

CONNECT News

Community Support, Networking, and Assistance
 for Environmental Career Training

June 2022

The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute (HMTRI) with a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency assists communities establish environmental job training programs. To better exchange ideas, HMTRI distributes CONNECT, a bimonthly e-publication, featuring topics of interest among those interested in participating in the EPA Brownfields Environmental Job Training (BJT) grant program. Ideas presented do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such. This month's issue addresses community and labor market assessments which are essential first steps in establishing successful BJT programs.

Community and Labor Market Assessments

Community and labor market assessments are among the first activities required before the establishment of a successful BJT program. Acknowledging their importance, EPA as part of the FY23 BJT funding competition has assigned almost 19% of application evaluation directly to community need (community and labor market assessments). Indirectly EPA has weighted over 21% of the evaluation to community and employer relationships which are often established as part of the community and labor market assessment process.

Community assessments identify "ground zero" where recruitment, training and placement are emphasized

A critical part of EPA's Brownfields Job Training program is to further environmental justice by ensuring that residents living in communities historically affected by economic disinvestment, health disparities, and adverse exposures to environmental contamination, have an opportunity to share economic benefits of revitalization and environmental cleanup.

"The objective of BJT is to recruit, train, and place unemployed and under-employed residents of solid and hazardous waste-impacted communities with skills needed to obtain full-time, sustainable employment." For environmental job training to move forward, the need for such a program must be demonstrated to local partners, supporters, and stakeholders. Community assessments identify locations where an environmental BJT program will have a positive impact on the economy and be received positively by residents and program participants. The BJT target community is identified as a place where the training program will concentrate most of its effort. It is not to say that residents outside the target community cannot or would not participate in training. Target communities may be as small as several underserved neighborhoods or expanded to include a city, county, special demographic, or geographic areas. As part of the EPA Job Training Application (RFA), applicants are asked for their rationale in selecting the proposed target community. Selecting a target community is one of the most important decisions to be

made during the earliest stages in program development. Community assessment directly impacts many other criteria used by EPA when evaluating proposals. With the current emphasis on environmental justice, EPA expects that successful BJT applications will also advance Justice40 priorities which promise to deliver at least 40 percent of the overall benefits from key federal investments to disadvantaged communities. A comprehensive community assessment can be time consuming and requires interaction with a variety of organizations. Selection of a target community often impacts other BJT critical issues including recruitment, retention, curriculum, and placement. It must be started early in the proposal development process.

Determining whether a community is underserved and disadvantaged

BJT applicants must identify an area they intend to serve. Multiple dispersed communities cannot be selected; however target areas can include a variety of geographical designations with common characteristics.

- Cities
- Partnerships between U.S. cities located in different states
- Counties
- Rural communities that include a number of adjacent towns
- Neighborhoods
- Census tracts
- Designated redevelopment zones
- Watersheds

A common thread among target communities across the country is that they are impacted by the presence of one or more brownfield sites, underserved and disadvantaged. Whether a specific community is disadvantaged, and underserved should be based on a combination of variables that may include, but are not limited to, the following characteristics.

- Low income

- High and/or persistent poverty
- High unemployment and underemployment
- Racial and ethnic residential segregation
- Linguistic isolation
- High housing cost burden and substandard housing
- Distressed neighborhoods
- High transportation costs - and/or low transportation access
- Disproportionate environmental impacts
- Limited water and sanitation access
- Disproportionate impacts from climate change
- High energy costs and low energy access
- Lost jobs through the energy transition
- Lack of access to healthcare.

Strategies for conducting community assessments

It is suggested by successful grantees that one of the first steps in locating potential target communities is coordination and consultation with the following local organizations.

- Brownfields assessment and cleanup grant recipients
- Mayor's offices of economic and community development
- City, county, and state environmental offices
- Local Workforce Investment Board offices
- Offices of housing, health, and human services
- Local social service organizations

This strategy involves identifying existing grants and programs that can be leveraged and where ample amounts of data have already been collected. Often, existing grants and Federal programs have already identified target communities consistent with those requested by BJT guidelines. Coordination and consultation with local agencies and nonprofit

organizations should be included as part of the community assessment process.

Working with the offices just mentioned will provide a detailed landscape of environmentally impacted, underserved, and underutilized communities of concern. Research will identify ongoing funded activities and potential leveraging partners. Information from this initial scan also identifies the following community characteristics.

