

# SOAR program at Solano Community College helps justice-involved students get their lives back on track



**Shanan Danley (center), director of the Students Overcoming Adversity and Recidivism program at Solano Community College, with two of the program's students. Photo courtesy of Workforce Development Board of Solano County**


by Matt Jocks

Most people would find Shanan Danley's story compelling. Danley is more interested in the stories to come.

Coming out of a background that included two terms behind bars, Danley navigated a path that has landed him in the director's chair of the Students Overcoming Adversity and Recidivism program at Solano Community College. His example would be inspirational enough for most trying to overcome barriers, but that wasn't enough for him.

"I don't want the recognition for what I do," he says. "The success of SOAR is based on what the students do."

Most of the students in SOAR have had involvement with the justice system, although the program also helps students who have dealt with other barriers, such as a history of foster care or homelessness.



*“... Our track record has shown that, once a person has really made that choice to change their life, they’re going to be the hardest worker you ever saw.”*

*Shanan Danley, director, Students Overcoming Adversity and Recidivism program, Solano Community College*

SOAR has partnered with agencies and services that address the needs of its population: Employment Development Services, psychologists and licensed clinical social workers, food banks and housing agencies, among others.

He and the four case workers provide a direct connection to the students. The case workers check in weekly and Danley conducts workshops and activities such as essay contests with cash prizes.

Danley also maintains a relationship with area employers to help create opportunities.

“A lot of employers are tempted not to go that route,” Danley says. “But our track record has shown that, once a person has really made that choice to change their life, they’re going to be the hardest worker you ever saw.”

Nel Sweet-Davis, an employability specialist at the Workforce Development Board of Solano County, has watched the success stories coming out of SOAR, as well as the WDB’s own programs.

One of the forms of assistance the WDB can provide is initial union fees, opening a path for the benefits that come with union membership.

“People from all backgrounds just need a chance,” she says. “They need someone to believe they have the talent to do the job.”

For Danley, one of the people who believed was Dr. Damany Fisher, the co-founder of SOAR.

“There was stuff he saw in me that I didn’t really see in myself,” Danley says.

Danley matches his drive to make a difference with the experience of going through incarceration, giving his words to his students more power. He knows what each step feels like, including the often-overlooked challenges of being on parole.

He understands that many who were incarcerated for significant periods will have to learn how to use new technology that didn't exist before they went in. He knows that some used skills in their criminal behavior that can be adapted to legitimate jobs.

Mostly he knows that every success story that comes out the SOAR program can open the door for the next student, selling employers on the benefits of hiring program graduates.

His own story shows it.

"I did so much wrong," he says. "If I could go back and apologize to everyone, I would. I know that can't happen the way I'd like to. So this is my way of giving back to society and this community."

*SOAR is one of dozens of Solano County community partners that make up the Systems Impacts in Solano Network established by the Solano Workforce Development Board. This group communicates regularly with information and referrals for services and resources specifically for justice-impacted individuals and their families.*

*The network was established utilizing funding from the state's Prison to Employment program. Partnerships that have developed because of this group have led to inspiring stories of individuals able to overcome justice-impacted barriers through the help of community organizations.*

To learn more, visit <https://www.solanoemployment.org/>

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