



IN THIS ISSUE...

HMONG AMERICAN PARTNERSHIP, p. 3

HIRED partners with the Hmong American Partnership to provide MFIP participants essential job skills training.

YOUTH SERVICES PROFILE, p. 4

Kao Choua Vue gained valuable work experience as an intern for Rep. Steve Simon.

HOSPITALITY TRAINING, p. 4

HIRED's newest training initiative will train 120 workers for careers in hospitality.

ADULT SERVICES PROFILE, p. 5

At 65 years of age Roy Pearson decided to pursue a new career in the health care industry.

CONTRIBUTORS, p. 5

WHAT'S NEW, p. 6

CHANGING LIVES

In mid-August, Jan West spent a day as a guest speaker for two job readiness skills workshops in the Lino Lakes Correctional Facility. "I've been working in prisons and jails for a long time, but I am still startled by the metal clank of the heavy doors closing behind me. You'd think it's a movie cliché, but it's not. On the way in, it sounds threatening and final. On the way out, it makes me appreciate the sun and the sky and the fact that I can leave at the end of the work day."

As the program manager of one of HIRED's newest programs, Changing Lives, West's work days are a little unusual. Changing Lives provides job search skills and training to sex offenders scheduled for release in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties. The state-funded program is administered by the Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC), and is designed to reduce recidivism by ex-sex offenders through employment preparation services and help finding transitional employment within thirty days of release. The transitional employment is intended to establish the beginning of a new work history that will lead to stable, permanent employment and successful re-integration into the community.

"There is clearly a link between employment and reduced recidivism," says Farris Bell, Community Reentry Coordinator with the DOC. "Because ex-sex offenders have substantially more difficult problems finding work, we solicited proposals for programs that would help these individuals move quickly into a transitional job."

HIRED's successful proposal was a reflection of its long history of working with and within the criminal justice system. The organization was founded by ex-offenders

to offer peer counseling and job skills support to others to ease their transition from prison back to society. "We have always taken on the heavy lifting in our job development work," says HIRED Executive Director, Jane Samargia. "H.I.R.E. (Helping Industry Recruit Exoffenders) was incorporated in 1968 as a peer counseling program because people with criminal records were having a difficult time finding acceptance in the job market and had no way to support themselves upon release from prison. That included people convicted of sex crimes, although in the 60s and 70s there wasn't the intense focus that now surrounds them. Throughout the



Changing Lives staff members: (seated) Frazier Robinson, Nancy Christensen and Deb Vosejpk; (standing) Jan West and Dawn Hall.

last 38 years, we have continued to help ex-offenders find and keep jobs because we know that the ability to earn an income through a legitimate job significantly lowers the likelihood that a convicted criminal will re-offend."

But even with this base of experience and culture of support for people whom society generally prefers to ignore, HIRED has experienced some turbulence in working

(continued on page 2)



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CHANGING LIVES (from page 1)

with ex-sex offenders. "It's basically the 'ick' factor," says West. "The way ex-sex offenders are portrayed in the media is a huge problem. We are led to believe that every one of them is a dangerous, Level III offender. That's just not the case. The vast majority are Level I or Level II offenders — people who pose little risk to society at large. They have completed the sentence for their crimes, have usually successfully completed a treatment program, and just want to get on with their lives."

Released sex offenders are just one segment of a growing population of people being released from prison with little or no support for the re-entry transition.

HIRED's programs focus on job search skills that help ex-offenders re-establish jobs and careers. Employment is a key element in finding housing, transportation, and other benefits and services

A Second Chance Success

Darrell spent a total of eleven years in prison for multiple felonies, including a sex offense. He entered prison without a high school education. While inside, he took advantage of a variety of educational opportunities and computer training. Over a decade of hard work, Darrell completed a GED and a college degree in information processing through Century College and an online program. His prison job was as a contract software engineer/web programmer.

