



Back on their feet

By **LARRY HENDRICKS** Assistant City Editor | Posted: Monday, January 11, 2010 5:00 am

Carolyn Stokes began battling depression and anxiety when she was very young. As an adult, she eventually had a nervous breakdown.

"I fell apart," she said.

Her mental illness led to a stay at a mental health institution. She ended up homeless at one point and couldn't hold down a job.

"I lost everything -- everything I worked for, dreamed for," Stokes said.

But now, living in subsidized housing and on the road to recovery, Stokes is working on honing her social skills and gaining some independence by joining the workforce again.

Stokes is getting job skills through a training program for the mentally ill offered through Goodwill Industries of Northern Arizona. And other severely mentally ill people seeking the same help in phasing back into the workforce now have more options from which to choose because the Northern Behavioral Health Authority has awarded contracts to Goodwill Industries and fellow community service agency Quality Connections.

Maria Esposito, employment and rehab coordinator for NARBHA, said extending contracts to more community service agencies is meant to offer more choices to customers seeking help in acquiring skills necessary to get into the workforce.

"We are always looking for more community service agencies that can provide services to get more people served," Esposito said.

Before, Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System funds meant for job training for the mentally ill were given exclusively to The Guidance Center, which also provides job training skills similar to Goodwill and Quality Connections.

POLISHING THEIR SKILLS

Armando Bernasconi of Quality Connections said that the two agencies help the disabled with polishing their skills to help them find and keep jobs in the community.

"And once we find them a job, we assist with maintaining the job," Bernasconi said.

David Hirsch, chief executive officer of Goodwill, said the training also offers on-site help with employment specialists.

"This is really about increasing employment opportunities for people with severe mental illness," Hirsch said.

Merrie Heath, director of mission services at Goodwill, has been helping Stokes with maintaining her job at the Pizza Hut on South Milton Road.

Heath remembered when Stokes couldn't even pick up a phone to talk to people. Now she regularly speaks with people as a customer service employee at the Pizza Hut taking orders over the phone and face-to-face.

Heath said that the employment program for the disabled at Goodwill has about 80 percent of the clients still employed after 90 days. Bernasconi said Quality Connections, at last look about two years ago, had about 64 percent of its clients still employed after 90 days.

As for how many more people the two agencies will help with new AHCCCS funds, Hirsch and Bernasconi said that number is unknown at this point.

Melissa Setren of Quality Connections said that although both agencies have a regular pool of employers to whom they send clients, they work with any employer in town that offers a job for which a client might have aptitude.

Bernasconi said, "Employers in Flagstaff are extremely benevolent ... and are just really open to these types of services and these types of programs."

NOT GIVING UP

Jeff Schaaf, Pizza Hut regional general manager, said that he was concerned about Stokes' performance early because she did not disclose her mental illness and she did not bring her oxygen bottle for her pulmonary hypertension with her to work either.

But then Heath stepped in after Stokes called her, frantic that she was about to be fired. She began coming to the restaurant and helping Stokes with areas she found difficult.

After being made aware of Stokes' disabilities, Schaaf and the rest of the staff began working more to help Stokes be successful.

"Basically, I don't like to give up on people," Schaaf said.

Stokes receives Social Security disability money and is only able to work part-time to continue to qualify. She is happy to be making her own money, but she said finding a job wasn't really about the money.

"It gives you a sense of responsibility," she said. "It gives you social time."

Stokes said she couldn't give enough praise to the help she has received on her road to recovery -- help she couldn't have done without.

"If you really want to get well, there's a lot of help out there," she said. "Your journey to mental health, you can't do it alone."

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