

@HEALTH & WELL-BEING ISSUE

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FOCUS: WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

NSU, Alliance and ConAgra Team Up for Training

What do an air conditioning compressor manufacturer and a poultry processing plant have in common?

That's a reasonable question to ask when you're told that two Natchitoches companies, Alliance Compressors and ConAgra, have teamed up with Northwestern State University and The Rapides Foundation for an innovative employee training partnership.

The answer is simple: both ConAgra and Alliance Compressors share a common need for better training for their entry-level employees. The two companies decided to collaborate in an effort aimed at enhancing the education and improving the skills of prospective and current entry-level workers.

"Our employees are our most valuable resource," said Ron Brannon, human resources



Jeff Risinger, human resources manager at Alliance Compressors

director at the Natchitoches ConAgra plant. "We depend upon them to provide quality products to our customers, and when they are well-trained and highly motivated, it's a win-win situation for everyone."

His compatriot at Alliance Compressors is equally enthusiastic. "We are using this project as a training and development tool for new entrants in our workforce," said Jeff Risinger, human resources manager at Alliance. "We are a high-tech company, and we have to do a good bit of training of new employees, especially in

(continued)

Team Up (continued from page 1)



"We are always looking for opportunities to enhance what we do. It's a wonderful thing for our area to have an organization like The Rapides Foundation to help us reach more people."

*Hershel Horton,
director of the
Natchitoches
campus of Louisiana
Technical College*

math skills needed for our computer-controlled equipment."

The joint training program, in association with NSU's Continuing Education Department, is a career ladder certification process that offers workers opportunities for growth and advancement. Named the CLIMB Network - Central Louisiana Industrial Mobility Booster Network - it offers three separate certification levels a candidate might use to step higher in both companies.

The project is part of The Rapides Foundation's new Workforce Development Initiative that offers grants to nonprofit alliances in Central Louisiana for worker training. The goal of the Initiative is to improve skills of current and prospective employees in order to raise wages and build technical knowledge within companies.

"We believe this Workforce Initiative is an important component of our overall goal to build healthier communities in our region,"

explained Joe Rosier, President and CEO of the Rapides Foundation. "A healthy economy is necessary for a healthy community. Our people need well-paying jobs and our businesses need the internal skills and competitive edge to maintain and expand job opportunities."

The Foundation is stepping in to help because employers, especially small to medium-sized companies, typically are consumed with day-to-day operational issues and don't have the time to focus on workforce development, explained Rosier. For these smaller companies, training is also quite expensive; the more cost-effective method of forming training alliances with others is a new concept they welcome.

The CLIMB program begins its first level certification training this spring. NSU is providing computers and both ConAgra and Alliance are providing instructors and space for classes. The five-day session includes three days of joint training and two days of separate training specific to each company. Among the topics covered in

(continued on page 3)

Team Up (continued from page 2)

the first three days of shared training are workplace communication and conflict resolution as well as OSHA requirements.

The two “break-out” days will include team building and “shop math” skills for Alliance Compressors’ workers, and hygiene, basic microbiology and quality control training for ConAgra employees. Team building sessions utilize NSU’s challenge course, an outdoor facility with climbing poles and ropes, that teaches cooperative problem-solving.

There will also be opportunities for employees to get GEDs (General Equivalency Diploma) if they are not high school graduates. Trained supervisors from both companies will conduct most of the first level certification sessions.

Second level certification programs will offer more intense, company-specific training that includes specialized classroom instruction at NSU. A third level of certification is still to be developed.

Northwestern State University is serving as the “facilitator and clearinghouse” for the project, explained Dr. Alvin Brossette, Director of Continuing Education at the university. “This project is very unique, and we are very pleased about it,” he said. “We want to help develop a healthy workforce for these companies and a strong economic base for our community.”

Dr. Brossette has worked to develop the program, along with representatives from both companies, as well as the technical assistant, Alan Kendrix, who is providing guidance for this effort. “It’s a serious investment in human capital,” said Kendrix, who directs the CLIMB project. He is managing partner of Connecticut Product Development Network, LLC in New Britain, Conn.

