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Green Jobs Seek Entry Level Workers

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RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

In the San Francisco area, environmental technology firms are growing so fast they can't find enough people to hire. We're talking about businesses that specialized in things like installing solar panels, weatherizing homes and recycling electronics.

At last count, there were 200 new firms in the Bay area. It's prompting the cities of Oakland and Richmond to retool their vocational training programs so that unemployed young people have a chance at grabbing these green-collar jobs.

NPR's Elaine Korry reports.

(Soundbite of construction)

ELAINE KORRY: I'm standing on the rooftop at a construction site in the Oakland Hills taking in the million-dollar view: Alcatraz, the Golden Gate Bridge, white caps on San Francisco Bay. A small crew is up here too.

Mr. JOHN O'CONNOR(ph) (Operations Manager, Sunlight Empower): And you are going to adjust the rail down to the string line and then tighten the rail up.

Unidentified Man: Yes, sir.

KORRY: They're installing the framework for solar panels that will power this five-bedroom home.

Mr. O'CONNOR: Excellent. Got a socket wrench - so you're going to get all this good and tight.

KORRY: John O'Connor is the operations manager for Sunlight Empower(ph), a certified green firm in nearby Berkeley. It supplies solar electricity and hot- water systems for commercial and residential buildings. He says it's consistently been one of the top 25 growth companies in the Bay area.

Mr. O'CONNOR: We are rolling like mad. And in order to meet that growth demand, we do need to hire and bring on staff. Right now, for example, I have about 18 people in my department, and we're hoping to double that next year.

KORRY: But employers in the new green industries have been stymied looking for people to

hire. O'Connor was getting nowhere until he discovered a vocational training program in nearby Richmond. He was intrigued to learn the city was already teaching young people how to build and install a basic photo voltaic system.

O'Connor interviewed several graduates and hired Andre Collins(ph), a 26-year- old with a hefty built and a socket wrench. Collins says that training program opened his eyes to new opportunities and the skills he acquired landed him this job.

Mr. ANDRE COLLINS (Employee): Larry Weston(ph), the teacher would have me say that I learned to cut, measure and nail. But I learned a lot more than that. I learned how to take orders, how to be a team player. I learned to have a great attitude.

KORRY: Government-run training programs have been around for decades, and their reputation is mixed. Many have been seen as sink holes for local and federal dollars. Often the programs led to deadend jobs that failed to lift workers out of poverty.

end But Collins is happy the training he got could lead to a promising career.

Mr. COLLINS: This is a great job. It's exceptionally well paying, and then you have the chance for a prevailing wage work of government sites, and they only promote from within.

KORRY: And that's the profile of a lot of the newly created green-collar jobs. They're basically blue-collar jobs, but in emerging industries, cities with high youth unemployment have concluded, they should actively recruit these businesses and then funnel them workers.

Professor Raquel Pinderhughes teaches urban studies at the San Francisco State University.

Professor RAQUEL PINDERHUGHES (Urban Studies, San Francisco State University): Employers are looking for workers. There are not enough places where workers are currently being trained for these jobs in terms of the hard skills, and there is a tremendous window of opportunity for people to be trained up and placed in manual labor jobs and green businesses.

KORRY: Pinderhughes says the right kind of vocational training could both sustain these upstart businesses and help break this cycle of urban poverty.

Elaine Korry, NPR News.