

Program puts senior citizens back into workforce

By SHARON KERR
Staff Writer

Older Americans who are trying to re-enter the workforce often face extra hurdles such as outdated experience, limited education, and maybe restricted physical abilities.

Take, for example, a woman who graduated in 1965 and learned to type on a manual typewriter, or a man who spent his life unloading trucks, but now can't work on his diabetic feet.

Both people are willing and able to work, but unless they get updated training and job experience, it's going to be tough to get an employer to hire them.

Sandy Smith, employment and training coordinator for ExperienceWorks, says to such people, "Let me tell you what I can do for you."

The Senior Community Service Employment

Program (SCSEP) is a bootstrap operation that matches older employees with community service and government "hosts" who offer on the job training and experience, and the program pays them while they learn.

The host agency gets a reliable worker for 20 hours a week and the employee learns valuable skills. The government, not the host agency, pays the employee minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour while training, but the goal is that the employee will take these new skills and move into the workforce at a competitive salary.

This program dates back to Lady Bird Johnson who, as First Lady, founded Operation Green Thumb. She proposed to Congress, "Take the green thumbs of poor, older and retired farmers and put them to work to beautify our highways... to provide older farmers with useful

employment for which they are fully qualified... And, not even in Washington, D.C., did anyone think this was a bad idea."

Green Thumb grew into SCSEP and expanded to include many fields beyond farming and highways. SCSEP seeks to match employee interests with community needs.

Smith emphasized the many benefits to the community when older workers are trained and hired. The program objectives are:

to foster and promote useful part-time community service opportunities to enhance their abilities, skills and aptitudes to change negative attitudes and stereotypes about older people to promote innovative work alternatives and second career training to help them gain valuable new skills and experience toward securing meaningful employment

In what sounds like a win-win situation, Smith is surprised to say, "We are currently under-enrolled."

She is seeking both qualified applicants and host agencies, and she is also needs a field operations assistant to help her cover Jasper and Newton Counties.

To be eligible for training, an employee must be 55 or older, currently unemployed and seeking work, and not have too much income. Income qualifications are complicated, but things like disability payments don't count, social security income is only counted at 75 percent, and resources like property don't count against an applicant (but interest does count as income).



Newsboy photo/Sharon Kerr

SALLY NAVARRE, left, is glad to have Mary "Apple" Bean to handle calls and visitors at the Burke Center in Kirbyville. The Senior Community Service Employment Program pays Mary to learn new job skills.

A host agency must be either a 501c3 nonprofit organization, or a government-funded agency such as city or county offices, schools, libraries, public safety and health services.

The host agency must be willing to commit one person to the training and supervision of the new employee, who is to be utilized for the stated purpose

only. Translation: you don't take the woman who hired on to learn the multi-line phone system and send her on errands to pick up dry cleaning.

What kinds of work are offered?

The program does not actually set limits, but typically the program is for cler-

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People in community benefiting from project

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Many times government programs are seen as "hand-outs" rather than a hand up, and people who could benefit from them won't apply.

The Senior Community Service Employment program (SCSEP) helps older Americans who haven't worked in awhile or need to transition to a different kind of work, learn the skills to get them good jobs, and it pays them while they train (see "senior work experience" story).

The best way to understand how the program works is to look at two people in the community who have benefited from it.

Mary Bean

Mary Bean is known to many who use the Burke Center in Kirbyville simply as "Apple." They know she keeps candy in her drawer but they really come in for the hugs.

Bean worked 18 1/2 years at the Kirbyville plywood plant, hard work and late hours. "I laid core from 3 to 11 p.m. in all kinds of weather," Bean said.

After the plant closed, she commuted to Beaumont for five years. "The pay was good, and I liked the work, but the company closed down," Bean said.

With gas prices rising, Bean felt she needed to find work closer to home. She also needed a flexible schedule so she could work around doctor's appointments and treatment schedules for family members who needed her help.

She found what she needed working 20 hours a week for New Directions Industries, a division of the Burke Center in Kirbyville.

Sally Navarre is manager of Kirbyville center that helps people with disabilities, including mental health and mental retardation (MHMR). She needed help in the front office to answer phones and greet people.

Burke Center qualifies for a senior workforce employee because they are a nonprofit under contract with the state of Texas to provide training and vocational assistance to MHMR and the disabled.

Navarre said it's important to have someone with Bean's maturity because their clients often have behavioral problems.

"I love to spoil them, love to help people," Bean said. "I just love my job, and they're so good to work around my schedule when I need to help my family."

Ginger Studensky

Ginger Studensky is now director of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), but she started in the SCSEP program.

"Ginger is the perfect local example of how the program works," according to Sandy Smith, employment and training coordinator of Senior Workforce Solutions.

Studensky explained, "After 38 years of marriage and five children, my husband decided he didn't want to be married any more. I didn't know what I would do. At 17 I went from being Daddy's girl to someone's wife."

Somehow, 38 years of being a chicken farmer's wife wasn't particularly helpful in finding a paying job. Self-taught and with no real credentials, Studensky said she was "scared and wondering how to keep the lights on."

"I prayed," Studensky said, "and prayed some more."

It's a long story, but prayer led to an ad in the paper, which led to a host agency didn't quite work out, but it finally led Studensky to a position with RSVP at the Deep East Texas Council of Governments (DETCOG).

RSVP was struggling, perhaps on the verge of failure. RSVP matches volunteers with local projects, but unlike SCSEP, this is not a training program—volunteers with skills donate time to help their community.

Mostly it is retired people who want to work a few hours, to give back and stay involved with life. Some of her volunteers, like those in the auxiliary at Christus Jasper Memorial Hospital, look forward to the friends they've made, and the social activities and fund raisers that help purchase needed

"The truth is, I have lived here three years and did not meet anyone outside my church. Now I know people everywhere. It's been such a blessing to me. Now I am not just so-and-so's wife — oh, I'm still grandma and mom — but it feels good to have a professional identity."

— Ginger Studensky

items for the hospital.

The RSVP program was limping along with few volunteers and fewer agencies requesting them, until Studensky was thrown into

the mix.

"I was scared," Studensky said. "I couldn't even sharpen a pencil correctly, but I love people and I've always been a hostess."

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She set about finding more volunteers, publicizing the program, finding out who needed help, learning what skills and interests her volunteers had. The program flourished.

Studensky describes herself as super shy to the point of being timid, hard to believe when she recently organized an appreciation luncheon for more than 75 RSVP volunteers, with several prominent local politicians and businesspeople as guest speakers.

Studensky says, "The truth is, I have lived here three years and did not meet anyone outside my church.

Now I know people everywhere. It's been such a blessing to me. Now I am not just so-and-so's wife — oh, I'm still grandma and mom — but it feels good to have a professional identity."

Smith was so impressed with Studensky's work that she tried to hire her as a full-time assistant to cover Jasper and Newton Counties. When DETCOG got wind of that, they countered with their own job offer.

The farmer's wife had gone from no prospects to having to make a decision between two good jobs.

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