

## **Barbour says rebuilding suffers because of shortage of workers**

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Gov. Haley Barbour says rebuilding along the Mississippi Gulf Coast has suffered because of a tremendous shortage of qualified construction workers.

On Monday, Barbour joined local officials in Gulfport for the announcement of a program to train more workers. The goal of Gulf Rebuild: Education, Advancement and Training is to train 20,000 Gulf Coast residents from Texas to Mississippi in basic construction over the next three years.

Once they get the skills, the students in a heating and air conditioning class at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College believe they'll have little trouble landing jobs.

"I thought it would be a good opportunity," said William Tune. "The classes are free so you just come in get a good education that's real quick. There's a lot of job opportunities right now around the coast."

The program is funded by both government and private dollars. Here in Mississippi, the classes are taught through several community colleges including Mississippi Gulf Coast.

"It's a four week program entry level," said Tim Johnson of GREAT. "It's free of charge to the student. They'll learn construction math. They'll learn basic measuring and cutting. They'll have hand tools and power tools. Perhaps more importantly, they'll get a lot of information around safety in the construction place."

With some 70,000 homes damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, Barbour said the need for more construction workers is apparent, but persuading people to take advantage of free education may not be easy.

"The big issue is not going to be the availability of jobs or the need for the workers. The big issue is going to be can we get a large enough number of people aware of this to recognize how much this can mean to them so they sign up and participate in the program."

About 150,000 workers will be needed to complete the rebuilding work needed in all the states hit by the 2005 hurricanes.

Regional program manager Tim Horst said planning for the initiative began in December. "We developed a detailed project execution plan," he said. "We are treating this like any other construction project we would take on."