When Kendrix began working with the two companies and NSU several months ago, he found the stage set for friendly collaboration. “The trust and respect was already there, so it was fairly easy to have a productive brainstorming session and come up with a plan that served the needs of both companies, even though they are as disparate as any two companies could be.”

He noted that Alliance Compressors has projected a future need for 300-350 new entry-



Ron Brannon, human resources director at the Natchitoches ConAgra plant with Mechelle Powell, human resources supervisor

level employees who have the requisite skills for its growing production demands. In ConAgra’s case, said Kendrix, the Natchitoches plant is focusing on improving its incumbent workers’ skills to maintain the company’s competitive edge in a very challenging national marketplace. “That’s a remarkable investment in their (ConAgra) incumbent workers.”

ConAgra’s Brannon is optimistic about the project’s potential. “We have made it one of our highest priorities within the company,” he said. “We are committed to put our time and resources into this because we realize the impact it can have.” The company has already purchased a portable classroom building to accommodate on-site training activity.

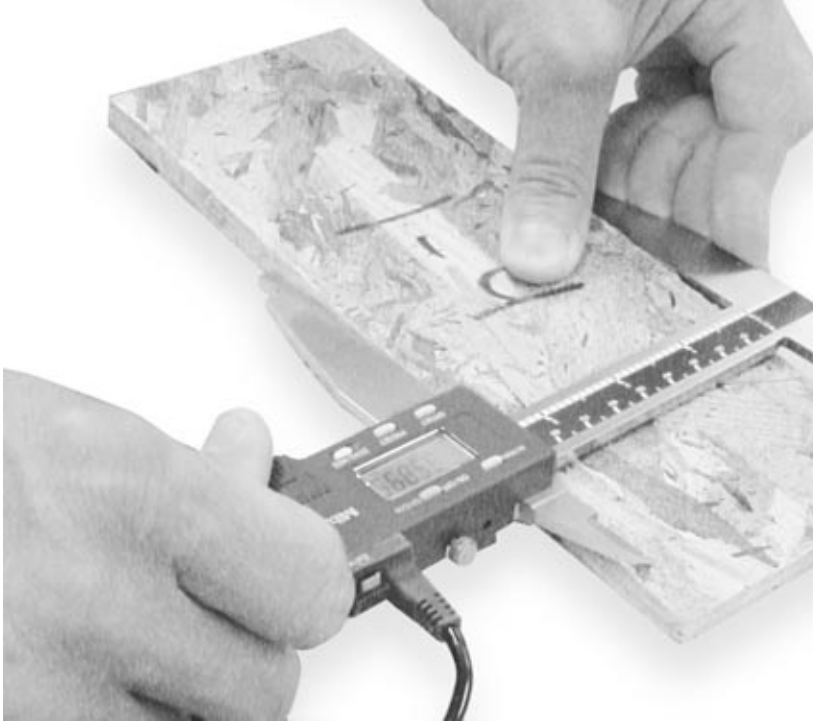
One distinctive aspect of the project for Alliance Compressors is the addition of team-building training for entry-level workers. Such training, which encourages trust and shared responsibility, is more commonly offered to employees in mid-to-upper management.

What ConAgra and Alliance Compressors are doing is applauded by Trent Williams, the Foundation’s key consultant for the Workforce Development Initiative.

“The ConAgra and Alliance Compressors collaboration is one of the most interesting projects we have. They have developed an innovative approach with a well-conceived career ladder. It is really ambitious.”

Workforce Development

A Healthy Economy Builds a Healthy Community



- is the "driving force" behind this Initiative, he added. "Our people must be able to earn a living wage, and businesses, both old and new, must be given opportunities to flourish using up-to-date skills and processes."

The Foundation expects to award a total of \$4.8 million over the next five years under this Initiative. In the first round of funding, \$936,975 was awarded to Cenla nonprofit or public organizations which have formed alliances with area businesses. In March, the Foundation recognized this first group of grant partners in a special public ceremony at the Holiday Inn in downtown Alexandria.

