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Residents gain life skills in new HRA Program

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HIBBING — When Theresa Espinoza walked into her first EMPOWER class, she was a little worried about the usefulness of her landlord's new program.

"I wondered to myself 'how much can I take away from this?'" Espinoza explained. "But it felt very welcoming and encouraging right away."

The Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) of Hibbing launched the EMPOWER Program in December of 2021.

Residents in the program meet regularly with a coordinator to identify goals and take free classes with community partners towards those goals.

"Many of our residents have the goal to move on and up," explained Diana Ricci, who coordinates the EMPOWER Program

SEE SKILLS, A8



PHOTO SUBMITTED

Marie Damiano, Executive Director of JET, laughs with HRA residents in the EMPOWER Program during a recent class

SKILLS

FROM A1

for the HRA. “We realized that residents need to be empowered with a certain set of life skills to be able to reach their goal.”

Open to all tenants of the HRA, the EMPOWER Program’s classes include physical wellness, financial literacy and career basics.

The HRA relies on a coalition of community partners to lend their expertise for the classes: University of Minnesota Extension, Smart Saving and Spending, Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency and the Northeast Minnesota Office of Job Training (JET).

“We see our role here as building relation-

ships,” said Wendy Rue, Youth Career Counselor at JET, as she prepared career development toolkits for residents before a recent class.

Residents can learn about and pursue other opportunities with the local organizations that visit them through the EMPOWER Program.

“I grew up without anywhere to learn about credit cards, buying a house, all that stuff,” added Espinoza, “So this is the perfect platform to ask how to get that.”

The HRA is able to provide the EMPOWER Program thanks to its Moving to Work designation. This special status, conferred by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, gives the agency the ability to test innovative programs and policies.

“For us, it’s all about helping residents move to wellness,” said HRA Executive Director Jacqueline Prescott. With some applicants waiting as long as 22 months for an open unit at the HRA, Prescott explained that the agency is eager to help current residents accelerate their journey to self-sufficiency where possible so the HRA can help as many low-income households as possible.

“We want to not only be a place of respite,” Prescott said. “But also a place that helps people thrive.”

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