

[New program prepares adults for green jobs](#)

by GLENN GANNAWAY • Staff Writer Coalfield.Com

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BIG STONE GAP — Twenty-four adults started getting “plugged in” to the 21st century workforce Friday at Mountain Empire Community College’s Goodloe Center.

The students started a six-month training program that will qualify them for green jobs. Mark Jackson, director of the New River Center for Energy Research and Training (NRCERT) in Christiansburg and the day’s keynote speaker, emphasized the growth potential in energy-saving green jobs, particularly weatherization of new homes and the retrofitting of old homes.

Jackson told the students that they will be on the “leading edge of this tidal wave” of green jobs and that by starting now, they will have the opportunity to advance their careers over the next five years or so.

The men and women — grouped into two cohorts, one of students from Lee and Scott counties and the other from Wise County and the city of Norton — are enrolled in an innovative classroom and internship program that will prepare them for emerging green jobs in home energy retrofit. The program, called “PluggedIn Construction and Weatherization,” is a partnership between MECC, the Regional Adult Education Program of Lee, Scott, Wise and Norton public schools, and the Appalachian Community Action and Development Agency.

Jackson and staff from NRCERT brought a mobile training lab and introduced students to such things as a scaled-down model of the agency’s “house of pressure” and other leading-edge equipment. The “house of pressure” is a training aide that visually demonstrates pressure and air-flow dynamics in a home.

Today, Jackson said, there is a movement away from “traditional” weatherization methods and toward viewing the house as a system. “We don’t just insulate,” he said. “For grandma’s house built 60 years ago, we come in and air seal and insulate,” while being aware of health and safety issues such as carbon monoxide.

CONSUMER DEMANDS

Consumers are increasingly demanding a high level of qualifications from contractors, Jackson indicated. Training such as “PluggedIn” produces workers who are “credentialed, certified, and have the knowledge to do things properly,” Jackson said.

Or, as Rebecca Scott, program manager for regional adult education, put it, “PluggedIn” plugs students into the 21st century workforce.

Scott said that Appalachian Community Action Agency and other agencies saw the need for a program that would give access to training that would lead to meaningful jobs with sustainable wages.

Having a supply of certified workers in green jobs benefits all stakeholders, Jackson noted, including employers, who will have access to a skilled workforce; consumers, who can hire people with confidence; and the workers, who will be ready for secure, higher-wage jobs.

Training for meaningful jobs and qualifying for better-paying positions appealed to the incoming students.

‘AN OPPORTUNITY’

“To me, it’s an opportunity to help my family, to better myself and to do something for society,” said 33-year-old Noah Porter of Big Stone Gap. “It will give me job stability and job security — a dream come true.”

“For people in the middle class or under middle class who can’t afford (weatherization), we are here to go in and help these people,” said Porter, who is currently working on his GED.

Skylar Peters of Norton summed it up by saying: “I love it. I’ve got a six-month-old child. I have zero income right now and bills coming in. I’m 20 years old and don’t have much experience in anything.”

Peters noted that the program is a good fit for him because he does have some experience in construction trades. And, he said, “in the long run, it will be good for me and my child,” because while entry wages may be low, there is the potential to make more in the long term.

James Mullins of Big Stone Gap, a 33-year-old father of two, said he was happy to have the opportunity to go to college and improve his life.

Earlier in life, he said, “I got into a little bit of trouble. I’ve had people talking to me, saying ‘you could do better.’ A few months ago, I decided to clean myself up. Then this opportunity came along.”

Mullins, who is currently working on his GED, is determined to make the most of the opportunity. “Every class, I’ve been there,” he said. “And I’m going to be there.”

As Scott said, “we are throwing a lot at these students (for example, in building science and math) in a six-month period, but they will come out head and shoulders above others in competing for green jobs.”

Richard Sebastian, instructional technology specialist for Virginia Commonwealth University’s Adult Learning Resource Center, pointed out that people entering today’s job market face worldwide competition. “I don’t think there are remote areas anymore,” Sebastian said. “You’re competing for jobs all over the world.”

Angie Sproles, like other speakers, emphasized the growth potential in green jobs.

“There are a lot of opportunities in new construction and in retrofitting,” said Sproles, director of Appalachian Community Action and Development Agency (formerly RADA). She said there is a “tremendous need in this region” for weatherizing old homes, which will require people trained in estimating costs as well as doing the retrofitting.

Or, as Jackson said in an interview, “people starting to go through training now are going to be on the leading edge. The energy crisis will continue to rise. The folks trained today as installers will be supervisors five years from now.”

Weatherization for energy efficiency got its start during the 1970s oil crisis, Jackson said. Weatherization, he said, was “the first green economy,” but had been under the radar for the past three decades until 2009, when the federal government began pumping stimulus monies into the economy.

NRCERT is a program of Christiansburg’s Community Housing Partners Corp., a non-profit housing development organization. Its motto is “conserving energy today for a greener tomorrow.”

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