

## **CONNECT News**

**C**ommunity Support, **N**etworking, and Assista**N**ce  
for **E**nvironmental **C**areer **T**raining

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The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute (HMTRI), with a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, assists communities in establishing environmental job training programs supported by the Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training Program (EWDJT). To better exchange ideas among EWDJT grantees, HMTRI distributes CONNECT a bimonthly e-publication featuring topics of interest among those interested in participating in the EPA environmental workforce grant program. Ideas presented do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such. This month's issue discusses strategies for increasing diversity in EWDJT programs.

## ***Training a Diverse Environmental Workforce***

### **Workforce diversity and environmental justice**

In the description of EPA's EWDJT's Request for Applications, environmental justice (EJ) objectives of the grant are clearly stated. EPA defines environmental justice as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income."

In the spirit of that mandate, community residents, regardless of gender or ethnicity, should have an opportunity, with training, to reap the benefits of revitalization and environmental cleanup. Priority should be given to the following groups:

- Residents of communities historically affected by economic disinvestment
- Residents in communities experiencing health disparities.
- Inhabitants of communities with environmental contamination
- Low-income, minority and underserved populations
- Members of Tribal communities

Under these guidelines, EWDJT Grants have provided support to train a range of

unemployed and under-employed residents from all types of communities. The only commonality is that these communities have been impacted by pollution and economic distress, such as from abandoned properties including waste and contaminated sites. EWDJT programs provide graduates with an opportunity to seek and obtain environmental jobs that contractors may otherwise fill from outside affected communities.

The broad goal set out by EPA establishes a range of possibilities regarding participants eligible to receive training and job placement assistance. Programs are open to just about any US citizen or legal resident with limited restrictions on age, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, legal status or education. While strategies for community assessment have been discussed as part of the Environmental Workforce Professional Learning Community (PLC) and HMTRI's best practices publications, this discussion addresses EWDJT participation from a different perspective.

This CONNECT issue begins a conversation on strategies to create a diverse environmental

workforce inclusive of women, Native Americans and ex-offenders. When developing proposals, most EWDJT applicants typically select a target community in which they propose to establish an environmental workforce training program. Questions that should be asked include:

- Is the community selected ethnically diverse?
- Has consideration been given in recruiting special populations such as formerly incarcerated individuals, and will the concept of gender neutrality be embraced?

The purpose of this month's CONNECT issue is to examine strategies that have been used successfully to attract and train a diverse environmental workforce. Three EWDJT grantees are showcased to illustrate how women, Native Americans and ex-offenders have been incorporated into EWDJT on a path to environmental careers.

### **The case for training a diverse environmental workforce**

A construction trade's [report](#) predicts that approximately 15 million people who identify as White comprising over 63 percent of construction trades are expected to leave the U.S. labor force between 2010 and 2030. With an annual growth rate over 13 percent almost 520,000 new jobs will be created by 2024. The deficit is expected to be filled by Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans with women making up an increasing portion of each group. Many of the groups mentioned will include previously incarcerated citizens seeking to reenter the workforce.

TradeSource, a construction labor solutions firm delivering labor solutions to contractors throughout the United States, presents the following advantages to employers diversifying their workforce.

[“Key Takeaways to The Advantages of Diversity for the Construction Industry”](#):

1. When you embrace diversity, you can address the labor shortage.
2. Tradespeople with diverse backgrounds bring more creativity to your firm.
3. A diverse team of tradespeople increases productivity.
4. Employing a diverse workforce allows you to grow your market share.
5. Adopting and implementing diverse initiatives gives your firm a positive reputation.”

The first environmental workforce training program to be highlighted is Oregon Tradeswomen followed by Zender Environmental Health and Research Group and then RecycleForce. These three EWDJT grantees represent leaders in training and placing Women, Native Americans and ex-offenders in an increasingly diversified environmental workforce.

### **Women in nontraditional trades**

Few statistics are available regarding women working in environmental technology as the sample size is small. Often referred to as women in nontraditional trades, information is available relating to women occupying construction jobs which are closely related to environmental remediation jobs.

