

## **MILWAUKEE JOBS PARTNERSHIP TRAINS WORKERS TO MEET EMPLOYER NEEDS**

When Tony Jagers was released from prison, he knew his chances of ending up behind bars again would be decreased if he could find a career where he valued the work – and where his employers valued him.

So he contacted the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership/ BIG STEP partnership, which trained him and helped to place him at Spring City Electric, an electrical contractor in Waukesha, Wis. Six months later, Jagers, 48, says he already believes he has “defeated the odds.”

“I actually beat the alarm clock going out the door every morning; that’s how excited I am about going to work every day,” said Jagers, who was incarcerated for four years.

The first step toward economic success for families and individuals is getting a job and maintaining a steady income. Utilizing public economic supports, paying off debts and building good credit, and accumulating savings and assets can help them begin to move up the economic ladder. But for some people, like Jagers, taking that first step is more difficult than it sounds.

WRTP/BIG STEP is a former Jobs Initiative site, part of an eight-year effort by the Casey Foundation to connect inner-city young men and women to family-supporting jobs and to improve the way urban labor market systems work for low-income, low-skilled workers.

The workforce intermediary, which is partially funded by the Casey Foundation, is working for Jagers and hundreds of others like him every year – including many who are fathers or single mothers. But the partnership’s efforts also benefit companies like Spring City Electric, a division of Pieper Electric Inc., based in Milwaukee.

“We have not had a high success rate of getting minorities to have success in this industry,” said branch manager Michael Kelliher. “What WRTP/BIG STEP does is they get these individuals ready for us as a construction industry; they get them into school; they do pre-testing and pre-screening. They have a passion for getting people into the industry.”

### **Partnership Efforts Begin by Assessing Employer Needs**

The WRTP/BIG STEP partnership has been successful in working with minority or marginalized populations. The majority of its clients are African American or Hispanic, said Earl Buford, the partnership’s executive director. Forty-five percent have been referred by officials from the Department of Corrections, or otherwise have some kind of criminal background.

Despite their pasts, Kelliher says the employees who come from WRTP/BIG STEP’s programs often do well. “Once we get these individuals on, they stay until they go through the apprenticeship application,” Kelliher says, adding that Jagers still is a rung below apprentice, at the “unindentured” level. “We have every intention of keeping him on until he’s an apprentice.”

Such a classic “win-win” situation is exactly the goal of WRTP/BIG STEP, which places an average of 500 people in jobs every year.

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation

<http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/FamilyEconomicSuccess/FESinAction.aspx>

“We are an employer-driven, worker-centered organization that focuses on sectors of the economy where there is a need,” Buford said. “We’re not really a training organization; we’re an intermediary. And the role of an intermediary is to bring all the parties together.”

Many traditional job training programs focus on applicants looking for work, and try to place them where their interests fall, whether that’s in retail, office work, animal-training or acting. Such a wide range of interests can be hard to manage.

“We do it backwards,” Buford says. “We start with the jobs first.”

Leaders at WRTP/BIG STEP spend time assessing where the needs are in the labor force. If there are shortages in hospitality jobs, or in the health care industry, then classes, outreach and programming will focus on those areas. Recently, the areas most in need of workers have been the industrial, manufacturing and construction skilled trades.

“By knowing where the jobs are we can develop our programs and curriculum around what their needs are,” Buford said. “We’re helping employers rebuild their workforce, which helps with market share and helps makes them valuable. And, on the other hand, we are helping connect people to job opportunities and career opportunities which are generally family-sustaining, which helps the tax base and everything else.

“We always include both sides of the coin,” Buford continued. “We feel it’s a full circle. You can’t have good employers if you don’t have a good workforce.”

### **Retention Services Improve Performance and Aid Employers**

WRTP/BIG STEP also provides a variety of supportive programs for current employees. “We develop a menu of services that help in either retaining or advancing employees that are already there,” Buford said. “And then when those employees advance, we help to backfill those other positions.”

Employers are grateful for the assistance WRTP/BIG STEP gives them when it comes to retaining employees who need help in “soft skills” areas, such as attendance.

“Say the employer has someone who has been with them six or eight months, and they’ve found that his attendance is 90 percent,” Buford said. “We all know that 90 percent is not good enough. So, instead of letting that person go and losing that investment, we say, ‘Let’s do an early warning mediation with that person. Let’s walk through these steps with them.’ One company we did that for, their retention went up 75 percent.”

Employers find such services extremely valuable, especially during tough economic times when hiring is slow.

