

Seniors Learn New Tricks

Local woman stays on payroll with help from national program

ROBIN CAUDELL Press-Republican – December 22, 2010

PLATTSBURGH — Suzanne Hand got a hand up from the Senior Community Service Employment Program.

It has allowed her to work the past five months at Clinton County Office for the Aging. She had been in retail and banking prior to entering the national program, a collaboration between the Administration on Aging and the Department of Labor.

"I got laid off from my last position this year," said Hand, a Plattsburgh resident. "I just wanted something to do. I don't want to draw any Social Security until I can draw the maximum."

Although she had tons of people skills, she's learning more while also updating her computer skill set.

"This has been just like a godsend. It kind of fell in my lap," she said. "It just worked out absolutely wonderfully. The people are just wonderful that I work with. They are understanding of older people."

Prospective enrollees shouldn't feel anxious about signing up.

"They work with us," she said. "Even if we are seniors, we are valuable."

In August and September, Hand was busy assisting seniors applying for the Home Energy Assistance Program.

"This office has so many areas that they deal with," she said.

ON THE JOB

To qualify for the Employment Program, seniors have to be 55 or older and meet income guidelines.

"Their annual income can't exceed \$13,000," said Crystal Carter, executive director of the Office for the Aging. "What we do is ask a host agency, a not-for-profit or a public agency, to host the seniors and train them on the job. They (seniors) can do lot of different kinds of things."

The Office for the Aging places the seniors in a subsidized-employment program.

"The host agency helps set their hours," Carter said. "They can work 20 hours a week, and they get minimum wage. We pay mandatory fringe benefits — Social Security, unemployment insurance and (Workers) Comp."

When seniors come to the Office for the Aging, they sit with a counselor who screens them about their work history and what skills they want to update. Then an appropriate host agency is located.

"Right now, we have people placed at the Red Cross, the North Country Underground Railroad Historical Association, the Senior Citizens Council and Clinton County Nursing Home," Carter said.

ROOM FOR MORE

The Employment Program was known in other incarnations as Experience Works and Green Thumb.

"It's been around quite a while," Carter said. "We've been struggling to find people. We think with this economy, there must be people who need this service. A not-for-profit may need some extra hands if they have lost someone or if they were hit with budget cuts."

Seniors may remain with the host agency up to two years.

"The host agency can hire them or we help them find un-subsidized employment. Sometimes, places do hire them. They have them already trained."

The Office for the Aging has federal funding for 17 seniors, and only nine are enrolled this year, including Hand.

She's celebrating a new beginning with the Employment Program as well as a new grand baby.

"We're not down and out because we're in our 60s," Hand said. "You want to be viable person, and this is what this offers. You can continue to work with this type of program. I found out about it haphazardly."

And she's glad she did.

"It keeps you active. Keeps your mind. It's a wonderful idea."