

Zender Environmental Health and Research Group

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Rural Alaska Community Environmental Job Training Program (RACEJT) serves scattered rural communities. Perhaps the two most challenging EWDJT programs include those in rural areas and those in tribal communities. These challenges are associated with the scarcity of potential local employers, the disparities in community culture, and the large geographic areas served. Zender Environmental Health & Research Group not only services a rural area, they also have learned to work with multiple and diverse tribal communities.

Techniques they have developed in areas of marketing, recruitment, training, and placement can be equally useful to programs in more populated and urban communities. In the face of these challenges, RACEJT has been able to place their entire graduating class. Some of the efforts that may contribute to their 100% placement rate include the following attributes:

1. The entire RACEJT program is clearly presented on their website at www.zendergroup.org. Employers, partners, supporters, and participants will see the entire program in detail with links to additional information including:
 - a. Program summaries and purpose
 - b. Program brochures
 - c. Application packets
 - d. FAQs
 - e. Informational flyers
 - f. Informational flyers for employers
 - g. Schedules and timelines for training (see the 2015 schedule below)
 - h. Course lists
 - i. Testimonials from graduates
2. RACEJT has established a priority application process for unemployed community residents who can find an employer who will hire them upon completion of training. Employers must provide letters of support and participate in the application/interview process.
3. RACEJT recruits from a distance but maintains a comprehensive and deep application and screening process. The application packet can be found on their website.
4. Training is structured as a full work day with students living and working together as a team.
5. RACEJT has extensive representation of employers as active partners and supporters.

6. RACEJT training and curriculum is based on a comprehensive needs assessment. RACEJT staff identified employers and jobs having the “best fit” for their graduates. Those employers are on their partnership/supporter list and on their website.
7. RACEJT staff are “all in.” Zender staff demonstrate the dedication and positive energy they have in making their EWDJT program work for the communities and students they serve.

Below is an overview of the Zender’s RACEJT program.

Background

- Zender is targeting unemployed residents of small and rural Alaskan Native Villages located throughout Alaska. Many are off the state road system and can be reached only by plane or chartered boat.
- Zender Environmental Health and Research Group's job training program serves up to 40 of the 197 remote and rural communities in Alaska.
- Their mission statement is “providing environmental job training to support local hire in rural Alaska communities...”

Targeted Community

- The target community has a combined population of 70,473 with populations greater than 30 percent Alaska Native. The unemployment rate in some villages can be as high as 19 percent, and approximately 22 percent of the residents live in poverty.
- The state has approximately 6,287 known contaminated sites, with much of the contamination resulting from inadvertent spills, careless chemical handling, and unregulated waste disposal during the last century's development.
- Thousands of remote mining sites likely contain high concentrations of heavy metals and processing chemicals.
- Recent program participants have been 95% native Alaskan (previously 10 % female—currently 30% female)

Key Partners

- Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation
- Association of Village Council Presidents Housing Authority
- Total ReClaim
- Tribal programs throughout the state
- AK Department of Labor
- State of Alaska Response Team—training provider
- Northern AK Tribal Education Programs—training provider
- University of Alaska Fairbanks (10 credit articulation and tuition program)
- Multiple leveraging partners and employers identified on their website

Program Challenges

- Working with multiple Tribal governments, cultures, and populations
- Training non-English speaking participants
- Providing training to disbursed communities not accessible by road
- Environmental workforce placement in rural locations
- Cold weather and short construction seasons with major impacts on training and placement scheduling

Training Objectives

- Due to severe weather conditions and employment cycles, training takes place in early spring for summer work. Class size has 18-19 participant openings.
- Students are required stay in Anchorage for two-week training sessions.
- Leveraged funding allows for transportation, telephone, and meal allowances.
- To provide graduates employment in their home communities, efforts are made to create local environmental jobs. For example, as communities expand, resident waste manager positions can be justified. The same applies to local spill response and fuel tank assessment jobs.
- The same approach applies to wastewater treatment facilities. However, existing training programs provide adequate wastewater treatment operator training. Solid waste, landfill, and spill response appear to be most in demand across the state and in local communities.

Core Training Program

- HAZWOPER 40-hr, OSHA 29 CFR 1910.120
- AK Village Solid Waste Management & Resource Recovery Technician PTI
- UAF credentialed
- Forklift Operation—National OSHA Standard 29 CFR 1910.178
- CPR/First Aid—American Heart Association Standard
- Freon Recovery—EPA Section 608 Universal Technician Certification
- OSHA Confined Space Entry 29 CFR 1910.146
- Oil Spill Response, State of Alaska Response Team
- Advanced Job Readiness
- AK Village Home Fuel Tank Assessment
- Water & Soil Sampling
- Rural Alaska Landfill Operation (RALO) Training
- Construction Safety
- Leaking Underground and Above-Ground Tank Introduction
- Additional cultural, life skills, and employment readiness is included as part of the program

Training Delivery and Schedule

- Due to severe weather conditions and employment cycles, training takes place February 22–March 6 with a spring break and continues March 22–April 3, 2015.

