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Program helps unemployed land jobs

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Class members, Margarita Perez, 52 of Miami, and Norma Figueroa, 55 of Miami, attend a computer class taught by Working Solutions at the Wolfson Campus of Miami-Dade College. The program trains displaced homemakers and the unemployed who want to return to the job market

Ten months ago, Mirza Galindo joined the ranks of the unemployed when she was laid off after 21 years of working in sales. It was a moment of sheer desperation. Her husband, Carlos, was already unemployed, and she had been the sole breadwinner for her family.

“I remember thinking, What am I going to do? How are we going to survive? Who’s going to hire me at my age?” says Galindo, 52, of North Miami. “Then I realized I needed to learn more English and I needed computer skills.”

She registered at Miami Dade College’s Working Solutions, a year-long program on the Wolfson campus that trains displaced

homemakers — and now others, including laid-off workers — to re-enter the workforce or move into higher-paying jobs. Galindo’s husband went through the program and was finally hired late last year. She hopes it will do the same for her.

Funded by marriage license application fees and dissolution of marriage filings, Working Solutions has been around since 1976, but its clientele and the skills it teaches have changed with the times. Computer classes are the most sought-after offering. Up to 30 percent of the 260 registered clients are now men who have been laid off or stepped out of the labor market to care for children or others. Though the program is free and open to those 35 years or older, most people are middle aged or older.

“We get a tremendous number of calls now from people we normally didn’t hear from — the middle class,” says Carol Kahn, the program’s job developer. “We have people from all walks of life, from no training and barely literate to professionals who haven’t worked for a while. They all face the same problem. They don’t know how to search for jobs or fill online applications.”

There are 18 similar programs around the state, including one in Broward County named WINGS. All focus on the same demographics: divorced, widowed or otherwise single people facing financial difficulties because they no longer have monetary support from a spouse or partner. Some have been out of the job market because they took time to raise

a family or care for a relative. More and more people, however, sign up because they've been laid off.

In addition to offering practical job skills such as interview etiquette and introduction to Excel, classes focus on financial literacy, from opening a bank account to using credit wisely. Clients sometimes require connection to social services, too. Working Solutions offers its services in English, Spanish and Creole.

"We're also seeing more people who retired and then later realized they couldn't make ends meet on Social Security and whatever else they were making off the savings," says program director Linda Scharf. "They come here to update their skills."

In South Florida, many Working Solutions clients have an added obstacle: limited proficiency in English. Olga Holmes, divorced five years ago, is one of them. She works as a parking lot attendant in downtown Miami, barely making enough money to rent a room nearby. She enrolled in English classes at MDC's Wolfson Campus, where she learned about Working Solutions. Because she took several certificate courses in finance and accounting in her native Colombia, she'd like to land a job in the field.

"I've been improving my English," Holmes, 53, says. "Now I'm hoping to improve my job prospects."

At times, she's discouraged because she says employers are hesitant to hire older workers, particularly those with limited computer skills. Scharf agrees computer illiteracy can be a problem, recounting a story of one woman in a computer class who began looking for her computer mouse — under her desk. The woman thought the teacher was talking about a rodent. But age, Scharf adds, can be a positive for employers.

"They are more reliable, more punctual, have more working experience and they're certainly more grateful when they get a job," Scharf says.

Statewide, the program has placed 69 percent of its clients in long-term jobs in 2010-2011 — mostly as secretaries, cashiers, home health aides and food industry workers.

One of the success stories is Benjamin Jefferson, 58, of Miami. Though he's worked mostly in construction, his last job was as a cook in a Florida Keys restaurant, where he worked seasonally until last summer.

"I was so unprepared for my first two interviews," he says, shaking his head. "I knew I had experience, but I was way behind in my computer skills."

He enrolled in the program and even got help repairing his credit. He now works as a cook for a catering company and would like to stay in the cooking field.

"I don't want to be 60 working construction," he adds. "Thank God, I had the idea to come here. It's made a real difference."

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