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United Way to launch Way to Work program

MARY ALFORD The News-Enterprise Feb 12, 2018 Updated 4 hrs ago



Roughly 14,306 of Hardin County's 103,574 residents live in poverty.

That comes to 13.8 percent of the county's population, according to a 2016 U.S. Census Bureau Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates report.

United Way of Central Kentucky is looking to cut the poverty numbers through its new program, Way to Work.

"Our objective is to move people out of poverty through employment," United Way Central Kentucky President and CEO Megan Stith said.

Stith said the process of creating the Way to Work program began about two years ago when the organization noticed a disconnect between the workforce in the area and employers. In speaking with many of its business partners, she said partners say they have plenty of job opportunities, but are struggling to find and retain employees.

"We just noticed there was this disconnect and said there has got to be something more we can do to try to fill this gap — really be able to bring a better connection between the nonprofit community and think about how we can support the long-term economic development of our community," Stith said.

She said the local United Way began looking at ways other communities were dealing with a workforce shortage. They found models all over the country, she said, but Way to Work is based on the Cincinnati Works model, which has brought thousands of the city's residents out of poverty through employment over the past two decades.

Stith said although Cincinnati Works was successful in Ohio, it has to be implemented differently in Elizabethtown. To assist, she said Goodwill Industries of Kentucky reached out to the local United Way.

Stith said the program will provide soft skills training to clients. They will receive a job readiness certificate, be paired with a personal coach and receive wraparound services to resolve the issues keeping them from being stable members of the workforce.

Stith said clients will receive one-on-one support through the job search process, with a coach providing guidance on positions available at partner companies that would be a successful fit for the candidate's circumstances, skills and interests.

Upon hiring, the coach will remain engaged with the member and partner company, making regular contact with all parties to improve retention.

"That relationship between the coach and the job-seeker, that doesn't end when that person gets a job," Stith said.

Not only will this program benefit job seekers and local employers, Stith said nonprofit agencies will be better coordinated with a backbone program that can serve as a referral pipeline to employment for those with barriers and to other services such as substance abuse recovery and housing.

Magnolia Bank CEO Scott Conway, who was 2016-17 chairman of the UWCK board, said according to Cincinnati Works, a family living in poverty costs society as much as \$30,000 per year in social services.

"What we're looking at here, we may be spending that same \$30,000, but spending it one time to move out of poverty into self-sufficiency," Conway said.

Stith compared United Way's work to a car's engine, saying the organization drives the community forward.

“We’re bringing the right people, the right resources around the table and trying to make sure our community has the resources it needs to not only deal with the issues and challenges we face today, but also prevent those problems from happening again in the future,” she said.

Stith said the organization’s goal is to start serving clients by the middle of the year.

Conway said their target for the first year is to try to enroll 50 residents in the program. Several businesses already have signed up to support the Way to Work program, including Magnolia Bank.

“We see it as an opportunity to find something that makes a difference in someone’s life,” Conway said.

For more information, go to <http://www.unitedwayck.org/waytowork>.

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