

Workers certify training program

State effort helps groups prepare clients to get jobs

By Barbara Rose
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Chantell Stovall once worried about the strain on her family's budget whenever one of her children came home asking for \$16 for a school outing.

"Now I'm like, 'OK, no problem,'" said the 30-year-old mother of three. "It makes me feel good, real good."

What made the difference in her family's finances was a \$9-per-hour job she landed last year as an Osco pharmacy technician after completing training offered by a non-profit agency in cooperation with Osco.

Stovall, who is married to a security guard, had worked as an usher, housekeeper and licensed practical nurse between stints of unemployment while bearing and caring for her children.

A friend of her father urged her to apply for pharmacy training at non-profit OAI Inc. in downtown Chicago. The seven-week program included an unpaid internship at an Osco pharmacy.

"The good thing about it is I found a job I really love," she said, adding that she hopes to move up in pay and responsibility by becoming a certified technician.

Stovall is among more than 5,600 Illinois residents who have benefited since 2000 from a modest state job training and economic development program that merits expanding, according to a report by the Chicago Jobs Council.

The program provided \$2.65 million in grants in fiscal 2004 to community-based organizations that partner with businesses to recruit, screen and train disadvantaged workers for jobs as diverse as metal worker and chef's assistant.

Graduates of these programs do better than comparable job seekers who receive traditional job placement services, the report said. They are one-third more likely to be

employed 12 months after completing their training, and they earn nearly 40 percent more.

Wage gap growing

The study comes at a time when the gap is growing between high-wage and low-wage earners and when good-paying jobs are harder to find for workers without college education. At the same time, many companies complain that they cannot find skilled workers.

Community-based training provides "connections" as well as skills, said Greg Schrock, research associate at the Center for Urban Economic Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago and one of the report's authors.

"People take for granted the importance of who you know" in finding work, Schrock said. "If someone without a lot of job experience showed up on the doorsteps of one of these employers, they are less likely to get hired than coming from a trusted intermediary."

Stovall said she was a little nervous going back into a classroom last year at age 29, but her OAI instructor, Kreshina Ingram, made her comfortable.

"She worked not only with the employment aspect but with attitude," Stovall said. "She's working with the person, not just the mind."

Classroom work included practicing basic math skills used to calculate doses, memorizing prescription codes, learning to use Osco's computers and practicing soft skills such as customer etiquette. Technicians often are the first and last people who greet pharmacy customers.

Stovall was hired at an Osco pharmacy near 25th Street and Martin Luther King Drive, where dejected patients often get a dose of her wide smile along with her gentle prompt: "You can't get your medicine until you smile."

"I try to be cheery," she said. "They say working with the public is hard but I find that if you remain courteous, most of the time they'll be courteous with you."

Career goal

Another OAI graduate, Forest Washington, 19, said working at Osco has given her a career goal.

"I really want to be a pharmacist," said Washington, who plans to enroll in Prairie State College in the fall. "I didn't think [working in a pharmacy] was going to be this much fun. You learn so much every day."

Osco Pharmacy spokeswoman Karen Ramos said the 6-year-old program "not only helps

us fill a need for qualified technicians, it helps us recruit the diverse workforce we're committed to having."

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READER CONNECTION

For information about organizations that offer skills training, contact Jennifer Keeling at Chicago Jobs Council, jennifer@cjcn.net. To read the council's report, "Partnerships for Job Training and Economic Development," visit www.cjcn.net.

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