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Job Program Redefines Green

Grant seeks to retrain local vets for environmentally conscious jobs

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NEW SKILLS: John Tartaglione, owner of the Hopkinton-based construction firm JMS Partners Inc., is a graduate of the Veterans Inc. green jobs training program.

In the past couple of years, the Obama administration has made “green jobs” a household term, with plenty of publicity and funding for initiatives to promote employment in environmentally friendly industries. Among the many beneficiaries of the effort is Veterans Inc., a Worcester-based nonprofit that recently received its second \$800,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to train veterans for those sorts of jobs.

Measuring Success

Within the first three quarters of the program's first year, Veterans Inc. had placed 88 veterans in jobs. According to the group's director of finance and development, Allison Alaimo, that was an especially significant achievement since many of them were newly returned from Iraq or Afghanistan and almost all had barriers to employment like disabilities or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Yet the majority of the new jobs gained through the grant program weren't actually anything that could be called green. Twenty-six program graduates found green jobs, including things like construction positions requiring lead remediation training, hazardous waste removal or driving a hybrid bus. The others got a variety of other jobs that couldn't be called particularly green.

Alaimo said the important thing is that so many people found work.

She said the grant doesn't demand that everyone who takes part in a training program gets a job with a connection to the environment.

"That wouldn't be realistic," she said.

Jen Boudrie, a Marlborough instructional design expert and director of the Massachusetts Green Career Conference, said the notion of green jobs is somewhat misleading.

Instead, she said, educators and employers should think about "greening" traditional jobs, or making them more environmentally friendly.

"The larger movement I think we're looking at these days is the greening economy and greening careers, which means that a lot of careers or jobs have greener aspects to them," she said.

One such career is construction. John Tartaglione is a retired Navy pilot and the owner of a small Hopkinton-based construction firm, JMS Partners Inc. He's also one of the graduates of the Veterans Inc. green jobs program.

Tartaglione said he needed to take an eight-hour course in lead abatement if he wanted to work on any home built before 1978 — which represents a large part of his business up and down the I-495 corridor.

"It was absolutely critical," he said. "It was just essential, and it was very informative."

Boudrie said many green jobs training programs are succeeding by considering what participants like Tartaglione already know how to do and then helping them add relevant green skills.

Construction workers can learn energy-efficient installation, fleet managers can learn about alternative vehicles and salespeople can study environmentally friendly product lines.

Alaimo said many of the jobs that graduates of the Veterans Inc. program have gotten so far may not have any of those green aspects to them, but she still sees value in giving a green focus to the job training funds.

She said the grant program encourages the group to work with employers and look to jobs that are likely to grow, like energy efficiency measures and winterization.

“I think it is a fast-growing field,” she said.

Still, Alaimo said there’s little point in thinking about environmentally friendly jobs as an entirely separate category from traditional work.

“It’s kind of a far-reaching, outstretched, ambiguous term, ‘green jobs,’ ” she said.