

The working poor in our area will have a new opportunity available to help them become economically self-reliant. Western Dairyland's Skills Enhancement program offers assistance to individuals who are working while pursuing post-secondary education. Under the Skills Enhancement program, income-eligible individuals who are working at least 20 hours per week and attending university or technical school classes may qualify for assistance designed to fill the gaps not covered by student loans and other programs. According to Jim Schwartz, executive director of Western Dairyland, "We are very excited to have this opportunity to provide Skills Enhancement to our community. Skills Enhancement is an important tool for our efforts to help lower-income families to achieve economic advancement."

Skills Enhancement was developed by Cap Services, a community action agency serving the Stevens Point area, which has been operating the program since 1991. The experience of Cap Services demonstrates that a relatively modest investment can yield remarkable success. Persons who graduated from the Cap Services program in 2004 increased their annual income by more than \$14,000 per year, while the average cost of the direct assistance was \$1,500 per participant. The program targets a very specific segment of the lower-income population, those earning less than 150% of the poverty level, which for a family of three is no more than \$24,135 per year. Individuals must be working at least 20 hours per week and be attending school full-time.

The success of the Skills Enhancement program came to the attention of the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, which embarked on a replication of the program. Western Dairyland is one of the replication sites, serving people in the counties of Buffalo, Trempealeau, Jackson and Eau Claire.

According to Jeanne Semb, who coordinates this program for Western Dairyland, "The working poor who are trying to become self-sufficient need this assistance in order to get out of poverty. If they have the opportunity to further their education, they are more likely to get better-paying jobs and become self-sufficient".

Tammy Taylor is a prime example of why this program is needed. Tammy's high school education limited her ability to obtain a good job sufficient to support her and her 3 children. Her varied work history included bartending, fast food, entry-level clerical, and working in a dog kennel. Although these jobs helped provide for Taylor's family, she knew they could not provide a bright future. With three children ages 6, 3, and 1 ½, she needed to find long-term employment which would offer her a decent salary and also benefits to support her family. Tammy decided to become a nurse. She took classes to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) at Western Wisconsin Technical College in Black River Falls. After completing her CNA training, she proceeded to enroll in the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) program at SE Tech in Winona, MN. She will complete her LPN degree in May of this year and plans to go back in the fall to complete the RN program, hoping to graduate in May of 2007.

Tammy's story demonstrates the difficulty faced by many lower income working individuals who are trying to improve their lives while supporting families. In addition to the rigorous school schedule resulting from taking 17 credits per semester, Tammy also spends more than 2 hours per day traveling to and from classes and works 20 hours per week at Black River Memorial Hospital.

Prior to hearing about the Skills Enhancement Program, Taylor said she had a conversation with her mom about possibly having to quit school due to the financial burdens. Although she does receive some financial aid, it isn't enough to cover all of her expenses. Taylor found out about the Skills Enhancement program and now receives a modest grant to help her continue her education. Additionally, comprehensive case management is provided to the participants to help them solve other issues which may impact their ability to succeed.

For more information contact Jeanne Semb, Western Dairyland Skills Enhancement Coordinator at (800) 782-1063.