According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), women make up 55 percent of the U.S. population and 47 percent of the total workforce. According to the same Bureau, in 2017, women made up only 2.7 percent of workers in construction. Reasons given for such a large disparity are many. Few have any logical basis in today's workplace. They often include:

- Gender stereotypes
- Economic competition
- Social expectations of gender roles
- Availability of training opportunities
- Perceived lack of physical abilities
- Gender bias (overt and subconscious)

Several organizations across the country are addressing issues of women in nontraditional

trades. EWDJT programs have been aggressively recruiting women into their training cohorts to become gender neutral. Others have been more ambivalent about female participants. While women have not been discriminated for inclusion into those programs, they have not been actively recruited. Predominantly male programs can often be tracked back to unconscious bias or a lack of sensitivity to female inclusion.

### **Oregon Tradeswomen (OTI)**

According to staff from Oregon Tradeswomen, the industry demand for women workers in trades is high. Environmental remediation is no exception. Equal opportunity, guidelines, state mandates and employer gender neutrality goals provide tailwinds for the placement of qualified EWDJT graduates. If students are screened for suitability in the industry and properly prepared for placement, the reputation of the program and previous graduate success facilitates placement. Successful placement at OTI involves one-on-one graduate to employer matchups. OTI offers extensive training relevant to the needs of local employers. Graduates are tracked for two years and encouraged to attend social events and participate in peer-to-peer mentoring. During their last EWDJT grant cycle, OTI achieved the following goals supporting their premise that women can succeed in the environmental workforce:

- 53% of the female cohort was nonwhite
- 40% single parents
- 15% re-entry
- 73% were receiving TANIF benefits.
- OTI achieved an 87% placement rate
- The retention rate exceeded 93%.

These impressive numbers were the result of extensive mentoring, team building and social interaction supporting program participants.

### **Strategies used to recruit, train and retain women in environmental technology**

The two most important strategies in training women as environmental technicians are

finding motivated applicants capable of success and engaging those students from orientation to graduation.

The goal of recruitment is to find applicants serious about a career as an environmental worker. At OTI, as with many of the best EWDJT programs, there are often more applicants than openings. The program's reputation of having a waiting list of applicants sets a tone of dedication and motivation from the start. Working hard just to get into the program establishes value to environmental occupations. Women need to know they are part of an elite group following the path of other successful graduates. The following tips may be useful to EWDJT programs interested in increasing the number of female applicants interested in their program:

- When recruiting a diverse participant population including women – ensure that marketing materials including instructional staff are shown to be diverse.
- All male graduate class pictures and all male staff do not attract serious female participants.
- Employ female trainers.
- Include referrals and testimonials from female alumni.
- Recruit in locations women frequent.
- Feature women speakers as part of awareness events.
- Showcase successful women in nontraditional trades.

Oregon Tradeswomen recruits women in places women frequent including laundries, grocery stores, gyms, day care, and churches. They actively support youth awareness by sponsoring summer camps for girls, leadership training, and career opportunities. Student engagement and retention combines mentorship, leadership, and team building.

- Women need to have ownership in the program not just participation.

- Make every woman feel part of a special team. Camaraderie among students keeps the group together.
- Establish regular social events attended by current students and alumni. In the “era of COVID”, these events are held virtually.
- A strong support/empowerment component is essential.
- Open discussion and sharing of ideas cultivate ownership of the training, and responsibility to pull each other up.
- Leadership development promotes empowerment and retention.

Trainers are key to student engagement in the classroom.

- Dynamic instructors create relevant and interesting training. Time must be set aside for discussion and conversation making students feel connected to the training and guide the experience.
- Teaching through involvement, not just lecture. Students need to move around.
- Respect that women are not “just students”, they are trades people and should be dressed as trades people.
- Participants need to talk and feel welcome in their future occupation.

Adopting strategies of recruitment and engagement directed toward women interested in environmental remediation can help insure a gender neutral EWDJT program with above retention and placement rates.

### **American Indians and Alaskan Natives (AIAN) in the environmental trades**

As with women in the environmental workforce, the sample size for American Indians and Alaskan Natives (AIANs) is relatively small. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not routinely tabulate detailed data on their demographic and labor market characteristics. The AIAN population is extremely diverse. Its members have origins in hundreds of distinct

and culturally diverse peoples from throughout North and South America. As of March 2020, there are 574 federally recognized within the contiguous 48 states and Alaska and many more are either not recognized or are recognized by states only. With similarly low numbers, only about 5.3 percent of working American Indians and Alaskan Natives are employed in construction and extraction industries. [BLS AIAN employment](#)

### **Zender Environmental Health and Research Group**

A mission statement on the Zender Environmental website is “Our purpose of the Company is to provide environmental program services for underserved Tribal and isolated-rural populations where the need exists. “ Perhaps the most challenging EWDJT programs among EPA grantees are those located in rural dispersed communities and those working with diverse tribal communities. These challenges are associated with the scarcity of potential local employers, the disparities in community culture and the large geographic areas served.

