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Orlando-area job-training money runs out

Workforce Central Florida unlikely to have more training scholarships till July

By Jim Stratton

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Jobless Central Floridians hoping to tap a training fund of Workforce Central Florida are likely out of luck — at least until July.

The region's publicly funded job-service agency has exhausted the money set aside early this year for training scholarships. The scholarships were partly funded by \$4 million in federal stimulus money that became available in April.

Since then, Workforce Central Florida has awarded about 2,000 training scholarships valued at about \$8 million. Officials said the program was so popular it will have no more scholarships until July.

Between now and then, a limited number of scholarships might become available if earlier recipients find a job, don't complete training or ultimately choose not to accept the money. But that's likely to be hit or miss.

"Throughout the year, we may be able to recycle those awards and award a few new scholarships," said agency spokeswoman Kimberly Cornett. But, she said, "we will not know how many that will allow us to award again until late January."

The scholarships pay for unemployed workers to be trained for jobs for which there is strong demand, such as nursing. Recipients can use the money at local community colleges or at schools specializing in adult education.

Gary Earl, Workforce Central Florida executive director, said in every economic downturn, there's far more need for retraining programs than there is money to provide it. This recession has been that much worse, in part, because it has lasted so long and cut so deeply.

Florida's unemployment rate now stands at 11.5 percent, with about 1.05 million people out of work in the Sunshine State. National figures indicate that more than one-third of people out of work have been jobless six months or more.

"Generally, you have enough money to serve about 5 percent of the population that's eligible," Earl said. "The money never keeps up with it."

Hao Phung was hoping to fall into that 5 percent.

A 67-year-old Clermont resident, Phung was laid off from a company that handled telephone billing for hotels in March. She'd been there for 12 years.

Workforce Central Florida officials said Phung was eligible but had been placed on a waiting list for a scholarship because last summer they placed her in a 90-day temporary job with Workforce money. So because she had from one program, they wanted to give others a shot at the training money for scholarships.

"I was all set to study medical billing. I was thrilled," she said. "But then they said they didn't have the funds. Now they're saying it might not be until June or July."

That's not unusual, said Jessie Hogg, a senior regional director with the National Skills Coalition, a workers-advocacy group based in Washington.

Hogg said she has not done an exhaustive study, but many states are reporting that training money is running out at local work-force agencies. Federal officials, she said, might provide more money, but it's not likely to arrive before the middle of next year.

"By then," she said, "there's no telling where some of these folks will be" financially.

Walescca Garcia knows all about being strapped for cash.

She lost her job at the Osceola County Courthouse in August 2007 and, after months of looking for a new job, applied for a scholarship around June 2008. She was lucky, she said, because she applied the same day Workforce Central Florida received its training money.

Garcia, 36, went to school for a year, studying at the Technical Education Center of Osceola County to become a licensed practical nurse. She finished in July and recently landed a job at a nursing home in Kissimmee. It pays \$16 an hour and includes health benefits.

For Garcia, the relief is palpable.

"After that long," she said, "you just don't know how good it feels."

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