On release, HIRED helped Darrell secure a technology job with a software consulting firm. "If Darrell hadn't applied himself while in prison and gained a set of useful skills, he would be struggling to find a low-skill, low-wage job," says Changing Lives program director Jan West. "Instead, with educational credentials, technology skills, and a track record of work, he was able to take a step toward a good job and a promising future."

with which clients build stable lives. "We work very closely with probation officers (POs), who often have unbelievably large case loads. Many POs have gone out of their way to let us know how much they appreciate the services we are providing, especially to ex-sex offenders. The POs know how difficult it can be for these people to re-build productive lives under the conditions of their release," says West.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROGRAM

According to figures from the Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC), at the end of 2005, Minnesota had just over 1,500 sex offenders in its correctional facilities. Over the past five years, an average of a little more than 500 new offenders have entered the prison system each year. About a third of the total population of imprisoned sex offenders complete their sentences and are released each year. Those released into Hennepin and Ramsey County are eligible to participate in Changing Lives.

The DOC assigns people to participate in Changing Lives as a condition of their parole. HIRED receives a list of people assigned to the program about 90 days prior to their release. The program's employment counselors, Dawn Hall and Frazier Robinson, try to meet with each client two or three times prior to release, to prepare them for the intensive job search that is expected to begin immediately. Group job search skills workshops and other training activities are offered by Nancy Christensen and Jan West. For the most part, these activities are similar to those offered to HIRED's other client groups.

On the outside, things are a little different. Job developer Deb Vosejka pounds the pavement to find companies with appropriate jobs and a willingness to hire ex-offenders. As a group, ex-sex offenders have a broader range of job skills than the general prison population. Changing Lives clients range from people without high school diplomas and work histories of low-skilled jobs, to highly educated professionals with extensive work experience. This allows the program's job development effort


to focus on a somewhat broader range of companies and potential jobs than is typically the case. "When we first meet with a potential employer, we are very clear that we are seeking placements for ex-offenders," says West.

When working to place ex-offenders, HIRED does not ordinarily volunteer the nature of the crime unless the company asks, or it is in some way relevant to the company's business. With ex-sex offenders, though, job developers have to be very direct about the nature of the crime, even before referring a specific individual. At this point in the conversation there is often a big gulp. "We have some really amazing employers who truly believe that people deserve a second chance," says Vosejka. "But even among this group, there is a reluctance to accept an ex-sex offender."

There are many occupations that are simply off-limits, and each ex-sex offender's parole delineates the special conditions they must fulfill. HIRED must be sure potential employers are aware of the nature of the felonies and any parole provisions that might have an impact on the ability of the clients to perform a given job. For example, an ex-sex offender might be prohibited from using the Internet, so an employer might need to provide a stand-alone work station if the job requires some sort of computer use.

PROMISING EARLY RESULTS

Since the program was officially launched in April, approximately 48 people have been referred to Changing Lives. Through July, about half have been released from prison. Of those released, 14 had begun transitional or permanent employment within the 30-day target window.

"It's a daunting task to find jobs for these clients," says West. "Our long-term goal is to work with 160 clients over the first 12 months of the program. We have recruited a very experienced team of employment counselors, and we've had great support from the other professionals in the criminal justice system and from our initial employers." 

HMONG AMERICAN PARTNERSHIP

In a new community center on St. Paul's east side, boisterous laughter and shouts in Hmong and English erupt from a couple of dozen kids enrolled in a summer program. Adults pass through the lobby of this former YMCA, now the home of Hmong American Partnership (HAP), a non-profit organization serving Minnesota's growing Hmong community. They offer greetings, stop to talk about upcoming meetings and workshops, check on the health of friends and family.



Employment Counselor Chan Xiong

On the second floor, a HIRED employment counselor, Chan Xiong, staffs a satellite HIRED office, providing a full program of job skills counseling and training for Hmong participants in the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). Under the terms of HIRED's contract with Ramsey County, the services offered follow the same regulations and provide the same services as the county-funded Specialized Training and Experience Program (STEP). The HIRED/HAP program provides clients with an additional measure of cultural awareness and community interaction and support.

