners.”





SCSEP's challenge for the 21st century:

Back to our roots

Transforming lives, strengthening communities

The unprecedented collaboration between Modesto's Center for Senior Employment and Monterey County's Alliance on Aging may lead the way to a significant new dimension in civic engagement.

The collaboration is built on a model rooted in empowering the work force. The agencies' clients themselves — low-income older workers — are solving their own problems, while providing vital services for nonprofit organizations in their communities. Just four months into the project, the scope has expanded to include four agencies in California, from Monterey to San Diego, and there have been echoes as far away as Alabama.

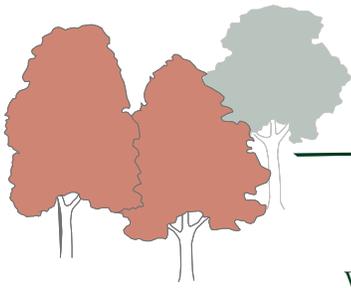
“If civic engagement means engaging people into the community to become part of the problem-solving network, that's what's happening in

Monterey with the Senior Aides,” affirms Teresa Sullivan, executive director of the Alliance on Aging.

Initiated by Senior Service America, Inc.'s executive director Tony Sarmiento, the collaboration began as an effort to mentor a new executive director. The original intent was simply to provide a crash course on running a Senior Community Services Employment Program (SCSEP) and to improve services. It quickly became clear, however, that the undertaking opened the door to a wealth of additional benefits for the agencies, their clients and their communities. It offered the opportunity to utilize a successful model to build capacity across the state and beyond. If it succeeds, as early indications suggest, it offers the opportunity to deliver at the highest level on the inherent promise of SCSEP: transforming lives while serving the community.

“The more we can train them, the more productive they are.”

Teresa Sullivan



“We want seniors to have a good experience and to be more marketable, but we also want that effort to contribute more to the community.”

Tony Sarmiento
Executive Director
Senior Service America Inc.

With the guidance of a team from Modesto’s Center, Sullivan has been learning how to utilize her agency’s Senior Aides as resources. “The more we can train them, the more productive they are,” she says. Once daunted by the challenges of dwindling resources and increasing demands, Sullivan now views Senior Aides, the older workers in the SCSEP program, as the key to her agency’s success.

SSAI is one of 13 agencies that administers the national SCSEP program for the Department of Labor. The program provides job-skills training to help qualifying low-income older workers re-enter the labor force, and it pays participants minimum wage for up to 20 hours a week. Some of those skills can be learned through on-the-job training in nonprofit agencies that agree to “host” a Senior Aide for up to two years.

“This is not a substitute for welfare,” Sarmiento emphasizes. “We want seniors to have a good experience and to be more marketable, but we also want that effort to contribute more to the community.”

Effective Senior Aides programs can help build the capacity of other nonprofits in their communities by matching skills and job training needs of older workers with needs of host agencies, so that the aides do meaningful work during their training, Sarmiento says.

He poses this challenge: “How many more people can a nonprofit serve by having successful Senior Aides?”

Modesto’s Center for Senior Employment, under the leadership of Joanne Waters, has proactively developed relationships with local nonprofit agencies, with results that reinforce the notion that low-income seniors can play an important role in civic engagement.

Shortly after opening its doors, the Carole Sund/Carrington Memorial Foundation received a call offering assistance. Today, executive director Kim Petersen credits the Senior Aides as a “critical factor” in getting the foundation up and running. The foundation was created in memory of Carole Sund, her daughter Juli, and family friend Silvina Pelosso, victims of a brutal crime. The foundation was established to help needy families find missing loved ones and bring violent criminals to justice. “As a young nonprofit, we couldn’t afford to pay a staff,” Petersen says.

The Senior Aides provided the work power to enable the agency to accomplish more, while learning important job skills. Since it started in 1999, the foundation has hosted about 15 Senior Aides, and by August 2004, the agency had 225 cases in 36 states.



Modesto Senior Aide Hilda Avila provides individual attention to a young student learning to read.

“We are big supporters,” says Petersen, who has hired Senior Aides for staff positions. “We couldn’t do what we do without their help.”

Similarly, Shackelford Elementary School, a year-round school serving a predominantly Latino population, hosts Senior Aides who work as tutors in the primary grades. The aides, working under the supervision of classroom teachers, offer one-on-one and small group learning opportunities that otherwise would be impossible. Michelle Perez, the teacher who helped organize the program, finds the consistent presence of committed adults in the classroom invaluable. Principal John Campopiano would like to expand the program with more aides in more classrooms. (So far, however, the number of tutors is restricted by CSE’s funding and enrollment limits.)