"It's really about generating higher wage employment opportunities," explained Trent Williams, a consultant with Regional Technology Strategies, Inc., a North Carolina-based nonprofit corporation with expertise in economic development.

Workforce development programs can have a real impact on building human resource capacity, he said, and that can lead to a general improvement in a region's economic vitality. While Louisiana has a government-sponsored incumbent worker training program, what the Foundation is doing is different. The Foundation's Initiative focuses on new entries to the workforce, career ladders and supervisory training, said Williams. "In addition, we want to build capacity and knowledge that can be institutionalized within companies."

To get the Initiative off the ground, Williams' firm conducted a series of meetings with area employers and training organizations last year and then developed a comprehensive workforce development program.

To qualify for funding under the Initiative, grant applicants must include at least two manufacturers, healthcare organizations or service businesses that compete in markets outside the Cenla region or sell directly to customers who compete outside the region. Additionally, applicants must partner with a training provider - a nonprofit organization or public agency.

Community wealth generation is the overall goal of the Workforce Development Initiative, said Williams. "It's important that we don't simply fund the status quo," he said. "The program is aimed at companies that

(continued on page 9)

That headline deftly summarizes why The Rapides Foundation is making an investment in workforce development projects in Central Louisiana. Working with an initial group of 16 nonprofit organizations and private employers, the Foundation has embarked on an ambitious quest to boost the area's overall economic health by improving both employee and company skills.

The Workforce Development Initiative, launched last year, offers grant dollars to nonprofit alliances of Cenla companies working together to design and deliver innovative employee training programs or build technical knowledge within their firms.

"Our economic health depends on what our employees and companies know and how fast they can learn," said Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation. The Foundation's mission - to improve the health and well-being of the people in Central Louisiana

"It's really about generating higher wage employment opportunities."

Trent Williams, key consultant for the Workforce Development Initiative

Workforce Competitive Skills Network



Billy Benefield Jr., human resources coordinator for Trus Joist

Getting people job-ready is the goal of a new program designed by two Natchitoches Parish wood product manufacturers and coordinated through Louisiana Technical College's Natchitoches campus.

The two companies involved in this alliance, called the "Workforce Competitive Skills Network," are Roy O. Martin (ROM) Lumber Company and Trus Joist, a Weyerhaeuser Business. Trus Joist manufactures engineered wood products used primarily for residential home construction. ROM's Martco plant in Chopin produces high-grade Southern yellow pine plywood products.

Assisted by a grant from The Rapides Foundation, the two companies joined with Louisiana Technical College in Natchitoches to develop a new program that provides pre-employment training and employee skills improvement. The first group of trainees graduated from the 50-60 hour program this spring, and several

have already been hired by the two companies.

"Our goal with this project is to have a pool of potential associates ready for hire that anyone in this community would be happy to have as employees," said Billy Benefield Jr., human resources coordinator for Trus Joist.

"This helps people who are underemployed or unemployed," added Ray Peters, vice president of human resources at ROM. Classes focus on such issues as safety in a manufacturing environment, math, communication skills and computer keyboards. The training program, which will be repeated three more times this year, is especially geared to entry-level production and operating employees. Those who complete the training are guaranteed job interviews.

"Because of this grant," said Benefield, "six people are working this week who probably couldn't have otherwise gotten these jobs."

The program dovetails well with the purpose of the technical school. "Workforce development is our mission," said Hershel Horton, director of the Natchitoches campus of Louisiana Technical College. "We are always looking for opportunities to enhance what we do. It's a wonderful thing for our area to have an organization like The Rapides Foundation to help us reach more people."

Yet a very important byproduct of the project, said Horton, is the collaboration that has occurred between the two companies involved. "It's allowed them the opportunity to work together, and that's actually been a very nice consequence."

Agreed David Dodd, the Foundation's technical assistant for the project, "This network has done extremely well, even though it's only two companies. These two companies have started talking with each other and working together, and looking at other opportunities for training.