"The Hmong community has been very well established in St. Paul for about 30 years," says Chan. "When my parents came over, they had to manage everything, with very little support, and very little English. Now there is a strong community and many bilingual people to help. But individuals still need extra training and support."

St. Paul is home to the largest Hmong community in the U.S. The 2000 census

tallied 41,850 Hmong in the city, and some estimates suggest that the number has swelled to as many as 60,000 people. Even with extensive support networks, relatives and mutual-aid associations, the challenges facing recent immigrants are daunting. Of the approximately 5,000 Hmong people who have immigrated to St. Paul from Thailand over the past 18 months, very few had opportunities to obtain much formal education. To find an economic foothold, they are often initially limited to lower-skilled jobs and must try to squeeze in English language classes around the job search requirements of the MFIP program.

JOB SKILLS TRAINING

On an August afternoon, Chan prepared to continue a series of job skills workshops with a cohort of four recent immigrants. The class is waiting patiently, exactly on time. They politely greet Chan and wait for the start of the class.

All four students enrolled are adults, and relatively recent immigrants. Xiong (no relation to Chan) has been in the U.S. the longest, just over a year and a half. He is in his late 20s and speaks better Thai (his second language) than English (his third). His face clouds with effort as he tries to follow a conversation in English, but lights up in a smile at a joke told in Hmong. "I came here one year,

ten months," he says. "I came here from Thailand to live." Xiong has yet to find a steady job due to the language barrier.

"In this class we spend quite a bit of time talking about how to handle a variety of workplace scenarios, like what to do if you don't understand something, or how to act if a new co-worker is cold or unfriendly, or how to deal with a boss who gives you all of the unpleasant tasks. These are the basic things that make people uncomfortable with a job," says Chan. Many daily workplace interactions are based on nuances of language and culturally based assumptions that are difficult for recent immigrants and people with limited English language skills to understand. One of the most important things job skills workshops provide is a de-mystification of workplace behavior. "Our clients — especially the recent immigrants — want to work hard and do well, but that's difficult if they don't understand what is expected, or how to behave."

THE HIRED/HAP PROGRAM

HIRED's partner in the program, Hmong American Partnership, operates its own social service and employment programs for the general Hmong community, but is collaborating with HIRED to offer services specifically to MFIP recipients. Since the program was established at the

(continued...)

Mickle

When Mickle first immigrated to the U.S., he landed in Wisconsin where he found jobs in an upholstery factory and a turkey processing plant. Both were demanding workplaces requiring hard physical labor. That was the easy part. For Mickle, understanding what his supervisors expected was harder. "Bosses are all different," he said through a translator. "Some try to help you before you make mistakes, but others wait until after you have made a mistake so that they can get mad at you."

Since moving to St. Paul, Mickle, a polite, well-dressed man in his early 30s, has been trying to find more challenging employment. He is focusing his job search on medical assembly work while trying to improve his English.

"Sometimes the question, 'What do you want to do?' is a difficult one to ask of recent immigrants," says HIRED/HAP employment counselor, Chan Xiong. "Many are used to doing whatever is required, or what they have been told to do. We are trying to help Hmong people have the opportunity to dream of a new future, and then take action to make it happen."

PARTNERSHIP... (from page 3)

beginning of 2006, eight cohorts of approximately six people each have gone through the program, beginning with a two-week job search skills orientation workshop, followed by a supported job search. About half of the program participants have found employment, most in light manufacturing or production jobs.

As a group, recent Hmong immigrants have three sets of challenges: language skills, education and work skills. Younger immigrants are usually literate in Hmong and often speak and read Thai. They have typically had some schooling, but generally have not had formal employment. Older immigrants often have limited literacy, have had little or no opportunity for formal schooling and have work experiences that do not match well with the work available in the U.S. For both groups, learning English is a struggle.

