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Progress, one step at a time

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By LISA VERNON-SPARKS

PROVIDENCE — Mijanielle Achille says that the Genesis Center, an adult education program, is like a second home to her.

The 40-year-old Haitian immigrant received job training, spruced up her English language skills and got help landing an internship at Rhode Island Hospital, ultimately turning that into a full-time job. Genesis also provided Achille, a mother of three, with child-care support so she could focus on her training.

Achille, who is now studying at the Community College of Rhode Island to become a certified nursing assistant, yesterday morning shared her success with Governor Carcieri, educators and roughly three dozen others who attended a conference about adult literacy strides in Rhode Island.

The program was held yesterday at Network RI, a one-stop career center, and was co-hosted by Adult Career and Technical Education Director Johan Uvin.

“I don’t think I would have finished without their support. This center is like a big family,” Achille told the audience.

At a time when the state’s unemployment rate has soared to 10 percent, it’s crucial to continue to provide adults with the skills needed for a rapidly changing workplace, officials said. While many jobs have been lost due to corporate downsizing, there are other positions that are vacant, such as nursing jobs, because people lack the skills to fill them.

There are 38 state-funded adult-education and literacy centers that provide people with the tools to find the jobs, but also to advance in them. And yesterday’s conference was a progress report from Carcieri about the adult literacy task force and its efforts to improve these programs, since the force was created in 2003.

“In every measured category, we have market improvement and built a network of community partners that have helped thousands of Rhode Islanders better prepare for the workplace,” Carcieri said to the group.

The three-hour program also included a panel discussion, moderated by state Education Commissioner Peter McWalters, on ways to integrate the adult education system into business.

The Genesis Center was among 15 state-funded programs the governor recognized as high performing.

State literacy programs provide job training, computer and language skills, have GED programs and high school and English as a Second Language [ESL] programs. Many also help to find jobs for their clients in growth industries, such as health care and hospitality.

Last year the Genesis Center had 600 clients, the majority of which are immigrants, said its CEO, Pheamo R. Witcher. Its work force development department partners with employers and provides its clients with various trainings that lead to jobs in sectors that need entry-level workers.

Genesis also has an external diploma program, which is a fast-track high school diploma program. Clients have tutors and take the equivalency tests that are either certified with Central Falls or Cranston public schools.

“We are creating job training programs... what they need to know to get employed,” Witcher said. “We just don’t stop there. We try to get our clients ... put on a career pathway. That means the employer helps to further the education and map out where they want to go.”

Witcher said a client might start out in the dietary area at the hospital, but with the stepping-stone program can receive additional education for job advancement. She said the work-force program focuses on two fields: health care/nursing homes and culinary arts.

Genesis also provides wrap-around services to provide clients with a holistic atmosphere to help them succeed. Witcher said that between April and December last year 44 out of 60 people trained in the two programs gained jobs, for a 72 percent placement rate.

Achille came to Genesis seeking the English as a Second Language program and from there moved into the health career program, an example of preparing workers for middle-skill jobs, such as nursing, carpentry, bookkeeping, and auditing clerk work, Witcher said.

According to the Workforce Alliance, middle-skill jobs are the backbone of the Rhode Island economy, and in 2006 accounted for 48 percent of all jobs in the state.

“The next areas we are discussing are green jobs,” she said.

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