- Distressed communities
- Underserved communities
- Economical depressed communities
- Environmentally impacted communities
- Federally identified opportunity zones
- Communities impacted by plant closures
- High crime communities
- Food and employer deserts
- Special situations and ongoing projects
- Formerly identified Empowerment Zones, Renewal or Enterprise Communities
- Identification of special factors and designations attributed to potential target areas
- Neighborhood assessments – location, demographics, and environmental justice considerations
- Stakeholder assessment and the potential for neighborhood partnership development
- Assessment of Community interest and involvement
- Confirmation of resident support for participating in an environmental training program
- Leveraging opportunities associated with candidate target communities

Whenever discussing BJT with governmental offices be sure to ask for contact information and introductions to community groups in potential target communities. Special consideration should be given to communities with special designations or ongoing rehabilitation efforts. BJT programs work best

when collocated with active social service efforts. The advantages of co-locating communities relate to the expansion of leveraging opportunities. Identification of potential support partners should be considered when choosing a target community.

- Are support organizations located in the proposed target community?
- What types of programs are available as potential leveraging partners?
- Are local governmental offices located in the proposed target community?
- Are governmental services available locally including law enforcement?
- Where are the local k-12 and community colleges?
- Is the community an “employer desert”?
- Are there neighborhood and religious organizations active in the community?
- Is there transportation in and out of the community?
- Are there local training or community centers?
- Is there a Department of Labor employment office nearby?

The final factor to consider when selecting the target community involves students to be selected for participation in the program. Obtaining this information requires that program staff develop relationships with church leaders, community leaders, local schools, and law enforcement. BJT programs do not work when prospective students fail to enroll or have little desire to enter environmental occupations. Community influencers familiar with the pool of potential candidates for environmental jobs can provide insight in the following areas.

- Demographics of prospective applicants
- Ex-offender, criminal background, and gang affiliations
- Specific underserved ethnic groups interested in environmental training
- Extent that remedial education and life skills education will be necessary

- Educational disparities among potential applicants
- Cultural disparities and age disparities among potential applicants
- Unemployment and underemployment demographics
- Motivation of community residents
- Local attitudes toward environmental restoration

Tools to assist selection of designated target communities

Having engaged in “hands on” assessments of proposed target communities, a variety of analytical tools are available to provide data for final selection of a BJT community.

Environmental justice mapping and screening tool (EJScreen)

EJScreen is an EPA environmental justice mapping and screening tool that provides a nationally consistent dataset and approach for combining environmental and demographic indicators. EJScreen users choose a geographic area; the tool then provides demographic and environmental information for that area. EJScreen provides a way to display information and includes a method for combining environmental and demographic indicators into EJ indexes. If a target area is smaller than a city/town, EPA is requesting applicants to list the census tract number(s) in their target area. One way to identify an area’s census tract number(s) is using (EJScreen).

To access the tool, go to...

<https://ejscreen.epa.gov/mapper/>.

- Use the search bar at the top right to find an address or place on the map.
- Use the plus (+) symbol in the top left to zoom in, or the minus (-) symbol to zoom out.
- Click “Select Location” on the menu bar and click “Report on Known Geography.”
- In the pop-up that appears, select “Tract” from the dropdown menu.

- Click on any area of the map, and the area’s census tract number will auto populate in the pop-up.
- Click additional areas to highlight them on the map and add their census tract number to the pop-up box. You can remove a selected census tract by clicking on the highlighted area and selecting “Delete Site.” Click and drag your cursor to highlight the census tract numbers in the pop-up and copy and paste the numbers into the application Narrative Information Sheet.

Cleanups in My Community (CIMC)

Cleanups in My Community (CIMC) enables users to map and list hazardous waste cleanup locations and drill down to details about those cleanups, grants, and other, related information. In addition to characterizing pollution sources in a potential target area, Cleanups in My Community is a helpful tool as part of the labor needs assessment discussed later in this newsletter.

<https://www.epa.gov/cleanups/cleanups-my-community>

Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (CEJST)

The White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) is in the process of developing the [Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool \(CEJST\)](#). The CEJST has been created to address environmental justice commitments in [Executive Order 14008](#). The Justice40 Initiative is a commitment to deliver 40 percent of the overall benefits of Federal climate, clean energy, affordable and sustainable housing, clean water, and other investments to disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution. When finalized, the tool will help agencies identify disadvantaged communities to ensure that everyone is receiving the benefits intended from Federal programs. To

explore the Beta version of CEJST, follow the link below.

<https://screeningtool.geoplatform.gov/en/#5.8/49.014/-99.127>

Labor market assessments identify employment opportunities for BJT graduates residing in the target community

“Training programs funded by the Brownfields Job Training Grant provide program graduates with the opportunity to seek and obtain environmental jobs that contractors may otherwise fill from outside the affected community.” Like community assessments, labor market assessments answer two basic questions.

- Is an environmental BJT program feasible in the proposed target community?
- Will graduates of the program find sustainable employment opportunities?

Labor market assessments need to be conducted concurrently with community assessments. Successful assessments establish the rationale for a BJT program before program planning gets too far along. Graduate placement is highly dependent on local employers interested in hiring applicants with the skills and certifications of BJT graduates. Comprehensive labor market assessments are much deeper than a general overview of labor statistics. Here are example outcomes that a comprehensive labor market assessment provides.

