

Financial Freedom Through Education

NONPROFITS: United Way of San Diego County Expands SparkPoint Initiative

By KAREN PEARLMAN

SAN DIEGO COUNTY – A spark of change in financial wellness for some San Diego County families is growing brighter.

Residents considered low- and middle-income earners in the North County and in the city of San Diego's Southeast region are part of a new initiative from the **United Way of San Diego County** called SparkPoint.

Since last year, UWSD through Spark Point has been providing one-on-one financial coaching, workshops and resources focused on helping people enhance their financial security, independence and success in the county. With personalized education and assistance in setting achievable financial goals, the initiative began in Escondido and has grown this year to include part of the city of San Diego.

The initiative utilizes a family-centered coaching model, which builds on individual strengths and puts the client in control. The coaching model is grounded in the belief that families are capable, resourceful, and whole, and with guidance from the SparkPoint

team, meeting financial goals is possible, says UWSD President and CEO **Nancy L. Sasaki**.

Program participants progress through financial stages, transitioning from crisis to vulnerability, then from vulnerability to stability, and ultimately from stability to



Nancy L. Sasaki
President and CEO
United Way of San Diego County

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United Way of San Diego County held a workshop as part of its new SparkPoint initiative late last year at Escondido High School. UWSD has several initiatives that are helping some of the most in-need residents become better educated on their financial needs and planning for the future. Photo courtesy United Way of San Diego County

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We are pleased to announce that Jeff Storch has been admitted to the KBF partnership. Jeff has nearly 20 years of experience in Corporate Tax, specializing in ASC 740 Accounting for Income Taxes. A graduate of SUNY Oswego with a BS and MBA, Jeff has earned a reputation for his dedication to clients and ability to solve complex challenges. Since joining KBF in 2023, he has been a key resource, valued for his technical knowledge, leadership, and commitment to developing others. Please join us in congratulating Jeff on this achievement and welcoming him to his new role.

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prosperity.

SparkPoint was founded by **United Way Bay Area** in 2009 and adopted successfully by **United Way Orange County** in 2012, with San Diego adopting the program in 2024.

Sasaki said with the COVID-19 pandemic largely over, it was time for UWSD to look at other needs within the community, renewing its focus on residents' financial stability – giving them the tools necessary to weather proverbial storms, with the ability to bounce back from any future emergencies or disasters, like the recent wildfires in Los Angeles.

While still in its early stages locally, SparkPoint has already shown significant impact. Participants have reported progress, such as reduced debt, increased savings and improved credit scores, Sasaki said.

An example, Sasaki said, is within six months, one participant was able to pay off more than \$5,000 in debt and increase their monthly income from \$736 to \$4,484 – a 509% uptick. Another client was able to reduce their debt from \$8,153 to \$1,083 and increase their monthly income from \$1,874 to \$2,624 (a 40% increase) within the six-month coaching period.

“Since April 2024, SparkPoint has served 115 individuals through workshops and personalized coaching,” Sasaki said. “Eighty-two participants enrolled in money management workshops and 33 clients engaged in one-on-one financial coaching.”

Sasaki said the program's impact on participants' financial stability can be measured through increased savings and improved credit scores, reduced debt-to-income ratios, increased income and progress toward individual financial goals.

“We include all of these factors in a matrix that helps us track participants' progress from a state of crisis to that of prosperity,” she said. “We also track if participants improve their employment situation and change their housing status. All of this helps to provide a holistic approach to clients so that we are truly helping

them to improve their financial stability. In addition, regular tracking and participant feedback ensure the program remains responsive and effective.”

UWSD Advancing Economic Mobility

One of United Way of San Diego's core pillars is economic mobility, and the increasing need for long-lasting solutions to assist under-represented communities achieve financial security, the nonprofit saw the launch of SparkPoint as a powerful, transformative solution to begin bridging this financial gap in the region.

UWSD seeks to empower community members facing financial challenges by providing guidance, connecting them to resources “and showing them they were capable all along,” Sasaki said.

