

Service agencies gather to discuss ways to beat employment barriers for lower-skilled workers

By THERESA CHURCHILL - H&R Senior Writer

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DECATUR - Job prospects for people with multiple barriers to employment may have gotten better Thursday as about 45 representatives of Decatur-area social service agencies came together with the goal of improving them.

"We talk a lot in this community about economic development," Lore Baker, director of Homeward Bound, said at the start of the meeting. "What we need to talk about more is work force development."

Thursday's luncheon meeting was organized at the initiative of the Chicago Jobs Council, which is already assisting agencies in Rockford and Aurora in efforts to more effectively prepare low-skilled job seekers for the work force.

Jeffrey Allington, a policy associate with the council, said Decatur already has a lot going for it, with the best turnout for the first meeting of community-based work force development providers and the highest level of cooperation he's seen so far.

"I don't have a boatload of experience, but the level of coordination and trust among agencies here is very high," he said.

Based on earlier conversations with city leaders, however, Allington said Decatur's two biggest problems are a loss of jobs that pay a living wage and a "disconnect" between economic development and work force development efforts.

Kathleen Taylor, executive director of the Good Samaritan Inn, agreed, saying that the segment of unemployed that seems to be increasing the fastest are people in their 50s who have lost jobs they held for many years.

"A lot of people in city government are living in the 1950s and 1960s, when industry was booming," she said. "They don't realize there's a problem."

Jerry Pelz, executive director of the Northeast Community Fund, pointed out that much can be done to improve the employability of the people agencies serve.

"I use people on Decatur Township relief and from the Department of Human Services," Pelz said. "Too often you set minimal standards, and they proceed to disappoint you."

Tia White of the YWCA's Wear to Work, an organization that provides interview outfits and tips for women re-entering the workforce, said she sometimes must teach clients how to work. "Some of them have never even swept a floor," she said.

Whitney Smith, associate director of the Chicago Jobs Council, gave the group several suggestions, including working more closely with the Workforce Investment Board for Macon and DeWitt Counties and attempting to influence city, state and workplace policies to increase opportunities for low-skilled job seekers.

Before going their separate ways, the community-based work force development providers agreed to meet again to develop strategies.

Rachel Joy, the Decatur Housing Authority's manager of community and supportive services for Wabash Crossing, said the purpose of Thursday's meeting was simply to get the discussion started.

"Our next steps will be more structured," she said.

Theresa Churchill can be reached at tchurchill@herald-review.com or 421-7978