- An understanding of the types of environmental workers locally employed
- Quantification of the local demand for certified environmental workers
- Skills and certifications most in demand
- Employment constraints and restrictions
- Identification of potential advisors and instructors
- Identification of potential partners, contributors, and supporters
- Identification of potential leveraging partners

- Outlines a path for curriculum development
- Promotes BJT program awareness
- Opens internship and apprenticeship opportunities

Employers with Jobs available for BJT graduates

Meaningful labor market assessments identify potential employers in addition to certification, skill and knowledge requirements associated with entry level positions. BJT helps residents take advantage of jobs across a spectrum of brownfield related activities, including assessment, cleanup, remediation, and planning/site preparation for the revitalization of brownfields. Examples of employers that have jobs requiring environmental training and certifications include the following.

- Government and municipal agencies
- Local Unions (labor, construction, painting, chemical workers, and steel workers)
- Manpower and temp. firms
- Consultants – remediation and environmental service providers
- Manufacturing firms
- Recyclers and scrap yards
- Pest control services
- Hospitals and medical facilities
- Laboratory, chemical and refining facilities
- Utilities, waste site, water and other public service organizations
- Highway and DOT employers
- Painting, construction, and deconstruction companies
- Transportation and material handling operators
- Scrap, recycling, storage, and land fill operation

Ignore occupational titles

Standard job descriptions and occupational titles can be misleading and deliver an incomplete and inaccurate labor market assessment. Many State Merit Systems recognize that job descriptions are highly

generalized and not necessarily representative of the skills and certifications needed to perform the job under consideration. Position descriptions only minimally reflect duties associated with the actual job. Private sector companies can be more misleading. For example, many construction and deconstruction occupations require environmental remediation certificates but do not incorporate them in job titles. Welders may need asbestos training; painters may require lead testing and confined space certifications. Trades working with potential hazardous exposures are required to have 1910.120 certifications. It is highly likely that any of these job opportunities will be missed in a cursory review of local employment opportunities. Do not survey solely for environmental positions. Instead, survey for positions requiring health, safety, and environmental certificates.

Strategies for conducting labor market assessments

When employers express interest in BJT, recruit them as participants in training, advisory board members, and for curriculum guidance. Document employer interests as part of an employer database which can be used in a variety of ways. An employer contact file will be a key resource when placing graduates. If willing, involve employers in proposal development. Make sure that employer involvement is written into the application narrative. Here are a few questions to consider when meeting with potential employers.

- Is the potential employer interested in the program if funded?
- What type of training or certifications are they most interested?
- Are positions unionized?
- To what extent will the potential employer participate in the program (references, meetings, emails etc.)?
- To what extent can the potential employer provide leveraged resources? (Training, guidance, mentoring or internships)

- Is there interest in working with special populations? (ex-offenders, women, veterans, or disabled workers)
- Are their additional contacts, programs or organizations that may be interested in BJT?

Always leave employer discussions with an action plan, commitment, or closure.

Conducting a comprehensive labor market assessment is daunting. The process needs to begin early and continue thru the entire grant.

Community and labor market assessments

Good community assessments, like good labor market assessments will highly influence the success or failure of the job training program. Nothing destroys the reputation of an environmental training program faster than poor graduate placement. Likewise, nothing worse than apathetic participants who are not motivated or committed to establishing an environmental career. Both community and labor market assessments need to begin early and continue throughout program development. Responsibility for these assessments should be assigned to staff members interested in working with employers and with the community.

- Begin community and labor market assessments early with as large a net as possible.
- Visit and “get to know” the neighborhoods under consideration.
- Use search engines, internet resources and surveys for initial background information.
- Do not restrict searches to environmental related industries.
- Involve governmental and municipal agencies in community and labor market assessments.
- “Drill down” to communications with community leaders and employers exhibiting interest a local BJT program.
- Engage supporters and employers to become part of BJT.

- Always ask government officials, supporters, and potential employers for help in identifying additional program supporters
- Assign responsible and outgoing staff members to conduct community and labor market assessments.
- Document meetings and supporters for possible inclusion in the grant application.

Join Our Listserv

HMTRI is part of Eastern Iowa Community Colleges and has provided environmental workforce development technical assistance since the inception of EPA's Brownfields Initiative.

CONNECT notes presented represent individual opinions and ideas from Professional Learning Community participants and EPA Environmental Job Training grant recipients. They do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such. Copies of prior CONNECT issues can be found at Brownfields-toolbox.org

For more information on HMTRI technical assistance services or to be added to our Grantee and Community Outreach Listserv, please contact us at: HMTRI@eicc.edu.



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