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“Challenging People to Shape a Better Future Now”

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SE Works Helps Jobseekers Break Through

By Helen Silvis
Of *The Skanner News*

Getting a job is the first step toward financial independence. Yet despite Oregon’s improving unemployment figures, thousands of people can’t find work.

Black jobseekers, immigrants and young people trying to get a foot on the career ladder are having an especially hard time. And if you have a felony in your past, or have been out of work for more than six months, it could feel like you need a miracle as well as a resume.

“How are you going to explain, ‘I’ve been in jail for 10 years?’” says Holly Whittleton, executive director of SE Works in Southeast Portland. “There is a lot of need out there.”

Anyone looking for work is welcome at the SE Works center. Part of the Oregon WorkSource network, the nonprofit is dedicated to helping people find jobs.

“We are trying to break the cycle of poverty through getting people into decent, good jobs which pay decent wages,” Whittleton says. “That’s how you break the cycle of poverty.”

Last year SE Works served about 16,000 people, who together made 32,000 visits. Customers, as center staff call them, are offered access to computers, job listings and resume help, as well as classes and workshops in everything from interviewing skills and resumes to English in the workplace. All the services are free.

Many employers, Kraft Foods, for example, are looking for workers who have a National Career Readiness Certificate. You can get several levels of that certificate at the center. And SE Works has partnered with the addiction nonprofit CODA, to offer classes in how to keep your job through recovery.

The City of Portland helps fund a re-entry program open to anyone with a felony background. A class called “Discover Your Road to Success” runs 16 times a month. People attend and get support in their job search until they land work. Last year in one three month period, 954 people attended the class.

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At just 19 years old, Byron Weiss (L) and Gabriel Martinez are working hard to put their juvenile justice records behind them. They both credit the SE Works Civic Justice program, not just for helping them find work, but for giving them hope for the future.

“It’s a good program,” Martinez says. “For kids who have been incarcerated this program gives us a second chance to make a change. I would recommend it to any youth who are struggling.”

In the program, youth spend time in class and time volunteering at work sites, such as a warehouse and store run by Habitat for Humanity. They can also gain credentials, such as a forklift certificate.

“I’d never had a job or anything like that,” Weiss says. “So when I came here I really had no experience. Since I got here I’ve had three jobs. I learned how to send thank you letters after interviews, how to do cover letters. Now I’m working I try to come in at least once a week to get help to better myself.”

Both young men entered the program owing big restitution fines. Martinez, who works 41 hours a week at Grocery Outlet, says he’s grateful he had the chance to pay off his fine. It’s taken a big weight off his shoulders, he says. Now he’s saving up to get an independent place to live.

“By doing what I need to do I can make my mother proud of me,” he says. “It feels good to see that smile on my mom’s face when I go to her on my time off.”

Weiss, who works between 32 -40 hours at a 76 gas station, says he wants to be the first in his family to go to college. “My family live paycheck to paycheck,” he says. “So that’s all I thought was possible for me. When I came here I realized more was possible.”

Asked about long-term career goals, both men say they think about joining the military or working in parole and probation.

“I could really help kids out there because I’ve been there and done that,” Weiss says. “I have used drugs and got out of it. I never thought I could, but I can. So I think I could inspire them.”

Perhaps the biggest gift they’ve received from the program is hope.

“You’ve got to believe,” Martinez says. “Never give up. That’s what this program taught me.”

Leonard Fearn: VA Hospital Emergency Department Medical Administrator and AFGE Local President

Leonard Fearn is a hospital administrator and the president of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 2157. He spoke with *The Skanner News* about why a career in government service is a good idea, and what his union does to give each member the best opportunities possible.

The Skanner News: Your job seems complicated. Can you describe it?

Leonard Fearn : I’m a medical administrative specialist out of the emergency room, what we call it is an administrative officer. I’m on duty between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. – during those hours we become the senior administrator of the hospital. So we attempt to coordinate our efforts administratively across the hospital, insuring that our veteran clients receive the appropriate allotment of travel arrangements as well as care and treatment, scheduling and things like that.

TSN: Talk about the AFGE. I think a lot of people don’t know you exist.

LF: That’s probably more true



Leonard Fearn

than not. The American Federation of Government Employees has been around since 1932, and is actually a consolidation of 42 federal agencies. The AFGE is a national organization with 12 distinct districts throughout the country — we have facilities in Guam, in Puerto Rico. So we’re out there and we essentially provide our services to represent government employees, the fulltime and part time workforce that is professional and nonprofessional employees in various

agencies like the department of veterans affairs, social security administration, department of justice, department of defense, transportation and safety administration, food and drug administration, bureau of prisons, the integration offices — there’s a couple more to the list..

TSN: I think a lot of people today don’t really know what occupations are unionized. Talk about what your union brings to a federal job — what’s good about it?

LF: We certainly advocate for pride and professionalism in the workplace, giving security to the bargaining unit, gives them the opportunity to further advance themselves through continuing education or what may very well be self-study; we maintain an effective relationship with management as a way of ensuring that a bridge or a what may very well be needed communications about a sensitive subject — or a variety of subjects — are covered.

Also what is a plus is that being a federal employee they could actually consider transferring to

other parts of the country because, if there’s similar work and responsibilities and jobs there, that’s something they can do.

We have a way of resolving our issues through a grievance procedure or third-party intervention.

It gives you flexibility as a worker, but there are also safeguards in case you encounter

Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.

—George Washington Carver

problems in the job. It gives you a few more rights, a little more power to make sure you can resolve conflicts.

TSN: If you could speak directly to young people and other people who are looking for a career, what would you say to them about your union?

LF: I’d tell them — look to

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