

New initiative receives positive response from industry, government

Gulf Coast Workforce Development Initiative

Just like industries across the board, the construction industry is feeling the effects of a work force shortage. This shortage is even more substantial along the Gulf Coast, where communities are working hard to rebuild after 2005's devastating hurricane season.

"The fact is that the regional demand for construction labor significantly exceeded supply before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and this shortfall has grown even more because of the need for workers in the recovery effort," Larry Burton, executive director of the Business Roundtable, said. "Thousands of construction workers will be needed to rebuild the Gulf Coast following last year's hurricanes, and businesses, labor, educators and government leaders are all working together to recruit and train more construction workers."

To meet this challenge, the Business Roundtable has introduced the Gulf Coast Workforce Development Initiative with a goal of recruiting and training 20,000 new construction workers across the Gulf Coast by 2009. All training is free and will be conducted by instructors certified by the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER).

Chad Holliday, CEO of DuPont and co-

chair of the initiative, said that while the national response to the hurricanes has been unprecedented, the Gulf Coast region continues to need support for reconstruction.

"The Gulf Coast region is a key component of a strong national economy, and Business Roundtable CEOs remain committed to helping this area regain its vitality," he said. "This landmark public-private partnership will train the workers that will be needed to rebuild the area."

Riley Bechtel, chairman and CEO of the Bechtel Group, noted that the massive reconstruction following the wake of the hurricanes offers a major opportunity to build skills and employment in the impacted region, helping the area retain and develop its residents and accelerate its economic recovery.

In August, the initiative launched the Gulf Rebuild: Education, Advancement and Training (GREAT) campaign in Baton Rouge, La., and Jackson, Miss., to promote the program and recruit participants. According to Burton, this campaign includes billboards, radio ads featuring NASCAR driver Denny Hamlin, a Web site and a special toll-free number.

Michael Matlock, site maintenance manager of Dow Chemical Co.'s Louisiana facili-

ties, has assisted in rolling out the campaign in Baton Rouge. According to Matlock, one of the things missing in the Greater Baton Rouge area has been the lack of a fairly cohesive marketing effort to recruit not only local residents, but people across the country to aid in the rebuilding process.

"This campaign will demonstrate to people that construction is a career that can be very rewarding and honorable and is open to where you want it to go," Matlock said. "We were facing a shortage before recovery and since recovery, all the expansion plans that plants have been making and all the recovery efforts associated with damage from the storms are really both our greatest problem and our greatest opportunity to define our future," he said.

According to Burton, the response to the new campaign has been positive.

"The response has been tremendous since we launched the campaign in the region," Burton said. "Classes have been filling up quickly in Baton Rouge and Jackson, and more classes are being added to meet the growing demand."

The initiative has also received support from President Bush and U.S. senators from

Louisiana and Mississippi.

"While the residents of Louisiana and Mississippi have demonstrated their resilience in the months following last fall's hurricanes, there's a great deal of work still ahead, and we need skilled workers to get the job done," Sen. Mary Landrieu said. "I'm pleased to see business, labor and other groups working together to lend a helping hand to rebuild our communities and revitalize our economy."

Sen. Thad Cochran said that this coast-wide effort will help address the immediate need to rebuild and recover following the hurricanes, while equipping those left unemployed by Hurricane Katrina with skills that will enable them to build a career in the construction industry.

NCCER President Don Whyte said that the need for craft training to provide a trained work force in the Gulf area has never been greater than it is today.

"We want to help rebuild our communities and rebuild the lives of the Gulf Coast residents," he said.

For more information on the Gulf Coast Workforce Development Initiative, please review Jack Darnall's column on p. 44. □

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