

IDOT's HCCTP Program Changes Lives for the Better

"I was living on the streets. I had nothing – no home, no car – and nowhere to go. Then I found out about the HCCTP and my life turned around. I now can provide for my family. Not only have I learned skills that will provide employment throughout my life, I've gotten my pride and self-esteem back."

The comments received from graduates of the Illinois Department of Transportation's Highway Construction Careers Training Program reflect the profound difference the program is making in lives throughout Illinois. The program, which since 2010 has graduated more than 1,800 individuals, is administered by IDOT's Office of Business and Workforce Diversity's (OBWD) Bureau of Small Business Enterprises.

In collaboration with the Federal Highway Administration, IDOT entered into an intergovernmental agreement with the Illinois Community College Board and 12 community colleges throughout the state to increase the number of minorities, women and disadvantaged individuals trained in skills that prepare them for a career in the highway construction trades. IDOT has made a strong commitment to build Illinois roadways with a workforce that reflects the diversity of the State of Illinois and is one of the leading states in financial commitment to the program.

Each participating community college develops a curriculum that prepares trainees for the trades and highway construction industry in their geographical location. The schools utilize members of the local trades as instructors and liaisons to the trade industry and have been very successful in establishing partnerships to advance trainees into labor apprenticeships.

"IDOT is not only paying to train these students but also giving them the opportunity to give back to their community and allowing them to get practical experience," said Pamela Simon, Director of OBWD.

Workforce Advisory Committees organized by each community college have played an important role in bringing trades and contractor organizations together for discussion on program improvements, the most effective course study and opportunities for hands-on projects. Some of these community projects have included replacing the concrete parking area of a retreat for veterans in Carterville; replacing a handicap-accessible walkway entrance for a local organization in Alton; and building a handicap-accessible boardwalk on the college campus in Kankakee. Other projects in the works include a conference room for the Spring Street Veterans Renaissance in Springfield and storage cabinets for the Mother Jones Museum in Mount Olive.

To address a shortage of CDL holders, the District 8 office proposed a program for successful HCCTP graduates similar to an existing one that assists veterans in obtaining their CDL. The idea was approved by Secretary Blankenhorn in May 2016 as a pilot program. District 8 employees work with voluntary graduates on study materials, classroom work, hands-on training and equipment practice. So far, four graduates have obtained their CDL, three of whom have earned employment specifically because of it.

To further strengthen the program, IDOT offers a financial incentive to contractors who hire HCCTP graduates, creating a greater chance of placement. Additionally, each community college holds up to five pre-apprenticeship training sessions per fiscal year in which each student receives 450 hours of intensive training that includes both construction and soft skills.

Because some HCCTP students come from challenging situations – including some from correctional facilities, off the streets or from homeless shelters — it is important they feel successful accomplishing basic life skills, Simon said.

“Many of our students have never had to manage a checkbook or been on an interview, so we provide training in these areas to help them as they progress,” she said.

All prospective trainees must possess either a high-school diploma or GED and pass periodic random drug screening, have a valid driver license and meet strict attendance guidelines that mirror highway construction industry standards.

“We’re providing them an opportunity to change their life, and they have to be committed to work hard,” Simon said. “Not every trainee graduates, but about 75 percent do — and that’s impressive.”

Recently, Simon said, several students of the Dawson Tech HCCTP in District 1 were serving as ambassadors at a Transportation Symposium and Business Exchange in downtown Chicago. They represented IDOT and Dawson Tech so favorably that two of the students were hired on the spot by a couple of contractors at the event.

“That’s life-changing,” she said, “and we’re helping to make it happen.”



(Pictured are members of a past class of HCCTP graduates from District 1.)

Participating community colleges:

- District 1 – Dawson Technical Institute of Kennedy-King College, South Suburban College
- District 2 – Rock Valley College, Black Hawk College
- District 3 – Kankakee Community College
- District 4 – Illinois Central College
- District 5 – Parkland College
- District 6 – Lincoln Land Community College
- District 7 – Richland Community College
- District 8 – Lewis & Clark Community College, Southwestern Illinois College
- District 9 – John A. Logan College