

HAMDEN DAILY NEWS

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Another Chance



Joseph Troutman's trying to change his life. *Photo/Sharon Bass*

Hamden's welfare-to-work training works for most

By Sharon Bass

In 1997, Joseph Troutman had just finished playing a basketball game at Hamden High when two teens jumped him and beat him over the head with a heavy object. That put Troutman in a coma for three months, dashing his dream to go pro.

In 2001, after years of getting into trouble with the law, the Hamden man wound up behind bars. Then, he said, his thinking changed. "I started over, doing everything right. I started thinking more about my kids and what I wanted to be," the 29-year-old father of two girls said.

In August 2007, Troutman enrolled in the town's More Than Just a Job, a welfare-to-work program held at the Keefe Center. He's got a couple of weeks left and then it's job time -- something he said he's very much looking forward to.

He's the only male in a class of seven, learning computer, résumé-writing and job-interviewing skills. The program, run by Community Services job counselor Sue

Hutchinson, is nine years old and funded with federal tax bucks. The purpose is to move folks on welfare to work. Many of the students are nearing the end of their 21-month lifetime max on state welfare and must get employed.

But Troutman said he's just been on welfare for several months. He signed up for the work program because he's pursuing another dream. He wants to own a clothing shop and needs to get a good job in order to save up for the retail venture.

"I think I could convince people to buy clothes and sneakers," the soft-spoken man said yesterday, after wrapping up another 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. day at Keefe. "I get along with people very well."

Troutman said he's learned a lot so far. Such as how to use a computer and the Internet, how to prepare for and dress for a job interview and how to manage personal finances. He said he's never had a checking account or a credit card and plans to get the former but not the latter.

"My mom has taught me and my brothers to never get a credit card," said Troutman. That advice was reinforced by his teacher at Keefe.

"It's a good program. I feel good coming here every morning," he said. "It's keeping me out of trouble." He's working on his third résumé and hopes to score a nighttime warehouse job and start saving for that frock shop.

Some Stats

Hutchinson predicted Troutman will be one of her success stories.

"I have complete faith that Joseph is going to be a complete success," she said. "He has the determination and the drive."

Not everyone who goes through the 10-week program lands a job and sticks to it. Hutchinson said there's about an 80 percent success rate, but clients are only tracked for 90 days after they graduate. There's a second work-to-welfare class for those whose first language is other than English, which is 15 weeks long.

From July 1, 2006, to June 30, 2007, Hutchinson said 109 students were enrolled, of which 75 completed the program and 61 became employed. She said the yearly budget is \$270,000. Much comes from Workforce Alliance in New Haven, which distributes the federal grant money.

An item on the Sept. 24 legislative Planning & Development Committee agenda called for approving \$165,000 from Workforce for the current fiscal year. Councilwoman Berita Rowe-Lewis said she had a problem with the welfare-to-work project because some graduates lack a high school education and are not easily employable.

Hutchinson said one of her criteria is for all incoming students to have a high school diploma or GED, but said case managers at Workforce occasionally ask her to make an exception. Those clients are then hooked up with Hamden Adult Ed to study for the GED.

“Every success is like a million successes because I know what that success has gone through,” said Hutchinson. “The barriers and obstacles they’ve overcome to get to that place.”

Troutman graduated Hamden High in '97 and worked briefly in a warehouse. On Oct. 10, when his training at More Than Just a Job ends, he said he hopes to have a job. Not just for his future but to make his daughters proud. “I want to be successful for my kids,” he said.

The *HDN* plans to check back with Troutman next month to see how he’s doing.
