

Fortune Society

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The Fortune Society is a nonprofit organization in the New York City area founded by author/playwright David Rothenberg with a 40-year history of serving those touched by the criminal justice system. Last year, the Fortune Society participants saved the city 88,000 days of resident incarceration.

Traditionally in housing, health, and mental health services, the Fortune Society began expanding into vocational education in the early 2000s. Primed with interest and funding for environmental studies, the Society applied for EPA funding in 2011 to establish an Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training program with three cohorts of 20 participants. The program successfully competed for additional funding in 2013.

The Fortune Society illustrates how an established community service organization, with the assistance of EPA workforce development funding, can expand their capacity to provide excellent career opportunities to underserved community residents. Additionally, the Fortune Society illustrates how social media can extend the reach of any EWDJT program.

Community background and history

Founded in 1967, The Fortune Society's vision is to create a world where all who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated can become positive, contributing members of society. Fortune Society serves approximately 4,500 men and women annually via three primary New York City area locations: Long Island City, and both the Fortune Academy (a.k.a. "the Castle") and Castle Gardens in West Harlem. The environmental program works closely with employers, city services, and re-entry organizations to leverage their expertise in environmental workforce development and training.

Key partners

- NYC Department of Corrections
- NYC Department of Environmental Remediation
- NYC Workforce Investment Board
- Re-entry Education Network
- NYC Brownfields Partnership
- Robin Hood Foundation
- Numerous environmental employers and stakeholder organizations

Wages

Participants of the program have opportunities far greater than other traditional labor programs. With their education, credentials, and certifications, Fortune Society environmental workforce graduates can double the wages paid for traditional vocational occupations. The average post-training reentry job opportunities are approximately \$11/hr. Basic environmental training pays approximately \$13/hr. and asbestos/lead training pays approximately \$23/hr.+.

With basic screening/training and six weeks of environmental workforce development and job training, serious students are provided jobs with sustainable futures. Many have an opportunity for internships as well as apprenticeship programs with Local 78 Environmental Technicians Union.

Curriculum and certifications

- 232 hours of instruction—6 weeks (currently 3 weeks of awareness and 3 weeks of specialty training)
- One state certification
- Five federal certifications
- OSHA 40-Hour Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response (HAZWOPER)
- Urban agriculture
- Lead abatement
- Asbestos handler
- Leaking underground storage tank corrective action
- Site assessment and remediation / awareness
- Innovative treatment technologies
- Urban agriculture
- Solid waste management
- Disaster site cleanup

Student recruitment

The Fortune Society is targeting unemployed or underemployed ex-offenders, primarily from high-poverty neighborhoods across New York City. Participants include all those touched by the criminal justice system. Prospective applicants are screened and referred by multiple re-entry organizations.

- GED required.
- 9–10th grade TABE for literacy and math.
- No drug test performed by the EWDJT program—monitored by partners.
- Applicants complete and are screened with a customized application for the environmental program.
- Participants complete a basic training program before certification training begins.
- Participants physically able to perform occupational tasks.
- Participants demonstrate a genuine interest in environmental careers.

Student retention

Issues that may impact retention rates and the ability to complete training:

- Verify that participants have stable housing.
- Verify that participants can support themselves during training.
- Verify that participants are not delinquent or overburdened by child support.
- Verify that participants are established with food stamps and other social services to avoid missing class and instructional sessions.

Student support

Issues resolved above are directly related to student support and retention. The Fortune Society retains a lawyer on staff to assist participants with legal issues. Partners provide back up and support to struggling participants. Extensive use of Twitter, Facebook, and a traditional website enhances student and community engagement in the program.

Student placement

Fortune Society works specifically with environmental employers and local 78 Environmental Technicians Union. Six participants were selected from 200 applicants for the Local 78 apprenticeship program.

The Business Advisory Council has been divided into “sector focus” allowing for two meetings per year with employers specifically in the remediation field. Internships play a key role in student retention as well as student placement. As many as five participants have participated in three-month internship programs externally funded providing wages and transportation subsidies (metro cards). The internship programs work well for graduates not ready for full-time employment and for employers hesitant about re-entry employees.

Lessons learned

1. Those communities touched by the criminal justice system can be reliable, hard-working, and as trustworthy as others in the community.
2. The ability to bring additional training and student contact “in house” saves resources and control over training.
3. Extensive use of established partners specializing in re-entry and re-entry services is essential.
4. Supplementing an established organization with environmental training allows maximum attention and resources to be devoted to environmental workforce development and training.
5. Student desire and motivation are most important but student “baggage” and personal issues can undermine student retention.