

Volunteers aim to improve literacy rates

By Sandra Baltazar Martinez | The New Mexican

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Soon-to-be literacy tutors Saturday were focusing on how they can learn to make others better learners.

A group of 17 people are scheduled to complete 20 hours of basic literacy training today, which will allow them to work with adults who read at the sixth-grade level or below. A New Mexico Coalition for Literacy trainer instructed the group that will be working with Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe, a 25-year-old program based at Santa Fe Community College.

Trainer Diane Ross had the chatty group, who munched on grapes and bagels and worked on tables crowded with notepads and paperwork, taking notes from the start of Saturday's training session. Before a lunch break, the volunteers worked in pairs to help each other hone skills on how to read and write short sentences.

Volunteers Jan Collett and Karen Diamond worked together on writing short paragraphs and practiced asking 'Why is this important?' — a question that attempts to further a student's thinking process. Tutoring is a learning experience for them too, they said.

One in five New Mexicans are classified as low-level readers, or people who read at the sixth-grade level or below, said Letty Naranjo, director of Adult Basic Education at SFCC, so having tutors who are willing to commit four hours a week of their time will make a big change for the dozens of illiterate adults signed up for the program who are waiting for a tutor.

Tom Slade said he decided to volunteer because he wanted a parent to be able to communicate with their child.

"The thought of someone not being able to read to their child, a man not being able to read to his son, is appalling," said Slade, who uses a wheelchair because of multiple sclerosis and decided to invest time to help others.

Kevan Morshed, basic literacy coordinator, said the program is designed for native English speakers who, for many reasons, fell behind in school. Almost half of the adults in Santa Fe County have a difficult time reading everything from a road sign to medical prescriptions, and even have difficulty filling out a job application, he said. These people are what educators call "functional illiterate," and their levels of reading, comprehension and writing vary from zero to sixth grade.

"Reading affects everything, it affects the economy and everything else," Morshed said.

During the past 25 years, Literacy Volunteers has trained more than 3,500 tutors who have provided about 400,000 hours of instruction, which translates into an equivalent of in-kind contributions of \$8 million.

Currently about 60 people are on a waiting list for tutors. Literacy Volunteers also offers literacy services to people learning English through its ESL program.

Collett said she recently discovered Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe and decided to invest her time with other adults who can use her assistance.

"I thought, 'If you can't read, write, how can you dream? How can a person have hope?' " Collett said during a break from training Saturday morning.

Diamond, a retired English teacher from Seattle, said she is a first-time volunteer and that the tutor training has motivated her to develop a competency-based curriculum to help teach adults how to read.

Lisa Morris, another volunteer, said she moved from Florida four months ago and only has a part-time job, so she wants to spend the rest of her time volunteering. Her goal is to also help adults use the Internet "as a resource as well."

Karen Sosa, a business administration major at SFCC, said she loves to read and wants to help adults have an opportunity to learn about the world through reading.

"When you read a book, you can imagine what you're reading, you can see the picture," Sosa said. "I want to help them see the big picture."

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LITERACY VOLUNTEERS OF SANTA FE

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer call 428-1353 or email lvsf@sfcc.edu.