

## **Putting working women on pathways to better careers**

### **School at Work program inspires women to up their aspirations**

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*By Ann Meyer*

Gloria Guzman is one motivated worker.

After completing the School at Work program offered by her employer, St. Anthony Hospital, Guzman was given a 10 percent raise and more responsibility this year. She was promoted to supervisor of the transportation department, where she manages seven employees, handles payroll and helps out with special reports.

"I like the fact they trusted me with the position," Guzman said. "I hope to move up to manager and maybe director."

Guzman's ambition is shared by the Chicago-based Eleanor Foundation, which funded the program at St. Anthony Hospital in Chicago because it realizes that women often get stuck in modest-paying jobs.

With little discretionary income, many women can't afford additional education that might accelerate their careers, said Rosanna Marquez, president of the Eleanor Foundation, which supports educational initiatives that help lower-income working women.

More than 300,000 households in the Chicago area are led by working women with an annual income of \$10,000 to \$50,000, according to research by the University of Chicago for the Eleanor Foundation released this fall. The number of single mothers whose incomes fell in that range totaled 137,000 in 2008, up 19 percent from 2000, according to the report.

Though training is a step in the right direction, even women with advanced degrees face obstacles to career advancement, said Sandy Wayne, director of the Center for Human Resource Management at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"Even though women are getting more degrees (than men are), they're still not moving up in today's organizations," Wayne said. "There's just not a pipeline for middle- and upper-level positions."

Among adults 25 and older, 29 percent of women in the United States have at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 30 percent of men, according to 2009 census figures released in April. But measured by raw numbers -- the United States has 103 million women age 25 and older and 96 million men age 25 and older -- women already surpass men in undergraduate degrees by roughly 1.2 million.

Research conducted at the University of Illinois at Chicago indicates male and female managers tend to overlook women for promotions to managerial positions because they assume women will have greater family conflicts, regardless of whether they actually do. That bias "affects women's promotability," Wayne said.

Other research shows that cultural bias causes many people to associate traditionally male characteristics, such as being "controlling and domineering," with leadership, while women tend to be more collaborative leaders, Wayne said.

By being aware of such biases, employers can educate managers to overcome them.

With less likelihood of being promoted, working women are at greater financial risk. Yet most fly under the radar because they don't meet federal poverty guidelines and, therefore, don't qualify for government assistance, Marquez said. That's one reason the Eleanor Foundation decided to fund initiatives aimed at putting women on a path to better-paying jobs.

"Many working women are barely making do," Marquez said. "They've been just scraping by. But they don't draw attention to themselves because they are too busy trying to feed and house their kids."

The Foundation invests about \$1 million a year in skills-based programs designed to lead women to jobs paying \$40,000 or more annually, Marquez said. That's considered the minimum needed to provide food on the table and a roof over their families' heads, though it doesn't leave much for anything else.

In the Chicago area, a disproportionate number of woman-led households are considered "housing-burdened," with 30 percent to 50 percent of their income spent on housing, or "housing distressed," with more than 50 percent of their income going to pay the rent or mortgage, according to the Eleanor Foundation-University of Chicago report.

Seventy-five percent of woman-led households in Chicago were housing-burdened in 2008, up from 60 percent in 2000, the report said. During the same period, the percentage of woman-led housing-distressed households rose to 57 percent from 46 percent in 2000.

"These are women who are working, playing by the rules and still not making a lot of gains," said Joe Antolin, executive director of Heartland Human Care Services, which launched an initiative to help women improve their financial security.

The problem of modest wages and no clear path to upward mobility affects not just the women but also their children, who are considered at-risk, Antolin said.

"At the end of the day, we have to think about the kids in these families. We need them to be well-enough educated so that they can lead self-sufficient lives," he said.

Heartland works with employers to offer financial literacy classes to women at their workplaces,

teaching them how to manage their finances. To encourage women in its programs to save some portion of their paycheck, Heartland double-matches the savings up to \$400. About 90 employers offer Heartland's program to workers.

"They see this as added value because it reduces turnover," Antolin said. "Workers are less stressed and more productive."

Cecilia Zapiain, a supply technician at St. Anthony Hospital who participated in the School at Work program, credits the financial literacy component with helping her buy her first home. Zapiain, a single mother who has three teenagers and two toddlers, also was promoted from a storeroom worker to supply technician, thanks to the training.

The School at Work program is held on-site at the hospital to make it convenient for workers to get additional training.

That helped Zapiain, who could leave her children at the day care across the street from the hospital while she took the two-hour class after work once a week.

Now, Zapiain is taking pre-requisite classes toward a program to become a licensed practical nurse, she said.

The Eleanor Foundation also has funded programs at Jane Addams Resource Corp., offering training in manufacturing skills; the Industrial Council of Nearwest Chicago, offering training that leads to emergency medical technician certification; and Chicago Women in Trades, offering training in construction and welding.

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Graphic: On the rise: The number of households led by women who spend significant portions of their income on housing has increased since 2000.

#### AFFORDABILITY-CHALLENGED HOUSEHOLDS.

With related children Chicago 2000

Housing distressed (housing costs are at least 50 percent of income): 16,962

Housing burdened (housing costs are at least 30 percent of income): 37,654

2006-08 Housing distressed (housing costs are at least 50 percent of income): 27,485

Housing burdened (housing costs are at least 30 percent of income): 49,272

Cook County excluding Chicago 2000 Housing distressed (housing costs are at least 50 percent of income): 9,402

Housing burdened (housing costs are at least 30 percent of income): 19,990 27,485 49,272

2006-08 Housing distressed (housing costs are at least 50 percent of income): 16,736

Housing burdened (housing costs are at least 30 percent of income): 29,290

SOURCE: The Eleanor Foundation