



Western Massachusetts job training programs get a boost; Community Works provides apprenticeships for building trades

biz 7xxtrain 1.jpg

07/25/13 Springfield- Republican Photo by Mark M.Murray - Aziza Holloway-Abdegeo, one of the graduates of the apprenticeship programs in the building trades, speaks about her experiences, during an interview with the Republican. *(Mark M. Murray/ The Republican)*

Jim Kinney, The Republican By **Jim Kinney, The Republican**

Follow on Twitter

on July 29, 2013 at 7:07 AM

SPRINGFIELD - Aziza Holloway-Abdegeo used to sell buildings; now she builds them.

The economy put a damper on Holloway-Abdegeo's career selling real estate. But, a pre-apprenticeship training program called Community Works helped get her foot in the door as a union apprentice carpenter.

As an apprentice she's helped build the **\$114-million Roger L. Putnam Vocational-Technical Academy** and work on the \$43.4 million renovation and expansion of Forest Park Middle School.

Hopefully, fingers crossed she says, she'll have a hand renovating Springfield's **Union Station** and building a **resort casino complex** no matter who the successful bidder turns out to be.

And, she's making \$16 to \$17 an hour plus benefits. She credits Community Works.

"I needed to know that there is a place for a woman in the trades," she said. "I need to learn that as a woman I could do this."

I don't want any talent to go to waste because someone wasn't exposed to the trades," said Michael J. Florio, executive director of the Western Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health and one of the organizers of Community Works.

But, before someone can get in an apprenticeship program, they need to first know what the trades are and have a few basic skills

"You would be amazed at the number of people who come to the class not knowing how to read a ruler," Florio said. "It's all 'One small line past the three?'. That just can't work."

After the training, the average hourly wage earned by participants in the 24-member class went up 68 percent, from \$10.36 to \$17.39. The group went from having a 15 percent employment rate to a 74 percent employment rate.

There were 20 job placements, and 78 percent of the adult graduates were accepted into trade-union apprenticeship programs, according to a news release.

That sounds good to Bill Spivey, of Pine Street in Springfield. At 34 years old, he's a prospective student in the program. Spivey has done some work installing drywall, but his main job is detailing cars. It's difficult to support his family that way, he said.

Bill Spivey of Springfield is a prospective trainee.
Mark M. Murray/ The Republican

"That's why if there is a job I jump on it," he said. "I want something better."

Community Works, which was called Springfield Works two years ago when Holloway-Abdegeo went through the program, is looking now to fill two more classes of 24 students each, said Joseph Connolly director of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst Labor-Management Workplace Education program .

Connolly's program and its partners, which include labor unions and MGM Resorts International, have received \$262,250 in state grant money to fund the project for another four years.

The program is expanding to Holyoke, hence the name change from "Springfield" to "Community."

It's part of \$4.5 million in grants announced last week by the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund. The grants are designed to address the need for workers who need more than a high-school diploma but not a four-year college degree.

The Regional Employment Board of Hampden County received \$350,000 for its Financial and Business Services Workforce Collaborative, which was put together with the help of employers including MassMutual Financial Group, Thing 5, PeoplesBank and Liberty Mutual.

The idea is to train people for employment in call centers, handling incoming calls for customer services, said J. William Ward, president and CEO of the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County.

It's a growing industry. And, just as Holloway-Abdegeo is looking to a casino project for work, banks and insurance companies know a casino will look to hire away trustworthy employees who know how to handle case and give great customer service.

"It's all about expanding that base," Ward said.

Ward said there will be a special emphasis on training Spanish-speaking bilingual call center workers. It takes education to jump from conversational Spanish to the type of formal language used in a business setting.

In Franklin County, the Franklin-Hampshire Regional Employment Board received \$239,751 to develop the Franklin Hampshire Middle Skills Academy to teach advanced manufacturing skills. Partners include Greenfield Community College and employers including Montague Machine, Valley Steel Stamp, Starrette Co. and Bette Fog Nozzle.

"It's about listening close to employers. What do you need now and what kinds of people come in looking to apply for these jobs?" Ward said. "It's not the applicants. It is the skill level."

Florio said the pre-apprenticeship training Community Works offers touches on soft skills like job interviewing and resume writing. But trainees get to go to various union training centers and learn, for instance, what is involved in being an operating engineer running heavy equipment. Florio was once head of training for the local operating engineers.

At the sheet metal workers, pre-apprenticeship trainees made a metal toolbox.

Holloway-Abdegeo said she is unemployed right now. And, Florio said not many local building trade unions have open apprenticeship programs at this time, but he expects them to start filling classes soon as work picks up.

Not only is there the casino project on the horizon somewhere in Western Massachusetts and Union Station, there is also ongoing work at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Also, skilled tradespeople are retiring and need to be replaced if the industry is to thrive.

© 2013 masslive.com. All rights reserved.