

At Opportunity Chicago, CHA residents take first steps toward a career



Career development specialist Mialisa Harris congratulates Eugene Harris on his receiving personal care technician certificate at Central State SER in South Lawndale. / Photo by Megan Cottrell

BY MEGAN COTTRELL / Staff Writer
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Growing up in the Henry Horner projects on Chicago's West Side, Eugene Harris was a bright kid, but after trying a couple of different college programs, he couldn't find one he wanted to stick with.

"I was depressed," says Harris. "It just seemed like nothing would ever open up for me."

Harris says it was a "detour" to a job fair that started him on the path he's on today. He's a certified nursing assistant working toward a degree in radiography.

The detour landed Harris in a health care career bridge program at Opportunity Chicago, a large citywide initiative to get public housing residents working.

The point of the initiative is to meet public housing residents at their level of skills and experience and to use a number of innovative strategies to get them into a career, says Jen Keeling, coordinator of the project with the Chicago Jobs Council.

"There are plenty of people who need more education. They need more literacy training. They need hard skills training," says Keeling. "They need to learn how to get up in the morning at the same time every day and go to work."

Opportunity Chicago started in 2006 as a collaboration between several partners, including the Chicago Housing Authority, the Partnership for New Communities and the Chicago Department of Community Development.

The initiative had a straightforward goal: to make 5,000 job placements for CHA residents in five years.

After three years, they're almost there. To date, there have been 4,400 placements for 3,300 residents, and they expect to far exceed their original goal by the end of 2010, says Keeling.

Maria Hibbs, executive director of the Partnership for New Communities, says that success comes from a focus on practicalities.

"How could it be that someone graduates from high school ... and doesn't have the requisite reading and math levels to get into the city colleges?" says Hibbs. "We could point our fingers every which way, or we could say let's do something about it. That person needs a way to get from here to there and what are we going to do to help make that happen."

The program Harris joined offered something called contextualized literacy, meaning he could work on reading and math skills while learning medical terminology and health care techniques.

On average, participants gain a whole grade level or more in both reading and math after an eight-week program.

After completing a bridge program to get their skills up to par, they can then work towards becoming a certified nursing assistant or a personal care technician. A lot of people who go through the program end up pursuing education beyond their initial certifications, just like Harris.

"He's continuing to take additional training to get to the job that he wants," says Hibbs. "That's what we hope people will do. Not to just stop at an entry level, but to continue and develop and advance in a career."

And helping people land careers, rather than jobs, is the ultimate goal, says Rachel McDonald Romo, executive director of Central States SER, which runs the program Harris joined.

"If we don't help you today to increase your skill level, you're probably always going to be stuck never making a living wage," says McDonald Romo.

When people do advance into a career, says McDonald Romo, their confidence skyrockets.

"You can see it on people's faces. You can see it in the way people carry themselves," she says. "If you have that vision of a career, it gives you a new level of hope."

Although the initiative ends in 2010, the key players say the job placements won't. Many of the initiative's programs, like contextualized literacy, will continue to be funded through the CHA and the city.

Part of the initiative's purpose is to show just how effective these kinds of intensive programs can be and help existing city services to better serve residents.

And that goes hand-in-hand with The Plan for Transformation's purpose of ending the isolation that public housing residents have experienced for so long and helping them connect with people that can help them and their families become self-sufficient, says Kellie O'Connell-Miller, interim director of research, reporting and communications for CHA.

"It's not a question of 'Should I serve these five CHA residents?' It's 'I'm going to serve these five citizens of Chicago because they need help," says O'Connell-Miller.

Harris calls the bridge program at Central State SER "the real deal" and says it has molded him into a new person. He hopes the program can expand to other places in the city to serve more residents.

"I hope the mayor or someone on top will see this program and see what they are really doing and expand it," says Harris. "They should put a branch on every street corner."

Harris can't wait to start the radiography program at Malcolm X College this summer, but no matter how successful he gets, he says he'll never forget he came from Henry Horner.

"My voice and my diction may change, but I will still be the person who ate free lunches and stood on the front porch and heard gunshots," he says.