Alexandria Renew Enterprises (AlexRenew) operates one of the most advanced wastewater reclamation facilities in the United States. Located on a 35-acre site within walking distance of Old Town Alexandria, AlexRenew serves about 320,000 people in the City of Alexandria and part of Fairfax County, processing an average of 13 billion gallons of wastewater every year. AlexRenew is committed to being an environmental steward, good neighbor, and industry leader in our day-to-day work of making dirty water clean again. Below is an interview with Karen Pallansch, Chief Executive Officer, and Johnnie Wallace, Environmental Health & Safety Manager, about AlexRenew’s partnership with Urban Alliance.

Why did you decide to partner with Urban Alliance?
Alexandria Renew (AlexRenew) was looking for opportunities to get involved in Alexandria. We wanted to create a true connection with the community, which is how our partnership with Urban Alliance came about. We initially thought this would give us another set of hands who could help out with some extra work. However, we quickly realized that this was more than giving another intern another job, it was an opportunity to open a young adult’s eyes and to show them what their future could be. Partnering with Urban Alliance allows us to help young adults explore different post high school paths, to figure out what sparks their interests, and help them find realize their passion. This isn’t just about extra help, it’s about changing lives, and it takes a team.

What benefits have your company realized from working with Urban Alliance Interns?
AlexRenew sees this partnership as a true investment. We contribute a donation to the Urban Alliance program to pay these youth, and it has had such a positive impact on all our employees. We have noticed that as the Internship progresses, you start to feel that you are having a deeper impact on the young adults. You get to know them and can start to read their expressions and understand what they need. This is a direct result of how invested our employees become when they start mentoring and supporting the Interns. Everyone loves sharing their knowledge and it has enhanced our team’s pride and morale. When we signed up, we didn’t realize what a significant impact our Urban Alliance partnership would have on everyone around the office. Today, when we invite our Urban Alliance alumni to visit, everyone blocks the time off on their calendars so they can spend time with them. We have become so invested with these young adults that we make sure the relationship doesn’t end after the program is over.

Tells us about the Interns you have worked with.
In 2014, we began our partnership with Urban Alliance starting with one intern, Jenny. Jenny was a hard worker who rotated through all departments. She became an expert on a lot of our work and had the opportunity to present to the board and local city council. Through her experience interning at AlexRenew, Jenny developed a laser focus on a career in environmental science and is now studying at Northern Virginia Community College. Jenny continues to stay in touch with the strong network of colleagues she developed at AlexRenew and we could not be more proud to watch her grow and become a successful business woman.

Why do you like partnering with Urban Alliance?
Urban Alliance supports and nurtures – both the Interns and the organizations who work with Urban Alliance – who want to make a meaningful contribution to our country. With the help of the Urban Alliance, talented young adults are given the resources and help they need to eventually be able to live the American dream. Urban Alliance students work hard and persevere to gain the tools they need to live a productive and meaningful life, to gain a college education, and to succeed in their chosen careers. And hopefully, when they are running a department or company, they will remember why it is important to work with an organization like the Urban Alliance and will actively find ways to help students who were like themselves so many years ago. We are extremely grateful to have the opportunity to support an impactful organization and help these young adults realize their potential.

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How has the partnership grown over the years?
We enjoyed having Jenny as an intern so much that we chose to double our investment in the Urban Alliance and the future of our great country last year. This academic year, we had two interns – Petrona and Fredis – who came from our local high school, T.C. Williams. Both wanted to be engineers and they sure were in the right place for that. Petrona and Fredis were intelligent, honest, hard-working, curious, reliable, and all-around great kids. Just like Jenny, we wanted to ensure Petrona and Fredis had the chance to experience every area of our organization including Human Resources, Information and Technology, and Engineering. This allowed us to give them projects that energized their interests and we’ve been amazed at how well they have done. Not only did this allow the interns to feel pride in their work, our company benefitted. Fredis and Petrona were motivated and smart, quickly becoming active and valuable members of the team, attending meetings and making decisions. Through their work with us, Petrona and Fredis gained a network of highly successful engineers and scientists and have built their confidence, skills, and focus as they prepare to attend universities with strong engineering programs.

Would you recommend this program to other employers?
We strongly recommend to others that they sign up and commit to bringing in an intern and to contributing to a young adult’s success in life. Honestly, we don’t know why every company doesn’t have at least one Urban Alliance intern. We believe that it is every company’s responsibility to fight and advocate for these young adults and their great, bright futures.
If you are on a company or nonprofit board or if you work for an organization that doesn’t have Urban Alliance interns, please introduce and talk up this amazing and impactful program or ask your organization to provide internships or resources to the Urban Alliance. If you are already investing in or working with Urban Alliance and its interns, I encourage you to do more. The return on your investment will be a huge win-win-win, for the interns, for your organization, and for our community.

ABOUT URBAN ALLIANCE
Urban Alliance empowers under-resourced youth to aspire, work, and succeed through paid internships, formal training, and mentorship. Its goal is to give youth access to professional growth and experiences. Through the course of the year, students participate in the High School Internship Program that prepares them for a life of work and self-sufficiency. All students start the program with 6-weeks of job readiness training so they are equipped to succeed in their internships and are supported throughout the program year by Urban Alliance staff, job site mentors, and continued professional development training.
Since its founding in 1996, Urban Alliance has partnered with more than 200 corporations, connected more than 2,000 young people with internships, and reached an additional 15,000 youth through job skills training and workshops. The results are impressive:
- 100% of Alumni graduate high school on time
- Over 90% of Alumni are accepted into college
- 80% of Alumni enroll in a 2- or 4-year college
- 80% of those who enroll in college persist to their second year
- More than 90% of Alumni report feeling comfortable in a professional office environment
- 84% of Alumni remain “connected” to a pathway—including college, employment, or a career training program—one year after completing Urban Alliance.

Urban Alliance is the only year-long employment program for under-resourced high school seniors in Washington, DC; Baltimore, MD; Chicago, IL; and Northern Virginia. For more information, please visit: theurbanalliance.org