



Job 101 for Berrien County underemployed

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To meet demand -- and relieve the area's stubbornly high unemployment -- **Michigan Works for Berrien, Cass and Van Buren Counties** opened an Opportunity Center in the former Mercy Hospital building in Benton Harbor. The Opportunity Center is funded for two years with a DLEG grant, and Michigan Works hopes that some other entity will continue it or that it eventually will become self-sustaining, according to spokeswoman Candice Elders.

There have been skills-training programs and remedial-education programs for years. The Opportunity Center approach connects them, Elders said.

One unique feature is modeled after Heartland Alliance's Inspiration Café in Chicago, where culinary and hospitality students run a for-profit restaurant, Elders said. Michigan Works saw it as a way to teach entrepreneurship and perhaps make the free job-training program self-sustaining, she said.

Free classes at the Opportunity Center are run by Heartland Alliance, the Chicago-based not-for-profit agency that grew out of Jane Addams's Hull House and the settlement movement of the early 1900s. Michigan Works typically contracts training, and the agency won a competitive search, Elders said.

"Employers tell us they need applicants with certain skill sets," Elders began. "There are lots of applicants with skill sets to meet their needs right away. There also are people who need more training. Sometimes they need remedial skills like math and reading -- basic academic skills -- in addition to vocational training."

Construction work demands solid math skills, Elders said, and some adult students just need more math classes.

In the Berrien-Cass-Van Buren region, employers want at least high-school diplomas or their equivalent. Employers there have not embraced the WorkKeys testing program that Michigan Works offices in other parts of the state are pushing.

An astonishingly high number of Benton Harbor residents read only at the second-grade level, said Rose Hunt-Redd, who left Benton Harbor-based Citizens for Progressive Change to head the Opportunity Center for Heartland Alliance.

How many is hard to define -- various labor market studies report differing functional-illiteracy rates.

"We've combined literacy training with work-force skills," Hunt-Redd said. "... We went to every literacy group in the Twin Cities and took the best from each. "We've partnered with Lake Michigan College and the Benton Harbor Street Ministry."

In addition to the classroom curriculum, students receive on-the-job training and in-class inspiration.

"Construction students will work with Harbor Habitat for Humanity," Hunt-Redd said "We've partnered with the Michigan State University Extension Service for the landscaping students. For hospitality and customer service, we're inviting CEOs from various stores to come in and tell the students what they expect."

Of the 25 students who began classes July 9, 15 have stuck with it, Hunt-Redd said.