

Eric Lopez of Veterans Green Jobs
inspects the crawlspace where a new
furnace has been installed.
Photo by Brian Brainerd



Veterans put to work helping low-income Families in Colorado

Veterans working to help low-income families reduce their energy bills and make their homes cleaner and healthier. Sound like a dream? Thanks to Veterans Green Jobs, this scenario takes place every day across the state of Colorado.

by The National Association for State Community Services Programs

Founded in 2008, Veterans Green Jobs is a Denver -based nonprofit organization that provides green jobs, education, transition support, and career development opportunities for military veterans. The organization understood that veterans returning from overseas posts such as Iraq and Afghanistan would need assistance transitioning back into civilian life in Colorado, particularly when it came to job placement. Veterans Green Jobs stepped in to help these veterans find meaningful employment in growing

fields, providing the same sense of service that led many of them to join the armed forces in the first place.

Now in its second year, Veterans Green Jobs has a number of programs successfully employing veterans throughout the state of Colorado and the Southwest. The Veterans Green Corps program, in conjunction with the Southwest Conservation Corps, trains and places veterans in land conservation methods such as forest thinning and land management. The Veterans City Canopy program works



Jordan Latva. Photo by Linda Lidov

with transitioning homeless veterans on the Mile High Million program, aimed at planting a million trees in Denver by 2025. As of August 2012, thirty-five Veterans City Canopy crew members will have planted 4,600 trees in Denver yards.

One of the most successful programs at Veterans Green Jobs is the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP). With their focus on green jobs, the organization seized the opportunity to expand into the WAP early this year, winning an \$11.8 million American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant from the Colorado Governor's Energy Office. It now employs veterans to weatherize low-income households in Denver and Jefferson counties as well as the San Luis Valley, one of the poorest in the state. In Denver and Jefferson counties alone, Veterans Green Jobs has created thirty-two jobs, eighteen of which are held by veterans.

Sergeant Jordan Latva is one of those veterans. Wounded in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004, the career Marine officer realized for the first time that he would have to find a job after retiring from the service in 2005. "I didn't have a clue as to what I wanted to do," he said. "I didn't know how to go about changing my resume from military to civilian terms." He learned about Veterans Green Jobs through a Veteran Affairs representative at a community college and was sold. The organization provided Jordan with training at an accredited education program in home energy auditing and weatherization, as well as employment placement opportunities. Today, Jordan works with low-income families in Denver and Jefferson counties to help them

understand the low-energy measures placed in their homes. "I joined this [program] not knowing anything about 'green,'" he remarked. "Learning about energy efficiency, and doing community outreach to help others be more aware, has been an eye opener."

According to Garrett Reppenhagen, Director of Programs for Veterans Green Jobs, positions like Jordan's



*A Veterans Green Jobs weatherization crew member blows installation into a homeowner's attic.
Photo by Brian Brainerd*

are "ideal for vets coming out of the military. Vets have a lot of great soft skills and a strong work ethic . . . work well under pressure in diverse conditions, work as a team, and have an incredible sense of service. Coming out of the war zone, this is a terrific way to help vets continue giving a service to the country by helping fellow Americans save money on their energy bill and save energy for the nation."

Eric Lopez, a former Marine, is another such individual. Eric learned about the weatherization work done by Veterans Green Jobs as a recipient of their services. After being laid off from the construction industry in 2009, Eric reflected on his positive experience with the Veterans Green Jobs crew

and the extraordinary reduction in his home heating bills—almost \$140 a month—and decided to enroll in an energy efficiency program at Red Rocks Community College. "I saw how energy was taking the forefront of the economy. Any job that had to do with anything important was a green job," Eric said. Today, he works as a training manager for Veterans

Green Jobs' Weatherization Services program.

Seeking to reproduce stories like Jordan's and Eric's, Veterans Green Jobs has teamed up with the Governor's Energy Office and the Colorado Community College system to create technical weatherization and energy training centers in the state's community colleges. This initiative helps both veterans returning home as well as students who receive training in the growing green job sector. The Governor's Energy Office is likewise looking to the future for ways to sustain the current level of weatherization services after the ARRA funding is spent. One option being aggressively pursued is "fee-for-service"

weatherization programs, which would fund low-income projects throughout the state.

“I can’t say enough about how much the State of Colorado has supported us,” remarked Tamara Ellentuck, Executive Director of the Weatherization Program for Veterans Green Jobs in San Luis County. “They have been very progressive in looking and planning ahead to sustain these jobs and this program after the

Recovery Act money is spent.”

The Colorado Governor’s Energy Office and Veterans Green Jobs are working to make a tangible difference in their community. Vince Ingram, a twenty-year Air Force veteran who found his way to Veterans Green Jobs after being laid off from the banking industry in 2009, summed it up best: “In my banking job, I supervised people I never saw. I missed the camaraderie after I left the Air Force. The work

at Veterans Green Jobs would allow me to help low-income families, put vets back to work, and help green the economy and the environment.”

This is, in essence, what Veteran Green Jobs is about: helping our veterans to find meaningful employment assisting low-income families while simultaneously improving the environment and reducing our dependence on foreign oil. ■