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LOCAL NEWS

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Moms explore alternatives to 9-to-5

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Tuesday, October 9, 2007

By **HEATHER HADDON**
HERALD NEWS

Bergen County To carry a briefcase or a diaper bag? Increasingly, mothers are looking for less of
Essex County a black-and-white solution to that often guilt-laden question.

Hudson County On Monday, several dozen North Jersey women gathered in Jersey City to kick off
Morris County a national conference series on ways to strike a balance between work and
Passaic County motherhood. Companies are starting to warm to the idea, with agencies such as
Employmoms, Mom Corps and Moms-for-Profit springing up in recent years to help women find jobs with more flexible schedules.

"A lot of people feel locked into their situation," said Meaghan McCartan, a Union County resident and conference co-organizer. "They think these jobs don't exist. They do."

Some mothers want to bring their careers home, looking to the Internet -- and a growing corporate thirst for freelancers -- to translate their expertise into an enterprise.

"You don't even need to be in an office anymore," said Nicole Knox, who quit her corporate law job after becoming a mother and now runs a legal consultation business from home. "I'm a much better lawyer now."

About a year ago, two North Jersey mothers decided to launch the conference series with a name appropriate to the Garden State: Detours & OnRamps. Both women had struggled to return to work after having children, cycling through such options as flex-time -- which allows employees to begin work earlier or stay later, so long as they work the required number of hours each week -- and consulting.

"It's lonely," said Kirsten Ly, of Morris County, a conference founder. "I wanted to hear other people's stories."

Despite minimal advertising -- most of it to online mothers' groups -- for the daylong event,

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they received dozens of responses. Many women cried for help: a doctor desperate to figure out how she could work from home, a single mother wondering if she had any options. Some who reported staying home for years are now searching for work to cover their now-grown-up kids' college tuition bills.

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More seminars are planned for Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and other major cities.

On Monday, Alisha Stephens drove up from Metuchen for advice on how to leave her corporate accounting job for at-home work. Working full time and raising three children has become a strain, she said.

"If I only get four hours of sleep, I could do all of this," said Stephens, a pair of sneakers peeking out from her leather briefcase. "But I don't want to go back there."

Many of the speakers sympathized, talking about how they ditched 80-hour workweeks for something more flexible. Nicole Paolini, from Warren, said her employer recognized her skill set, allowing her to work from home while keeping her telecommunications job.

Knox, the lawyer, quit outright after the birth of her first child. But when a friend sought her out for legal advice, she gradually began seeing more clients at home. Knox joined networking groups but found that word-of-mouth drives most of her business.

But as the conference organizers admitted, working-class women have fewer options to find flexible jobs. Waitressing, cashiering and fast-food employment don't allow for freelancing. Even those with in-demand skills need to remember that doing a less traditional job, whether in an office or one's home, can involve trade-offs.

"I think I had more personal time when I was in the corporate world," Knox acknowledged. "At least I got to go out to lunch sometimes."

Still, conference participants see momentum growing for less rigid jobs. Younger workers schooled in freelancing and the ways of the dot com world, they say, have come to expect jobs with more flexibility.

Though she has yet to start her family, Gina Villiotti, of Pompton Lakes, said she's already figuring out how to work from home.

"I don't want to work all the time, said Villiotti, 26, who has begun freelancing in public relations while working a 9-to-5 job at Valley National Bank. "I want to spend time being a mother, too."

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