

City Mission's workplace counseling service growing

BY JOHN CROPLEY
Gazette Business Editor

SCHENECTADY — What began as an effort to help shelter residents transition to independent living has become a fast-growing workplace resource for Capital Region employers and employees.

The City Mission of Schenectady on Feb. 8 presented its annual report on the performance and accomplishments of its Employer Resource Network program.

The mission now runs three: the North Country ERN, begun in 2016; the Capital Region ERN, begun in 2015; and the original and largest, the Schenectady ERN, which served 197 employees in 2014, 589 in 2015 and 1,013 in 2016. By the end of that three-year period, employer participation had gone from five businesses to 30, and the Mission had five full-time "success coaches" working with those businesses' employees.

Executive Director Michael Saccocio said the goal is to add a sixth full-time coach and six to eight more client businesses this year.

Following the classic employee assistance program model, the Employer Resource Network serves employees to the benefit of both workers and employers. It provides coaching and assistance that employers may not be able to provide themselves, since many of the problems that need to be addressed exist outside the workplace. Accomplishing this successfully also helps employers, when workers become better employees as a result of the assistance.

Saccocio said the ERN grew

from Bridges to Freedom, a one-year life-skills program the Mission offers shelter residents. One of the biggest problems encountered along the road to independent living is retaining a job, he explained — "Life seemed to keep on catching up with people."

In developing ways to teach residents the skills and give them the tools to land and keep a job, the Mission built the core of what would become the ERN.

Plenty of people in all stages of their careers face the same life challenges as shelter residents, but entry-level employees are often the worst off.

"That's really the target group that ERN was designed to support," but it is not the only one, Saccocio said.

One of the ERN success coaches, Susan Vellano, said Feb. 8 that a recent counseling session was not with an entry-level employee, but a manager who had no sense of how to deal with a domestic-violence situation affecting a grown daughter.

Vellano said addressing basic life-skill problems is not the biggest part of her job; the crisis of the moment is what she sees more often.

"I really work with employees who are under-resourced, have a lot of life stuff going on that they are just ill-equipped to handle," Vellano said. "I say, if it hangs heavy on your head or heavy on your heart, come talk to me."

Of the missing life skills, financial literacy is the biggest problem she helps people deal with. She doesn't solve problems herself — she coaches, motivates

and helps navigate.

"I don't do anything for the employees I serve," Vellano said. "They do it; I empower them."

Among the Capital Region employers that have contracted with the Mission for its ERN are Ellis Medicine, Kingsway Community, Mazzone Management and Rehabilitation Support Services.

Justine Ochal, director of human resources at Mazzone, said employees appreciate having a resource to speak with confidentially outside the company, because they might be hesitant to disclose problems to their employer.

"That has really helped to bridge gaps," she said. "That's been the huge success for our team here."

Ochal said in the 18 months that Mazzone has used the ERN, common problems employees have sought help with have included transportation, budgeting skills and debt repayment. One worker was on the verge of having the electricity cut off at home. "It's really helpful to them," Ochal added.

Kingsway human resources director Lorraine Hobart said she's seen a morale boost from the efforts of ERN's success coaches.

"It has been a wonderful experience for Kingsway Community," she said. "They're amazing."

Many of the Kingsway employees and ERN coaches are from the Schenectady area, Hobart said, so there is elevated understanding by the coaches of issues facing employees, as well of an awareness of the resources available locally.



PETER R. BARBER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Nathaniel Mandsager, who runs the City Mission's Employer Resource Network, goes over paperwork with Imani Payne at 28 Yates St. in Schenectady.

Common issues Kingsway employees seek help with include debt consolidation, Department of Social Services paperwork, domestic problems and — especially — child care.

"The ERN has really come through for our employees [who need to arrange] child care," Hobart said.

Chris Silipigno, associate executive director of business and donor development at the Mission, shared some vignettes about clients who sought assistance through the ERN:

- ◆ An employee whose disabled adult son needed help burying his father, then help finding and paying for a new place to live.

- ◆ An employee whose work hours had been reduced, had no health insurance, lacked funds to buy her grandchildren toys and was behind on her rent.

- ◆ An employee stuck with recurring late charges who wasn't as pinched for cash as it would seem and just needed help scheduling bill payments.

Names of participants are kept confidential.

Saccocio said the core purpose of the City Mission remains unchanged as the ERN develops and grows:

- ◆ It shelters an average of 90 people a day in its 76-bed men's shelter and 30-bed shelter for women and children;

- ◆ Serves 600 meals a day at its dining center;

- ◆ Operates 24 units of transitional housing for people ready to leave the shelter but not ready to live independently;

- ◆ Runs an 18,000-square-foot distribution center for clothing and other goods;

- ◆ Operates a 4,000-square-foot job training center.

According to the Mission, almost all of the companies who have started using ERN — 97 percent — have retained it. These companies have a combined 8,500 employees, nearly 2,000 of whom have engaged with success coaches a total of about 3,500 times.

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