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HOMEWARD BOUND

WITH JOBS PROGRAM, HOMELESS FAMILIES FIND STABILITY

By DAN CROWLEY Staff Writer

WESTHAMPTON — Homeless and living in a Holyoke hotel for more than half a year with her 3-year old son under the state's emergency shelter program, Bonnie Dirth would sometimes drive to Fitchburg one day a week to work in an automotive parts store.

She made about \$100 a day there, but the commute was too arduous, the pay too low, and as her car became more and more unreliable, her only job and source of income ended.

"I really wasn't able to get to Fitchburg anymore," said Dirth, 29. "I just couldn't do it anymore."

Meantime, life with her son, Jayden, had become unbearable in the crowded hotel, and the state social workers trying to help her seemed overwhelmed by their caseloads.



Bonnie Dirth, 29, carefully removes her pies from the oven at Outlook Farms in Westhampton, where she works as assistant baker. The job is one of two she found with the help of assistance programs for the homeless. In top photo, Dirth checks her prep-sheet before the end of her shift.

JASON PICARD PHOTOS

"I was having trouble finding the people who could help," said Dirth, who had been living in Orange for the past decade before becoming homeless.

She left the hotel and moved to Jessie's House in Amherst, the only shelter for families in Hampshire County. During her four to five months there, a staff member referred her to the New England Farm Workers Council in Holyoke, which in turn helped her enroll in a program called Secure Jobs Connect, which is helping train and put homeless people to work in western Massachusetts.

"I had a lot more individual help," Dirth said of her time at Jessie's House, which is run by The Center for Human Development in Springfield. "They kind of gave me more of a chance than I think other people would."

A chance was all Dirth would need. Today, through Secure Jobs Connect and a growing coalition of area human service providers working to end homelessness, Dirth has parlayed two part-time jobs into full-time work in the food service industry at Highland Valley Elder Services in Florence and Outlook Farm in Westhampton. The steady work has allowed her to pay for her own apartment in Holyoke and car as her state housing assistance ends. More important, the changes have put her on a career path toward economic stability for her and her son.

“I would not have been able to do it without their help,” Dirth said, during an interview this week at Outlook Farm where she has been working as a baker’s assistant since September.

Ending homelessness

During the past year, the Secure Jobs Connect program, administered by the Corporation for Public Management in Springfield, is working with more than 70 homeless people in the region. As of December, the program had placed 43 people like Dirth in jobs in areas such as health care, retail, manufacturing and accounting. The program provides access to career exploration, education, skills and job readiness training, job placement and support to overcome the challenges homeless people face to achieving self-sufficiency.

The program was funded by a \$304,000 grant from the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation. Through collaborations with area human service agencies, like HapHousing and FutureWorks Career Center in Springfield and CareerPoint in Holyoke, the program has widened its reach to help 143 families, including 290 children, find stable housing through new jobs. The jobs offered have had wages averaging \$10.20 per hour, exceeding the minimum wage.

The effort to put homeless people to work will continue thanks to a \$230,000 state grant announced in December, which the Corporation for Public Management will oversee in partnership with Northampton-based ServiceNet, the **Franklin Hampshire Career Center** and Construct, a human service agency in Great Barrington.

“We have seen firsthand how good jobs with good wages can end homelessness,” said Lisa Lapierre, program director for Secure Jobs Connect. “We watch as the seemingly impossible becomes reality.” Lapierre was speaking Friday about Secure Jobs Connect at Holyoke Community College’s Kittredge Center before a crowd of more than 100 state lawmakers and officials, business leaders, human service agency providers and formerly homeless people like Dirth. Recognizing the program’s success, the state Department of Housing and Community Development is committing another \$1 million statewide to continue the initiatives to put homeless people on career paths, Aaron Gornstein, undersecretary of the state agency, announced at HCC Friday.

