

Reporter's Notebook: Hard-luck story turns to hard-won triumph

Barbara Clements; The News Tribune

After working her entire career in the grocery industry, Linda Murdock suffered a triple whammy that would derail most people.

She became pregnant, and during her seventh month of the pregnancy, she had a heart attack.

Her son, now 5, was born during an emergency Caesarean section. Her doctor said she couldn't return to work. Instead, the 42-year-old Tacoma-area woman was encouraged to consider applying for permanent disability.

She tried welfare for three years and decided she didn't want to be on state aid the rest of her life.

"I just couldn't see myself doing that," Murdock said. "I've worked all my life. I just couldn't raise my son this way."

Instead she turned to the Washington Women's Employment and Education association and the state's Community Jobs program, both of which help get people working again.

That decision two years ago has made all the difference, she said.

"It helped turn my life around."

Murdock recently was hired on permanently at Community Jobs in Tacoma, when a position for a business assistant opened up. She will be back in Washington, D.C., this week at a transitional jobs conference to tell her story.

She also will be featured in a film scheduled to be shown to congressional committees, as lawmakers begin debating changes and reauthorization of welfare reform programs. On the agenda: whether to expand the Community Jobs program to other states.

More than 7,500 parents have enrolled in Washington's program since 1998. Participants earn minimum wage while receiving mentoring from state-contracted private and public agencies.

According to a report from the state's Economic Employment Institute, 72 percent found employment after leaving Community Jobs.

The average Community Jobs participant earns \$963 a month. That compares with the average welfare payment of \$546 a month.

In Pierce County, more than 2,000 people have participated in the program since 1999, with 69 percent landing jobs.

Results such as these played a role in the Council of State Governments giving this program a national innovation award. Gov. Gary Locke will accept the honor from the council today.

For more information on the Community Jobs program, go to www.cjforum.org.

First-quarter job-search times were 50 percent longer than a year ago, as productivity gains gave wary employers one more reason to delay hiring, according to a new survey by Chicago outplacement firm Challenger, Gray and Christmas Inc.

The increase in the number of people rejoining the labor force boosted the average search time in the first quarter to 3.41 months, up from 2.27 months in the first quarter of 2001.

The latest report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that 16.3 percent, or 1.3 million of the nation's 8.1 million unemployed, have been looking for a job for 27 weeks or longer.

In February and March of this year alone, 300,000 people re-entered the labor force.

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