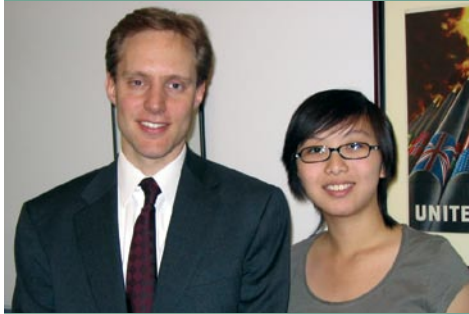
Ka, a cheerful woman in her mid-twenties is a good example of the challenges. Through a translator, she says she does not have a fixed idea about what she wants to do. "I am willing to take almost any job, providing there is enough training to help me do the job well." It is clear that she has the energy and ambition to succeed, once she has acquired the language skills necessary to function in the workplace.

A WORK-IN-PROGRESS

"Our collaboration with Hmong American Partnership is an experiment in providing services that explicitly include an effort to help people bridge the gaps between their home culture and contemporary American culture," says program director, John Klem. "By placing Chan on-site in a community organization, we're providing support that goes well beyond the services required under our county contract. As the program moves forward we will be looking carefully at the impact of the cultural dimension. If it seems to make a significant difference in helping recent Hmong immigrants make a smoother transition to employment and self-sufficiency, we'll look at expanding this work to other immigrant groups." **H**

Youth Services Profile: Kao Choua Vue

Kao Choua Vue, a senior at Central High School and a participant in YouthLEAD, a program operated through a partnership with Ramsey County Workforce Solutions, worked



Kao Choua Vue with Rep. Steve Simon

with Adam Levy, a program manager at HIRED to secure a once-in-a-lifetime internship opportunity with Representative Steve Simon at the Minnesota State Capitol. During her four-week job-shadowing experience last spring, she worked directly with Rep. Steve Simon in the State Office Building. The experience, the first of its kind for HIRED youth program participants, provided Kao Choua the opportunity to attend a wide range of

hearings, policy meetings and constituent forums with Rep. Steve Simon, and to help with the day-to-day work of a state representative.

"Until this internship came along, I never really thought about politics. I felt honored when HIRED chose me. It challenged me to think about issues like education, immigration and health care," said Kao Choua. "My family felt it was an awesome opportunity for Hmong people to be involved in local politics."

When asked what surprised her most about the experience she said, "I was surprised to realize that the people in politics are real. They care about who I am and why I was there. Before arriving, I assumed they would be too busy to pay attention to me, but I truly felt respected."

Admittedly, Kao Choua says she has a lot to learn. She didn't always understand everything that was discussed in the house gallery, but she feels fortunate to have had the opportunity to be a part of something that is so vital to Minnesota's well-being.

PREPARING WORKERS FOR CAREERS IN HOSPITALITY

Building on the success of our innovative training partnerships in the metal-forming training program, HIRED was awarded a grant from the Minnesota Job Skills Partnership to pilot a hospitality training program for low-income workers in the Twin Cities area. The two-year initiative will train 120 workers for jobs as front desk service representatives, bell attendants, maintenance workers, restaurant servers, guestroom attendants, cleaners and banquet servers. The program will begin training its first cohort of students in Fall 2006.

The hospitality training program is designed to address recruitment and retention problems in the hospitality industry. The program will be coordinated

by project manager Linda Hoffman, and delivered by HIRED and Normandale Community College through partnerships with Four Points by Sheraton Minneapolis Metrodome, Hyatt Regency Minneapolis on Nicollet Mall and Embassy Suites in Bloomington.

Nancy James, senior program director for the project said, "We will take the knowledge we've gained in our highly successful manufacturing initiative and apply it to the hotel industry. We felt it was a good industry to focus our efforts on for several reasons: 1) it is an area that no other provider is targeting for job training; 2) the leisure and hospitality industry is expected to continue grow-

(continued on page 5)

HOSPITALITY (from page 4)

ing for several years; and 3) the industry welcomes diversity, offers relative ease of entry, good wages and ample opportunity for advancement. In fact, the Hyatt Regency Minneapolis on Nicollet Mall, one of our partners in the project, reports that 70% of its managers were promoted from hourly positions and 90% of their executives were promoted from their management team.”

