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Public Employee Press

A chance and a real job

It was work, not experience, that 50 former participants in the Work Experience Program needed. Today they are full-time employees in the Sanitation Department, active members of Local 1549 and strong examples of the benefits a Transitional Jobs Program could bring.

By MOLLY CHARBONEAU

The city says its Work Experience Program is designed to provide on-the-job experience that welfare recipients lack — a claim that District Council 37 has challenged.

"Workfare is being used to replace the permanent, paid work force with a transient work force that has no rights or benefits," said DC 37 Administrator Lee Saunders. For this reason, the union is battling the WEP program through grievances and lawsuits.

Clerical-Administrative Local 1549 filed a "reverse out-of-title" grievance. "We are challenging the Dept. of Sanitation for putting WEP participants in our jobs," said Delsie Butler, deputy administrator of the local. "An arbitration is pending, but the case has helped pave the way for 50 former WEPs to get full-time jobs and become active union members."

"Some WEP workers are smarter than you and me put together, with education and credentials, but they just fell on hard times," said Ravena Monroe-Roberson, who chairs the local's Sanitation Chapter.

Nearly four years after they were first assigned to Sanitation, three of the former WEP workers say it wasn't experience they needed — it was a chance and a real job.

"These Local 1549 members are living testimony to the potential benefits of the Transitional Jobs Bill, which would open up permanent, full-time jobs for workfare workers," said DC 37 Deputy Administrator Eliot Seide. Here are their stories.

Update on the struggle

Transitional jobs: In April 1999, DC 37 and a coalition of unions, religious and civil rights groups began pressing for a local law to create government-sponsored jobs programs for welfare recipients.

The aim of the Transitional Jobs Program is to use federal funds to provide welfare recipients with real jobs with paychecks, union and legal rights, valuable experience and training.

The New York City Council passed the City Transitional Employment Bill in February 2000. Similar programs are in place in Baltimore, Detroit, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle and the states of Washington, Vermont, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. However, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani vetoed the bill and, despite a City Council override, he has so far refused to implement this alternative to workfare.

DC 37 and coalition allies are planning their next step in this fight. A jobs program is urgently needed by 2002, when the federal limit on lifetime benefits will pull the social safety net out from under thousands of welfare recipients.

WEP lawsuits: In May 2001, the union moved closer to trial in three of the five lawsuits filed by DC 37 and locals to stop the city from assigning WEP workers to members' titles.

The suits, filed in 1999, involve Parks Dept. employees in Locals 983 and 1505 and clerical-administrative staff in Local 1549. Last month, judges from the state Appellate Division, First Department, upheld an April 2000 lower-court decision to allow the cases to proceed, but converted them to Article 78 proceedings that set limits on what the union can recover.

According to the DC 37 Legal Dept., the new ruling underscores the union's position that the cases are viable and deserve a hearing.

Excelling at her first full-time job

Nettie Morgan, who has a bachelor's degree in psychology, began her WEP assignment at the Sanitation Dept. in 1995.

"I graduated from college, did volunteer work and prepared my resume like everyone else," said Ms. Morgan. But because of her diminutive stature, she ran up against prejudice during job interviews. She turned to the welfare safety net while she looked for work, and she ended up in the WEP program.

"Dwarfism is part of being physically challenged," Ms. Morgan explained, but that didn't keep her from excelling at her WEP assignment.

In 1997, Ms. Morgan was hired by Sanitation as a Clerical Aide (later upgraded to Clerical Associate) and assigned to rotate between locations. This posed problems, however, and she contacted Local 1549 for assistance.

"I was taking buses and I had to climb in and out. In some offices, the items I had to work with were located above my head," she said. "I needed the union's help in finding a physically appropriate work assignment."

DC 37 Rep Carolyn Bass intervened with the Sanitation Dept. to find Ms. Morgan a work location that was closer to home and helped her get a custom fitted desk, chair and computer.

"The union also told me about the city's 55-A program for people with disabilities," she said. Ms. Morgan was accepted into the program, which converted her civil service title to a non-competitive status that requires no test.

"This is the first job I ever had," said Ms. Morgan, yet you'd never know it to talk to her. Every day, she schedules and records assignments for about 155 sanitation workers on three shifts at her Canarsie location. And she still finds time to attend union meetings, rallies and other events because, she says, "I believe in fighting not only for jobs and the union, but also for the physically challenged."

Proud to be helping her family

Lillian Smith has had to miss a few union meetings since she became a Local 1549 member two years ago. That's because the

former WEP worker, who already has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, is furthering her education through courses offered by the DC 37 Education Fund.

"I've taken computer classes and I'm taking American Sign Language, and sometimes the classes coincide with the union meeting times," explained Ms. Smith, who is now a permanent Clerical Associate 3.

Ms. Smith had always worked, but she found herself in the WEP program after a period of temporary unemployment. In 1996, she was assigned to the Office of Personnel Management in the Sanitation Dept. As she delivered time sheets to 137 Centre St. on her WEP assignment, she learned that the department was hiring full-time clerical workers and applied. After attending job workshops and being interviewed, Ms. Smith was selected for a full-time Clerical Aide position (later upgraded to Clerical Associate).

"Later, in 1998, I saw the notice for the Clerical Associate 3 exam, so I studied for the test, passed it, and became a permanent CA3 effective July 1999," stated Ms. Smith, who now works at Sanitation's Manhattan East 11 Garage.

A mother of two, grandmother of eight and great-grandmother of three, Ms. Smith is glad to be back in a permanent job.

"It feels good to be self-supporting and get that paycheck every two weeks," she said. "I can bank on a definite income, establish credit and help my family."

Happy to be back at work

Mary Chauncey came to the WEP program already equipped with work experience. "I was in the workforce for over 16 years and was laid off when my employer went bankrupt," she said.

Ms. Chauncey was assigned to the mailroom of the Chief Clerk's office at 125 Worth St. when she learned that Sanitation was hiring 50 full-time clerical workers. She applied and was hired to work at the Manhattan Borough Office as a Clerical Aide (later upgraded to Clerical Associate).

Seeing a notice in the paper for the Clerical Associate exam, she took and passed the test.

"I was just appointed in March 2001 to a permanent Clerical Associate position," said a happy Ms. Chauncey. "It feels good to be in the work force and earning a regular check." Since then, Ms. Chauncey — a mother and grandmother — has been active with Local 1549, attending meetings and events when she can. And she conveys a deep understanding of the WEP experience that cuts through the stereotypes. "There, but for the grace of God, goes just about anybody," she said.