EPA United States Environmental Protection Agency

brownfields

Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training Success Story

Cypress Mandela Training Center
Oakland, California

HIGHLIGHTS

Since serving as one of EPA's original Brownfields Job Training "Pilot" grants in 1998, CMTC has gone on to receive an additional, two-year EPA Brownfields Job Training grant every time it has applied. CMTC has also received funding under the Agency's new and expanded Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training program.

Core training focuses on hazardous waste remediation, including asbestos and mold removal and supplemented with masonry, plumbing, carpentry and surveying, as well as solar and other renewable energies and life-skills. Students graduate with eight different certifications.

Through a collaboration with EPA and a local contractor, CMTC is testing an innovative, safe and non-intrusive remediation method with the potential to revolutionize the way lead contamination in soil is addressed.

Poverty and unemployment have long been issues for residents of West Oakland, California, with rates doubling national averages. In 1989, after an earthquake collapsed the Cypress Mandela Freeway, community activists expressed their desire that cleanup and rebuilding jobs created through the disaster should be filled by area residents. The problem was that few who lived in the area had sufficient training and no area training programs existed.

In response, with West Oakland's predominantly low-income and minority, unemployed residents in mind, neighborhood representatives applied for and received funding from the Federal Highway Administration (FHA) to train residents with the skills needed to clean up earthquake debris on the freeway. A large, vacant building in the city's warehouse district became the Cypress Mandela Training Center (CMTC)—and 90 percent of the first round of trainees were hired for freeway cleanup. This success led to additional funding from FHA, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), the State of California, and other public- and private-sector sources; and solidified CMTC's presence in the community. Word of mouth began to spread and waiting lists began to form for training classes.

CMTC students learn construction skills as part of the 16-week training program.

In 1998, CMTC applied for and received an EPA Brownfields Job Training Pilot for

$200,000 to prepare local residents not only to clean up the contaminated properties that had plagued their neighborhoods, but for lasting careers in environmental remediation. An experimental "pilot" grant at the time, this EPA funding allowed CMTC to further expand its environmental training curriculum and change the lives of disadvantaged residents. From initial courses in lead and hazardous materials cleanup, CMTC now offers comprehensive coursework in environmental remediation that includes modern, "green" cleanup techniques as well as life-skills training leveraged through non-EPA funding.

"We have high standards in this program, both for our students and what we offer," explains Art Shanks, who has been with CMTC since its inception and is now the Executive Director. "Classes begin at 7:00 a.m. sharp and are no-nonsense. They learn masonry, iron works, plumbing, carpentry, surveying, construction materials handling, blueprint reading, and CAD (also known as Computer Aided Design or Drafting) skills; lead, asbestos and mold removal; confined space cleanup; and first aid/CPR. We are also a green-approved training center, teaching students about solar and other renewable energies, materials recycling, and energy-saving insulation techniques." Students graduate with no less than eight different certifications. "We also give them the life-skills training they may not already have," Shanks elaborates. "We teach them how to manage their time, parenting skills, how to overcome chemical dependencies, and avoiding toxic relationships. They learn anger management and how to budget their finances. But our high standards make students raise the bar for themselves and ensure their success after graduation."

Offering three 16-week training cycles per year, CMTC now has as many as 400 applicants on their waiting list—understandable given the program's near 90 percent placement rate after graduation and local word-of-mouth,

"[The program gives] you what you need to create a good career… it's like you have a Harvard degree in construction and cleanup. Without the program I'd be working some odd job now, I have no clue where I'd be."

—CMTC Graduate Charles Jones

which is CMTC's main source of recruits. "We had a diversion program that we offered for the Justice Department," says Art Shanks. "We went in and spoke to a group of around forty first-time drug offenders, 18-to-22 year olds. We explained that through this agreement, if they went through our 16-week program, they'd have their records expunged. Only six or seven accepted the offer initially. But one of those who chose not to enter the training saw one of our graduates on the street later in his surveying uniform, making $22 an hour. The kid asked him, `How can I get a job like that?' and the other kid told him, `You were at the same meeting I was, Mr. Shanks came in and offered you the program and you turned it down.' But that kid ended up re-applying and eventually got into our program and graduated. So we're taking kids that are problematic in our community and turning them into responsible citizens—we are changing the future of this city."

Since proving its value—as well as the value of the EPA Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training Program (formerly known as Brownfields Environmental Job Training Program), in 1998—CMTC has been the recipient of EPA Job Training grants (each spanning two years) every time it has applied. Through the years, CMTC has forged close relationships with local business organizations to help graduates find jobs, including the Alameda County Building and Construction Trades Council, and the Associated General Contractors and Minority Contractors Associations. More recently, the Center partnered with a local community college to offer trainees classes

in carpentry and modern weatherization techniques.

CMTC students learn modern insulation techniques in addition to other skills.

In 2011, CMTC entered into a collaboration with EPA and a local environmental contractor, SFS Chemical Safety, Inc., to test a method of soil-based lead cleanup with the potential to revolutionize how such cleanup is performed. Oakland's South Prescott neighborhood—built on the site of a former landfill used for disposal of debris from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, with lead levels averaging twice federal safety guidelines—will serve as the perfect proving ground. This new method uses dry, ground up fish bones, which are regarded as waste product by fish processing plants. Workers trained by CMTC dampen the crushed bones, spread the resulting paste over selected yards, and work the mixture into the soil with a rototiller. The process allows neighborhood trees and plants to remain undisturbed. Over the next several weeks, a chemical reaction takes place that bonds lead contamination with bone particles, rendering the lead harmless to humans. At the time of this article, CMTC had only applied the paste on three South Prescott properties, and the method's effectiveness was still being determined. But ultimately, this EPA-funded, $4 million test project could potentially replace the method of digging up and disposing of hundreds of thousands of tons of contaminated soil—an expensive, time consuming and difficult process that has been used for decades.

For CMTC's nearly 2,400 graduates, the program's value is already evident. "It was what I needed to get back on track," he explains. "The CMTC staff care about the individual that they're training. They give you what you need to create a good career. With those certifications, it's like you have a Harvard degree in construction and cleanup. I found work within a week after graduating. Without the program I'd be working some odd job now, I have no clue where I'd be. It's made a big difference in my life and I've already recommended five or six friends for the training."

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