United Way of California's 2023 report, “The Real Cost Measure in California,” found the amount of income required to meet basic needs in the San Diego County region is significantly higher than what the average household makes a year.

That demonstrates a critical need to address regional financial insecurity, Sasaki said.

According to the report, 36% of all San Diego County households are below the Real Cost Measure – despite 97% of those households having at least one working adult.

“The 2023 Real Cost Measure report revealed deep-rooted financial challenges that many households in San Diego County face,” Sasaki said. “Housing costs are the largest burden, with over 50% of renters spending more than 30% of their income on housing. Families with children and communities of color are disproportionately impacted, particularly in under-resourced areas like Southeast San Diego. The high cost of childcare, healthcare, and transportation compounds financial instability.”

Sasaki said that SparkPoint responds by combining financial education, income growth strategies, and resource access to bridge economic gaps so clients who receive financial coaching through the program are supported in establishing and working toward personal

goals such as increasing their income, decreasing their debt, improving their credit score and growing their savings.

Pinpointing Targets Needy Areas

The program is currently operating in two locations that have historically been under-resourced – Escondido and Southeast San Diego – the regions illustrate the deep-seated impact of long-standing societal inequities and systemic barriers.

According to UWSD, in Escondido where 26.6% of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher, the employment rate is just over 63%.

In Southeast San Diego, UWSD reports that a history of disinvestment and limited access to quality education, affordable housing and stable employment opportunities contribute to a 7.7% unemployment rate. The nonprofit says that 13.4% of the population in Southeast San Diego lives below the federal poverty line, including more than 15% of families with children under 18, showing how these challenges disproportionately affect families.

Wells Fargo, U.S. Bank, San Diego Gas & Electric and PNC Bank are continuing to pledge help through UWSD to bring the family-centered financial coaching model to life. Community-based organizations partnering with UWSD for one-on-one financial coaching include **Lifeline Community Services, Interfaith Community Services, Interfaith Shelter Network, Operation HOPE, Logan Heights CDC, Community HousingWorks and Chicano Federation.**

Other collaborators with SparkPoint include network providers like the UWSD-led **BankOn San Diego Coalition, MAAC and the San Diego Financial Literacy Center.**

The SparkPoint initiative also offers Money Management Workshops throughout the year. In collaboration with partners such as U.S. Bank, **California Coast Credit Union and Credit.org**, the workshops provide education on relevant financial topics to empower participants to make informed financial decisions and improve their livelihood. Sasaki said UWSD aims to help 135 families through the workshops by August of this year.

Sasaki said the success of the SparkPoint program in North County allowed it to expand into Southeast San Diego this year, and notes that UWSD will also continue working with partners to grow its network of referrals and services that clients can access through coaching.

Sasaki said UWSD is working to advance its program evaluation so that it can serve as a continuous improvement tool and help it measure and communicate SparkPoint's impact “so that we can offer this service to more San Diegans in the future.”

She said UWSD has a deep desire to expand to other parts of the county but “other things need to be in place (including) funding through strong community partners.”

This year, she said UWSD will integrate SparkPoint into UWSD's other education and economic mobility initiatives, including its STEAM-to-Careers program for high school students and the San Diego County Earned Income Tax Credit Coalition, which offers free tax support for those who qualify.

“We plan to continue expanding access to SparkPoint within historically disinvested communities... by building strong partnerships and addressing community needs as they arise,” she said. ■

United Way of San Diego County

FOUNDED: 1920
PRESIDENT AND CEO: Nancy L. Sasaki
HEADQUARTERS: San Diego
BUSINESS: Nonprofit
REVENUE: \$6.2 million (2023)
EMPLOYEES: 40
WEBSITE: uwsd.org
CONTACT: 858-492-2000 or info@UWSD.org
SOCIAL IMPACT: UWSD partners countywide with school districts, businesses, the public sector, nonprofits, philanthropy and social services to support early childhood success, youth success and family stability
NOTABLE: United Way says its challenge is making systemic changes that will reach hundreds of thousands of children and families