

Leveraging Partnerships to Create Accessible Green Career Pathways

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ABSTRACT

California has experienced an almost 30% decline in construction sector employment over the past three years. Overall unemployment in this state continues to hover around 12%, but for Latinos in California unemployment is closer to 15% and for African Americans unemployment reaches closer to 20%. There is hope: A 2011 UC Berkeley report indicates that energy efficiency policies in California will result in the creation of 211,000 energy efficiency jobs by 2020. Rising Sun Energy Center's Green Energy Training Services (GETS) program leverages multiple partnerships to provide an integrated and accessible green career pathway to those who have been hardest-hit by the recession. GETS combines classroom, lab, and field training designed to meet employers' needs, and graduates leave the GETS program knowing the fundamental principles, language, tools, and practices of residential Building Performance. Local employers have played a crucial role in the development of this innovative career pathway program. Some graduates gain additional training as employees at GETS Energy Services, Rising Sun's building performance social enterprise that offers local residents subsidized energy audits and retrofit work while providing hands-on, paid field experience. Others gain industry-recognized certifications through a BPI certification class. The result is an integrated career pathway program that serves as a best practice model for offering quality training, creating green jobs, and successfully placing individuals into employment in the building performance industry.

Introduction

Under the growing threat of climate destabilization, Americans are in the midst of a jobless recovery. While the nation has recently made modest gains in employment, millions of Americans, especially those who have been historically excluded from economic opportunity, continue to be left behind. According to recent data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the national unemployment rates for Latinos (10.3%) and African Americans (13%) continue to surpass that of the overall population (8.1%) (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). Similar trends bear out in California where, according to the December 2011 *California Labor Market Review*, the unemployment rate for Californians of color (12.6%) continues to surpass that of the overall population (11.1%) (California Employment Development Department 2011). Particularly hard-hit has been the construction sector in this state, which, despite modest growth in the past few months, has declined more than 40% since its peak in 2006 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). Locally, in California's East Bay Area, a third of families in Berkeley, Oakland, and Richmond have incomes that fall below the poverty line, but more than 40% of Berkeley and Richmond families, and more than 50% of Oakland families, fall below the standard for economic self-sufficiency for a family of four (US Census Bureau 2012; ICCED 2011).

There is hope: A 2011 report by the Donald Vial Center on Employment in the Green Economy, *The California Workforce Education & Training Needs Assessment*, indicates that energy efficiency policies in California will generate about \$11.2 billion of public and private investment, resulting in 211,000 jobs created by 2020 (Donald Vial Center on Employment in

the Green Economy 2011). According to the report, just over 54,000 of these jobs will be in the building trades and require specific training in building performance assessments and installation. These are career-track jobs, and with continued training and on-the-job experience, can offer wages at the level needed to ensure family economic security – between \$13 and \$17 per hour for a single adult and up to \$22.50 per hour for a family of four in the Bay Area (ICCED 2011).

The green economy has been a focus area for economic development nationally and in California for several years, with energy efficiency identified as the low-hanging fruit that offers the most potential for job creation (Goldman, Fuller, & Stuart 2010; California Apollo Alliance 2010; Next 10 2012). With a boost from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), California and the nation saw a rapid expansion of the residential energy efficiency sector through the Weatherization Assistance Program, and the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (EECBG) program, among others. The result is a new and growing entry point for dislocated and disenfranchised workers, particularly those who have depended on the residential construction sector for short- and long-term employment.

The Center on Wisconsin Strategy, Green for All, and others have identified several best practice innovations to help ensure that low-income and disenfranchised populations have the skills to access quality jobs in green sectors. The key to creating career pathways that allow individuals to escape from poverty are strong policy and economic development initiatives that create jobs, combined with training partnerships between an array of actors that create multiple entry points and opportunities for advancement (White & Walsh 2008). The best partnerships are those that include employers, community-based organizations, unions, community colleges, and the workforce development system (White & Walsh 2008; Green for All 2009). The best training programs are those that teach transferable skills that are certified through stackable and industry-recognized credentials, and build in case management and job placement support to ensure client success (White 2010; Green for All 2009). The addition of a social enterprise is an innovative practice that allows a training program to place graduates into employment immediately while allowing them to continue gaining hands-on skills in the field (Green for All 2009).