- Training is centralized in Anchorage, requiring students to travel from remote communities, remain in Anchorage for 2 weeks of training, return home, and then return for 2 weeks of final instruction and graduation. Classes consume the entire day simulating a working environment.

Anticipated RACEJT 2015 Timeline posted on their website for all to see:

- Sept 17: Applications available on Zender website at <http://zendergroup.org/racejt.html> or by phone
- Oct. 1: Optional Q&A Conference Call, 2 pm–3 pm
- Oct. 9: Optional Q&A Conference Call, 2 pm–3 pm
- Nov. 3: Applications Due
- Dec. 19–22: RACEJT 2015 Participants notified of their selection
- Dec. 30 or Jan 6: Mandatory Q&A Conference Call, 2pm–3pm
- Jan. 9: Acceptance Paperwork Due/Deadline
- Feb. 3: Mandatory Conference Call on logistics, travel, expectations
- Feb. 21: Participant Travel Day
- Feb. 22: Full Day Orientation (Sunday)
- Feb. 22–March 6: Session 1
- March 9–13: Spring Break
- March 22–April 3: Session 2
- April 3: RACEJT 2015 Graduation

Graduate Placement

Graduates receive a Program Diploma and individual course certifications. In addition to oil spills and small communities with their own water and waste operations, graduate placements include the following:

- Wastesite Worker
- Landfill Operator
- Contaminated Site Worker
- Tank Inspector
- Brownfields Technician
- Hazardous Materials and Spill Response
- Wastewater Technician

Student Services, Retention, and Placement

- Scholarships available with leveraged funding
- Extensive job readiness training
- Non-English speaking assistance
- Placement services and job fairs
- Transportation and meal reimbursement
- Additional social services with leveraged assistance

- Additional leveraging with the Alaska Communication System
- Phone cards available to call home with leveraged funding
- Graduates can earn 10 credits from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks and go on to complete the University's Occupational Endorsement program for Rural Waste Management and Spill Response Technicians.

Student Recruitment

In Alaska, perhaps one of the best communication, awareness, and marketing approaches is extensive use of radio. Dispersed communities make radio an essential marketing and recruitment media. Internet is important and extensively used by the RACEJT program. The www.zendergroup.org website is used for instructional materials, resource distribution, marketing, recruitment, and application processing. RACEJT applications are online at www.zendergroup.org/racejt.html. Additional program information, schedules, recruitment materials, and much more are posted on the site. The website was developed with leveraged funding from an environmental justice grant.

Student Screening in Remote Communities

In Alaska as with other rural communities, it is not feasible for participants to commute. For this reason, recruitment and training is handled differently than most, more concentrated grantee programs. Applicants download and complete applications available online with telephone assistance and support. While a GED is required, the primary screening methodology involves personal communications.

The next step is a series of telephone interviews providing RACEJT staff an opportunity to assess the applicant's desire and interest in the program. This essentially replaces the onsite interview used by most programs.

The final step is board review of the application and final orientation. The system works surprisingly well with most applicants graduating with jobs.

Participant Eligibility (from the website)

- Must be a resident of a rural Alaska Native community (defined as 30% or greater Alaska Native population).
- Must be 18 years of age or older, or an emancipated minor.
- Must be unemployed or under-employed (less than 20 hours/week).
- Must be able to attend two 2-week training sessions in Anchorage on February 22–March 6, 2015, and March 22–April 3, 2015.
- Must have a high school diploma or GED, or obtain a GED by November 3, 2014.
- Much of the environmental work for which you will be trained requires heavy lifting and working outdoors. You must be physically fit, able to work in confined spaces, and able to wear a mask respirator. Are you unable to perform heavy lifting or other essential job functions, but

have an employer who is willing to hire you? Then you may submit an employer letter stating this, and you will still qualify for the program. Letter must be received by November 3, 2014.

- Must provide two completed personal reference forms found in the application packet.
- If accepted, you must provide a copy of your social security card.
- Must consent to a criminal background check.

Summary Notes

Environmental workforce development in rural and disbursed communities is difficult but not impossible. Student populations may be lower than in urban communities, but with 83-100% placement rates RACEJT demonstrates that rural and Tribal programs can flourish.

Rural communities have the ability and necessity to leverage with other rural programs bringing multiple resources to students. It is important that organizations in small communities seek out all available partners and resources to help offset constraints imposed on rural programs.