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Spreading the word about education, jobs programs

MARSHALL - The stories were as varied as the people gathered around the room - job-seekers working to further their education, teens developing better job skills, immigrants improving their English as they apply for U.S. citizenship. The one thing all the speakers had in common was that their lives were changed by state programs offered through Adult Basic Education, the Minnesota Workforce Center, and more.

Around 35 people were gathered in conference rooms at the Lyon County Government Center on Tuesday afternoon to share their stories as part of Southwest Adult Basic Education and the Southwest Minnesota Workforce Center's annual legislative meeting.

While state legislators, including District 20B Rep. Lyle Koenen, DFL-Clara City, District 21A Rep. Chris Swedzinski, R-Ghent, and District 21 Sen. Gary Dahms, R-Redwood Falls, were there to listen and ask questions, most of the meeting was dedicated to southwest Minnesota residents who have benefited from education and jobs programs. Several students in ABE English classes said it has helped them in their work, and allowed them to do things like talk to neighbors, buy groceries and run errands without help. One Hmong mother from Walnut Grove said she can now help with her children's education.

Several students in a new Certified Nurse Assistant training program offered through Southwest Adult Education talked about their experiences.

"This is emotional for me," Marshall resident Malyni Young said of telling her story. Young said she has worked as a personal care assistant for several years, but becoming a CNA will mean greater opportunities for her and her children. Furthering her education is also the first step toward Young's career goal of becoming a mortician.

Speakers said jobs programs offered through the Workforce Center and partner organizations like the Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council have made a big difference in their lives.

Rene Martinez talked about his experiences participating in the Minnesota Family Investment Program, which helps low-income families move out of poverty through work, between 2007 and 2010.

"It really helped me over a rough time when I was in college," Martinez said. "My job counselor really helped me plan for my future," he said - and it made such an impact that he now works as an MFIP job counselor in Cottonwood County.

Tracy Becker of Hector said the Southwest Minnesota PIC's dislocated worker program is helping her get started on a new career. Becker said she lost her job earlier this year after working for the same company for 23 years.

"I knew I needed to go back to school to enter any type of workforce," she said. After working with a counselor, she said she is now scheduled to begin accounting classes at Ridgewater College. "I'm so excited to be starting school next week."

Speakers at the meeting even included students from the Dawson-Boyd School District, which participates in a youth work experience program through the PIC. Students said they were learning skills to make them better employees, and gaining self-confidence as they did.

Southwest ABE Director Pat Thomas emphasized that adult education and continuing education will be even more important for the state's economy in the near future. By 2018, 70 percent of all Minnesota jobs will require some post-secondary education or training, Thomas said.

About 3,000 people in southwest Minnesota were served by ABE in the past year, Thomas said. The state total across Minnesota was 78,000, she said.

Koenen said he was struck by the diversity among area students, including the ABE students. It will be important for Minnesota to continue to support education opportunities in the future, he said, especially to fill jobs throughout the state.

"Our workforce is going to need immigrants," he said.

Dahms agreed, noting that immigration will be a key factor in growing many communities in southwest Minnesota.

Dahms said it was also good to see the results of the investments being made in southwest Minnesota residents. He congratulated the students at the meeting on their successes.