



Photos courtesy of Sustainable Workplace Alliance

TRAINING PROGRAM CONNECTS WORKERS WITH ENVIRONMENTAL CAREERS

BY MARIA SONNENBERG

Trouble seemed to have no trouble finding Vincent Wade.

“I’ve been to jail 14 times and prison twice,” said the 30-something Titusville resident.

Wade knew that in order to turn his life around, he had to leave the toxic environment and friends of his youth, so he moved from St. Petersburg to Titusville to close the door on his turbulent past and open the window to a brighter future.

Eight years had passed since his last conviction. He wanted to straighten himself for good. For that, he needed a job, but without an education in the trades, a good job eluded him.

“I tried so many different opportunities to find stable employment, but I wasn’t having much success,” he said.

His big break arrived when his counselor at CareerSource suggested he enroll in the Environmental Career Worker Training Program. This specialized training is administered by the nonprofit Sustainable Workplace Alliance under a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

The program, in existence for a quarter of a century, focuses on training disadvantaged and underrepresented minority workers in job sectors such as environmental restoration and hazardous materials handling. Since its launch in 1995, the program has provided training to thousands of people from underserved communities nationwide.

Initially, Wade wasn’t sold on the idea.

“I was teetering on whether or not I was going to take this course,” he said.

Good thing he did.

“Within a week of completing the cohort, I was hired at a great company with great benefits and pay,” he said.

Lake Wales-based Sustainable Workplace Alliance, or SWA, has teamed up with Melbourne grassroots community development organization Neighbor Up to offer cohorts of classes at Neighbor Up’s Evans Center, which straddles northeast Palm Bay and southeast Melbourne. The Center is part community market, part Brevard Health Alliance clinic and part community room for health and wellness programs.

“Since economic stability is among the top social determinants of health, we place priority on workforce development, too,” said Lynn Brockwell-Carey, executive director of Neighbor Up.

The SWA cohorts are a welcomed addition to Evans Center programming.

“The SWA cohorts at Evans Center in 2021 changed students’ life trajectories,” Brockwell-Carey said.

“Students engage in an intensive program focused on critical skills and certifications needed to work in environmental fields. SWA goes beyond training, as they also introduce students to employers. The rate of job placement is impressive, with decent wages and opportunities for upward mobility.”



The program does not baby students as it prepares them for new careers.

“It’s a rigorous training where students have lots of hands-on experiences to fully understand the subjects being taught,” said Sarah McKee, SWA’s outreach and financial director.

“They have to be ready and willing to go to work fulltime after the training ends.”

Students meet Mondays through Fridays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. for three and a half weeks. Beyond job skills training, students are also guided in developing resume and interview skills that will help them stand out from the crowd. Upon graduation, job placement assistance helps students secure permanent positions.

Students who successfully complete the course receive multiple nationally recognized certifications, as well as additional skill-focused training.

Each graduate receives 138 hours of technical training, plus five certifications, including an OSHA card in construction, an OSHA disaster site responder card and a certified lead, asbestos and mold remediation card.

“The goal of the program is to place graduates in the environmental field,” McKee said.

“These can be environmental sampling, environmental cleanup, emergency response to environmental spills, working for water treatment plants or labs, and work in mold remediation and in lead-

based paint sampling.”

Students also receive training on subjects such as powered forklifts, first aid, CPR and bloodborne pathogens.

McKee admits these are not the easiest of jobs, since the work may entail being out in the heat and dirt and the hours may be long. For the right person, however, they can mean a new future.

“We look for individuals that are healthy enough, willing and capable to do these jobs,” she added.

SWA chose Brevard for the county’s thriving job market.

“As we conducted our initial outreach, we saw lots of job potential for our future graduates,” said McKee, who added that positive response from Career Source Brevard as well as incubator Groundswell sealed the deal.

“The success of the program keeps us coming

back,” McKee said.

After three cohorts in 2021, SWA can claim an impressive 72% placement rate for graduating students. Placement success relies heavily on partnerships with local employers.

“We are always looking for new employers to partner with to continue making this program a success,” McKee said.

With funding through 2025, SWA plans to conduct two cohorts a year in Brevard.

SWA’s initiative to connect with prospective

students takes staff on door-to-door canvassing and to barbershops, laundromats and other local businesses to distribute flyers describing the benefits of the program and the fact that tuition is paid by federal grants.

“We connect with local job placement agencies, we connect with county departments that assist individuals to get back on their feet, we really try and get the word out and talk to anyone we can,” McKee said.

However, SWA’s greatest marketing asset may well be the graduates themselves.

“They have seen what this opportunity has done for them and they are excited to tell others about it,” McKee said.

Wade heartily agrees.

“If they can help me, they can help anybody,” he said. ■

LEARN MORE

Individuals interested in enrolling in the program and businesses eager to hire ready to-work graduates can contact Kim Kelly at 863-438-1467.

Sustainable Workplace Alliance also provides OSHA-related training to companies at no costs on a variety of topics.

Visit sustainablewp.org.