With no safe place to discard hazardous waste, subsistence resources on which these communities depend are threatened. Environmental justice is rooted in the philosophy that all peoples have an equal right to clean air, water, and land. Environmental justice is advanced by working with remote indigenous populations and their communities. Zender targets unemployed residents of small and rural Alaskan Native Villages located throughout Alaska. Many are off the state road system and can be reached only by plane or chartered boat. Zender Environmental Health & Research Group not only services a super rural area, they also have learned to work with multiple and diverse tribal communities. Zender ‘s job training program called the Rural Alaska Community Environmental Job Training Program (RACEJT) serves up to 69 of the 197 remote and rural communities with about 95 percent of the students having Alaskan native heritage.

### Rural Alaska Community Environmental Job Training Program (RACEJT)

While the combined target community has a population of 70,473, most villages range from 100 to 1,000 residents. Villages are usually populated with over 30 percent indigenous residents. Often communities have dual councils, both tribal and town councils. The unemployment rate in some villages can be as high as 19 percent, and approximately one third of the residents live in poverty.

The state has approximately 6,287 known contaminated sites, with much of the contamination resulting from inadvertent spills, careless chemical handling, and unregulated waste disposal during the last century's development. In addition, thousands of remote mining sites likely contain high concentrations of heavy metals and processing chemicals. Recent program participants have been 95% Native Alaskan (10 % to 30% female). Some of the challenges overcome by the Zender EWDJT program include the following:

- Working with multiple tribal governments, cultures, and populations.
- Training Non-English speaking participants.
- Providing training to disbursed communities not accessible by road.
- Environmental workforce placement in rural locations.
- Cold weather and short construction seasons with major impacts on training and placement scheduling.

### Strategies used to overcome challenges of a rural and culturally diverse student population

In the face of these challenges, RACEJT has often been able to place their entire graduating class.

Strategies RACEJT has developed in areas of marketing, recruitment, training and placement while unique to Alaska, may be equally useful to programs in more populated and urban communities. Some of the efforts that may

contribute to a 97 percent placement rate with 85 percent retention include the following:

- Extensive attention to student services, retention, and placement.
- Scholarships are made available – with leveraged funding.
- Extensive job readiness training prior to graduation.
- Non-English speaking assistance (Alaska has over 20 regional languages. Yup'ik is most common).
- Close coordination with local governmental employers.
- Training is centralized in Anchorage with two-week intervals between class and home.
- Transportation, lodging, and meal reimbursement is provided.
- Additional social services are provided with leveraged assistance.
- Additional leveraging with the Alaska Communication System.
- Phone cards are provided to call home – with leveraged funding.
- Zero drug and alcohol tolerance.

Zender's RACEJT environmental training program may be unique due to special circumstances, but it shares and magnifies diversity issues with many other EWDJT programs working with diverse populations.

### Re-entry into the environmental trades

As the discussion on diversity in the environmental workforce continues, inclusion of previously incarcerated citizens needs to be addressed as it impedes both women and Native Americans from securing employment in the environmental workforce.

The availability of ex-offenders for entry into the workforce is huge. In the United States, about [650,000 people](#) are released from prisons each year from a total population of over 2 million inmates. With such a large pool of potential workers, recently released inmates have a difficult time finding employers willing to take a chance on them. Even with tax credits

and hiring incentives such as the [Federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit](#) and the free [fidelity bond](#) funded by the federal government, to protect employers against employee dishonesty, the unemployment rate for those attempting to re-enter the workforce remains around 60-70%. Currently, 24 states prevent ex-felons from obtaining professional licenses required to work in a variety of blue-collar trades, including certain environmental professions.

With a lack of job skills and employment opportunities many recently released felons have nowhere to go but back to prison. As a result, almost 25% of prisoners return to prison within the first 3 years. According to the Pew Center on the States, those fortunate to secure jobs can expect to earn about 40 percent less in annual wages compared to people in similar circumstances who have not spent time in prison. As previously noted, to improve employment prospects for ex-offenders, many states have adopted policies to encourage employment, addressed employer liability and hiring incentives, expanded eligibility for record-clearing policies, and supported employment training and reentry programs. With exceptions, most EWDJT programs accept previously incarcerated men and women. Critical issues concerning diverse EWDJT cohorts with ex-offenders remain student retention and graduate placement. RecycleForce specializes in job readiness and training for reentry into the environmental workforce.

