
RI Workforce Alliance pushes for equality in adult education funding

(Thu, May 17 07) - Contributed by KALUNIAN, KIM

By KIM KALUNIAN "There's a hole in the middle of the state, that's us, that's Warwick," said Kathleen Howell at Tuesday's meeting of adult education advocates, teachers and students at the Warwick Public Library. Howell, the Director of the Westbay Adult Academy, was referring to the lack of funding for the adult education programs in Rhode Island, particularly in Warwick. "We need to get the Governor to understand," said Howell, "It isn't all about Providence." According to an information packet distributed at the meeting, nearly 20,000 adults are without a high school diploma in Warwick and four other cities including East Greenwich and Coventry. Yet while Providence receives almost 37 percent of the \$7.7 million currently appropriated through the board of adult education, Warwick only receives 2.2 percent, slightly over \$168,000. Though there are twice as many uneducated adults in Providence as there are in Warwick, advocates for adult education feel that the money should be divided equally geographically. Shannon Russell, who recently received her GED, spoke about on the importance of programs like the one she was a part of. Despite her jitters, Russell said her achievement has given her confidence. "I can't even convey the confidence it has given me," she said. A waitress and mother of a six-year old son, Russell said she wants to get a college education. She also has plans to work in a bank. Arlene Monahan, a current student of the Westbay GED program said, "I'm here to represent the whole class. So we can get the grant that we need so badly." The Governor's Five Year Plan for Adult Education calls for an additional \$1 million to be invested in adult education in fiscal year 2008. Currently, approximately \$8 million is spent annually on adult education, \$2.8 million of which is from the state, the rest are federal funds. The Alliance is working to boost the proposed \$1 million to \$3 million. "The pie isn't big enough," says Linda Katz, Policy Director at the Poverty Institute. It's not just that Warwick isn't getting enough money, she says, it is that there aren't enough funds to go around. That's why the RI Workforce Alliance, a coalition of educators and upward mobility advocates are pushing for the \$2 million increase in state funding. Dan Crowley, Director of The Warwick Adult Learning Center for 19 years and employee of the school department for 35, says that the goal of the Workforce Alliance is to "help people that have hit hard times." The adult education system works to help adults gain their GED, learn to read, improve their English speaking skills and get them prepared for higher wage employment. Crowley's daughter made the decision to drop out of Warwick Veterans High School as a senior. She attended adult education classes and currently holds her GED. But, according to the Alliance, programs such as those that benefited Crowley's daughter and Russell cannot continue to help others in the future if the funds are not expanded. "Despite the budget crunch, we cannot move backwards," says Katz. Recent US Census trends show that while skilled jobs are increasing, the amount of educated adults is decreasing. By educating the adults of Rhode Island, the RI Workforce Alliance hopes to alleviate the economic bottleneck that is occurring. "Rhode Island has a crisis – a lack of a strong workforce," says Katz, "and the keystone of a good economy is a strong workforce." The Alliance is looking toward the future of the state. Jeanne Gattegno, the President and CEO of Westbay Community Action said, "The support of the state is absolutely critical." Because many uneducated adults often end up utilizing state and tax-payers' money down the road, says the Alliance, the state has to make a choice between educating them immediately or dealing with the consequences. "You pay now, or you pay later," says Gattegno.