



Mike McCollum

Maria Winfield has a hard time paying bills

A bleak future for Maria

Second of series on laid-off Green Giant workers.

By LEE ROMNEY
STAFF WRITER

Fifty-six-year-old Maria Winfield, a 12 1/2-year Green Giant veteran who was laid off in January, is convinced no company will ever hire her again.

A back injury she received when she fell on the job, combined with her age and rudimentary English skills, have her convinced the retraining program — run with federal dollars and company contributions of some funding, classroom and office space for the Job Assistance Center — is not for her.

Administered by Careerworks, a branch of the county Human Resources Agency, the retraining effort is providing English as a Second Language and basic math and reading classes — most of them in trailers at the

Green Giant plant — to 109 laid-off workers. Forty-three others are enrolled in private vocational schools and local community colleges, and 22 workers have found jobs.

While more than 300 permanent and seasonal jobs were terminated when the company moved the bulk of its operations to Mexico and Ohio, many workers retired or relocated, and so are not eligible to participate in the program.

Still others, like Maria, cannot imagine shifting into new lines of work — something more and more processed-food employees in the area may have to do if the Free Trade Agreement with Mexico comes to fruition.

Many also find the bureaucracy of public assistance cumbersome and unfair, and learning basic language skills frustrating while the bills pile up at home.

While Maria said the program is working well for some people, what she needs is money.

The burgundy-haired grandmother of 14 holds up an envelope stuffed full of unpaid bills as she relaxes on the bed in her tidy Locust Street duplex.

"I'm displaced, too, and they're not giving me anything. They said, 'Get your husband to work,' but I don't have a husband," she said with a good-natured burst of laughter.

Winfield doesn't see how taking English classes at this point in her life will improve her situation.

"I'm worried about how to pay the bills. I'm old, and I don't have the same head for English as the young ones do," she said; and besides, one year is not long enough to learn how to read and write in English, Win-

See WORK page 11 ►

WORK

► From Page 1

field added. The program is working best for those who can study a vocational skill as well as English every day, she said.

Winfield had to borrow money for last month's rent, and she's afraid her gas will be turned off soon. She pulls out the Job Assistance Center's May newsletter, which mentions an upcoming housing fund that now holds \$80,000, but Maria is discouraged.

"Who will get the money? Who will qualify?" she asked. One thing is clear: Winfield will not qualify. The housing fund is designed to help the neediest of the people who are participating in the retraining program pay their rent or mortgage — and will go to an estimated 20 to 25 people, said Careerworks' Kathy Zwart, who until recently coordinated the program from the Job Assistance Center at the Green Giant plant. Zwart, who helped secure the foundation grant and has appealed to other organizations for housing assistance, is moving on to a permanent county job.

"The fund is to make it possible for people to be in training," Zwart said. The limited pool of money will go to a limited number of families "in order to make a real difference in their lives," she said. Eligibility will be decided by applying a housing-subsidy formula and,

if necessary, by evaluating people's performance in training.

It is exactly those types of formulations that have upset some of the laid-off workers.

Gloria Veneer, who worked at the Green Giant plant for 22 years, participated in the retraining program for three months before she abandoned it to accept a \$5-an-hour cleaning job at the National 9 Motel three days a week, a standard wage for the work. She continues to call the employment office every day in search of a better job, and said economic realities dictated her decision to leave the program.

"I can't be sitting in there while the bills are piling and piling and piling," she said.

Veneer thinks the grant money should be for everybody.

"They receive money and they don't want to split it with everyone who got laid off. That's not right," Veneer said. "I am 58-years-old and it's kind of hard to get me a job."

Veneer supports her son, Manuel, a junior in high school, and lately has had to pay his doctor's bills in cash, at \$40 a visit. Like all the laid-off Green Giant workers, her health-insurance benefits have expired. She also must come up with the money to pay \$400 rent, a \$245 car payment, and \$100 in car insurance every month. They are eating less than they used to.

"It's kind of hard to support a

high school boy," she said, "and that's why sometimes I get so sad."

Like Veneer, many of the laid-off workers have managed to accumulate enough possessions to disqualify them from welfare programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which requires applicants to possess less than \$1,000 in assets, said Paul Bellerjeau, the program manager of eligibility services for the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency.

Others may be too proud to apply.

"People have a real good work ethic in South County. They've worked all their lives," said Bellerjeau, adding that his staff could probably "count on one hand" the number of laid-off workers who have come in to apply for benefits. His office, at 1430 Freedom Blvd., also handles applications for food stamps and Medi-Cal.

Careerworks Executive Director Jim De Alba said his organization, which serves about 1,000 other displaced workers, has never orchestrated a job-assistance program quite like this one; the only effort that compared in size was for Seagate Technology, a Silicon Valley-based disk drive manufacturer whose workers came equipped with a more marketable set of skills.

But with the Free Trade Agreement with Mexico pending, De Alba expects it will not be the last

time. As manufacturing jobs continue to move to Mexico, and the economy becomes increasingly service-oriented, workers like those at Green Giant — typically middle-aged, Spanish-speaking, with little formal education — will have to be retrained for other work.

"I don't think I can change where we're going with free trade," De Alba said, "but I can try to prepare my staff to make sure that as changes occur we are ready for this."

The unique situation — the loss of jobs in an industry that's moving out of the country — may help fund a portion of De Alba's program and enable laid-off workers to extend their unemployment benefits. Federal funds should be available under the Trade Readjustment Assistance Act, but understanding the requirements and means of accessing the money is proving a challenge even for bureaucrats. It is sure to come in handy in the future, however.

Sergio Lopez, secretary-treasurer of the Teamsters' union Local 912, which represents the Green Giant workers, concurs.

"If we think we have monetary problems now, when the free trade agreement comes to pass, there's not going to be enough money — not just here but all over the country — to retrain the workers who lose their jobs when companies move to Mexico," Lopez said. "It's going to be a catastrophe."