
Retraining helps downsized workers, incoming employers

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Were you laid off because of downsizing, plant closure, or seasonal work that ended? Are you looking for new skills to get a good job in a high-demand field? Local worker retraining programs may be able to help. Through its Worker Retraining Program, Columbia Basin College focuses on upgrading or acquiring vocational and technical skills. More than 20 vocational courses are available, ranging from accounting to welding technology. Course work can be completed in three months to two years, depending on the program.

To be eligible for this state-funded program, applicants must either be receiving state unemployment compensation or have received their total allotment. They must be enrolled in a vocational or technical program. Assistance can include tuition, fees and books, child care, transportation, and living assistance to complete training. Since 1993, worker retraining at CBC has served more than 1500 people. Applicants come from a variety of market sectors and skill levels. "We get everyone from downsized Hanford and Supply System employees to seasonal workers associated with the agricultural industry," said Carla McLane, CBC's Worker Retraining Coordinator. McLane and others work with local and regional employers to tailor training courses to the skills they need. State records of CBC's worker retraining statistics show an average job placement rate of 77 percent. A program that trains pharmacy assistants places nearly 100 percent of its graduates. Retrained workers are finding jobs locally as well as outside of the community and in other states. On average, workers retrained by CBC receive wages of at least 85 percent of what they made at their previous jobs. "The average annual Hanford salary of more than \$50,000 can make it tough to find private sector jobs at comparable pay," McLane said.

Workers with high-tech skills make particularly good candidates for the manufacturing/light industry firms that Tri-Cities business leaders are working to attract to the community. One example is training targeted toward International Hearth Melting, an Albany, Ore.-based company that is constructing a titanium manufacturing plant in Richland. "We worked closely with CBC to design a powerful training program for the skills we need, such as welding and metallurgy," said Marg Holm, the company's Human Resource Manager.

Several other programs for displaced workers are administered at the Re-Employment Opportunity Center in Kennewick. Most of these programs help victims of layoffs or plant closures, as well as the long-term unemployed who meet eligibility criteria. The Center's programs, funded by public and private organizations, include financial assistance, occupational counseling, skills training, resume development, and access to resources for job searches.

Another resource, CBC's Workforce Training Center, provides training and hiring assistance for local companies. One such firm is a Montana-based railroad company, which will open the Livingston Rebuild Center's Richland Research and Development Division in April. Workers will inspect, repair, and rebuild locomotives

and associated parts. The Training Center also sought and screened applicants for International Hearth Melting's Richland plant.

Those who are already employed, but are expecting upcoming layoffs and want to prepare themselves for a new job search, can also get help. "We refer employed workers to other community resources such as the local libraries, the Job Service Center in Pasco, and the Career Center at CBC, all of which are open to the public," McLane said.

Washington State University Tri-Cities offers professional certification programs in business, technical, and computer fields. Certificate programs take anywhere from ten days to six months to complete, depending on the worker's prior experience and background, and usually culminate in taking a nationally certified exam. "Some of our professional certification students are funded through the Re-Employment Opportunity Center, but most are already employed and seeking a career change or advancement," said Karen Hodges, Director of WSU's University Center for Professional Education.

For more information about CBC's retraining programs, contact Carla McLane at 509-547-0511, extension 446. For information about the Re-Employment Opportunity Center, contact Clyde Massie at 509-734-7050. For information about WSU's University Center for Professional Education training programs, contact Doris Leonard at 509-372-7200.