Rising Sun Energy Center, a non-profit organization founded in 1994 and headquartered in Berkeley, California, has evolved from a modest renewable energy education center into green workforce development and retrofit services organization. Rising Sun is responding to the need for access to economic opportunity and for a skilled energy efficiency workforce by providing green job training and employment to Bay Area youth and adults. Rising Sun also creates energy efficiency jobs by providing low-to-no-cost retrofit services to Bay Area households through its summer youth employment program and its social enterprise, with a focus on under-resourced communities: moderate and low-income residents, renters, and non-English speakers. Through strong partnerships with local governments, utilities, and community organizations, Rising Sun offers a unique and integrated program that serves as a best practice model for providing access to green career pathways to those who are most often excluded from economic opportunity.

The GETS Program

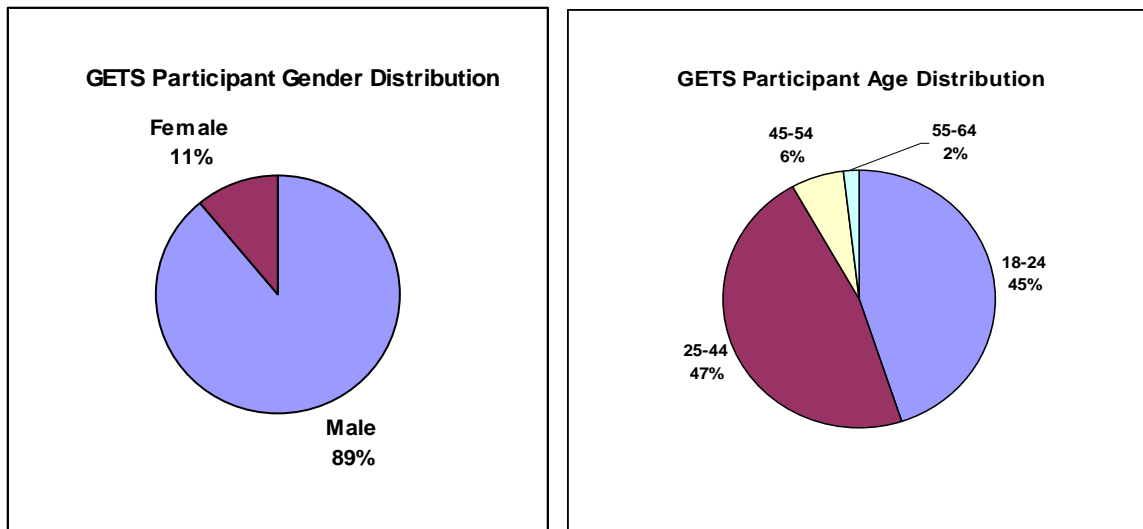
The Building Performance Institute, developers of one of the most widely-accepted set of standards and accreditations in residential energy efficiency, defines building performance as a

comprehensive whole-house approach to identifying and fixing comfort and energy efficiency problems in a home (Building Performance Institute 2012). Rising Sun Energy Center’s Green Energy Training Services (GETS) program prepares adults for entry-level jobs in residential building performance. Initiated in partnership with the City of Richmond’s Build construction pre-apprenticeship program, GETS now leverages multiple partnerships to provide a green career pathway to dislocated workers and low-income adults who face multiple barriers to employment - those who have been hardest-hit by the recession.

GETS combines classroom, lab, and field training designed to meet employers’ needs, but broken down in a way that makes difficult theoretical concepts and practical applications easy to learn and master. To graduate from the course and earn a certificate, participants must pass a comprehensive final exam proving that they are leaving the GETS program knowing the fundamental principles, language, tools, and practices of residential building performance. They also leave prepared to seek entry-level employment in the building performance industry. During training and after completing GETS, graduates receive ongoing case management and job placement services, with the goal of connecting them with long-term, stable, living-wage employment. On an ongoing basis, the GETS staff works hard to build and maintain relationships with local building performance companies, in an effort to be the go-to source for hiring.

