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Avondale Estrella Mountain Community College to train utility workers

\$13.5 million in federal money will be used for jobs in energy industry



APS machinist Clyde Knoll works on a valve at the APS West Phoenix Power Plant. Energy companies need workers with specialized skills.

AP Photo/Scott G. Fries

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By **Cale Ottens**

The Republic | [azcentral.com](#)

Tue Jan 15, 2013 1:44 PM

Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale is part of a \$13.5 million effort to train future workers for jobs in the energy industry.

The program will help prepare residents for high-paying jobs and it will help fill thousands of energy jobs as waves of veteran utility workers retire.

Five Arizona community colleges will share a \$13.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, which will help the schools develop a universal training program for utility workers.

"We're all doing similar programs, but we're doing them differently," said Clay Goodman, vice president of occupational education at Estrella Mountain Community College. "What we want to do is make sure the programs we are offering are consistent."

The group includes Estrella Mountain, Chandler-Gilbert Community College, Northland Pioneer College, Pima Community College and Yavapai College. The group is called the Arizona Sun Corridor Get Into Energy Consortium.

The universal program would be offered at each of the colleges.

"There's also a bigger mission here to develop best (education) practices that can be implemented everywhere," Goodman said.

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Each college in the consortium already has a training program to help students get jobs in the energy industry. However, it's essential for each college to train every student the same.

That way, when utility workers from different companies must work together — after a major storm, for example — they have been trained with the same tools and equipment, Goodman said.

The schools plan to modify some classes, write new courses and install new equipment for hands-on labs. The group also plans to create a new curriculum that will be the same for each of the colleges, Goodman said.

Retirements

Utility companies need a pipeline of new workers soon because many of their current employees are gearing up for retirement, said David Heler, Palo Verde human-resource program manager for Arizona Public Service.

The company estimates that 5 to 6 percent of the workforce at its Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station will retire every year for the next 20 years or so, Heler said.

In Arizona, that means about 3,000 jobs must be filled between now and 2017, Goodman said.

Heler estimates 1,600 to 1,700 people will be hired directly from this new program over the next three to five years.

At Arizona utilities, a technician at a power plant with a two-year degree could earn \$50,000 to \$60,000 annually, while more specialized workers at a nuclear power plant could earn as much as \$100,000 annually with overtime, Goodman said.

"This is a big win for Arizona," he said. "I can't express how significant this is for the state of Arizona."

Power plants around the state need new workers, he said. So the program will benefit job seekers in small communities as well as major metropolitan areas.

In the Southwest Valley, Estrella Mountain has worked with APS for many

years.

Students participate in internships and apprenticeships at its Palo Verde power plant. Since about 2001, APS has hired about 80 people from the apprentice program and about 150 people from the internship program, Heler said.

The new program will expand what Estrella Mountain and APS already have done, he said.

Special skills

It can be difficult to hire new workers in energy-related fields because the skills necessary to work at various power plants are very specific, but community colleges are one of the best places to learn them, said Dennis McGinn, the president and CEO of the American Council on Renewable Energy.

Community colleges excel at training workers relatively quickly. Workers can get entry-level work after a two-year community-college program, while a traditional university degree could take four years or more, experts say.

"You need a skilled workforce to maintain these industries," McGinn said.

The federal grant is "literally an investment in our future workforce and our future economy," added McGinn, who heads a national organization that promotes the development of renewable energies.

Well-trained workers should be part of the nation's overall energy strategy, McGinn said.

It's important that they have a balanced, diverse energy portfolio with renewable energy along with fossil fuels and nuclear energy, McGinn said.

The consortium is hiring people to help manage all of the planned changes to the training programs.

Each new addition to the community colleges' programs will come in phases, Goodman said.

The changes will start at the beginning of the next school year in August and will be completed by fall 2015, Goodman added.

"This is something that will have a long-term impact," he said.

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