

## LaborWorks@NeighborWorks Provides Vermont Contractors With Help When They Need It

NeighborWorks of Western Vermont (NWWVT), a nonprofit home ownership organization based in Rutland County, Vermont, received \$4.5 million in seed funding from the U.S. Department of Energy's Better Buildings Neighborhood Program to help Vermonters complete home energy efficiency upgrades. NWWVT created the Home Energy Assistance Team (HEAT Squad) in 2010 to make it easy for homeowners to proceed with energy upgrades by connecting them with qualified contractors who could evaluate and improve their homes. In 2011, NWWVT established LaborWorks@NeighborWorks (LaborWorks) as a nonprofit temporary labor pool to assist professional contractors involved with the HEAT Squad during busy periods when they couldn't keep up with demand or hire full-time help. Following is an abridged transcript of an interview with Melanie Paskevich, HEAT Squad coordinator.

### Q: Why did NWWVT set up a temporary contractor pool?

For qualified contractors of community energy efficiency programs, it can be challenging to meet the fluctuating demand for home energy efficiency upgrades with a traditional staffing approach. When demand is low, contractors may not have enough incoming work to keep their staff busy; at other times, there might be so much work that contractors are forced to delay projects, and upgrades get bottlenecked.

One year into the launch of NWWVT, we found that our network of professional home weatherization contractors was struggling to keep up with surging demand for home upgrades. Due partly to our successful efforts to drive demand for home energy efficiency in the community, these contractors were starting to accumulate a significant backlog of projects. At the same time, the contractors were reluctant to hire additional employees because of seasonal variability in workload—demand for home upgrades in Vermont is cyclical, typically peaking in fall and winter while ebbing in spring and summer. Contractors also have high rates of staff turnover but don't always have the time and resources required to hire new employees. NeighborWorks established LaborWorks as a 501(c)(3) organization to fulfill our contractors' need for a temporary workforce for home weatherization upgrades, and because insurance requirements made it difficult to incorporate these workers into our own organization.

### Q: How did the program recruit temporary workers?

NWWVT looked to several sources for qualified applicants. Having hosted several trainings put on by Vermont Green (a statewide green jobs training initiative), we were already aware of a pool of skilled laborers that had completed the Vermont Green training and were seeking employment. We also contacted the Vermont Department of Labor and the VA (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs) and used our contractor base to spread the word about this opportunity.

### Q: What are the requirements for being a member of the pool?

Prior experience is not necessarily required. We sort temporary workers into two tiers: The first tier is made up of individuals with minimal or no training in home weatherization upgrades; the second tier includes individuals with at least some experience in the field or weatherization training certifications.

In addition to completing an application, requirements for temporary employment include a valid driver's license, a clean driving record, reliable transportation, willingness to work within 48 hours' notice, and the ability to take directions and succeed in a team environment.

LaborWorks does not require employees to have their own equipment. Basic construction skills are helpful but not mandatory.

**Q: Does NWWVT undertake any kind of vetting process for the temporary workers?**

LaborWorks conducts an interview, runs a background check, and contacts professional references for each potential new temporary worker. Our participating contractors love this, because it relieves them of these responsibilities.

**Q: How do contactors access the temporary contractor pool?**

LaborWorks currently employs one part-time coordinator to administer the program. This individual serves as the intermediary between the contractors and the temporary workers for staffing logistics and payment.

Contractors contact the LaborWorks coordinator with 48 hours' notice and describe the nature of the project, specific labor needs, the location, and dates of employment. We then match a LaborWorks employee to these criteria and will call the employee to provide the project details. The selected employee must accept or decline the job within 8 hours of initial contact, or we will offer the job to another worker.

**Q: How do temporary workers get paid?**

Contractors pay LaborWorks for the assistance, and LaborWorks in turn pays its temporary workers for each hour worked. We do not charge additional fees to the contractors beyond the hourly rates for LaborWorks employees. Employees in the first tier make \$12 hourly (contractors are billed \$22 hourly); employees in the second tier make \$15 hourly (contractors are billed \$25 hourly). Temporary employees are only paid for work completed. They must complete a timesheet for each job, and the employing contractor must approve it. LaborWorks also covers commercial general liability insurance and workers' compensation for the temporary laborers.

**Q: Are there any feedback mechanisms in place for LaborWorks employees?**

Yes. Contractors complete a brief employee survey form each time they hire a temporary worker. The survey asks contractors to rate the worker's timeliness, performance on the job, and ability to follow directions. LaborWorks compiles and tracks each employee's ratings. Highly rated employees may continue to work for the program. LaborWorks may terminate a temporary employee's contract if that employee does not show up at a job site on three separate occasions.

**Q: What has the program accomplished so far?**

Ten employees—of various ages and backgrounds—have worked in the temporary pool since the program started, and about three to five workers are in the pool at any given time.

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Anecdotally, many of the professional contractors have shared their enthusiasm for the temporary worker pool, and the extra staffing has helped reduce the number of backlogged projects throughout the community.

We think the ultimate success of this program is achieved when a contractor hires a trained temporary worker on a full-time basis, which has happened on two occasions since we started in February 2012. Also, all 12 professional contractors that access the temporary pool have added staff since our program began.

**Q: What advice would you give a program looking to set up a temporary contractor pool?**

Here are a few of our lessons learned (so far):

- Take the time up front to make sure that contractors understand how the program is designed to work and how it is advantageous for them. Also, listen to what these contractors need and adapt your program offerings accordingly. Their engagement is critical, because they are the ones that will use the pool. Not all contractors will be eager to sign on to the program immediately; getting them on board requires you to forge strong personal relationships.
- Establish an organized program coordinator, who is at least a part-time employee, to administer the temporary labor pool.
- Get started early and plan ahead! It always takes longer than you think to set up the administrative framework, including insurance and legal documentation. And because of the cyclical nature of demand for home weatherization work, it's a good idea to prepare in the "off season" so that you can hit the ground running when the projects start streaming in.
- Make sure that prospective temporary employees (particularly those with little or no experience) understand the nature of home weatherization work and the potentially harsh conditions they may find themselves in, such as crawling into tight spaces and working in warm temperatures.
- Consider opening up your temporary worker pool to a variety of trades. Despite our best efforts to counteract the cyclical nature of home weatherization work, we found that temporary workers were leaving the pool during the spring and summer to seek other employment opportunities. To address this issue, we allowed professionals in other trades (including insulators, property managers, masons, and landscapers) to access the pool. Diversifying the project pipeline has helped us retain high-quality temporary workers throughout the year.

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