

In Sight and Within Reach: Residents Help Each Other Learn How to Land a Good-Paying Job

by Ellen Hanusa Wonderlin

Ramona feels she's ready, willing and able to find that ever-elusive good-paying job. She has the skills and the drive, but not that polished resume needed to help her get her foot in the door. She believes getting help creating a powerful resume that reflects her skills would enable her to find work.

Maria taught school in Mexico. She wants to know, how can she become equipped to teach school here?

Maha and her husband recently arrived from Jordan. She has many questions. Among the easiest to answer is how to get a driver's license. The more difficult – how does a mother balance going back to school to become credentialed in her profession here, work at a less-than-satisfactory job, and take care of her children, all at the same time?

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And Bashar is from Iraq, among the first wave of refugees to arrive in Iowa as a result of the war there. It's clear he wants a job, he wants to understand how things work in this country, but there are so many new terms and ways of living to learn. It can't go fast enough for him.

But, at least for Bashar, he has a clear advantage over some of the other Iraqi refugees present. He can understand some English, good enough to carry on a conversation and ask challenging questions. For the others, whose native tongue is

Arabic and who have been in Iowa for just a couple of weeks, the language is only a rush of sound.

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For the next six months, members of this group who commit to the process laid out by the workgroup will focus on landing a job, but not just any job. A good-paying job. A good-paying job that meets certain conditions...

- Is at least 32 hours a week
- Pays at least \$10/hour
- Has benefits, like health insurance and time off with pay
- Offers opportunities to move up

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The decision to strategically use the FES Workgroup to help a small group of committed people find good-paying jobs grew out of a series of convenings called Neighborhood Circles sponsored by the FES Workgroup in February. The original goal of the circles had been to engage more people from Des Moines' more challenged

neighborhoods in addressing the roots causes of unemployment, lack of access to affordable housing, and barriers to building assets.

As the circles process unfolded, however, one thing became clear. Before beginning to address the bigger-picture concerns, residents said they needed something more immediate and tangible – a good-paying job. Period.

The FES Workgroup listened and altered course. That decision led them to this night, when those in the room will decide whether or not they are game to try a process – participate in an experiment – designed to result in gainful employment.

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FES Workgroup co-facilitators Peggy Aguilar and Dayna Chandler, neighborhood residents who have become trained to lead grass-roots, resident-driven meetings for action such as this, have arranged to connect the group to community resources that provide direct assistance with the job search process.

Peggy and Dayna introduce Elia Cardenas to the group. She provides free job placement assistance through ISED Ventures – help with things like crafting a resume or cover letter, completing applications, honing interviewing skills.

Up until this point, the room has been filled with nervous energy and friction. It is a diverse group – people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds saddled with the weight of their own personal stories. The sense of urgency is great.

Elia offers no formal remarks or fancy speak. She simply asks the question, Why work? Why work? she asks again, quelling the room.

Elia listens as the group lists the benefits of working in the first place – for self-wealth beyond financial; for the benefits, like paid vacation, health insurance, retirement; for the social interaction; for the continual learning that comes from

employment. She also listens as some in the group bemoan the fact that, so far, employment has been out of their reach.

Then, she says, "I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear why you cannot succeed." Elia challenges them to name the barriers that stand in their way and move past them.

She goes on, asking the group to identify the qualities that comprise that "good-paying job" which all in the room says they want. They say enough hours to qualify for benefits, decent pay, ways to move up. They begin to think about the possibilities.

Dayna and Peggy then introduce Otis Henderson, another community resource. He serves as an employment pathways coordinator out of the Neighborhood Health Initiative at 16th & Jefferson. He specializes in connecting persons needing work, especially former offenders, with employers who need workers.

On this night, Otis continues where Elia leaves off, pushing the envelope, helping people dream and articulate what a good job looks like to them.

Terry says he wants a job that "meets or exceeds all, needs, wants and desires, including mental and financial." Ameka wants a job that pays well and recognizes and appreciates her contributions. Yet another says he wants a job that he is "happy to wake up to."

Otis listens and then asks, What do you need to land that dream job? They pause and begin to name the kind of supports they need, things the community offers if one can connect to them.

Time grows short. So many questions. So many avenues to pursue.

For the experiment to continue, the group's facilitators must now ask participants, Will they commit to the six-month process laid out by the workgroup, one

all hope will result in landing good-paying jobs? With a show of hands, most say they will.

The leaders encourage people not to wait until next month and get started with their newly-found connections. Otis and Elia hand out business cards until they're gone.

As the attendees begin to disperse, a young woman raises her hand. She asks, My employer has reduced my hours because I am pregnant. I didn't ask for this. Can he do that?

An older gentleman speaks up, and with steeled-eyes, tells her, Employers cannot discriminate against a woman because she is pregnant. You have rights, he says. He takes the lead in offering her information about community resource that can help.

Perhaps unbeknownst to this man, he himself is a resource. And by offering up his knowledge to help the young woman, he has proven, at least in part, people who share a central goal – securing a good-paying job – can help each other get there.



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