When training sessions begin this fall, the first component will be classroom-based education focusing on studying the Skills, Tasks and Results Training (START) curriculum developed by the American Hotel & Lodging Association’s Educational Institute. Following the completion of classroom training, students will apply for positions at HIRED’s partner hotels. Once employed, HIRED will provide on-site job coaching to support program graduates in their new positions and ensure their success on the job. Upon completion of the 10-week program (classroom training and on-site job coaching), participants will be awarded a Hospitality Skills Certificate. **h**

Adult Services Profile: Roy Pearson



Roy Pearson’s interest in the health care industry began decades ago when he worked as a nursing assistant to help put himself through college. Over the next

40 years he ran through a string of careers as a pilot, business owner and salesman — but nothing gave him the same level of satisfaction. Pearson said, “Working as a nursing assistant was the best job I ever had. I enjoy giving back to people, and working in a hospital setting allowed me to do that more than any other place.”

When he decided to quit his job as a salesman and pursue a career in the health care industry, HIRED helped him update his training. He attended a CPR certification course at Anoka Technical and graduated at the top of his class. Reflecting on his training

experience he said, “My 20-something classmates called me Grandpa Roy. They asked if as an old man, I would be able to do it. I think I taught them a good lesson in determination.”

Although he had new skills, he didn’t have any present-day work experience to back them up. His dream of working in the operating room at North Memorial was put on hold while he took a job at Twin Rivers nursing home and volunteered at North Memorial. As luck would have it, less than 30 days after he started at the Twin Rivers, North Memorial called asking him to interview for a position in the operating room... exactly what Roy wanted.

Days later Roy was offered the job, and hasn’t looked back. He enjoys his work and feels as though it’s truly valued. When asked about retirement he said, “To me, this is retirement. It feels good knowing that my work is still valued, and because of that, it builds my self-esteem. HIRED guided me in making my dream a reality.”

HIRED CONTRIBUTORS *March 15, 2006 through August 31, 2006*

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- Bouquets by Carolyn
- Cynthia Bremer
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WHAT'S NEW!

HIRED LAUNCHES REFRESHED WEBSITE

In mid-June, HIRED re-launched its website (www.HIRED.org) to provide job-seekers, employers, policy makers and media representatives with the essential workforce development and employment-related information they're seeking in a more comprehensive, organized manner. The improved navigation and expanded content provides visitors with more information and allows HIRED program directors the opportunity to create and post program information and resources specific to their client-base. Customized web pages provide detailed program information and appropriate job-search resources to participants in HIRED's dislocated worker, youth, MFIP and adult programs.

HIRED Executive Director Jane Samargia said, "We are steadily improving the content of our site to provide better services to our clients. We hope users will find the site intuitive and informative. Since HIRED first launched an electronic employment bulletin board in the late 1980s, we have tried to provide users of all backgrounds relevant information on HIRED's services and employment opportunities."

In addition to new content and improved navigation on the main site, Job Link (www.joblink.org), HIRED's online, proprietary job-search database, has also been redesigned, allowing visitors to search for jobs by more detailed geographic areas and standard career field descriptors. The database, which is available exclusively to HIRED clients and partner employers, was the first of its kind in the area.

HIRED LAUNCHES NEW DRUG COURT PROGRAM

HIRED has launched a new youth program to serve youth offenders in Ramsey County. The Drug Court program will provide intensive job search skills, supported internships and job coaching to approximately 25 youth, ages 14–18. A HIRED employment counselor, George Clabon, will work closely with a team of three probation officers and a Ramsey County judge to develop and administer the program, which is funded through a grant to the Juvenile Substance Abuse Courts from the Otto Bremer Foundation.