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3,000 CHA tenants get jobs

Work requirement credited by officials

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More than 3,000 public-housing residents have found work during the last seven years through one of the country's most ambitious welfare-to-work programs, Chicago Housing Authority officials said Tuesday.

A quarter of all CHA adults had at least a part-time job in 1999, when the agency began its \$1.6 billion remake of public housing in the city. By June, the percentage working had risen to nearly 40, according to figures released by the agency.

The increase in employment has been driven by a controversial requirement for the CHA's new mixed-income housing developments: Adult tenants in the 6,600 public housing units must work or attend school at least 30 hours a week. Critics have predicted the requirement will keep many families out of public housing.

In order to help make enough tenants eligible to move into those apartments, a network of public and private agencies provide job training.

Those programs are open to all CHA residents, but so far, the group that has shown the most benefit are those who are eligible to move into the new developments, which are meant to replace demolished high-rise housing.

"This shows that the Plan for Transformation is about not just integrating our residents into the community in the physical sense, but also integrating them into the larger community, the employed community," said CHA spokesman Bryan Zises.

However, more than a third of the jobs created since 2003 are part-time, which could leave hundreds of CHA residents ineligible for the new developments, figures show.

Also, experts warned that it might be difficult for residents to maintain steady paychecks or to bring home a living wage over the long term.

In a shifting global economy, layoffs are a constant reality, and many decent-paying jobs require specialized skills, said Bob Giloth, a director of the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, who participated in a panel discussion Tuesday about the CHA's job-training efforts.

"It's keeping the jobs that will be the challenge," said Giloth, who has consulted on welfare-to-work programs in several states. "Unfortunately, a lot of our workforce development around the country is helping people to become working poor, where people are living paycheck to paycheck instead of collecting subsidies. We really have to stick with this over time."

In it for long haul

CHA officials and private groups that have signed on to help with the effort said they are in it for the long haul.

With government agencies and private groups pledging \$22.5 million over the next three years, job-training experts hope by 2009 to place at least 3,000 more public residents in jobs ranging from bank teller to construction worker to phlebotomist. In all, 165 businesses in the Chicago area have agreed to hire CHA residents, officials said.

To reach that goal, hundreds of CHA residents need help with fundamental shortcomings, such as math and reading skills below the 8th-grade level, said Evelyn Diaz, a director of the Chicago Jobs Council, which is helping to direct the effort.

Many CHA residents expect to be placed in jobs immediately and are turned off by the idea of first having to learn how to read, write or interview properly, she said.

Rev. Anthony Haynes, whose Building Bridges Project prepares black and Latino applicants for construction jobs that carry union benefits, said a recent class of Robert Taylor Homes residents dwindled from 26 students to five after they realized they would first have to learn geometry and undergo weeks of class time.

"These are some of the challenges involved with this effort," Haynes said. "We tried to tell them that this is a career we're preparing them for, and not just a job. Some had the attitude that they didn't want to give the time and effort to stick it out."

Cassandra Murray, 41, jumped at the chance for a regular paycheck.

A resident at the Cabrini-Green Homes on the Near North Side who hopes to move into a nearby mixed-income development under construction, Murray had been out of work for two years before she landed in a job-training program earlier this year.

She is now a customer-service agent at a Fitness Formula health club in Old Town, making \$8 an hour.

Turns life around

The experience has motivated her to turn around her life, inspiring her even to exercise and drop 25 pounds in recent months, said Murray, who is a recovering alcoholic.

"I got close to everybody I work with," she said. "We just had a Christmas party!"

But, with a disabled mother and a 2-year-old cousin to care for, Murray also faces some of the obstacles that dog the CHA effort. She works between 35 to 40 hours per week, and her schedule has been a series of dashes between Cabrini and Old Town, she said.

Moreover, the hours are only guaranteed until March, when a co-worker she's replacing returns from vacation, Murray said. She worries a reduction in hours could spoil her chances to move into the new development.

"I don't want to change my job. I love it," she said. But, if things don't go her way, "It'll be fine. I never really wanted a five-day-a-week job."

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