

Landing A Green Job

by Jeff Kelly Lowenstein

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This is the final installment in a three-part series for Chicago Matters: Beyond Burnham. Now in its 19th year, Chicago Matters--an award-winning annual public information series made possible by the Chicago Community Trust, with programming by WTTW11, WBEZ Chicago Public Radio, the Chicago Public Library and the Reporter--returns to explore how our region can thrive in a global era. For more information, visit www.chicagomatters.org.

Pete Baker typically teaches his students what it takes to maintain a building, everything from how to install electricity and plumbing to figuring out what each of the hash marks and numbers represent on a standard ruler.

There are two dozen adults enrolled in his class at the Michael Barlow Center on the city's Near West Side. Most of the students are either black or Latino. Some are unemployed. And many are optimistic that once they complete the 10-week program they'll get a new job in the green economy, despite their criminal records. The center serves as an education, training and job placement facility specifically for ex-offenders. This class trains students for green jobs.

On a cool July morning, Baker tells the students about a new revolution that's building steam: A green revolution.

"It started 30 or 40 years ago," said Baker, a trim man with nearly four decades of carpentry experience, referring to the environmental movement. His piercing blue eyes scan the room as students strain to hear him over the clanking of the air conditioning. "Now it's in the mainstream," Baker said. "We're just opening the door."

Student Renee Berryhill wants to walk through it. The mother of three has a scar on her left cheek, a remnant of one of many bad decisions she said she made during nearly a quarter century of drug addiction. "It's not going to be easy. But it's not going to be hard," she said as gold hoop earrings dangle from her ears.

But it's uncertain whether Berryhill and Baker's confidence is warranted.

Green economy advocates say that the jobs in the emerging green economy are geared for people like those enrolled in Baker's class: people living in areas of high unemployment, ex-offenders and at-risk youth.

More money and more jobs are expected to be on the way as the federal government spends the next 15 months pumping money into green programs to help stimulate the economy.

Already, more than \$240 million of federal stimulus money awarded to Illinois has been set aside for the weatherization of low-income homes, Gov. Pat Quinn announced in April. The state received nearly \$100 million of this in September.

This money, combined with about \$425 million of capital funding that received Quinn's signature in July, is projected by some advocates to create more than 5,000 weatherization jobs in Illinois. The state program includes language that says training and hiring should occur in census tracts where at least 20 percent of the people are living in poverty. Many of them are in black communities.

An investigation by *The Chicago Reporter* found that job training is occurring in some communities, particularly black neighborhoods, which traditionally have had the city's highest levels of unemployment. The Reporter analyzed 2000 Census data for each of the city's 77 community areas and found that all but two of the 20 communities with the highest unemployment were predominantly black.

But there are problems. Some advocates say there may not be enough jobs. Others say there are not enough people being trained. There's also concern regarding an oversaturation of training in specific jobs skills. On top of that, high unemployment among construction workers in unions, where Chicago has had a legacy of racial discrimination, has created the potential for intense competition with the newly trained green construction workers. Possibly worse news is that several green jobs are not technically new jobs but represent a "greening" of pre-existing jobs.

"It's an exciting time and it's also very challenging because everyone's scrambling to figure out what's going to be done," said Kerry Knodle, president of the Illinois YouthBuild Coalition, a collection of groups advocating for additional resources for poor and minority youth in Illinois.

Green job activity started in earnest in Chicago around 2005, spurred by the City of Chicago's Green Permitting Program and national concerns about energy efficiency. The planning picked up momentum during the fall of 2007 after passage of the federal Green Jobs Act, according to Victoria Cooper, who directs the Environmental Technology Program at Wilbur Wright College.

By December 2007, the Chicagoland Green Collar Jobs Initiative, which was started earlier that year, held the city's first green-collar jobs summit. The group also adopted an official definition of a green-collar job: It had to have a positive effect on the environment while providing long-term income, job training and work with upward mobility to people with significant barriers to employment.

The Chicago movement received an unprecedented push in 2008 when then-Sen. Barack Obama promised during his presidential campaign to create 5 million green jobs nationally. Shortly after Obama's January swearing-in,

Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, setting aside \$500 million nationally for green-jobs training.

The Reporter surveyed close to 30 members of the Chicagoland Green Collar Jobs Initiative, which represents more than 50 organizations throughout metropolitan Chicago, and other organizations to determine how much training is taking place.

Initiative members have created at least 14 training programs. Some, like Chicago Women in Trades, began as early as 1981, while others, like the Michael Barlow Center, are far more recent. In all, a little more than half of the programs surveyed are geared toward people with barriers to employment: the formerly incarcerated, those who live in areas of high unemployment and youth considered at risk for destructive behavior.

