Opening Doors

How Greater Pensacola SHRM Is Developing Future Talent Through Mentorship

SHRM Foundation

Big Brothers Big Sisters OF AMERICA



Overview

Across industries, employers are struggling to fill open positions while people from untapped talent pools are on the sidelines — often overlooked because of nontraditional backgrounds or limited access to mentors, professional networks, and early workforce guidance.

With support from SHRM Foundation, the Greater Pensacola SHRM (GPSHRM) chapter in Florida set out to address this challenge for employers by focusing on young people ages 16-24 who face barriers to education and employment and are disproportionately youth of color. Giving this vital untapped talent pool — which comprises more than four million youth nationwide — early workplace exposure helps ensure career success while strengthening a talent pipeline for employers.

Building on its commitment to community partnerships, GPSHRM partnered with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwest Florida to create a workforce readiness mentorship program that connects high school sophomores with HR professionals — who serve as mentors, coaches, and career guides — and employers who open up a world of professional possibilities for the students.

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The result has been a program that changes lives for both students and the professionals who mentor them — while demonstrating the critical role HR can play in workforce development.

Meeting a Workforce Need

In December 2023, SHRM Foundation awarded GPSHRM a $10,000 grant to serve as a local partner in its Workforce Pathways for Youth initiative. The initiative is part of the Foundation's Widening Pathways to Work portfolio, which helps employers — 7 in 10 of whom told SHRM in 2024 that they struggle to fill open positions — tap into often overlooked but qualified talent pools by focusing on skills rather than traditional degrees.

"GPSHRM has long been involved in workforce development efforts, and their strong employer relationships and community presence made them an ideal partner to bridge youth and the workplace in a meaningful way," explained Amber Douglas, senior specialist of programs at SHRM Foundation.

For GPSHRM leaders, the grant represented more than financial support — it was a call to action aligned with the chapter's mission to educate, serve, advise, and empower the workforce across Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties.

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"Working with young people gives us, as HR professionals, an opportunity we do not normally have — to help shape the future workforce before it comes to our door," said GinNeal McVay, immediate past president of GPSHRM, who, as the chapter's president in 2024, helped spearhead the partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwest Florida. "We were excited by the opportunity the SHRM Foundation grant afforded us, and we jumped right in."

Connecting With Community Partners

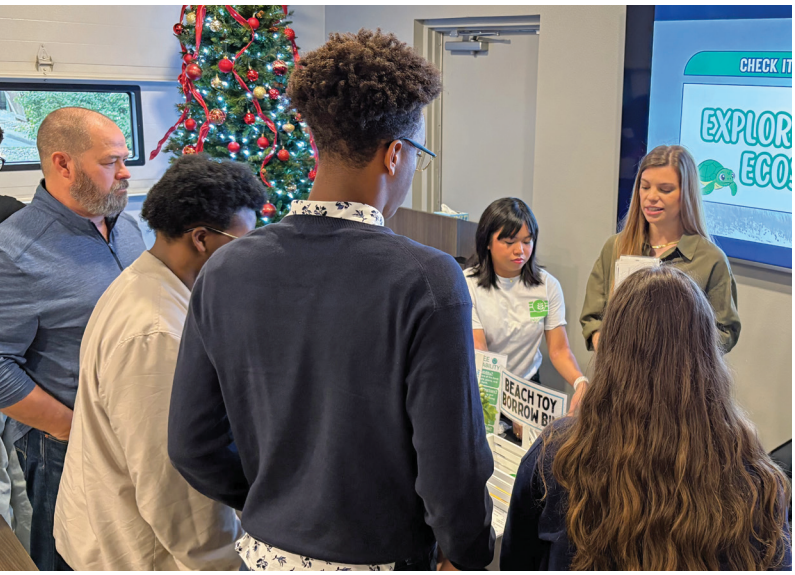
GPSHRM contacted Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwest Florida in early 2024 to explore opportunities for empowering young people.

Taking inspiration from the national Big Brothers Big Sisters Beyond School Walls program, which pairs high school juniors and seniors

with employer mentors, the two organizations designed a preparatory program for sophomores at Pensacola's Booker T. Washington High School, where 58% of students are minorities and 51% are economically disadvantaged.

"We rely on community partnerships to expand our reach and find mentors, whom we call Bigs, for our waiting list of more than 340 Littles — youth who are in need of mentoring," said Paula Shell, CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwest Florida. "Partnerships with employer organizations like SHRM and its local chapters like GPSHRM are crucial for establishing mentorships that can make a huge difference in a young person's future."





The new sophomore program introduces students earlier in high school to mentorship and foundational workplace skills, helping them prepare for future opportunities — including, for some, continued participation in the Beyond School Walls program for juniors and seniors.

