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Church program aims to help the unemployed

BY MARCI LAEHR TENUTA, Journal Times, Aug. 18, 2002

RACINE -- Helping the chronically unemployed or underemployed deal with the issues in their life that might be impeding their ability to find work, and then assisting them in new career paths is the objective of a new program beginning in Racine.

Racine Vocational Ministry, which will be run out of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, is a faith-based job counseling service whose staff will attempt to reach out in the community and help people become financially and emotionally stable.

"People need help finding jobs," said Executive Director Jim Schatzman. "It's not as easy as filling out applications."

Many of the people who have a hard time finding and keeping a job have other issues in their lives that contribute to being unemployed, Schatzman said.

Racine Vocational Ministry will act as an advocate for those people, help them deal with those issues that might include emotional problems, domestic or child abuse, drug and alcohol dependency and financial problems. Some might have educational needs, a sketchy work history or have been just released from prison.

"There's so many issues to sort out for the chronically unemployed and underemployed," he said. "We help them sort it out."

Clients who come to the vocational ministry for help will participate in Solutions for Success classes led by Program Director Sherry Hartog. Schatzman said the classes are the gateway to the program. Following those courses, the agency will help people find a job to get them stabilized, and then work with them to start developing a career path.

"This is not just about getting an entry level job and then we wave good bye," Schatzman said.

He said they will work to get to the dreams of the individual, and help set them on a path of education or work that will lead them to the type of career they've always wanted.

"People have given up on their dreams," Schatzman said. "They've made life choices that have made it virtually impossible for them to get what they want."

Listening to clients, assisting them, assessing their educational needs and then helping them develop a career path will ensure future accomplishment, he said.

Schatzman said people are more likely to succeed if satisfied in what they're doing.

"Participants chose what they want to do," he said. "That's part of this ministry's success."

The ministry is an interfaith program that has people from Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian and other Christian faiths working together.

Gateway Technical College has agreed to work with Vocational Ministry, Schatzman said. And once the program is up and running they also hope to partner with local government agencies.

"Hooking people up with services is going to be a very important part of what we do," Schatzman said.

Local businesses and agencies have already begun to help the new program get on its feet. Racine Vocational Ministry recently received a \$30,000 grant from the SC Johnson Fund.

In addition to the grant, the ministry program has received support from the Racine Community Foundation, ELCA Domestic Hunger Fund, Bethania L.A.C.E. Foundation, St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Women of the ELCA, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant Lutheran Church, Holy Communion Lutheran Church, the Styberg Foundation, Racine Dominican Fund, Herbert H. Kohl Charities, and the Racine County AFL-CIO.

Schatzman said the idea for the program was born about two years ago when he was a member of the outreach and mission committee at St. Luke's Episcopal Church. "We were looking for opportunities to minister to the community," he said.

The group heard about a similar vocational program in Milwaukee called Abundant Life Ministry and gathered information from them. Then they set about to recruit a board of directors, build a staff and decide how they were going to run their program.

This week, the ministry opened its doors. They will go through training later this month in Milwaukee and be up and running in early September. The ministry is also organizing a job fair with Jewel Osco that will be held in early September.

Anyone interested in learning more about the Racine Vocational Ministry can contact Schatzman at (262) 412-0823.

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