"Now we are looking at, for a second round of funding, expanding that network to include some other timber-related firms and suppliers in the Foundation's service area. We could have a fully integrated network focusing on training and value-added production in the timber industry, which is really exciting.

LSUA - healthcare hiring needs

A one-year planning project led by Louisiana State University at Alexandria and area healthcare employers will help determine long-term healthcare professional training and hiring needs in the region.

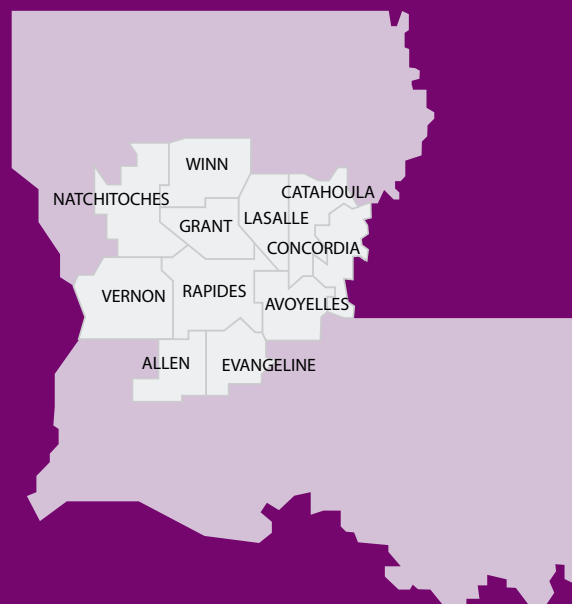
Through the use of a comprehensive assessment of health sector employment in Central Louisiana, the project will examine existing training programs and identify gaps that may exist between what is already in place and what is needed. The collaborative members will work to develop educational programs tailored to meet projected hiring demands.



The Rapides Foundation is a philanthropic organization that provides grants to organizations throughout an 11 parish service area that share the Foundation's mission to improve the health and well-being of Central Louisiana.



THE RAPIDES FOUNDATION
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Job Skills Development for Cenla Industries

It's becoming more important than ever for employees to tune up their technical skills if they want to work for manufacturing plants in Central Louisiana.

Three area companies have joined forces with Northwestern State University in Natchitoches to help maintenance workers enhance their skills in electrical, mechanical and leadership abilities. A two-year grant from The Rapides Foundation is providing the funds to get the program, "Job Skills Development for Cenla Industries," underway.

"The first thing we are doing is developing a good assessment tool to identify our employees' skill levels," explained Ray Peters, vice president of human resources for Roy O. Martin (ROM) Lumber Company. His company is working with wood products manufacturer Boise Cascade and air conditioning compressor manufacturer Alliance Compressors in this innovative program. The Department of Industrial and Engineering Technology at NSU is coordinating the plan.

After identifying existing skill sets, said Peters, the companies are able to identify training needs and design a process that ensures a solid skill foundation and allows for upward career progression. A combination of video teleconferencing, classroom training at NSU and on-site, hands-on instruction is used in the project.

"It's certainly an advantage to employees because they have the opportunity to become more valuable to the company and earn more money," said Peters. "With more skilled employees, the whole organization benefits, improving productivity and profitability."

Even though the three companies involved produce different products, there are certain common skills employees need, said Peters. An understanding of such issues as industrial safety and basic industrial math is important to workers at any of the three local plants participating in the program.

"The foundation is the same," he explained.

ROM's Martco plant in Chopin produces high grade, Southern yellow pine plywood. At its Natchitoches plant, Alliance Compressors produces scroll compressors that are used in commercial and residential air conditioning units and commercial refrigeration products. Boise Cascade's plant in Alexandria produces high quality engineered wood products.

"Over the long term, the more people we have in the community who are qualified for highly-skilled jobs, the more revenue is generated within the community," said Peters. "It's a circle: you have better skilled, more efficient employees, so you have a better operation, and produce a better product. It's the greatest of all the win-wins."



