

Program Aims to Help Residents Find, Keep Jobs

STAFF REPORTS

Published: Monday, November 11, 2013 5:06 PM CST

The first month-long Job Preparation and Retention Program offered by Grace Learning Center and Citizens Concerned for the Homeless recently concluded, with the next session set for January.

According to organizers, the program grew out of La Porte County's high unemployment rate, 11.9 percent in 2010.

To combat that statistic, board members from Citizens Concerned for the Homeless approached its sub-organization, Grace Learning Center, about doing something to help La Porte County's citizens find and keep work.

Grace Learning Center Director Kristen Patterson began doing research so the program could hold clout in the local business community. She began looking at job trends in La Porte County for citizens who may or may not have education higher than a G.E.D.

Patterson also began researching what makes a great employee and what tends to get a person fired.

After months of lengthy research and some dead ends, Patterson, with help from board members and two volunteers from Horizon Bank, Heather Penziol and Melissa Wood, the program took shape.

They developed contact lists and continued to meet with local employers. They also created curriculum that would allow people to remove emotional reactions in the workplace and replace them with detached action steps instead.

The inaugural program was held twice a week for one month. Clients were tracked for attendance and timeliness, participation and preparedness. The classes were kept small intentionally.

"It was important that those participating were truly 'ready' to learn, take the next step and be committed. We are essentially putting our reputation on the line by endorsing these candidates afterward and wanted to make sure we could do that with a clear conscious," Patterson said.

Part of the class required participants to repeatedly practice the action steps so business appropriate behaviors would become rote.

The instructor "... made sure we understood; plus she helped us practice, gave us notes and homework," one of the participants said.

Another said, "She took her time to teach every step in getting a job and how to be prepared for an interview."

The program would have taken much longer to implement if not for volunteers and businesses willing to take ownership of the program. Local businesses were targeted as potential partners and the list continues to grow as human resource representatives and business owners have indicated the need for something to change.

Human resource managers came as guest speakers and others came to provide mock interviews.

“The human resource managers were perfect. It was easy for them to talk about the topics because they live the topics every single day. Their insight was priceless. It was so fun to see the participants scribbling down notes and smiling when something they already learned was affirmed by these wonderful people who gave up their time,” Patterson said.

Grace Learning Center and Citizens Concerned for the Homeless hope that as the clients get placed, employers will seek employees who have gone through the program. One of the participants has already landed a job.

The director of the Job Preparation and Retention Program will be keeping in touch with the participants throughout their first year after the program, offering tips and keeping track of their retention and success.

If a La Porte County resident knows someone who might benefit from the program, contact Patterson at 219- 879-6788 or gracelearningcentermc@gmail.com.

Businesses interested in collaborating with the program through offering insight, coming to speak or conducting mock interviews on a volunteer basis are also encouraged to talk to Patterson.