

Employment counseling office to open on east side

Rafael Disla has a degree in finance and economics. Last week he was turned down for a job as a McDonald's cook. "I was making \$70,000 a year and now I am fighting for jobs that pay less than \$13 an hour," he said. "I grew up in the projects so I don't mind the fast-food jobs as long as it feeds my kids." Disla and other struggling job hunters in East Orlando said employment counseling centers such as Workforce Central Florida and job fairs are overcrowded and underresourced.

"I feel very discouraged. They are not even taking resumes at job fairs and I am applying for jobs that 15 other people are applying for. People just ignore you," said 52-year-old Maritza Hernandez-Diaz, who recently re-entered the workforce after a debilitating car accident six years ago. Christian Help, an organization located in Casselberry that strives to prevent homelessness through employment counseling, found that on average more than half a dozen East Orlando residents were traveling to their Casselberry office for help each week over the last year, representing a 30 percent increase in need. This prompted the organization to house their first satellite office within University Presbyterian Church on Rouse Road. "If there is that kind of demand that will find its way all the way to Casselberry, then we will anticipate 20 to 30 people a week at the satellite with the economy the way it is. It could be more than that," said Tim Maguire, board member of Christian Help and UPC elder.

The office, which will offer employment counseling, resume writing, interview skills and job-lead assistance, opens Monday, April 20, and operates with one counselor every Monday and Thursday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. By August Maguire said they will likely need more counselors.

"We are out of space in Casselberry but the need for services has grown. I always thought we needed an Orlando address because it is the bigger nut to take care of," Maguire said. About 100 of the 125 people who come for food and health assistance at Woodbury Presbyterian Church twice a week are not homeless but are unemployed. Woodbury Elder Robert Gumbs said only 30 people came for assistance two years ago and 25 of them were homeless.

Last year Christian Help came to Woodbury to do employment counseling but could only get through a fraction of the two dozen people who lined up. "Many of them have extensive work history and are great candidates for jobs but they are one in tens of thousands of other job seekers. They need direct lines to people. They need a chance," Gumbs said. UPC Pastor Mike Osborne said many members of his congregation are unemployed or facing joblessness, which is why he was open to housing the office. He ultimately hopes to have a separate building dedicated to employment counseling on their 21-acre lot, with a dozen or more counselors and classrooms where people can practice computer skills and resume writing.

"I was very happy to bring this opportunity closer to where the need is. Plus, when it is located in the church I think it creates a different vibe. Hopefully people think a church program is more reliable and credible. They know we are not just a bunch of strangers," he said. Christian Help Executive Director Sandi Vidal said they also plan to host employment seminars four times a year with topics like "Getting Noticed Online" and "Financial Planning During Unemployment." "Job fairs are struggling because not too many people out there are hiring. We want to provide additional services, hope and empowerment to those who feel discouraged," Vidal said. Christian Help will train volunteer counselors like Karen Barbiari, who previously counseled at the Casselberry office before opening the East Orlando satellite office.

She said the first thing she does is encourage those without a high school degree to get their GED since even some minimum wage jobs require it. Many of the people she counsels worked in blue-collar jobs like landscaping or construction, which were some of the first sectors of the economy to slump.

"It takes discernment, faith and compassion [to do this job]. People are experiencing really tough times. They get discouraged and I try to give them options by asking them about family support. It is sad. I am speechless sometimes," she said. "No matter the situation, if they are homeless, parents, alcoholics, or high school dropouts, we want them to feel better about their future and their choices. We all need help these days." Vidal said the most common job-hunting mistakes people make are leaving blank spaces on their job applications, failing to match their resume to the job they are applying for, and not developing a strategy when they start their job search.

"People do not realize how important these things are," she said. Christian Help plans to open anywhere from three to six more satellite offices throughout Central Florida in the next two years. They are negotiating with four different churches and nonprofit organizations for space and resources.



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