

CREATES program teaches workers skills of tomorrow

By CHRISTOPHER BROOKE
Staff

Training workers in 21st Century skills will create cutting-edge business opportunities, like in the burgeoning green energy and construction industries, say partners collaborating on the CREATES program.

As applied to the Twin Counties by recipients of a \$3.8 million stimulus funds grant, the effort could decrease unemployment and provide companies with well-trained employees to expand their business, say the participating agencies, which include Wytheville Community College, the Workforce Investment Board and Community Housing Partners, among others.

CREATES is short for Construction, Retrofitting and Energy-efficiency Assessment Training and Employment System, which was funded by a federal Department of Labor grant.

Wytheville Community College has already

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added solar installer classes to the building trades curriculum offered at the Crossroads Institute, and educators continue to work to develop industry certification for students.

This will allow training for potential employees for an array of companies, which will in turn will help them meet rising demand expected for environmentally friendly services, says Jackie Pontious, employer outreach specialist. That will be good for everybody involved.

"What's good for business and profit, is good for people and the planet," she said.

Her job is to show the benefits of these training opportunities to potential employers. Pontious is looking for firms in construction, energy auditing, engineering, architecture, contracting and heating-ventilation-air conditioning to work with CREATES to provide places for the trainees to go to work.

CREATES could help current workers improve their skills or those out of work find new jobs, she said.

Two bills in congress would provide help with energy efficiency directly to homeowners, Pontious noted. If those bills pass, they would drive an increase in demand for these services.

"We can provide new skill sets that will really help these potential trainees be able to find work in domestic jobs that are being created from stimulus funding and other incentives, as well as a growing concern for environmental preservation," she said.

More than 40 people are already receiving training at Crossroads through the dislocated worker, adult and youth programs, according to Marty Holliday, program planner with the New River and Mount Rogers Workforce Investment Board.

Potential participants for CREATES undergo an assessment to ensure they have the interest and aptitude for training and occupations, she explained. As a part of that, they need to reach the bronze level on the Virginia Career Readiness Certificate test.

CREATES program workers also try to find other funding through Pell grants or the Training Readjustment Act to help match their grant funding.

"This helps our training dollars go further and we can train more people," Holliday said. "We have some — a little — supportive service funds that could help with books, child care, etc.

"This is a small amount — it could not pay fully for any of those things."

CREATES has funding for 372 people to get the training, but that's over a region with 21 localities and three community colleges.

Most trainees will go into traditional occupations, but they will be ready to take on more responsibilities as energy efficiency catches on in the building management, construction and remodeling fields, Holliday said.



Partners working with the CREATES grant stop by the building trades shop at Crossroads Institute to talk to Danny Choate about this solar installer classes, available through Wytheville Community College.

Getting employers onboard with the green effort is very important, Holliday stressed.

"We are hoping to partner with employers that are looking to move their businesses in this new direction and willing to hire — straight on or maybe as an apprentice — our trainees."

The grant funding has allowed the Workforce Investment Board to hire a program specialist, Rhonda Womble, and has provided monies for the worker assessment and about \$1 million for training across the region.

New companies and business opportunities will also arise for the trainees, including going into business for themselves, Holliday expects.

"I fully expect entrepreneurship to kick in once someone is trained... actually, I hope to see that happen," she said. "The occupations we're highlighting lead to self-employment for those with the aptitude and attitude for it."

Employers seeking more information on CREATES can contact Pontious at (540) 267-4737.

A website for the program is under development at www.communityhousingpartners.org/development/energy_services/CREATES.shtml.

Rhonda Womble can be reached at (540) 357.3122. The New River-Mount Rogers Workforce Investment Board's website is located at www.nrmrwib.org.



Sealing the box with glass reused from sliding doors will trap the heat inside this solar-powered water heating system.

Enlightening students on solar energy

A new class in Galax teaches about using solar power technology.

By **CHRISTOPHER BROOKE**
Staff

Many construction workers taking building trades classes at the Crossroads Institute have seen the light when it comes to the possibilities of solar energy.

While educators continue to develop a solar installer certification at Wytheville Community College's Galax campus, those enrolled in the building trades program can already take one of the green and alternative energy course as an elective.

(See today's related article about the CREATES grant and what it means for the Twin Counties.)

Solar program coordinator Danny Choate had his students use their construction skills to build solar collectors for a water heating system powered by the sun.

Made from lumber and sheet metal painted black, water pipes run through the box to

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collect the heat.

Recycled "fins" from a baseboard water heating system will improve the efficiency in capturing the sun's rays and transferring heat to the pipes.

And the heat's trapped inside by sheets of glass — old sliding doors repurposed — sealed with silicone on top.

"They learn the concepts of what does work and what doesn't work," Choate said about the exercise and the class in the building trades shop at Crossroads. "That's the way these things are figured out."

Domestic hot water makes up an estimated 30 percent of an electric bill. A solar system could take care of 80 percent of those needs, so homeowners can use this to cut back on power, he said.

Later, the class will get into photovoltaics, the kind of solar energy that generates electricity. Choate said there's a series of classes for students that will get more in-depth after this overview.

Grants have bought equipment for the class to use.

Most of these students enrolled in electrical, carpentry and heating, ventilation and air conditioning classes, but there's been considerable interest in the solar classes.

Enough people enrolled — 44 — that they broke it up into two classes.

Choate estimates about 60 percent of his current students will go on to take the next class in the fall.

They're also interested on a personal level. "I've got several people who want to take this knowledge home, use it in their houses and save money on their electric bills."

Green energy is poised for explosive growth in this country — if congress takes the right action to spur it on, Choate said.

"I think if we can get our congress to pass a law to tell AEP they have to supply a certain percent of their power from solar, that's what's going to drive this business," he said.

There's a lot more to do to raise awareness about consumption and energy efficiency and how those ideas work with new construction, Choate said. He wants to involve the public more with seminars in the future, teaching those building new homes how to orient it towards the sun, adding windows to get solar gain and overhangs that would block the light from the high summer sun.

Members of the class sounded upbeat about the possibilities of solar. A device that people could install in their window to generate extra heat got the attention of Bud Swiney.

"I'm going to build one for my house with Danny's help. I'm going to try it in my bedroom window," he said. "It'll make my wife happy because she's cold-natured anyway."

The window faces toward the south. From what he understands, the solar insert could generate enough heat to warm two rooms and cut down what he needs to burn.

Making solar window heaters sounds like an idea for a cottage industry. Choate expects some of his students will take what they've learned and start businesses of their own.

In time, those businesses might grow and need three or four employees.

Swiney praised Choate and the other instructors in the building trade classes at Crossroads.

Swiney can see the benefit for the people in the classes and the wider area.

"If these guys put what they know to use, it's going to help the whole community," he said.

One of these days, the construction industry here is going to pick back up. These classes will help provide trained workers to take on those jobs.

"Instead of having to sub out to people out of state, the people to do it are going to be available here and it'll keep the money in this area," he said.

For more information, contact WCC at Crossroads at 744-4971.



Building trades workers in the solar installer class at Wytheville Community College's campus at the Crossroads Institute in Galax pitch in on several tasks all at once while building a solar powered water heating system. The students will make the system operational and see how effective it is.