The country’s recent recession has prompted WRTP/BIG STEP to introduce more mentoring and retention and advancement programs for apprentices in the industries they work with.

“Our [placement] numbers are still good,” Buford said. “It’s just not working as fast on the front end – the hiring end – as it has in the past. So we had to adjust what we do on the middle and back end, and really use our menu of employer services more than we’ve had to.”

One such program that has been instituted because of the recession is Mentor/Mentee night – an evening where apprentices come by after leaving a job site, grab a bite to eat and get some face-to-face time with a mentor.

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation

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This helps the mentors spot potential problems quickly, which allows employers to retain valuable employees by intervening before issues get out of control, Buford said.

Retention programs are helpful to employers even when the economy is booming, said Carrie Hersh, WRTP/BIG STEP operations manager.

“It saves them time,” Hersh said. “They know that we’re giving them a product that has training coming with them that they now don’t have to do themselves. And it’s not a blanket program. It’s customized and developed with the employers.”

### **Former Prisoner Finds Opportunity and Stability**

Thinking about employers first is advantageous for potential employees as well.

Such was the case with Terrell Harper, who served five years in prison. When Harper, 31, was still incarcerated, he began to think about what he wanted to do when he was released. One thing Harper was certain of—he did not want to be a recidivist.

“The problem with people coming out of prison...is that a lot of times they don’t have a plan before they get out,” Harper said. “But I like to plan ahead; I already knew.”

Harper read about WRTP/BIG STEP in a newspaper article, then saw a spot about the partnership on local television news. He wrote down the intermediary’s contact information and kept it until he was released from prison.

After going through one of the organization’s training programs, Harper started as a welder with Milwaukee-based Super Steel Products Corps. He brings home nearly \$15 an hour, a sum he calls “real nice,” and finally feels like he’s found his footing. He’s passed several initial certification tests and been praised by higher-ups for his efforts.

Recently, Harper was able to lease an apartment on his own and currently is in discussions about getting to keep his three children overnight from time to time. In the meantime, he takes great pleasure in buying household items to furnish his new apartment, using money he earned the hard way.

Already Harper is thinking about ways he can become a better employee.

“I want to stay with Super Steel for awhile. I like the people here; they’re willing to work with you,” he said. “I think I’m going to try to go back to college for some more welding experience.”

That kind of commitment is one upshot of hiring workers who have come through the WRTP/BIG STEP intermediary. “They really get these individuals ready for us,” Kelliher said. “They ask them, ‘What are you interested in?’ And then, when they say, ‘Well, maybe I want to do electrical; maybe I want to do plumbing,’ WRTP/BIG STEP lets them know that whatever they choose to do, in order to do well, there’s going to be a lot of training. So that helps them to focus more on something they *really* want to do. They do the pre-screening and really look at their passion for the industry.”

### **Working Hard, Building a Better Life**

Jagers is a good example of finding the right fit. In high school, he took a semester of residential wiring in shop class and loved it. “That was my passion,” he said. But after high school, “life took a turn.” Jagers got involved with drugs and alcohol and ended up in jail. But he always held on to his interest in electrical work.

Once released, he sought out WRTP/ BIG STEP and now is well on his way to an apprenticeship.

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation

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“I am so grateful to them for giving me an opportunity in the field that I have such a passion for,” Jagers said. “When I got there, I vowed ‘I’m going to be your success story.’ And some people may say, ‘Well, he’s 48. He’s an old man.’ But it does not matter to me how long it takes to establish credentials. I feel the Lord has blessed me with a second chance. I *will* be that success story.”

Confidence like that comes from being well-matched with a sustaining career, Hersh said. “A lot of the people that we’ve been serving, they’re really lacking confidence. Especially when we’re dealing with such a high re-entry population. They feel as if there’s no hope when they’re released. So we really encourage them through the whole process, and once they get that job and they see that there’s a future, it’s incredible. They feel very empowered.”

The success stories go beyond the job site. One male WRTP/BIG STEP graduate, a machinist, married an operating engineer from another class. They now have a child and are buying their first home.

“For some people, something like that is beyond their wildest imagination,” Hersh said. “But they gain confidence, and self-worth and I think for many of them, just knowing that they can support their family, that’s huge.” Harper knows that his future is up to him now. But he’s confident that it’s a bright one, and that he doesn’t have to be defined anymore by his past.

“They helped me a lot. I owe BIG STEP a lot,” Harper said. “For me, there ain’t no turning back.”