

WEDC: Fresh starts fuel Wisconsin's construction workforce

Posted on Wednesday, Jan 26, 2022

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

Wisconsin's Workforce Innovation Grant will allow Operation Fresh Start to help more young people build careers

MADISON, WI. JAN. 26, 2022 – Kevontay Deans isn't sure where he'd be if it wasn't for Operation Fresh Start – but it probably wouldn't be on a crew learning construction skills as they build a home in Sun Prairie.

"It's helped me a lot," Deans, 19, of Madison said. "I like seeing houses come together. It's interesting to me."

Deans, who hopes to be chosen for a carpentry apprenticeship, is one of the first participants in Operation Fresh Start's Build Academy.

The academy aims to help young people ages 18 to 24 get the education and training they need to earn their pre-apprenticeship certification. Students work alongside mentors and professionals while learning practical construction skills, math or even earning their driver's license to get ready for a career in construction or conservation work.

Operation Fresh Start's Build Academy is one of 12 programs across Wisconsin that has received a Workforce Innovation Grant. The grant – up to \$3.3 million for Operation Fresh Start – is aimed at collaborative programs aimed at solving regional workforce challenges. In December, Gov. Tony Evers announced about \$59.5 million in the grants, with a second round of funding to be announced later this year. The grants are paid for by \$100 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds.

The programs funded range from job training and entrepreneurship support to addressing child care access. Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

(WEDC) Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes, along with Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS) Secretary Dawn Crim and Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Secretary-designee Amy Pechacek took part in a roundtable discussion Wednesday at Operation Fresh Start on Madison's East Side.

"It's exciting to see how this investment in young people is directly paying off with graduates being placed in family-supporting jobs that our businesses need to grow," Hughes said. "As our current and future workforce needs continue to grow, it's more important than ever to help young people find career paths that allow them to grow and build careers."

A nonprofit serving Dane County since 1970, Operation Fresh Start offers students a chance to earn their high school diploma and driver's license while also getting experience in construction and conservation work. While studying, participants also gain exposure to construction and conservation jobs by working on projects such as affordable housing or Dane County Parks improvements. Once participants earn a high school diploma, those who are interested in pursuing a career in either field can join the Grad Crew, which offers a more intense job shadowing experience.

The Build Academy grows out of that Grad Crew experience, Operation Fresh Start Executive Director Greg Markle said. Participants, who now have been exposed to multiple trades and conservation jobs, can receive additional training and work experience to become certified as pre-apprenticeship ready.

"This gets them on the site," Markle said. "It also gives the foreperson the chance to see them and hopefully hire them."

In the past, Operation Fresh Start has typically placed 10 to 15 participants into professional construction jobs annually. As the Build Academy reaches capacity through the Workforce Innovation Grant, Markle said the nonprofit expects to place about 50 participants into jobs each year.

"Build Academy showcases innovative collaborations across sectors with the shared goal of helping teens and young adults develop the tools they need to stay on track toward promising careers," said DSPS Secretary Dawn Crim. "Careers in the construction industry, including the licensed trades, are stable and offer competitive wages that allow individuals to support their families, build prosperity, and pursue their dreams."

“Wisconsin’s record-low unemployment rate demonstrates the strength of the state’s economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic,” said DWD Secretary-designee Pechacek. “At the same time, long-term demographic trends have been exacerbated by the pandemic and many employers find it difficult to fill job openings. The ideas and partnerships we heard about today reflect the innovative thinking and collaboration that will be critical to remove employment barriers and connect workers in the region with sustainable, family-supporting jobs. We applaud the work of Operation Fresh Start and their partners.”

Markle said he’s not worried about finding Build Academy graduates positions.

“There’s pretty strong demand for construction workers, especially in the skilled trades,” said Brian Hornung, executive vice president of J.H. Findorff and Son construction. “We’ve been short in skilled trades people in one or more areas pretty much every year.”

Operation Fresh Start participants often work alongside the professionals on Findorff sites. Findorff has hired many Fresh Start graduates.

“It’s typically the first place Findorff goes to look for people in skilled trades,” Hornung said.

Operation Fresh Start participants typically come from low-income families and are generally either unemployed or are not meeting their potential in the workforce, Markle said. More than 75% of Operation Fresh Start participants are people of color. The majority of construction workers in the field are white, Markle said.

“This will literally change the face of the construction workforce,” he said.