

Memphis Bioworks Foundation

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Memphis Bioworks Foundation secured their second EPA EWDJT grant in the FY 2014 competition after upgrading an unfunded proposal in FY 2013.

Memphis Bioworks Foundation could be considered a model Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training (EWDJT) program. They have approached the development and operation of their program in a systematic and organized manner. They focus on strong partnerships, employer input, and student needs.

Community background and history

Memphis Bioworks Foundation was an established community nonprofit organization providing free training to community residents before expanding into environmental occupations. With a focus on health information, IT, and medical technicians, Memphis Bioworks had an established reputation among governmental workforce development agencies, trainers, and community organizations. In 2009, with assistance from the Department of Labor, they were able to expand their services to include green jobs training. By 2011, Memphis Bioworks was able to plan and obtain EPA funding for an expanded EWDJT program.

There are over 350 brownfields and 380 out-of-service underground storage tanks in the Memphis area. As part of their first grant, Memphis Bioworks Foundation served inner-city neighborhoods in north Memphis, west of the Wolf River Harbor and Mississippi River. Seventy-five percent of the residents in the target area are minorities with poverty rates from 20.9 to 35.6 percent. Former employers abandoned the area including tire plants, chemical and fertilizer plants, crude oil refineries, stockyards, meat packing plants, and lumber mills.

With great success, the Wolf River Environmental Job Training program trained more than 100 unemployed and under-employed Memphians as environmental technicians. They were able to exceed their goals in training cycles delivered (4 to 5) and student placements exceeding their proposal goal by 126 percent.

Participants of the program were placed in the following jobs:

- Environmental workforce safety
- Solid waste regulation/recycling
- Underground storage tank (UST) leak prevention/regulation
- Green remediation

- Conservation and energy awareness
- Mold and asbestos awareness

Despite this excellent track record, Memphis Bioworks submitted but did not receive EPA funding in FY 2013. They participated in a comprehensive EPA debriefing and review of the weaknesses in their proposed program plan. With improvements and revisions, Memphis Bioworks Foundation was successful in the FY 2014 EWDJT grant competition.

Lessons learned:

1. Don't be discouraged if a grant proposal is not funded even when the program is running well.
2. Do seek to revise and improve your program after consultation with others.
3. As a program develops, actively seek additional funding from a variety of sources. Additional support may not be directly related to the EWDJT activity, but does provide for a "critical mass" and safety net if program support is not immediately forthcoming.

Labor market assessment

The labor market assessments provided by the state projected growth for hazardous materials removal workers, forklift operators, materials handlers, and insulator workers. Additionally, the employers surveyed anticipated hiring new employees, especially for workers trained in healthy home construction, hazardous waste and recycling transportation, and hazardous substances remediation. The needs assessment formed a basis for the program's training plan.

Key partners

- Memphis Workforce Investment Network
- City of Memphis
- University of Tennessee Extension
- Veteran's Affairs Medical Center
- Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation
- Two ex-offender special needs organizations
- Numerous community-based organizations
- Numerous environmental employers

Student recruitment

Students are recruited from unemployed residents of the target area. That target area was expanded to include the greater Memphis area for broader coverage. Ex-offender residents come from two ex-offender program partners. The Memphis Bioiworks Foundation works with nonprofits specializing in ex-offender recruitment, support, and placement services. The experience, resources, and specially trained staff from these organizations provide important skills especially when working with employers familiar with the difficulties those having criminal records have in obtaining employment.

Student support

Memphis Bioworks maintains contact with students via text and cell phone. Families are involved in student/staff communications. Close attention is paid to student issues and ancillary needs.

Training resources

Training comes from a variety of providers including educational institutions, potential employers, and individual trainers including Mississippi State University and the University of Tennessee. Staff from Memphis Bioworks attends training sessions to evaluate and ensure training quality and performance.

Certifications

- OSHA 40-Hour Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response (HAZWOPER)
- USDOT Hazardous Materials Transportation (HAZMAT)
- OSHA Forklift Operator (Sit Down, Stand Up, Reach Truck)
- Lead Renovator, Repair and Paint (LRRP)
- Asbestos Abatement Worker Initial
- Mold Remediation

Training plan

Core training

- 84 hours of instruction (mandatory and awareness)
- 40-hour HAZWOPER

Awareness training

- Solid waste management and recycling
- Underground storage tank remediation
- Green remediation
- Water and wastewater treatment
- U.S. DOT HAZMAT
- Transportation
- Lead, mold, and asbestos abatement

Specialized Training

After basic training, students choose one of two advanced technical tracks based on the community needs assessment.

- Energy efficiency/retrofit (40 hours)
- Healthy homes/construction (40 hours)

Student placement

Memphis Bioworks Foundation works with environmental employers who serve on the Employer Advisory Committee. Community-based organizations, WIB placement services, and direct interaction with employers are also engaged to place graduates in environmental jobs. Memphis Bioworks participates in an employer round table every other week in addition to promoting an environmental job club for students. Employers participate as trainers and speakers, providing networking opportunities for program participants.

Internships and community service

All students participate in a community service project. When possible, students participate in internship programs.