

Vegas Seven

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Photo by Anthony Mair

Instructor Les Lazareck, right, gives direction to students in the federally funded Weatherization Training Program.

Building a Better Future

Program helps unemployed construction workers expand skills, find jobs

By Tiffannie Bond

Richard Pipkins helped build more than 6,000 homes here over 13 years. But once the demand for homes stopped, so did his livelihood. He was laid off 15 months ago, with no job in sight.

Then he applied for the Weatherization Training Program, a federally funded program that last year received an injection of stimulus funds. After being one of 14 applicants accepted into the six-week certification class, hope has been rekindled for not only a regular income again but for a future.

"Hopefully, [I'll] get back into the housing industry," he says. "Right now, it's slow. ... With the price of homes, it'd be better to make your home more efficient than to rebuild or remodel."

And there are a multitude of Las Vegas homes that could use this type of help, which could equal jobs and reduce air-conditioning expenses for homeowners this summer.

"If any state in the country should be successful with this, it's Nevada," says Brian Patchett, president and CEO of Easter Seals of Southern Nevada.

To bring the creation of this new industry full circle, Easter Seals is exploring ways to connect newly certified workers with the population in need of weatherization.

It's "a work in progress," says Jokeen Arnold, assistant director of vocational rehabilitation for Easter Seals of Southern Nevada.

The goal of the program is to help put a broad spectrum of people back to work, including the disabled. That's why, along with Home Free Nevada, the effort is coordinated locally by Easter Seals. Of the total number in the program, 20 percent have disabilities.

The six-week program takes students through online training, plus about 25 hours of in-class training and field instruction, in preparation for the national certification exam. It is taught in two parts, and includes about two hours of homework each night. First, students are trained with Nevada's Weatherization Program in mind and learn to help poverty-stricken homeowners replace inefficient light bulbs, make water-heater blankets and seal ducts. Home Performance training teaches students how to assist homeowners in making up to a 20 percent energy reduction, says instructor Les Lazareck, of Home Free Nevada.

"It's across the board with the people we're helping," Arnold says. "Many are out-of-work construction workers, which seem to be the large pool right now."

According to Bill Anderson, chief economist for the Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation, the number of unemployed in the construction industry remained steady at 66,900 from January to February. Since June 2006, the industry has lost 81,900 jobs, or 55 percent of the workforce.

If WTP students pass the exam, they'll receive a Building Performance Institute certification. With this in hand, their expertise is instantly broadened. If they are disabled, Easter Seals can help them find a job through the WIA Grant.

"From perspective job offers to starting my own business, [this is] another certificate to help the clients I provide services to," Pipkins says. "Hopefully, this is something that will be around for a while now that people have to stay in their homes longer." ■

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