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Collaborating to Implement a Workforce Readiness Mentorship Program

GPSHRM members volunteer as mentors after completing Big Brothers Big Sisters' screening and training requirements. Each mentor Big is paired with a student Little and commits to monthly four-hour sessions with their Littles at the local Big Brothers Big Sisters facility.

The sessions cover essential topics such as developing a career plan, identifying transferable skills, reflecting on personal values, and writing resumes. They also feature guest speakers from local employers who give the Littles a look inside real workplaces from people with all kinds of backgrounds. In the first year, Littles explored military careers, the life of a hotel head chef, what it is like to work in environmental geosciences and marine biology, and even the inner workings of a medical examiner's office — X-rays and all.

“What we’re trying to do is spark interest in what is possible,” said McVay. “Sometimes college is part of that path, but sometimes it isn’t.”

The program is a true collaboration. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwest Florida coordinates logistics, student enrollment, and transportation, while GPSHRM takes responsibility for designing and delivering the content for the program’s seven sessions.

“GPSHRM really shines in providing unique and diverse programming that keeps students engaged and opens the door to future possibilities,” said Shell, sharing how mentors listen to the students, covering topics or inviting in guests that respond to their requests.



In addition to serving as guest speakers, local employers provide career opportunities, such as summer internships, to further support the program. Escambia County School District assists with student engagement, while SHRM Foundation supports the initiative through funding, national guidance, and Communities of Practice that allow chapter leaders to learn from peers across the country.



Fostering Two-Way Learning

What has been especially valuable is the two-way learning. For students, the experience provides early exposure to career pathways, practical workforce skills, and trusted relationships with professionals who help build their confidence and readiness for the future. For HR professionals, the initiative fosters leadership development, coaching skills, deeper community engagement, and serves as a strategic workforce development tool — helping build and strengthen a valuable pipeline to young talent for employers.

> ***“I learned to be open to the needs before me, not my own agenda — a valuable lesson in work and life.” — Brandee Prange, vice president of programs at GPSHRM***

The impact is often deeply personal. “One day, my Little needed to talk about her difficult living situation, not the interviewing techniques I had planned to cover. She needed to hear that somebody else believed in her, and that it was going to be okay,” reflected Brandee Prange, vice president of programs at GPSHRM, who chaired

the chapter's Workforce Development Committee as the program was getting started. "I learned to be open to the needs before me, not my own agenda — a valuable lesson in work and life."

Students emphasize the importance of being heard and understood by adult professionals who show genuine interest in their goals and challenges. One student put it simply: "She's just my type of person, and she understands!"

Measuring the Impact

The program has produced strong results in its first year. GPSHRM members volunteered more than 410 hours, representing an estimated $13,530 in in-kind community value based on Florida's volunteer rate. Mentor participation grew by more than 40% from the 2024-2025 school year to the 2025-2026 school year, demonstrating strong engagement from HR professionals.

Student feedback has been equally encouraging. All participating students reported that the sessions were relevant or very relevant to their interests and development, and all students indicated they felt better prepared for their futures.

With the support of a second SHRM Foundation grant awarded in December 2024, the program continues to expand. "We didn't know where this would go when we started. We just jumped in with both feet and figured it out as we went," McVay reflected. "As long as we're all going with the end in mind — making the future workforce ready — we'll get there."

STRONG RESULTS

410
volunteer hours

$13,530
in-kind community value

40%
mentor growth rate



Getting Started

GPSHRM's work demonstrates how local SHRM chapters can turn national workforce initiatives into meaningful community solutions that lead to career opportunities. "There will never be a perfect time when a chapter feels completely 'ready' to take on a new partnership like this — and that's okay," counseled Douglas. "The key is to start. Engage community partners, listen to local needs, and lean into opportunities to connect employers with untapped talent. The appetite for partnership is there, and the impact can be significant when chapters take that first step."

Chapters considering similar initiatives can learn from several key lessons:

1. **Start with strong partners.** Collaboration with established organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters can provide essential infrastructure, credibility, and access to an available talent pool to kick-start your effort.
2. **Leverage HR expertise intentionally.** Look for partnership opportunities that capitalize on HR leaders' unique skills — teaching workplace readiness, coaching confidence, and modeling professional behaviors.
3. **Build structure and flexibility.** Build your program around a consistent framework, but let it evolve based on feedback to keep it engaging and responsive to local needs.



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4. **Value relationships as outcomes.** Skills development matters — but for those you serve, establishing trust, connection, and support is an equally powerful indicator of success.
5. **Design for sustainability.** Relationships with local employers and alignment with SHRM Foundation initiatives help ensure programs can scale year over year.

SHRM Foundation is the 501(c)3 nonprofit arm of SHRM, the world's largest HR association. We mobilize HR and employers in their essential role to act around complex societal issues that impact the workplace. Together with our mission-aligned partners, SHRM Foundation aims to expand access to the fullest possible spectrum of talent, support employers in creating environments where all employees can excel and provide resources for current and future HR leaders to thrive.

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