Milagros Figueroa of Springfield, a single mother of five children, fought back tears as she explained her journey from living in a motel and shelter for more than a year to finding her own apartment after becoming trained and employed as a registered medical assistant at Baystate Medical Center. She described her new occupation as her “dream job.”

“It feels really good to know that you can provide for your family, to know that you don’t have to choose to pay one bill instead of the other or to choose between sneakers and school supplies,” said Figueroa, who had to pause several times to collect her emotions.

Cindy Ferguson, also of Springfield and a mother of six children, said that thanks to Secure Jobs Connect she was able to finish a degree at Holyoke Community College and is now working fulltime on a production team at Savers, which operates thrift stores that support local nonprofit organizations. Ferguson, who also had been living in a shelter, said she next plans to pursue a degree at Springfield College and transition into a career in the area of domestic violence.

“I am proud of my accomplishments,” she told the crowd that had gathered at HCC Friday. “I am no longer

worried about being homeless or hungry.”

Road to employment

For Dirth, the road to employment and out of emergency shelter was not easy, but she wanted a better life for her and her son. Secure Jobs Connect gave her the opportunity she needed and forced her to think hard about what she had to do to turn her life around, she said.

"A lot of it is just learning about personal sacrifice," she said. "When you're really trying to push forward, it's learning about what you can live without in terms of necessities." Lapierre, who worked directly with Dirth, said one of the first orders of business was finding out where her skills and interests lay. She learned that Dirth, who grew up in Florida, had taken some courses in the culinary arts while a high school student at the Franklin County Technical School in Montague.

"I really enjoyed it," Dirth said. "I never went further with it when I graduated."

In early 2013, Secure Jobs Connect helped provide Dirth with a range of job skills training, including paying for coursework and testing to receive a food service certification. She got help writing and perfecting her resume, basic computer literacy and job interviewing skills. "Bonnie was motivated from the start," Lapierre said. "We saw that her passion was in the culinary arts."

It was an exciting but nerve-wracking time, Dirth recalled, as she began applying for jobs last year.

"It was a little scary; change is always scary," she said.

Dirth held about 20 job interviews and distributed her resume on several Internet job sites before finally landing a part-time job on Aug. 26, 2013, as a kitchen assistant at Highland Valley Elder Services, where she does everything from cleaning, stocking and taking inventory in the kitchen to food prep work and covering as a relief cook 25 hours per week.

"I definitely had to look for quite a while before landing the job," she said.

Her hard work then soon paid off again because Outlook Farm, which provides produce for Highland Valley Elder Services, was in search of a part-time baker's assistant. Dirth expressed interest in the position when it was brought to her attention and came highly recommended, said Erin and Brad Morse, co-owners of Outlook Farm.

"She cares about what she does, her work ethic," Brad Morse said in an interview at the farm. "It's kind of interesting that you have somebody who is such a good worker who doesn't have a job."

Between the two jobs, she works about a full-time job.

Dirth is doing it all these days in the bakery, from making the batter for muffins and cookies during the week, to operating the bakery on Sundays when her work day starts at 6 a.m. She said she found the job interview with Erin Morse refreshing.

"She said, 'We're just going to work for a day and see how you like it,'" Dirth recalled.

Morse said that has become a better way to figure out whether a job applicant is the right fit at Outlook rather than the traditional interview. Dirth said she's getting a lot of hands-on experience cooking and baking at Outlook, skills that complement her other job at Highland Valley Elder Services.

“It was like a win-win,” Erin Morse said. “We needed her, she needed us. She’s creative. She’s come up with some good ideas on her own. You like that in an employee.”

Dirth said she knows she still has a lot of work to do to develop and maintain her career to remain on the road to economic stability, but she sounds optimistic that even better days are ahead.

“I’m trying really hard,” she said moments before removing fresh-baked pies from an oven at Outlook Farm. “My entire world has changed. When I first entered the shelters, the outlook was really bleak.”



Bonnie Dirth works in the bakery at Outlook Farm in Westhampton.

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