The value of a well-functioning Senior Aides program is clear to Sarmiento. “They are a temp agency for people who can’t afford a temp agency.”

Marc Freedman, a leading advocate of civic engagement and founding president of Civic Ventures, a San Francisco-based organization working to transform society’s attitudes toward aging, says he is “heartened” by the Modesto model. It seems to recapture SCSEP’s original purpose, making full use of the talent of participants — while benefiting the community, particularly the nonprofit sector.

Freedman has been critical of many SCSEP programs, which have shifted from the idealism of its roots in the

War on Poverty to more politicized, hunkered down bureaucracies. “That was a tremendous waste of a really good program idea.” The Modesto model may point the way toward revitalization necessary for SCSEP in the 21st century, he says.

Waters, the Modesto agency’s executive director, has been tapped both by Sarmiento and California Department of Aging officials to train other leaders on the new federal regulations governing SCSEP, which encourage agencies to serve more people more effectively — meaning more people getting jobs and meaningful training. The new regulations are more labor-intensive, requiring more accountability, more follow-up, and more documentation.

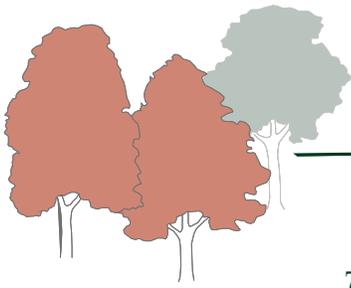
The secret to success, Waters says, is to leverage all programs, keep a careful eye on the budget cycle, operate with a brisk timetable to ensure that placement rates are in sync with seasonal hiring patterns, and move more people through the program faster. In other words, work faster, work smarter, do better with fewer resources — just as in the corporate world. Further, it means that Senior Aides will become even more critical as resources in order to accomplish the work.

Waters operates her 21 state and federal programs with a staff of four — all but Waters are former Senior Aides. In addition, eight Senior Aides work in the office in training positions, with CSE operating as a host agency.

For six consecutive years, Modesto’s center has exceeded its goals, this year exceeding its placement goal by

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Kim Petersen
Carole Sund / Carrington Memorial
Foundation



“These people are
our resources.”

Joanne Waters

76 percent and its enrollment goal by nearly 35 percent. Waters attributes the success to engaged Senior Aides, working in a team environment. “These people are our resources,” she says. And she means it.

Earlier this year, Audrey Menniefield, executive director of the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham, was inspired to follow Waters’ lead and identified Senior Aides who could take on work in her Alabama office. “Within a week I found I had wonderful talent.” She started gradually, delegating administrative paperwork and letter writing, freeing her to focus on building relationships with employers. “This is help I never had before.” Delegating and letting others handle work that she is responsible for has not come easily, she admits. “I just have to be patient and teach people.”

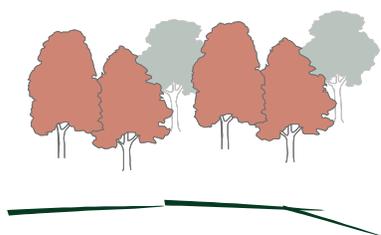
By mid-century, the number of Americans over 65 will exceed those 18 and under. Already, the number

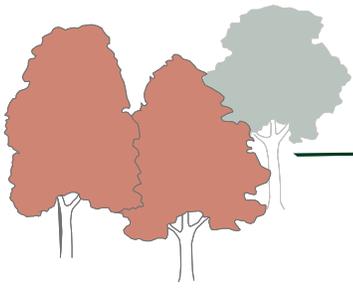
of older workers served in senior employment programs is a tiny fraction of those eligible.

Sarmiento has encouraged SSAI agencies to “get the right mix of people,” ensuring that each prospective Senior Aide is committed to rejoining the labor force. Such commitment can raise the effectiveness of the program, the number of people served, and increase the likelihood of meaningful contribution to the community.

The first few months of the Modesto-Monterey collaboration have already resulted in notable changes — from transformation of individuals who now realize they have value and can contribute meaningfully in the work place to transformation of an agency. “SCSEP, the way Joanne is running it, is a good, solid civic engagement program for low-income seniors,” Sarmiento says.

To Monterey’s Sullivan, “It’s truly a phenomenon.”





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