Aroostook County Action Program, one of four grant recipients in the U.S., will assist rural Maine women interested in working in non-traditional occupations

The pay gap between men and women has improved in the past half-century, but has remained stubbornly stuck with women in the workforce earning eighty percent of what their male counterparts earn. This is due in part to the fact that women continue to be underrepresented in the skilled trades and STEM fields. The Aroostook County Action Program (ACAP) recently received a federal grant to help train women for these non-traditional occupations in three counties in rural Maine: Aroostook, Washington, and Hancock.

ACAP was among four grant recipients nation-wide to earn the Women in Apprenticeship and Non-Traditional Occupations (WANTO) grant from the US Department of Labor.

“It is very exciting to have been selected from agencies across the country,” said Christy Daggett, Senior Manager at ACAP Workforce Development. “This grant is particularly important for these three counties as manufacturing occupations and jobs in the skilled trades make up a large part of the economy in rural Maine. Employment in these areas would offer women good pay and benefits, which will lead to economic security for more rural families.”

The goal of the grant is two-fold: prepare women for immediate employment or facilitate partnerships with local businesses to create apprenticeship opportunities. ACAP will match female participants’ strengths with the needs of the employer for the intended successful outcome—long-term employment for the women and a committed workforce for the employer.

By participating in the grant, women can earn a no cost WorkReady credential recognized by employers across the state. This national program will set them apart as a candidate ready for a career—not just a job. Local businesses have agreed to interview those who successfully complete WorkReady. Participants will also earn an OSHA 10 certificate, which provides an overview of health and safety hazards present in the workplace. This certificate is accepted in 50 states and ensures employers that safety is important to the applicant.

According to a policy brief from Mathematica, women continue to be underrepresented in the skilled-trade jobs, which perpetuates the gender wage gap in America. In Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), a federal grant that supports employment services and training, only 1 in 15 women received training on mechanical and transportation-related occupations in 2009. The brief also states that only 1 in 10 participants in Registered Apprenticeship programs are women.
Mathematica notes that greater access to high-paid trade occupations that are traditionally male dominated has advantages for women and their families, as well as employers. Women can help their families be financially self-sufficient, while employers can overcome skill shortages. According to International Finance Corporation, having more women in trade occupations helps employers have a more productive workforce and can also improve health and safety compliance at worksites.

Once the women in the Maine program are placed in employment or apprenticeships, ACAP will assist with retention services. All women will have a career counselor and mentor who will follow up on their progress through the first year. The cost of employee turnover can have a significant impact on any business’ bottom line. These retention services can help to ensure long-term success. Businesses who hire a WANTO participant also may be eligible to claim the Work Opportunity Tax Credit.

"Helping women move in to non-traditional, high wage careers is an important strategy in addressing the gender wage gap," said Eliza Townsend, Executive Director of the Maine Women’s Policy Center in Augusta. "We applaud Aroostook County Community Action for their innovative approach, and we are excited about the opportunity for women to improve their economic security through this program."

Women or businesses interested in learning more about this grant can contact one of three representatives in their respective counties: Aroostook, Erin Benson at 554-4165 or ebenson@acap-me.org; Hancock, Gary Clingman at 667-2995 ext. 228 or gclingman@acap-me.org; Washington, Patsy Smith at 598-5781 or psmith@acap-me.org.

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ACAP is celebrating 45 Years of Making Life Better in Aroostook County! ACAP provides the people of Aroostook County with services and resources that help individuals and families achieve greater economic independence. As a leader, or in partnership with others, ACAP provides guidance to the community in responding to emerging human needs in the areas of community health, early care and education, energy and housing, and workforce development services. For more information on ACAP, or to make a tax-deductible contribution, please contact the agency at 771 Main Street, on the web at www.acap-me.org, or by calling 764-3721.