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County kicks off workforce renewal program

By Jason Evans

LIBERTY — With the state's unemployment rate at 11.4 percent — the third in the nation, there's no denying that it's tough times in South Carolina.

But local and state officials believe that it's also a perfect time for undereducated and unemployed people to better themselves, so that they can find higher-paying, more rewarding jobs.

The county officially kicked off its Workforce Renewal Program Tuesday afternoon with a press conference at Liberty's Rosewood Center.

"Thirty percent of the state's unemployed have been laid off," said Pickens County Special Projects Coordinator Olivia Vassey.

"They've lost their jobs through the economy, through no fault of their own," she said.

The WRP is County Council's effort to revitalize the county's workforce by paying for high school drop-outs to go back to school for their GEDs.

The program will also pay for unemployed residents to go back to school for job retraining through Tri-County Tech's Quick Jobs program, and help residents with small business ideas get those ideas off the ground through Clemson University's FastTrac program.

The county will not only pay for the \$25 enrollment fee at the Adult Education Center, but will provide returning students with incentives to encourage them to stick with the GED program.

The WFP program will cover up to 1,000 enrollments, Vassey said.

"If that student makes an academic gain for that academic year, they'll receive \$50 as an incentive," Vassey said.

The Adult Learning Center will pay for the \$80 GED testing fee for students, Vassey said.

Upon receiving their GED, the county will reward students with an additional \$100, she said.

Adult Learning Center officials want to do everything they can to help people earn their GEDs, said ALC Director Dr. Mary Gaston.

“We want to do as much as possible to help families build better futures in Pickens County,” she said. “Education’s the key.”

Tri-County Tech will partner with the county, to offer job retraining classes at no cost to students.

“Possible classes range from nursing to food service,” Vassey said. “Computer classes will also be offered to compliment the classes offered at the Adult Learning Center.”

“We think it’s a great program to get the citizens of Pickens County back into the workforce,” said John Lummus, vice president for Economic Development and Governmental Affairs at TCTC. “There are a lot of folks out there in need of jobs, and we really think that through this program, through Pickens County, we can help people get training as needed, to help them get into the workforce.”

The Quick Jobs retraining classes will be taught in Pickens County, at Tri-County Tech’s new Easley campus, he said.

“Those will be taught in our Quick Jobs training center,” Lummus said.

Tri-County will hold a groundbreaking May 29, and officials hope the Quick Jobs center will be completed by the first quarter of 2010, he said.

Incentives will also be offered to those interested in bring their small business ideas to life, through Clemson’s FastTrac program.

Three classes will be offered through FastTrac, with the First Step class focusing on small retail and service businesses, such as day care or lawn maintenance.

Those who complete that class will receive \$50 from the county, Vassey said.

The New Venture and Growth Venture classes will focus on new and expanding business, and once students develop a business plan based on these classes, they will receive an additional \$50.

Anyone interested in any aspect of the program should first go to one of the OneStop Center and complete an assessment to determine what federal funds they are eligible for, Vassey said.

“In the event that a Pickens County citizen, 18 years or older, does not qualify for any other program, then the Workforce Renewal Program will kick in,” she said.

The county will hold an Expo at the Rosewood Center from noon to 7 p.m. Thursday, May 21 at the Rosewood Center, to give more information to those interested in the program.

The Expo will feature presentations and information booths from the county and its partners in the WFP, including how to get started in the program.