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Gulf Coast Rebuilding After Hurricane Katrina Means Developing the Work Force

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The Gulf Coast was hit hard in 2005, with seven hurricanes tearing through the region. Katrina was the devastating showstopper, causing an estimated \$81 billion in damage.

Following the storm, Gulf Coast builders and civic authorities found themselves in the hole. Even before the hurricane, the local building trades were shorthanded. Now, with post-Katrina rebuilding work to do, there were nowhere near enough hands to go around. Entire neighborhoods languished.

"We wound up hiring people who weren't trained, who certainly would not earn as much money, who would not be as productive or efficient," said Fred McManus, vice president of The Shaw Group Inc., a Baton Rouge, La., engineering and construction company.

Things have changed for McManus, whose 27,000-person firm has been able to bring in more than 3,000 trained workers in recent months. The windfall of personnel came thanks to the Gulf Coast Workforce Development Initiative (GCWDI), a public-private partnership that has trained more than 20,000 workers in various construction skills.

The effort has helped fill the labor gap, making it possible to rebuild and renew the region.

Assembling the Team

GCWDI had its genesis in a 2005 meeting of the Business Roundtable, a captains-of-industry conclave of about 160 CEOs working for major organizations. The group conceived a program to be led by the Bechtel Corp. and DuPont that would work to fill the labor gap.

Members agreed to pitch in \$5 million in cash and in-kind services, as a monetary foundation to attract \$25 million in public support. The U.S. Department of Labor added \$5 million to the pot through its Pathways to Construction Employment Initiative. Louisiana added \$15 million more. National emergency grants, community block grants and other sources also supported the effort.

Planners conceived a three-pronged approach for the initiative, which formally launched in spring 2006: recruitment into construction careers, training and job placement.

Promotion came through the GCWDI Web site, www.imgreat.org, and paid advertising. Local community colleges formed the backbone of the training component. Contractors, homebuilders, trade groups and others stepped up with job-placement initiatives.

Planners and educators worked closely with those companies that would be hiring. "We wanted

to let them know what our class schedules are, when students would become available and how to find them," said Tim Horst, GCWDI program manager. Job fairs give recent graduates the chance to interact directly with employers.

Training began in mid-2006 and continues throughout the region, with programs in Mississippi, Texas, Alabama and Louisiana.

Forging Partnerships

In addition to its government sponsors, GCWDI has drawn support from the community.

Trade associations have played a role, for example, through The Roofing Industry Alliance for Progress, which donated \$25,000 to the effort. The National Roofing Contractors Association also donated resources to produce a recruitment video and worked with GCWDI to include a roofing component in the program's curriculum.

The education community stepped up with extensive training programs. Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, for instance, offers a range of four-week courses based on the National Center for Construction Education and Research curriculum.

The Mississippi Construction Education Foundation also played a role. "They were at the table with us from the very beginning, helping us develop those programs and identify the shortages of workers in the entire construction industry," said Anna Faye Kelley-Winders, vice president of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. "You must have partners at the table who are aware of those regional and national trends."

The short-course format, produced outside a college's usual for-credit track, allows for innovation. "[It] has made a great deal of difference because it allows us to try new things, to change formats, to respond to a particular need on a moment's notice," Kelley-Winders said. "Because you are operating outside the credit rules and regulations, there are fewer barriers to starting a program, to do it at night, for example, or in a new format."

To round out their participation, colleges held a job fair for recent trainees, sometimes once a week. In the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, these events typically are highly targeted, zeroing in on the skills of a graduating class.

"Employers know the profile of the existing students, and they know their own needs, so it can be done on an appropriate level and in an appropriate way," said Jim Henderson, senior vice president for work force training and development in the Louisiana Community and Technical College System.

Best Practices

As the initiative unfolded, planners and participating entities slowly created a picture of best

practices, starting with ideas about marketing strategies and tactics. From the educators' point of view, getting the word out was a crucial component in making the project work.

"Outreach and recruiting were critical to the success of the effort," Henderson said. "While the schools themselves lacked the resources to promote the initiative on a large scale, GCWDI was able to reach out into markets we couldn't, and they brought in expertise in crafting the message."

Planners took care in developing their marketing plan. "We took baby steps; we didn't really put a lot of money into any one thing," Horst said. Eventually a mix of radio, billboard, newspaper and other forms of advertising formed the core of the outreach message.

Not every effort succeeded, though. The team tried to market to car races, but the results were disappointing. "When people go to an auto race or a football game their mind is on that event, and they aren't too interested in talking about construction," Horst said.

Simultaneously more grassroots efforts were used to reach out to individuals and institutions. At Advantous Consulting in Baton Rouge, for example, GCWDI Community and Outreach Manager Tim Johnson addressed career fairs in the inner city and worked with the Greater Baton Rouge Christian Ministerial Alliance to connect with some 85 African-American churches.

"You think about the impact a church has on its community and the ability to touch young people's lives. In some cases, the churches will act as a haven for people who have specific needs, are down on their luck, need some direction and some opportunities," Johnson said.

Positive Outcomes

GCWDI set out to train up to 20,000 new construction workers to the apprentice level by the end of 2009. In fact, the effort hit 20,421 training completions, with another 685 students enrolled in training, by December 2008.

How did the program rocket past its original target? "The synergy of having a public-private partnership is really important," Horst said. "The federal government, with its financial resources, along with the community colleges, with their on-the-ground training and instructors, and the participation of employers -- it all forms a very solid basis upon which to build."

More than just a jump-start to regional rebuilding efforts, GCWDI has improved the lives of thousands of people.

"We know of any number of people who were sacking groceries, and now they are working as carpenters and electricians. It has really turned their lives around," Horst said. "They can think about buying a home or first automobile, something they could not have done before. It has opened brand new doors and new opportunities."