

## **Women Build: Pre-Apprenticeship Training for Bay Area Women**

**By Elena Foshay**

Rising Sun Energy Center, a green workforce development and energy and water efficiency services non-profit located in Berkeley, California, has embarked on a new initiative to increase the number of women working in the skilled construction trades.

Rising Sun's Green Energy Training Services (GETS) program offers pre-apprenticeship training for careers in construction, solar, and energy efficiency, and preparation for entry into union apprenticeships. This spring, GETS launched its first all-women pre-apprenticeship class, Women Build. This class provides 20 women with hands-on construction and applied math skills, an orientation to union apprenticeships, and tools for success as women working in construction. As part of training, participants work on Habitat for Humanity construction sites and visit local apprenticeship training centers. The class also includes valuable workshops led by women currently working in the trades on topics including how to survive and succeed in a male-dominated field. Participants will graduate with OSHA 10 and First Aid/CPR certification, as well as the Multi-Craft Core Curriculum (MC3) certificate.

Women Build participants were recruited through a broad network of community agencies. The GETS team reached out to Case Managers, Job Developers, and other partner organization staff to tell them about the program and invite client referrals. Word of mouth and outreach through social media, our network of past GETS graduates, as well as women currently working in the trades, were also important recruiting tools. Women interested in participating attended an information session to learn about the program and careers in construction, and took a math and reading test to assess for program readiness. Applicants then participated in two rounds of interviews before being accepted into the program. Once accepted, they completed a comprehensive assessment that looked at their work history, barriers to employment, goals and motivation to find work, and support systems in order to identify challenges that need addressing as well as resources that will support participant success both during and immediately after training.

All Women Build participants are low-income women who live in the East Bay, mostly in Oakland and Berkeley. Fifteen percent are under the age of 25, and 30% are over the age of 45. The majority are single parents, and more than half are formerly incarcerated. Fifty percent don't have a driver's license, or have a suspended license, a major barrier for working in construction. Participants face a variety of other barriers, including homelessness or unstable housing, limited math or reading skills, and a lack of resources for food, appropriate work clothes, or transportation while in training.

In addition to eight weeks of hands-on and classroom training, participants receive 12 months of case management and job placement assistance, as well as opportunities for ongoing alumni engagement. One of the goals is to create a community of women who can serve as an ongoing support network for each other as they go through their respective apprenticeships and face the associated challenges. Once graduates start their apprenticeships, the West Oakland Job Resource Center will provide ongoing support to ensure long-term retention.

Women Build is being developed and implemented through a partnership with Tradeswomen, Inc., the Alameda County Workforce Investment Board, Alameda County Social Services, the City of Berkeley, the West Oakland Job Resource Center, and the Alameda County Building and Construction Trades Council. Partners help with recruitment, curriculum design, and placement, as well as engaging employers and union representatives during training. The program has been made possible through a Workforce Accelerator Fund grant from the California Workforce Development Board.

The first Women Build training class is now halfway over. The women have already built a strong support network among themselves, and the sense of community is palpable in the classroom. Those with cars give rides to those without so they can get to class on time. Those who wake up early call the ones who have trouble waking up to make sure they get out of bed and get ready. Those who have the resources bring food to share with those who are struggling so everyone has something to eat. And all the participants are already showing a strong motivation to work hard and find good jobs at the end of training.

There are many lessons we, as training providers, are taking note of in thinking about future cohorts. As the heads of household with children to support, many participants in this class have a very difficult time participating in eight weeks of unpaid training. To respond to this, we will begin offering a small stipend to future cohorts, and will help participants access income supports like CalWorks and food stamps and will look for ways to offer paid internships during and immediately after training. Additionally, most of our participants need help purchasing steel-toe work boots and safety gear fitted to a woman's body, so we are looking for ways to leverage the support our partners can provide to offer that.

Rising Sun is thrilled to have been recently awarded state funding through Prop 39 to continue providing pre-apprenticeship training for women over the next 18 months. An expanded group of partners will take lessons learned from this cohort to continue strengthening our training model and connecting women to career-track jobs in the building trades. We will test a variety of different training classes, including a daytime class that is half women and half men, an evening and weekend class, and another all-women training class next spring.