

POVERTY REDUCTION

A new program to help reduce poverty in the Wausau area kicks off in June

When a new task force formed to address the lack of affordable housing in Wausau, one thing became starkly clear as they began to meet — part of the problem was the income side of the equation.

And also, part of the problem is that there are many parts of the problem. Childcare, highlighted in last week's issue, is a huge barrier for a number of people. Low wages are another. And lack of affordable housing is yet another.

All combined, it creates some challenging issues, especially for people in the lower-income brackets.

A new program aims to change that. Getting Ahead is a framework for a new program that St. Vincent De Paul is organizing. City Pages last week sat down with Emily Mueller, the program director of Getting Ahead for St. Vincent De Paul to talk about how the program will work.

Mueller has been recruiting participants for the program, circulating the idea through various non-profits such as The Neighbors' Place, The Salvation Army and The United Way. So far they've recruited about half of the first 12-person cohort and expect there will be many more folks who will end up on waiting lists for future cohorts.

The way Mueller explains it, this is probably different than the simple budgeting workshop many are probably picturing. Getting Ahead is a 16-week program that pairs community volunteers with 12 participants through a mentoring relationship. Each week they will meet for a meal and a two-hour workshop led by a trained facilitator. Through the program, participants will learn skills to overcome issues in not just financial poverty, but ten others such as spiritual poverty, physical resources, relationships and role models, among others.

"We will talk a lot about resources and how you build those resources," Mueller says from her office in the back of the St. Vincent De Paul store on Thomas Street. Participants will actively design their aims and goals based on the information they learn. "It's not up to us to say 'you look like you could use a higher-paying job,'" Mueller says. "It's up to the individual to say whether they want to work



▲ Emily Mueller is the director of the Getting Ahead program at St. Vincent De Paul. It kicks off in June and aims to pair mentors with participants to help them overcome poverty.

on a certain thing or not. They choose their goals."

Mueller says the aim is for those relationships to continue outside of the program. Hopefully some mentors and students will bond during the program and keep in touch, so they can keep working on their goals and measure progress after the 16 weeks is over.

The program is technically open to anyone, though Mueller is recruiting people who use services of places such as The Neighbors' Place and The Salvation Army. Mueller has gotten a good insight into some of the realities of those recruits' lives already. "It's amazing how open people have been with sharing their struggles," Mueller says. Many told stories of living paycheck to paycheck, crisis to crisis. Difficulty with transportation. Lack of affordable child care. And a lot of time spent navigating through different agencies and completing the processes to receive benefits.

That's one thing the Community Partners Campus aims to help solve, putting a number of area non-profits under one roof in order to save costs and resources on the non-profits' end, but also saving time and constraints on the end of people using the services. It is slated to open in the fall, and could house future cohorts. Right now, the first cohort will be held at St. Michael's

The first cohort, which starts June 2, is meant to be the first of many. Eventually Mueller would like to see cohorts held in Spanish and Hmong, for instance. And there's hope that former program participants can ultimately become advocates for the poor in the community, helping shape policy and lend a voice to people who often don't get one.

But for now, the focus is on getting the first cohort off the ground and making it successful. And building relationships is an important part of that, Mueller says; it's a big part of the St. Vincent De Paul mission. "We're interested in building relationships with the participants in the program, to be a friend for them; a resources connection and a cheerleader for them," Mueller says. "Someone in their corner. It's really hard to try to do this alone."

Mueller says interested participants or volunteers can call St. Vincent De Paul at 715-298-3028 and select option 3 for more information. **CP**

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