

Donning a green collar Program readies workers for environmental jobs

By Vanessa E. Jones, Globe Staff | July 4, 2008



Wanting to get into a new field, Henry Alvarez took a JFYNetWorks training program to learn about waste-water facility management. (Michele McDonald/Globe Staff)

It was Hurricane Katrina that inspired Henry Alvarez to end a seven-year career as an emergency medical technician to explore jobs in waste-water management and water purification. Alvarez felt burnt out and wanted to focus on environmental issues.

"I saw the damage that was inflicted by Katrina and that level of destruction," says Alvarez, 36, of Lynn. "My thinking is I spent too long trying to heal the sick and injured."

Last year Alvarez started a 14-week environmental technology program at JFYNetWorks - a workforce development organization that targets career changers, immigrants, and the underemployed - where he learned how to handle hazardous materials. Two months ago he started working as a temporary laborer at a waste-water treatment center in Concord. If Alvarez passes a certification test in November, he can move up to a job as a waste-water treatment technician.

JFYNetWorks trains participants in a variety of environmental services jobs. But Gary Kaplan, executive director of JFYNetWorks, believes that more green jobs will develop in another area - the energy services field - as this country deals with climbing energy prices and the effects of global warming. The cities of Boston and Cambridge, for instance, have announced programs focused on making their buildings energy efficient. This summer JFYNetWorks is meeting with energy service companies to find out what green positions the industries need to fill. If there is demand, says Kaplan, JFYNetWorks could launch a clean-energy training program focusing on solar panel and energy audits, and energy retrofits as soon as this fall.

"Nobody exactly knows what those jobs are going to be or when," Kaplan says. "It's going to happen, but is it going to happen next week or is it next year? There's likely to be a whole lot of energy conservation measures, which will have to do with things like retrofitting inefficient heating, machinery, boilers. It'll have to do with fixing old buildings, both housing and commercial buildings, to make them less leaky, more energy efficient."

Amid the uncertainty, there's a growing movement among community organizations, environmental groups, unions, and workforce development agencies to pinpoint what jobs will become available and how to get people into them.

The goal is to create "green-collar" jobs that would provide those often shut out of new job opportunities - such as people of color, the poor, at-risk youth, the underemployed, the unemployed, and the formerly incarcerated - the training necessary to compete for positions in the burgeoning field.

"Our low-income communities and communities of color have borne a disproportionate brunt of environmental injustices," says Lisa Clauson, director of Community Labor United, a coalition of seven unions and eight community organizations. "We want to make sure that they're at the forefront of getting energy-efficiency work."

Those working in this area want to create careers for this community that offer opportunities for advancement and livable wages, rather than dead-end jobs. Kaplan, for example, hesitates to train JFYNetWorks participants in solar power yet because few jobs exist in that field.

Only a few green-collar training programs operate nationally. Richmond BUILD, a construction training program for low-income people in Richmond, Calif., last year added a two-week component that teaches participants how to install solar energy. Greencorps Chicago trains ex-offenders in landscaping, computer refurbishing, household hazardous waste handling, and home weatherization. This fall Roxbury Community College plans to launch a yearlong training program focused on renewable energy and energy conservation, says Morisset Saint-Preux, an assistant dean of continuing education at the college.

Activists working in this area believe the current movement to create more inclusive programs will have historic economic impact.

"We're going to need to see a lot more of this stuff on a much larger scale than we have before," says Penn Loh, executive director of Roxbury's Alternatives for Community & Environment, an organization focused on eradicating environmental racism that is also a member of Community Labor United. "This could be as big as the New Deal and the restructuring of the economy after the stock market crash and the Great Depression. We're at a turning point in human history."

The organizations are making their stances known as a variety of government policies are being discussed locally and nationally. In June the City of Boston began requesting green jobs training concepts for a \$250,000 pilot program for low- to moderate-income people. The Massachusetts Green Jobs Coalition, known as MaGJC (pronounced "magic"), wants House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi's clean energy bill, which provides \$100 million over five years to fund clean energy research and development, to include money to create a green-collar workforce. In April, state Senator Ben Downing, Democrat of Pittsfield, introduced a green-collar jobs training act that targets at-risk youth and low-income and unemployed workers.

"We want to make sure there are policies in place that ensure that a portion of those jobs go to underserved communities," says Laurie Leyshon, cofounder of MaGJC, which will have a panel of experts advocate its proposal during a hearing Monday on DiMasi's bill by the Joint Committee on Economic Development and Emerging Technology.

Adds Scotland Willis, cochair of the Urban Massachusetts Green Alliance, a subgroup of MaGJC consisting of people of color: "We need a table. Having a table means that we're not having this discussion without you. It means that what is happening and occurring on the landscape is shaped by your input." Urban Massachusetts Green Alliance, whose other cochairs are Cambridge Mayor Denise Simmons and Boston City Councilor Chuck Turner, is sending letters to various organizations to see what opportunities are available for underserved communities.

Last year Congress passed the Green Jobs Act, a \$25 million pilot program that will train participants in renewable energy and energy efficiency. Van Jones, creator of Green for All, an Oakland, Calif., organization started last year to focus on using the green economy to fight poverty, helped draft the act. Jones has created national momentum around this issue through appearances, including a charismatic speech last month at the Massachusetts Democratic Convention in Lowell. Jones, a mentor to MaGJC cofounder Kalia Lydgate, has given the organization guidance and support in its legislative efforts.

"The Massachusetts model, if it includes green pathways out of poverty, could set the template for the other 49 states," Jones says. "Washington state has already got off to a good start, California is trying, but there's no comprehensive model that includes low-income people and pathways out of poverty." ■