



Agencies mull barriers facing low-skilled workers

By THERESA CHURCHILL - H&R Senior Writer
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DECATUR - Representatives of Decatur-area social service agencies are moving closer to forming a coalition to more effectively prepare low-skilled job seekers for employment.

About two dozen people gathered Thursday at the Decatur Housing Authority's Ullrich Center to identify barriers that must be overcome and to brainstorm strategies for accomplishing that.

Rexlyn Nicole, who focuses on work force development as community and economic development program coordinator for the Macon County office of the University of Illinois Extension, said attitude made some displaced workers resist going back to school after Decatur's Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. plant closed in 2001.

"The world outside changed while they were working at Firestone, but they didn't," Nicole said.

Emily Dobson, program manager for Soyland Access to Independent Living, said people with disabilities deal with low expectations and accessibility problems.

"Employers not willing to make accommodations are a barrier that might as well be the Berlin Wall," Dobson said. "It's not coming down anytime soon."

Other obstacles faced by the group's clients include a lack of personal identification, transportation, child care, education, work experience and social skills.

Participants added, however, that some barriers exist because social service providers lack knowledge about other community resources or funding to offer them.

Mike Wakeland, supervisor of Decatur Township, said strings attached to funding also can cause problems - forcing the township to put participants in the Earnfare welfare-to-work program into jobs before their education is complete or risk losing their funding.

"If you want to deal with the whole client, there are disincentives to do that," Wakeland said.

Agency representatives then broke into three smaller groups to discuss possible strategies and resolved, after they came back together, to fine-tune those at an upcoming meeting with the goal of developing a concrete action plan for improvement.

Thursday's meeting was the second organized in Decatur by the Chicago Jobs Council, which has been assisting agencies in Rockford and Aurora in their work force development efforts this past year.

Jeffrey Allington, a statewide policy associate with the council, said the enthusiasm of Decatur's social service providers continues to impress him.

"I think we'll see local ownership of this process a lot sooner here than we have in the other two cities," Allington said.