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Bridging the gap

Group will focus on ways to lift JeffCo citizens out of poverty

Jeff Kaley

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WAURIKA — For a new movement to pick up steam, it must walk before it can run.

Or as Kelly Armstrong phrased the message from the initial training session for the Bridges Out of Poverty program, “We’ve got to take baby steps and work at one thing at a time for this to become productive.”

A Social Service Specialist at the Oklahoma Department of Human Services office in Waurika, Armstrong was one of the organizers for a seminar on Sept. 5, during which essential information and goals of Bridges Out of Poverty were presented.

The program addresses factors that combine to create poverty, the impact on those living near the bottom of the economic ladder and creating action plans that can help lift individuals and families out of poverty.

With Jefferson County being among Oklahoma’s leaders in the percentage of people living at or below poverty level, Armstrong was encouraged when 37 people representing several entities and groups attended a Bridges Out of Poverty introductory and training session at the Rock Island Depot in Waurika.

“Back in April, I went to Oklahoma City for a seminar conference on families, and one of the speakers was Becky Kephart, who is with OKDHS and a trainer for Bridges Out of Poverty,” Armstrong said, relating how the idea of bringing the Bridges program to Jefferson County transpired.

“I was just really touched, and when I got home, I started researching and talking to people in the community about trying to organize (a Bridges program).”

“Along with several counties on the Oklahoma-Arkansas border, Jefferson County is one of the poorest counties in the state.”

A committee of eight area individuals coordinated the Bridges Out of Poverty training at the Depot, with sponsorship being provided by the OKDHS, FaithLinks of Oklahoma and the Oklahoma Partnership for Successful Reentry.

During the gathering, facilitators Kristi Tarwater and Cindy McGowen from the OKDHS training center in Norman gave the folks in attendance the basic outline and strategy suggestions for development of a Jefferson County Bridges Out of Poverty program.

Noting that many different entities, organizations and individuals will be needed to accomplish the program’s main goal of reducing the number of those piving in poverty and improving lifestyles in the county, Armstrong

was pleased to see diversity at the initial meeting.

“There were representatives from the cities of Ringling and Waurika, the county sheriff’s department, the Waurika Police Department, the assistant associate judge and district attorney office, the county commissioners and the county hospital,” she noted. “We also had representatives from the (Waurika) Lions Club and the (Waurika) Chamber of Commerce, and some members of the clergy.

“So it was a well-rounded group of people, from the type of organizations it will take to make the (Bridges) program work. That’s crucial in it working, having the people and groups involved it will take to develop any kind of programs or things that could help. Plus, you get insights and different perspectives.”

In Jefferson County, the all-ages poverty percentage is 37 percent higher than the state rate. Unemployment in 2011 was at 6.2 percent, which is above the current state level, and 22.33 percent of county residents live on incomes of less than \$15,000 annually, which is 10 percentage points higher than the national level of 12.37 percent.

“There are limited employment opportunities for people in our county,” Armstrong said. “Most of our business are ‘mom-and-pop’ businesses, small businesses that employ as many people as they can, but not enough to make a big change in the poverty numbers.

“We have an influx of people who are needing help from family or friends, but there’s not opportunities for them here, even if they get that help.

“Another problem is if a person with no skills can get a minimum wage job somewhere like Duncan, they don’t have any way to get to the job.”

Public health and services such as day care are other problem areas in Jefferson County, which figure into conditions keeping people at poverty level and below.

“Right now, there is only one certified day care center in the county,” Armstrong said. “There are free clinics in Ardmore, Lawton and Duncan, but how can someone who can’t afford gas get to those services?”

“It’s just basic that to help someone get out of poverty, they have to stay healthy so they can work. They also need to know there’s a safe place for their kids to go while they’re working.”

Those are the types of problems Bridges Out of Poverty will address as the program begins to take hold. Armstrong said there will be a second free training session in the near future.

“We’re looking forward to having a meeting of the minds to see what different strategies we could do for our county,” she said. “There are a lot of things we can try to implement, but we just need to see how and what kind of funding is available.

“We’ll be talking about things like that the next time we meet.”