

Louisiana, Leads the Next Generation of Weatherization Workers

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act) invested \$5 billion in the Department of Energy's (DOE) Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) to promote energy efficiency, train workers for the burgeoning green economy, and help low-income families reduce their energy bills during a difficult economic time. The Louisiana Association of Community Action Partnerships (LACAP) embraced the opportunity the influx of federal funds provided to enhance their own workforce with a new Baton Rouge Weatherization Training Center. Now fully operational, the training center provides workers with valuable skills in weatherizing homes.

The Recovery Act gave the WAP an unprecedented chance to expand the depth and breadth of an already successful, 30-year-old program. Charged by the DOE and the Obama administration to weatherize 650,000 low-income American homes by March 2012, state offices around the country sought new workers and contractors to meet this challenge. Many people think of replacing windows and doors and maybe a little weather-stripping when they think of weatherization; weatherization in the WAP, however, far exceeds those simple measures. Technicians must learn a comprehensive, house-as-a-system approach coupled with the latest in building diagnostics to meet DOE standards and regulations. Recipients of weatherization services receive the highest quality work in the energy efficiency retrofit industry.

LACAP, an organization comprised of forty-two community action agencies operating in all sixty-four parishes in Louisiana, established a training center in Baton Rouge to meet the administration's challenge as well as to train the next generation of weatherization workers. Located in an industrial warehouse, the new LACAP training center opened in July 2009. The site boasts 11,000 square feet of classrooms, hands-on props, demonstration houses, and a full-size training mobile home. By combining classroom instruction with real-world demonstrations, weatherization workers better learn and understand the fundamentals



a month with his crews for the State of Louisiana. The WAP was such a boon to his business that he had the opportunity to hire three more workers to

before they are sent out into the field.

“I don’t see how you could weatherize a home without training,” Ray Sharkey, owner of Public Construction, said. Mr. Sharkey added weatherization to his home repair business’s portfolio after demand for workers increased. Despite the significant dip in the housing industry during the Great Recession, the move into weatherization allowed Public Construction to retain their twelve staff members and put some of them through the weatherization programs at the Baton Rouge center.

“I was really impressed with the training center,” Mr. Sharkey added, noting that after several trips to the Baton Rouge site he and his staff “had learned something new to take back with them into the field.” Now Mr. Sharkey uses his weatherization training not just on the federally funded, DOE homes but also on private HVAC contracts as well. He hopes to enter the growing middle-income market for weatherization services in the future with his trained workforce.

To date, the LACAP training center has taught over 110 classes to more than 350 community action agency staff and weatherization contractors such as Mr. Sharkey. The more than 15,000 hours of instruction has certainly contributed to the 2,761 homes weatherized in Louisiana through February 2011.

Contributing to those production numbers is Jeremy Robinson of Tangi Energy Conservation. Laid off as a result of the 2009 recession, Mr. Robinson heard about weatherization from a friend working at Tangi. Today, Mr. Robinson owns Tangi Energy Conservation and weatherizes eight to ten homes

keep up with demand, a number of whom trained at LACAP’s Baton Rouge center.

“WAP has been a tremendous asset as far as I’m concerned,” Mr. Robinson said. “It helped me get a job, and I help homeowners have a more energy efficient, comfortable home.”

Other training centers like the LACAP’s in Louisiana have been established throughout the United States with Recovery Act funding. To date, more than thirty-five centers exist across the nation in diverse climactic and housing stock areas such as Maine, Florida, Indiana, and Montana. Each employs the high technical standards established by the DOE under their standardized curricula, coupled with local standards and techniques specific to each state’s region. The creation of these training centers has laid the foundation for a solid, well-trained workforce in green, living-wage jobs.

As the cases of Mr. Sharkey and Mr. Robinson demonstrate, a well-trained workforce helps not only the low-income people served by the WAP, but also the small business owners and workers who can use the training to enter the growing energy efficiency retrofit market. This is a win-win for all: It creates jobs, reduces America’s carbon footprint, and reduces our dependence on foreign oil. ■

