

Program aims to connect benefit recipients with jobs that work

By JOHN WAYNE FERGUSON The Daily News | Posted: Saturday, November 26, 2016 11:00 pm

Editor's Note: This is a third in an occasional series on issues facing the evolving workforce in Galveston County.

GALVESTON

Wayne Scott wants to keep his job.

Scott, 42, a father of two, and recipient of a housing voucher from the Galveston Housing Authority, has gone through multiple certification and training programs to try to keep one. But since 2008, Scott said he's held half a dozen jobs.

He wants to keep them, but the ones he's found don't keep him around.

Scott in some ways typifies an incongruity in Galveston, where employers say they can't find enough people to hire, yet there are plenty of unemployed residents.

The conundrum arises in part from a reliance on foreign seasonal workers and lack of skilled workers. Retiring baby boomers, ever-changing technology and underemployed workers complicate the problem.

Now, Scott is participating in a housing authority program that aims to help him find something that sticks.

"I've been in school, I've got an electrician trade, a janitorial trade and went to McDonald's and got a management certificate, but it's still hard to find a job because they look at education," Scott said. "They look at it as if you are too qualified for a position."

At the Galveston Housing Authority, a federal initiative called the Family Self-Sufficiency Program, aims to increase the financial literacy of housing authority residents and reduce or eliminate their need for welfare assistance.

The program has existed since 1990. But Scott and other participants say that it received a shot of life this year when its management was taken over by Jeri Lyons.

"She's given me references to jobs that will take me on or help me get better at a skill I don't have," Scott said. "She's opening up a lot of doors for me that I couldn't open up for myself."

Twenty-four families or individuals are participating in the program, Lyons said.



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Linda Dailey, left, director of the Health Initiatives Learning Center, talks with Lacrese Davis on Saturday, Nov. 19, 2016, about courses her center offers during a Family Self-Sufficiency fair at the Galveston Housing Authority.

Kathy Castillo, 38, another program participant, has tried to deal with some credit issues by herself. But the married mother of six hasn't been able to figure out a solution.

"It's hard trying to do that on your own, especially if you don't know what you're doing," Castillo said.

Castillo could only use one word to describe trying to fix her credit on her own — failure.

One of the key aspects of the program is connecting participants with employers and other resources, Lyons said. She's established a network of more than 30 employers, businesses and agencies in Galveston that aim to help participants in the program. Participants are shown where to get financial help, or training programs for new skills, whatever they need to achieve their five-year plan to get off the housing voucher program.

The program emphasizes personal responsibility, Lyons said. Participants are not given handouts. They receive a referral and are expected to make calls and set up appointments themselves.

"What we're trying to do for the participants is put an emphasis on financial independence," Lyons said. "What we want to do is de-emphasize welfare dependence."

Most people who receive help through welfare programs are employed. A 2015 study by the University of California, Berkeley determined that 56 percent of money from state and federal programs between 2009 and 2011 went to working families and individuals with jobs.

The percentage is greater in Texas, where the study found that 64 percent of welfare went to working families.

Steven Craig, an economist and interim dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Houston, said welfare reforms created by President Bill Clinton in the 1990s emphasized work requirements as a condition of welfare.

"It's sort of impossible to live your whole life as a child of the welfare system," Craig said. "Our welfare benefits are still relatively low, which is another way of saying working does pretty well, relative to that."

Despite the number of people that are working while receiving benefits, they can still struggle to come off such programs. Part of the reason is the way those benefits can change as people begin to earn higher wages.

At the housing authority, for instance, clients are required to report job and salary changes, which in turn change the amount of housing subsidy a family receives.

The Family Self-Sufficiency Program has one solution to ease that burden. Participants in the program are given an escrow account, which can be tapped if a participating family's rent increases. When a family completes the program, and is self-sufficient, it receives the total amount that is in the account. One of the goals of the program, aside from reducing welfare dependence, is promoting homeownership.

If a participant drops out of the program, they forfeit the money in the account.

Being able to collect on that account is one of the things Scott is looking forward to as he works through the program. But that's not what the real sign of success will be to him.

“I like the assistance,” Scott said. “But as a parent and a man, I want to own a home, I want that yard. I want to get off the program.”