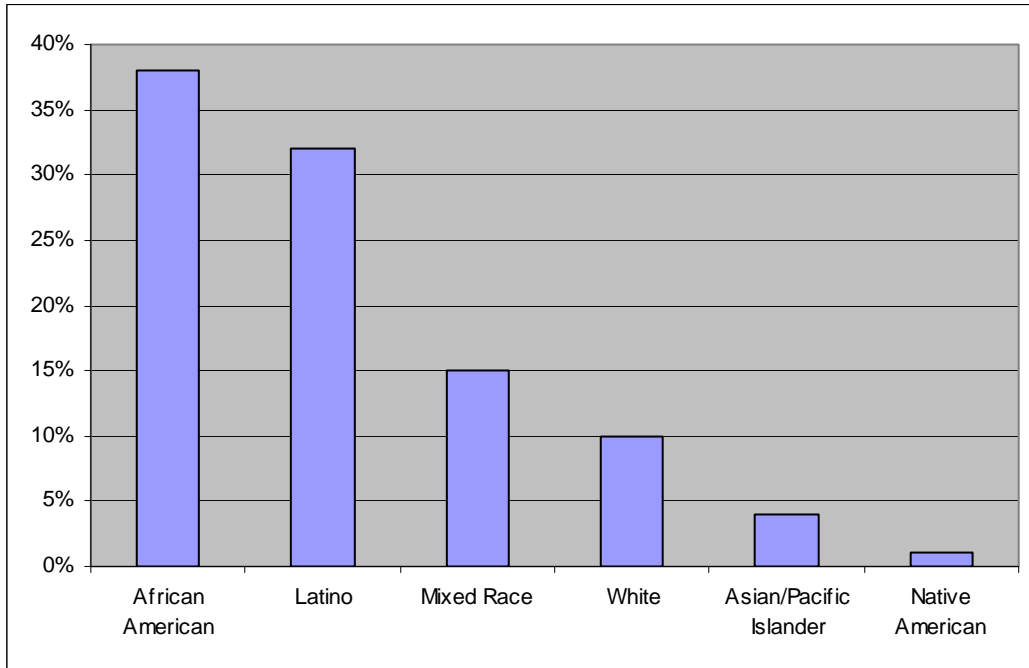
Since 2009, over 230 people have graduated from GETS. Participants are residents of Berkeley, Oakland, Richmond, and nearby cities of California’s East Bay Area. The majority of GETS participants are male, 45% are under the age of 24, more than 60% are African American or Latino, and all are low-income or living below the poverty line (Fig. 1 & 2).

Figure 1. GETS Gender and Age Distribution



Source: GETS Intake Surveys 2009-2012

Figure 2. GETS Participant Race/Ethnicity



Source: GETS Intake Surveys 2009-2012

To date, almost seventy percent of GETS graduates have found employment, half of whom have found jobs in energy efficiency or related industries (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. GETS Graduate Outcomes

GETS Outcomes 2009-2012	
Total training cohorts	15
Total number of people trained to date	254
Total number of GETS graduates to date	238
Graduation Rate	94%
Total number of GETS graduates placed (training and/or employment)	195
Overall Placement Rate	82%
Number of GETS graduates placed in employment	160
Overall Employment Placement Rate	67%
Number of GETS graduates placed in building performance or related	81
Percent of Those Placed in Employment Who Found Jobs in Building Performance or Related	51%
Number of GETS graduates engaged in additional education/training	112
Overall Education Placement Rate	47%

Source: GETS Placement Data 2009-2012

In these tough economic times, jobs come at a premium, and competition is fierce. Individuals who have been out of the workforce for some time, or who face barriers such as homelessness, a criminal background, limited English, no driver's license or access to transportation, or limited work experience are the last to be absorbed by new job growth. To respond to this challenge, and try to give GETS graduates a leg up in the industry, Rising Sun created Rising Sun Energy Services (Energy Services), a building performance social enterprise. Energy Services provides transitional employment to GETS graduates, many of whom are among the hardest to place.

