

## Seminar plants seeds for change in Kearney

By MARY JANE SKALA Hub Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, October 7, 2012 7:00 am

KEARNEY— Jan Rodehorst stands at this side of the water. Far away, she can see the opposite shore, but she's not sure how to get there. She's dipping her toes in the water anyway.

Rodehorst, the executive director of the Kearney Area Chamber of Commerce, and Denise Zwiener, director of Buffalo County Community Partners, are launching an effort to help Kearney's unemployed and underemployed people find and keep jobs.

The idea sprouted during the daylong Bridges Out of Poverty seminar at the Kearney Housing Agency on Sept. 14. The presenter was Jodi Pfarr, a peppy, blunt social worker with a divinity degree who grew up in poverty in South Dakota. Now based in Minneapolis, she travels all over the country teaching people how to work with those on the lowest rungs of society's ladders.

KHA expected 35 attendees, but 75 people showed up. Of those, 27 volunteered to help bring the concept to fruition.

"I learned a lot," Rodehorst said. "Basically, I realized I have a lot to learn."

Rodehorst knows that with Kearney's miniscule rate of unemployment, many companies here can't find the workers they need, but the seminar opened her eyes.

"I began to understand what people in poverty deal with and how it impacts society. They spend a lot of time in agencies to get help and services. There is also a lot of paperwork," she said.

"That impacts our business community. People who aren't employed don't contribute to the tax base or our retail stores. Our employers need workers. It is helpful to step back and look at the problem through the eyes of others."

Zwiener said Kearney is "different from other places," especially larger cities such as Omaha. "If we want to impact poverty, we have to start by understanding how everything interacts," she said.

She also believes policies need to be in place about day care, health care and other business-related issues.

"We want to keep family-owned businesses in town. They might need help. If it's a mom and pop store, who watches the store if someone gets sick?" she asked.

Rodehorst is proud of Kearney's low unemployment rate of 2.7 percent in July. "But we want to be even better. If we can remove barriers, we can envision better jobs and education and invite our community to contribute more."

She also wants to take aim at generational poverty. She said that in many low-income homes, there are no books or bright colors. "We want to give people the opportunity to dream of where they want to be," she

said.

In Omaha, she said, mothers bring babies 6 months and older to a program called the First Five Years. As their infants learn, so do the mothers.

“One mother told me, ‘As I watched my child, I had to be more educated.’ We have the ability to get this done.”

Rodehorst said members of this new, still-unnamed committee will brainstorm “to figure out what we have and where we need to go.” It could take a year before the effort has an official name, she said.

Rodehorst and Zwiener have confidence.

“If we had all the answers,” Rodehorst said, “We’d already be doing it,”

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