August 31, 2016
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New program takes aim at rural poverty

(MADISON) – The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is targeting the issue of poverty in Wisconsin's most economically disadvantaged areas with an exciting new subsidized work program. The Transitional Jobs (TJ) program is a public/private partnership that teams local businesses looking for a low-risk way to expand their workforce with eligible unemployed or underemployed jobseekers in need of training and mentorship. The program has a specific focus of helping people with high-barriers gain the skills needed to transition into long-term, family sustaining jobs.

Based on the promising Transitional Jobs pilot program that ended in 2013, eligible low-income workers can now apply to participate in Transitional Jobs, thanks to recent agreements between the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) and contractor organizations in four geographical areas.

"Many people believe that poverty is in an urban issue, but in Wisconsin a higher percentage of people living in rural areas face the daily challenge of providing for their family," said DCF Secretary Eloise Anderson. "This new grant gears up the Transitional Jobs program, in selected locations with the highest percentage of rural poverty rates with the goal of helping people move from government dependence to true independence."

The new program aims to help low-income adults who are not receiving Wisconsin Works (W-2) benefits and not eligible for Unemployment Insurance benefits obtain stable unsubsidized employment and job training skills. It provides various job-related services and subsidized employment for up to six months at minimum wage, although employers may choose to increase participants' hourly rate.

Authorized by Governor Walker in the last state budget, the Transitional Jobs Program is now up and running and looking for applicants in ten rural counties in northern Wisconsin as well as two urban locations. Agencies operating the TJ program and their service areas are:

- UMOS, Inc. - serving participants in Florence, Forest, Langlade and Menominee counties.
- Northwest Wisconsin CEP (Concentrated Employment Program) - serving participants in Ashland, Bayfield, Iron, Rusk, Sawyer and Taylor counties.
- Community Action, Inc. - serving participants in the city of Beloit.
- UMOS, Inc. - serving participants in Racine County.

The northern counties also include participation by Bad River, Menominee, Sokaogon Chippewa, and Potawatomi tribal members.

To qualify to participate in the Transitional Jobs program individuals must be at least 18 years old, or, if over 24 years of age be a biological or adoptive parent or relative and primary caregiver of a child under 18; have an annual household income that is below 150 percent of the federal poverty line; be unemployed at least four consecutive weeks; and satisfy drug-testing requirements.

"The program is designed to help unemployed ex-offenders, unemployed parents with child support orders, parents in the child welfare system and unemployed youth aging out of foster care," said Anderson. "It helps people gain the work experience they desperately need, while helping employers identify new sources of needed talent in exchange for the simple investment of training and mentoring.

Employment opportunities can help individuals towards a path to independence and prosperity by transitioning into the workforce and helping them to support their children. Currently, the Governor's Transform Milwaukee Jobs program serves high poverty areas in Milwaukee County; the Transitional Jobs program was designed to serve other areas of the state, with priority going to areas with relatively high rates of unemployment and childhood poverty.

For more information about the Transitional Jobs program, visit http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/w2/tj/.

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