Crew members work under the supervision of a licensed general contractor and BPI-certified Building Analyst, and receive case management and job placement support from GETS staff. In addition to technical skills, they develop soft skills, like showing up on time to work, behaving professionally at the job site, and working as a team. Crew members are paid a wage of \$15.00 an hour to start, which meets the City of Berkeley standard for a living wage. This income not only helps build stability and self-confidence, it also puts them on a clear path to economic self-sufficiency. After six months to a year of hands-on field experience performing energy assessments and installing efficiency measures, Energy Services crew members become our most in-demand candidates for both entry-level and supervisory jobs.

Partnering with Employers

Employers are key partners in the GETS training model. Rising Sun hosts regular meetings of its Employer Council, a group that meets biannually and includes representatives of local building performance businesses, training programs, local government partners, and other industry professionals. The Employer Council serves as a key source of information about industry trends and labor force needs. In the beginning, the Employer Council played a crucial role in the development of the GETS training curriculum, providing significant input on which skills to emphasize. The GETS curriculum was then written in-house by a BPI-certified Building Analyst, in collaboration with industry and curriculum design experts. The curriculum continues to be developed and refined with significant input from Employer Council members.

Rising Sun Energy Services was developed, in part, as a response to employers' requests for candidates with more field experience. Local employers also played a crucial role in the development of the next step in Rising Sun's innovative career pathway program. In 2011, the GETS curriculum was approved by the Building Performance Institute, and is aligned with testing requirements for four levels of BPI certifications: Building Analyst, Envelope Professional, Retrofit Installer, and Crew Chief. This allowed Rising Sun to begin offering GETS graduates with experience working in the field the opportunity to earn an industry-recognized certification through an Advanced GETS training class. Earning a BPI certification increases GETS graduates' earning potential by opening up opportunities for career advancement. It also meets employers' needs for trained experts to work in the field.

Building Stronger Partnerships

Rising Sun continues to depend on strong partnerships to build and expand its programs. Already, many GETS graduates have taken additional training in solar, electrical, lead and asbestos abatement, and to become Certified Green Building Professionals through ongoing partnerships with Richmond Build, Solar Richmond, Build it Green, and the Alameda County

Healthy Homes Collaborative. Through the Alameda County Green Business Program, GETS offers internship experience to graduates, who work as Green Business Energy Auditors. Initially an unpaid internship, participants gain skills in customer service and computer-based data tracking platforms, and build on their residential energy efficiency skills by learning the basics of energy efficiency in small commercial buildings. After successfully completing the unpaid internship, participants can become paid contract auditors for the program.

Rising Sun also partnered with Richmond Build and the English Center in Oakland to develop a specialized English language curriculum and offer its first Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL) class in conjunction with GETS first in 2011, and again in 2012. Twenty-two individuals, primarily Spanish speakers, completed 45 hours of contextualized English over three weeks before joining a regular GETS class that was supplemented with daily tutoring support provided by their English instructor. Armed with the language skills they learned in VESL, combined with the technical skills taught in GETS, these individuals can now access a job market that they could not have entered before.

Finally, Rising Sun has been working with three local community colleges – Contra Costa College, Skyline College, and Laney College – to begin developing more articulated career pathways bridging from GETS into certificate and degree programs in related fields. Rising Sun is also a PG&E Power Pathways training partner, and is tapping into the vast knowledge of trainers at the Stockton and San Francisco Energy Centers to develop new curriculum modules that will help bridge GETS into commercial building performance, which it hopes to roll out in 2013.

GETS Success Stories

Success stories of GETS graduates offer the best examples of how the GETS career pathway looks in practice.

