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By Karin Elton , Marshall Independent

Legislators hear about the benefits of educational and job programs

MARSHALL - Some could only say their name and how long they had been in the United States. Others said how happy they felt that they could finally be understood in English and how they can now help their children with their homework and enhance their job skills.

District 22A House Rep. Joe Schomacker, R-Luverne, said he could see the level of confidence grow in each speaker the more English they could speak.

Schomacker, along with District 17 Sen. Lyle Koenen DFL-Clara City, and District 16A Rep. Chris Swedzinski, R-Ghent, attended a legislative panel titled "Workforce Development in Southwest Minnesota: What the Partnership Offers to Minnesota's Future - Adult Education and the Workforce System's Role in Strengthening our Economy" Friday afternoon at the Lyon County Government Center in Marshall. They heard from people who are in the English as a Second Language program, people getting their GED and people who received certificates as certified nursing assistants.

Representatives from Adult Basic Education, Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council and Southwest Minnesota WorkForce attended as well to let the legislators know the impact their programs have in assisting individuals obtain, retain, or improve employment opportunities in southwest Minnesota.

Joan Danielson, Job Service field operations area manager, said that rural Minnesota has a low unemployment rate, which is usually good news, but for southwest Minnesota it means there are not enough skilled workers.

To fill the needs of employers, especially in the industrial and health care areas, programs have been set up to help unemployed or underemployed individuals receive industrial maintenance and certified nursing assistant certificates. Various agencies work in concert with each other to help the students who might need to better their English, math or computer skills.

Chris Ellingson, the human resources manager for the seven Schwan Food Co. plants in Marshall, said he relies on people who graduate from the industrial maintenance and ESL programs.

"I hire nonstop," he said. "We take them and train them further."

Ellingson said there is a workforce shortage because the population in southwestern Minnesota "isn't growing," and furthermore "60 percent will retire in five to seven years."

Julie Kellen of Pipestone wasn't able to attend the panel because she was at work and happily so. She sent a letter which told of her losing three jobs in four years. She was a 51-year-old who had worked at Bayliner Marine in Pipestone for about 20 years when she was laid off. She attended a resume-writing class at WorkForce in Marshall. WorkForce directed her to the ABE Center for math, reading and computer skills testing.

"My life and career path changed for me that day," she wrote. She enrolled in the CNA program and worked on her math, computer and job training skills "which will set a foundation for more advancement in my career," she wrote. She drove two hours each day to get to classes. She now has an "updated resume with a degree, works full time at Maple Lawn Nursing Home in Fulda and part time in Slayton at Golden Living Center."

Schomacker said he appreciated hearing the stories of how the various agencies have worked together and how their customers have been helped to better their lives.

"Getting a face and story with the program is going to stick with me," he said.