



December 10, 2009

Pilot program takes flight at FdL Library

Volunteers help job seekers with computer skills

BY SHARON ROZNIK
The Reporter

Job seekers may find a golden opportunity at the Fond du Lac Public Library.

The new Opportunity Center, located in the library's lower level computer lab, caters to residents looking to hone their job-hunting skills.

Open in November, the center is part of a pilot program being offered in five chosen libraries in the state and funded through the American Recovery Reinvestment Act.

Americorps VISTA volunteers Josh Cowles and Sara Byrnes, along with professional volunteers from the community, are available to assist unemployed residents with resume writing, job searching, learning computer skills, and interview techniques.

Cowles said both day and evening hours are offered to give people a place to come for help after Fond du Lac's Job Center closes at 4:30 p.m.

Computer stations

The lab has 12 computer stations where volunteers work one-on-one with clients learning computer applications, like Microsoft Word, setting up e-mail accounts, navigating the Internet, filling out online job applications, and finding job source Web sites.

Donald Herrmann of Fond du Lac has a background in human resources and lends a hand at the center.

"Many people coming in haven't had to apply for a job in a long time. They don't know how to fill out an online application. We get them up to speed," he said.

Local job hunters have backgrounds in both skilled and unskilled trades. Many of them used to be store clerks or in customer service, general laborers, and construction workers, Cowles said. A few are laid off executives, wondering how to get back into the work force.

"There was a woman in here the other day who had several children and she was re-entering the job market for the first time in 15 years. She was getting ready to start a nursing program and was looking for a part-time job," he said.

Byrnes said they've helped about 20 people since the center opened, and more are expected as word about the program gets out.

"During the day, our clients are a lot more focused on job seeking, and at night, we have people who come in to build on their resumes. They've heard Oshkosh Truck and John Deere are hiring, and they want to apply," she said.

Looking to future

The project is being coordinated through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and will run through November 2010. Library Director Ken Hall said he hopes the program will sustain itself after the first year through volunteer efforts. An advisory council is being formed .

"We want to work with local schools, colleges, job and career centers to keep this going," Hall said.

With funds through a Library Services and Technology Grant, written by the two VISTA workers, the library will be obtaining a mobile (laptop) computer lab to service the outlying community libraries, Hall said. With it, job skill classes can be held in rural areas throughout the county. The lab should be up and running by August 2010.

Because of the county's high unemployment rate, Hall jumped at the chance to host an Opportunity Center in Fond du Lac. Fond du Lac's unemployment rate continued to climb in October to 8.1 percent, ranking higher than the state average of 7.6 percent.

"We are service-oriented and consider our primary role to be the community's information center," Hall said.

Byrnes and Cowles will be launching a series of classes on job seeking after the first of the year, including one that explores career options. Another caters to young adults.

"We try to give people the best chance possible," Cowles said. "We review their resumes and interview skills. In the coming months, we'll be setting up mock interviews."

Byrnes said it's not uncommon these days to see a couple hundred applicants apply for one job. The goal is to transition people away from careers where jobs are dwindling, such as manufacturing, and guide them to technology-driven fields.

Employers looking at resumes also want to see that people, when they were unemployed, used the time wisely, by taking classes or doing volunteer work, she said.

"It's all about giving people the confidence and the skills they need to succeed," Cowles said.

Additional Facts

OPPORTUNITY CENTER

Fond du Lac Public Library
32 Sheboygan St.
Lower level computer lab

- Mondays and Wednesdays: 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 4 to 8 p.m.
 - Tuesdays and Thursdays: 4 to 8 p.m.
 - Saturdays: 9 a.m. to noon.
 - Sundays: Noon to 4 p.m.
-