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Contact:

Michael Cornett
Director of Agency Expansion and Public Relations
Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program, Inc.
Office: 606-435-8482; Cell: 606-438-9938
mcornett@ekcep.org

Paths 2 Promise Helps Knox Countian Melissa Hurst Achieve Life Goals and Support Her Family

Knox Countian Melissa Hurst was in a bind.

With three children and her husband newly laid off, she was faced with figuring out how to quickly help support her family—there was just one problem. As a long-time stay-at-home mom with no high school diploma or GED, her options were almost nonexistent in her small-town.

However, with the assistance of the KCEOC and the Paths 2 Promise (P2P) program, Hurst was able to turn her life around.

"I needed to get out of the house, and we needed money," Hurst says as she adjusts herself in a chair in the offices of the KCEOC Community Action in Barbourville, Ky. "I had been a stay-at-home mom for eight years. That doesn't look good on an application."

Hurst explains that in 2016 her world was turned upside down. In the few years previous, she had moved to rural southeastern Kentucky, given birth to twins, and lost her mother. On top of that, her husband lost his job at a time when she was unable and unprepared to rejoin the workforce.

"It was really hard," she says, adding that she and her husband were unsure how to save themselves.

Just before the turn of the new year, Hurst's husband heard about a program offered at KCEOC that could help a person find a job and further their education. That program was P2P.

P2P was a pilot project that teamed up local and state agencies to help increase employment among residents who receive benefits through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) in Kentucky's Promise Zone counties, which include Bell, Harlan, Clay, Letcher, Leslie, Perry, Knox, and Whitley counties. Partners and employers coordinated to help educate and skill up participants through work-based learning opportunities, internships, and on-the-job training (OJT), as well as educational and training programs.

While enrollment in P2P ended in August 2018, Hurst's husband was one of hundreds of people who signed up for services over a two-year period.

By January 2017 he was enrolled and his family was already reaping the benefits of a secure income. Hurst says that by the time the holiday season rolled back around she was ready to take the same leap her husband had.

"I thought the program was fantastic. It really is," she says.

Hurst called P2P Coordinator Candace Smith at the end of November 2017 to set up an appointment to see if she would be enrolled in the program. Hurst remembers how obliging Smith was when her babysitter was unavailable the day of their meeting.

"I couldn't get down here because I couldn't find a sitter, so, she actually did a phone interview with me," Hurst explains. "She went out of her way to help me."

After the initial interview and some more paperwork, Hurst began working in January 2018 as a janitor at the KCEOC office—a job some may not be as thrilled about as she was.

"I was just head over heels," she says, laughing. "It completely changed everything from then until now. I would not be heading in the direction that I'm in without this program, I can tell you that right now."

Though things were looking up for Hurst and her family, there was still one thing nagging in the back of her head—getting her GED.

"I drug my feet with my GED," she admits.

Hurst had not expected that her janitor's position through P2P would be something she would enjoy so much and would want to stay at.

"I didn't expect to keep the job, I just expected it to be a job to put on my applications, that's what I thought it was going to be," she says. "I liked it there, and they liked me there, so, they had offered to hire me in May before my time was up with the program in June."

Hurst quickly accepted the job offer, but was then faced with a hard decision.

One of the requirements for the position was a high school diploma or GED, something Hurst admits she'd been too afraid to go for.

"My supervisor said, is it something you might consider, going back to school, and I said no, I don't want to do it," she says, shaking her head.

However, sleeping on it seemed to change her mind, and a few days later she enrolled in GED classes.

"I just went ahead and enrolled. I thought, I'm not going to tell anybody, I'm just going to see if I can do it," Hurst says.

And she did. In less than five months, Hurst had completed all the classes required to obtain her GED.

"I had promised my mom that I'd go back to school and get that GED at 16—I'm 38. But I did it," she says, a smile lighting up her face. "That was a hard decision going back to school, especially when you're an adult and it's been a long time since you've been in school."

With tears welling in her eyes, Hurst admits that she cried when she found out she'd passed her math exam—the last test standing between her and her GED.

"I never realized the difference a GED can make," she says, wiping her eyes. "My 10-year-old didn't know I didn't have my GED. . . and she was upset by that. When I got it and she came home from school that day, I told her I'd passed my last test and she said, 'I'm so proud of you mom.'"

“My kids, they’re watching. They’re watching what we do, and if my 10-year-old watches me study as hard as I did, she will too,” Hurst adds.

When her GED certificate came in the mail a few days later, Hurst made the trip to enroll in the 16-week Choice MD clinical medical assistant (CMA) program in London, Ky., something she’d always wanted to do but never thought would be possible.

Though she’s only been in class a few weeks, Hurst is sure that her life is heading in the right direction and would be going down a much rougher road had it not been for KCEOC and P2P.

“I would probably still be a stay-at-home mom struggling, or flipping burgers at Burger King—whatever I had to do to take care of my kids, but it would not be the same direction I’m heading in now. I can guarantee that,” she says.

Hurst says she knows her community is struggling to make ends meet with a tough local economy and job market, and she urges anyone who needs help finding a job or getting an education to talk to someone from their local Community Action Agency.

“You have to take that first step,” she says. “You have to walk outside your comfort zone. You’ll be so glad you did—I am, my whole family is.”

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Partners in the Paths 2 Promise pilot project include the Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program, Inc. (EKCEP), the Kentucky Department for Community Based Services (DCBS), the Kentucky Department of Workforce Investment branded as the Kentucky Career Centers (KCC), Kentucky Adult Education (KYAE), and the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS).

EKCEP, a nonprofit workforce development agency headquartered in Hazard, Ky., serves the citizens of 23 Appalachian coalfield counties. The agency provides an array of workforce development services, administers the Hiring Our Miners Everyday (H.O.M.E.) program for dislocated coal miners and their spouses, and is the White House-designated lead organization for the federal TechHire designation for Eastern Kentucky. Learn more about us at <http://www.ekcep.org>, <http://www.jobsight.org> and <http://www.facebook.com/ekcep>.