### **RecycleForce**

RecycleForce's primary mission is to help formerly incarcerated individuals rebuild their lives through on-the-job and classroom training, social support and job placement. RecycleForce is addressing employment issues by primarily targeting ex-offenders and unemployed residents, some older, but many in the age group of 18-24. Despite economic conditions, the battle for formerly incarcerated individuals is always up hill.

### **Challenges faced by participants preparing for reentry**

Food and housing are the first and second highest priorities faced by returning citizens. In most cases, released inmates return to their home communities, hoping for support from family and friends. No job, no money, a reputation and a return to peer groups that brought them to prison are just the beginning of a long road to productive citizenship. Here are just a few of the many consequences faced by recently returning inmates:

- Some participants are homeless with no transportation.
- In addition to mental issues, PTSD from incarceration is becoming more prevalent.
- Some participants have persistent health issues.
- Certain states require reentry candidates bear all costs of administration and tracking such as court costs, restitution and ankle bracelets.
- Without employment, basic life skills and personal hygiene are sidelined.
- State laws place restrictions on employment or even volunteerism.
- Criminal records often place restrictions on occupations.
- License restrictions may include a commercial driver's license.
- Government employment may be unattainable.
- Incarceration may limit the ability to secure loans or grants.
- Incarceration may limit the ability to receive SNAP benefits.
- Fines, restitution and civil liabilities will inhibit the ability to earn a livable wage.

### **Strategies used to transition ex-offenders into environmental jobs**

Services that support retention when training previously incarcerated citizens include the following:

- Case management for all participants
- Mental health services
- Legal services
- Meal and food pantry assistance
- Housing assistance
- Drug counseling and rehabilitation services
- Transportation services and bus passes
- Childcare and assistance
- Extensive use of peer-to-peer networking including volunteer mentors providing support and guidance.

Unfortunately, these services are not supported by the EPA environmental workforce development grant. Fortunately, several grantees such as Auberle, The Fortune Society, and RecycleForce have access to a broad range of philanthropic, volunteer and stakeholder support. RecycleForce provides wrap around social services including the following.

- HHS provides housing assistance.
- Local charities and restaurants deliver lunch daily.
- A “health mobile” visits RecycleForce facilities on a regular basis.
- Law enforcement assists with activities at RecycleForce facilities.
- Legal services provide assistance in minor crime expungement.
- Parole officers and case workers come to RecycleForce facilities.
- Participants are instructed to leave colors (gang affiliations) and prejudices at the door.
- Dropouts are able to reenter the program with a change in attitude.
- RecycleForce provides paid transitional work and a work history in addition to training and certifications.
- Every morning RecycleForce has a friendship circle, sharing ideas and concerns regarding training and reentry. Participants form a circle (youngest to oldest). Elders mentor and guide younger less experienced team members, providing encouragement and support during and outside organized activities.

### **Can EWDJT programs address student disparities**

This newsletter is only the beginning of a discussion related to training a diverse environmental workforce. Some EWDJT grantees choose to specialize in specific underserved populations while others address a broad spectrum of individuals. In each case, with training and mentoring, underserved community residents have an opportunity to become self-sufficient and at the same time expand the talent pool of a diverse environmental workforce. Questions for future discussion include the following EWDJT challenges:

- Can instructors and students be successful with large classroom disparities?
- To what extent will remedial education and life skills education be necessary?
- Can underserved youth work and learn with older mature participants?
- Will cultural disparities inhibit team building?
- Could gang or criminal history cause classroom disruptions?

Each of these issues influence training, retention, and placement and should be considered when targeting prospective diverse applicant populations.

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HMTRI is part of Eastern Iowa Community Colleges and has provided environmental workforce development technical assistance since the inception of EPA's Brownfields Initiative.

*CONNECT notes presented represent individual opinions and ideas from Professional Learning Community participants and EWDJT grantees. They do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such.*

*For more information on HMTRI technical assistance services or to be added to our Grantee and Community Outreach Listserv, please contact Heather Ballou at [hkballou@eicc.edu](mailto:hkballou@eicc.edu).*

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