A newly single parent finds it tough to re-enter work force

Story by Erin Middlewood • Columbian staff writer

The possibility of getting laid off never crossed Jennifer Fendley’s mind. Her full-time job as a stay-at-home mom seemed like a sure thing — then her marriage ended.

Now at 33, Fendley is trying to ramp up a new life just as the economy is winding down. All at once she’s trying to find work, save enough money to rent an apartment and figure out how to file for divorce. With all these life changes competing for her energy, Fendley has struggled to figure out the best course to get back on stable footing.

Fendley had worked odd jobs a few months at a time to help her family make ends meet on the $60,000-a-year her husband made as a mechanic, but she never established a career. “It was either take care of the family or work,” she said. She chose to care for her daughter, now 8, and son, now 12.

Since separating from her husband last year, she and her daughter moved out of their home in California and in with Fendley’s mother in Vancouver. She and her daughter share a room. Her son remains in California with her husband.

Fendley receives $400 in cash from the state’s Temporary Aid to Needy Families program, $280 in food stamps, as well as medical stamps. She recently completed classes as part of the Southwest Washington Displaced Homemaker Program at Clark College.

To have enough money to move into an apartment of her own, Fendley needs to find work. So far, that’s proven difficult because of her lack of workplace experience and the tight job market.

She has a line on a part-time position at Clark College, where she’s taking classes to become a pharmacy tech, but it hasn’t come through yet. She’s also exploring job placement through the state Work Force Investment Act program.

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Obstacle 1: Getting back into the workforce

Fenelly got a head start by taking the fourteen-week class offered by the Southwest Washington Displaced Homemaker Program at Clark College, but she’s yet to land a steady job.

What the experts say:

The displaced homemaker, as defined by the U.S. Department of Labor, is a homemaker who can take a job easier to return to the work force. Her recommendations:

Merritt said former home-makers often discuss a work experience that’s potentially valuable to prospective employers. Be able to discuss your volunteer positions with the PTA or as a Cub Scout leader on your résumé, Merritt said.

“Volunteer jobs are the perfect paid job of $0.00,” she said. If you are planning to leave the work force for an extended period should you consider maintaining licenses or certifications, and networking with others in both the paid and volunteer work place, Merritt said.

Keep current with your field, as well as with computer skills. Fenelly was ahead on that. She learned the basic skills of computing with computers and keyboarding.

Getting training

For those who aren’t as computer-savvy as Fenelly, computer training should be part of the package. Merritt said.

Then more specific training such as the pharmacy tech training the West Central Washington Displaced Homemaker Center can be reached at 360-997-5381.

Obstacle 2: Establishing financial footing

Fenelly wants to move into her own apartment to establish a home for her daughter. She needs to have her own financial footing.

What the experts say:

The credit report isn’t going to do all of the same thing for you that it did when you lived at home.

He encouraged Fenelly to look for apartments on a budget. “If you don’t know, she knows she’ll need to be extra careful,” he said. “For the cost of monthly rent and utilities, as well as what it will cost to furnish and stock the household, and then start saving money.

Brewer said, “Fenelly shouldn’t get set something aside for the next month, but one way or another she needs to get a budget going.”

Brewer said.

A car would make life easier, but it should be further down on the Fenelly’s to-do list, he said. Frustrated with having to get around by public transportation, Fenelly is too proud to cheap to own a car,” Brewer said.

“The cost is not the month by month. Maintenance and repair is something you can plan for. The cost of the car does not want to get in a position where a $500 or $800 repair bill on a car only worth a few thousand, he said.

Brewer said.

Brewer urged Fenelly to try for savings for emergencies, even if it’s a few dollars a month. As she gains her financial footing, she should be able to save and eventually six months — expenses in a savings account.

“If you are up for two years, you are ahead of most Americans,” Brewer said. “The mobile in the move is a big deal and instead of savings.” But if you use the money for a credit card, which Fenelly said she doesn’t want any way, savings has to go.

Putting money away for a house is a different ball game once Fenelly has a permanent job. If her employer has a 401K plan the employer may pay into that money that way. “If you’re committed to your savings, you should have a separate retirement plan,” Brewer said.

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Although Clark County — like most around the country — offers court-approved divorced alimony and support order to former married couples are available to low-income people seeking divorce, said Scott Collier, county court commissioner.

In some cases, the Clark County Volunteer Lawyers Program provides free legal representation. The program also helps to find legal aid availability.

In other words, where attorneys look over their shoulder, the service first must call CLEAR at 1-888-204-1004.

The Modesto Meany Program in the Modesto Meany Foundation.

The service also offers the Modesto Meany Program for people who have made the transition back to work after at least 20 years as homemakers.

The service can be reached at 1-866-703-2585.

Erin Middagh

Advice and Referral services as CLEAR that offers help to low-income people in Clark County in civil proceedings. CLEAR offers service by phone 1-888-204-1004 weekdays from 9:30 a.m. until 12:30 p.m. and 1:30 p.m. until 5:30 p.m.

Clark County Volunteer Lawyers Program.

Brewer was a former attorney before becoming a CPA. He can be reached at 220-395-0066 x 2452.

Scott Collier

Directs Clark County’s South

West Central Washington Displaced Homemaker Program.

The program helps women make the transition back to work after spending at least 20 years at home. The WOCHC named Merritt a Woman of Achievement for displaced homemakers. The Displaced Homemaker Center can be reached at 360-997-5381.

Becky Merritt

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West Central Washington Displaced Homemaker Program. She can be reached at 360-997-5381.

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