

Job Training Initiative Includes Free Construction Classes

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So much to build and not enough builders. Governor Haley Barbour says rebuilding here is suffering because of a tremendous shortage of qualified construction workers. That's why on Monday the governor threw his support behind an initiative called "[I'm GREAT](#)." GREAT is an acronym for Gulf Rebuild: Education, Advancement and Training. The goal 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."

How to fix the Gulf Coast shortage of qualified workers was the question put before 160 company C.E.Os. Their answer was "I'm Great" a five million job training initiative 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 I'm 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, Governor Haley Barbour says the need for more construction workers is apparent, but convincing people to take advantage of free education may not be easy.

Governor Barbour said "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. "