From the Streets to a Union Job

S. was a young adult with limited work experience and a history of getting in trouble with the law. When he started GETS, he lacked the technical and soft skills and required to obtain employment on his own.

I began Rising Sun's GETS program and broadened my horizons to a concept that I had never really heard of before: energy efficiency. A month's worth of GETS training gave me a foundation of knowledge that I applied to several job interviews...the training I received gave me the confidence to explain the laws of thermodynamics and the relationship of different components that make up a building. I worked hard and did what I needed to do to successfully complete the training, and then GETS staff helped connect me with local businesses that were looking for qualified energy efficiency specialists. Currently, I am employed by [a local building performance company] where I am receiving advanced training to perform energy audits on residential and commercial buildings.

After graduating, S. went on to earn his BPI Building Analyst certification and continued to work in the field of Building Performance. He was recently accepted into an electrician apprenticeship with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

Overcoming Barriers to Find a Career Pathway

K. had a criminal background, was homeless and participating in a substance abuse recovery program, and suffered from an extreme lack of self-confidence when he was referred to GETS by his case manager.

With GETS I got the opportunity to learn the purpose of what I was doing, the big ideas behind it, and how I can benefit myself, the customer, and the environment. I had the opportunity to explore so many aspects of green energy practices through GETS that I really feel empowered to make good decisions about my career... While working with Energy Services, I was placed in a constructive working environment. I am surrounded by friendly co-workers and supportive, knowledgeable supervisors who care about my safety as well as getting the job done.

K. continues to work with Energy Services. A year later, he has earned his BPI Building Analyst certification, and has been promoted to Crew-Chief-In-Training so he can develop his leadership skills.

From Unemployment to a New Profession

R. was a dislocated construction worker who had been out of the workforce for more than a year, and who had lost his driver's license as a result of a DUI.

At 37 years old, R. has been looking for an opportunity to gain valuable skills and experiences to help him find a career to support himself and his 10 year old daughter. R. graduated from the GETS program and was hired to join the Energy Services crew. After 6 months, R. earned his BPI Building Analyst certification, and was offered a full-time position as a Junior Auditor with one of the largest San Francisco Bay area residential energy efficiency contractors.

With support from the GETS Case Manager, R. completed his obligations and got his driver's license back. He continues to work as an energy auditor.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

After three years of building a strong track record of successfully training and placing dislocated workers and adults with barriers to employment, there are several lessons learned which are helping to strengthen the GETS program moving forward. First, the training program and curriculum must be nimble and continuously adapted to stay relevant and connected to labor market needs. Employers, particularly Rising Sun's own social enterprise, play an essential role in maintaining a continuous feedback loop, and it is essential that we continue to invest in building and maintaining those relationships. Second, the majority of instruction must be hands-

on. The populations GETS serves are more likely to be kinesthetic learners, meaning that classroom learning is not the ideal way for them to master the material. GETS continues to find ways to build in more lab and field time, and integrated with Energy Services, offers real-life learning experience to both students and graduates. Finally, the program must spend as much time on soft skill development and case management as on technical skills training. Employers constantly tell us that soft skills like showing up on time and communicating effectively are not ones they can teach on the job. Candidates that are strong in these and other areas stand out among others. And the barriers that kept GETS participants from obtaining or retaining employment in the past must be addressed and overcome, with the support of a Case Manager, for them to stay on track in the future.

Green jobs advocates nationwide maintain a vision of a new economy that creates pathways to quality jobs that are accessible to those that have been historically left out of economic growth. ARRA offered new resources to reduce energy use in buildings while supporting training partnerships and implementing new workforce development programs that offer pathways out of poverty. Rising Sun Energy Center built on its existing partnerships to build a strong green career pathways model. The result is a comprehensive and integrated program that offers quality training, creates green jobs, with a successful track record of placing individuals who face many barriers into employment in the growing building performance sector. Rising Sun hopes to continue to serve as a best-practice model, and to grow and expand these pathways to allow those most affected by the recession an opportunity to participate in the green economy, obtain quality employment, and gain economic self-sufficiency.

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