While training is occurring in neighborhoods that need it the most, there are some downsides. Once people participate in the training programs, a potentially saturated marketplace could await them, said Greg Schrock, a former research associate at the Center for Urban Economic Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago. This could happen if hundreds of people receive weatherization training, but there are few jobs available for this service.

The infrastructure for the state's weatherization program is not in place yet and is not expected to be ready until at least the spring, according to Rep. Will Burns, one of the state initiative's supporters. That means the program could be launching at a time when unemployed construction workers are also looking for weatherization work, Schrock said.

Another problem is that there are still few training programs and the number of people who benefit from them is small.

The Reporter's survey found that initiative members who responded estimated that they had trained about 900 people during the past year. By contrast there were about 1,200 people trained for green jobs in the Portland, Ore., region, which is listed as one of the top 10 greenest cities in the nation, and has a population smaller than Chicago.

According to the latest report by the Illinois Department of Employment Security, there were 470,000 people unemployed in metropolitan Chicago in August. However, the number of entry-level green jobs expected to be created in Illinois is less than 2,000, advocates say.

Other barriers exist in trying to get the few jobs that will be created. Schrock said that many of the 23 construction trades have unions with largely white memberships and a history of racial exclusion.

Gary Menzel, a business representative for the United Union of Roofers, Waterproofers and Allied Workers, Local 11, said about 2,300 active members of his union are more racially diverse than Schrock suggested. More than 40 percent of the roofers' union members are Latino and at least 12

percent are black, he said. “We’re open to everybody,” he said.

But others disagreed.

Cheryl Freeman Smith, director of workforce development and diversity at the Chicago Urban League, said the entry tests that prospective union members have to take can present a barrier to many residents of black communities who have attended, and even graduated from, Chicago Public Schools without having achieved adequate high school-level writing, math and measurement skills. The league has developed a program working with the Dawson Technical Institute to help potential union members gain the skills necessary to succeed, she said.

“Our goal is not just to help them to Dawson Tech, [but to] get them prepared to score high enough on the union test,” Freeman Smith said. “If they have 20 slots, they are going to take the top scores.”

But test success does not ensure these workers will be able to travel to the jobs for which they qualify, Freeman Smith added. “Once you get accepted to the group, can you get to the group?” she asked.

In February, the Chicagoland Laborers’ Training and Apprentice Center will provide weatherization training at its new center near Grand and Cicero avenues.

Beyond these concerns, because of the struggling housing market, construction workers could qualify as a disadvantaged group, which is one focus of the money available nationally for green jobs training through the \$787 billion stimulus package approved in February.

Construction unemployment rates nationally soared to an eight-year high of 21.4 percent in February 2009—a figure that was more than four times higher than the rate for the same industry in July 2005, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In August 2009, the unemployment rate among construction workers had dropped to 16.5 percent, the bureau said.

“Much of the green jobs are related to construction, and construction is dead in the water,” said Cooper of Wright College.

Many construction workers are looking to the green economy to find work and bristle at the idea that the work they do can be easily learned by newcomers in 10 weeks, said Mary Gallagher, executive director of Chicago Federation of Labor Workers’ Assistance Committee.

Alexander Prentzas, director of worker education and training at OAI Inc., a nonprofit that advocates for equal access to education, training and career opportunities, was pessimistic about the prospects for some graduates of Baker’s class. “If you are a black male with a record and you are competing against a white guy with 10 years experience, guess who gets on the job?” Prentzas asked.

With its potential difficulties notwithstanding, others are optimistic about what the green-collar economy will do for the region. Knodle of Illinois YouthBuild said he hopes that when the stimulus money runs out after 15 months that other organizations would replace the funding.

Jennifer Keeling, director of city policy at the Chicago Jobs Council, which assumed leadership in late summer of the Chicagoland Green Collar Jobs Initiative, said the current moment holds possibilities that previously seemed impossible. "At least there's money there, there's potential to ... move people in the labor market," Keeling said. "The fact that there's this big influx of funding that's related and appropriate to use is itself a major accomplishment."

Back at the Michael Barlow Center, student Raul Favela shares Cooper's belief. Soft spoken and solidly built, Favela spent a decade behind bars for a drug-related offense before being released in December 2003. The 44-year-old with dark hair flecked with gray lives in the basement of his parents' house. He's hopeful that he'll find a green job after completing the building maintenance class in early October.

"As soon as I pick up the certificate and start looking, with all the help they are giving me ... I think I will be able to accomplish what I need to accomplish," he said.

*Contributing: Sarah Bloom, Mike Jakubisin and Elizabeth Schiffman.
Marian Wang helped research this report.*

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