Ray Peters, vice president of human resources for Roy O. Martin (ROM) Lumber Company

Workforce Development

Skills Build Youth Program



Bruce Tassin, director of human resources and risk management at CHRISTUS St. Frances Cabrini Hospital in Alexandria with administrative assistant Kathryn Hilton

"This is an excellent opportunity for us to get staff in who are prepared for the work environment," said Bruce

Tassin, director of human resources and risk management at CHRISTUS St. Frances Cabrini Hospital in Alexandria.

At Rapides Regional Medical Center, human resource specialist Sheila Kight is equally enthusiastic when talking about the "Skills Build Youth Program," a new training concept for entry-level hospital employees.

"This gives people a way to learn how to get and keep a job," she said. The two Alexandria hospitals have teamed up with North Louisiana Goodwill Industries Rehabilitation Center to launch the program aimed at an 18-24 year old age group. The program is supported by a one-year pilot grant from The Rapides Foundation.

Both hospitals have experienced challenges in attracting and retaining qualified entry-level employees in the housekeeping and food service areas of their operations. What the Skills Build program does is offer basic training in "soft skills" - successful work attitudes and habits - as well as employment simulation and vocational skills training. That is particularly important for job

"This gives people a way to learn how to get and keep a job."

Bruce Tassin, director of human resources and risk management at CHRISTUS St. Frances Cabrini Hospital

seekers with minimal skills -- perhaps recent high school graduates or high school dropouts.

After screening, program participants

initially spend time receiving vocational training at the Goodwill store, then are given more specific instruction during a month-long "rotation" in each of the two hospitals' housekeeping departments. The aim is for participants to emerge from the three-month program much better prepared, with the proper skills set, to obtain and keep jobs.

"Our goal is to retain several of these individuals as we have openings," explained Tassin. Agreed Kight: "We hope we will get some good workers through the program."

They said that at both hospitals there are opportunities for growth and upward mobility for employees who prove their abilities and seek continued education.



Evangeline/Rapides Skills Network

*Bernie Beethe,
engineering and
maintenance manager
at Cabot Corporation*

Employees at every level should gain new knowledge and expertise through a training project that joins AFCO Industries in Alexandria with two Ville Platte manufacturers, Cabot Corporation and Cooper-Cameron Corporation.

Called the "Evangeline/Rapides Skills Network," the collaboration centers around training coordinated through the Coreil Campus of Louisiana Technical College in Ville Platte. The project's chief intent is to identify and assess gaps in skill levels of existing employees and implement customized training to upgrade those skills.

"It will impact everybody - from management to the most active worker on our plant floor," said Bernie Beethe, engineering and maintenance manager at Cabot Corporation, which manufactures carbon black at its Evangeline Parish facility.

The three companies involved manufacture

different products, yet they all engage in precision manufacturing with complex processes. AFCO fabricates a variety of metal, wood and plastic products for the building industry, and Cooper-Cameron manufactures oil tools for worldwide use. Many of their employees perform highly-technical work, operating computer-controlled systems, for example, which require specialized training.

The training project will include some pre-employment training, as well as instruction in computerized machinery operation, clerical work and front-line supervisory and management strategies. Other training topics include preventive maintenance, industrial machine shop, modern welding techniques and lab technology. A comprehensive system for improving entry-level workforce skills, called the "Work Keys" program of the American College Testing Institute, is being utilized.

Working with other companies to share employee training is good for everyone, said Beethe. "The Foundation grant helps supplement our existing training budget, and helps us get higher quality instructors. "As employees become more productive, that will improve the bottom line for us all," said Beethe.

Healthy Economy Builds *(continued from page 4)*

compete outside the region - companies that export goods and import cash."

By encouraging employees to increase their skills and education and companies to build their "internal smarts," Williams believes the Foundation's Initiative will produce tangible, long-term benefits for the entire area.

When companies work together, as they are doing in these grant-funded alliances, a great synergy is produced, commented David Dodd, a Shreveport-based economic development consultant. He is serving as a technical assistant for two of the Initiative's new training alliances, the Evangeline/Rapides Skills Network and the Workforce Competitive Skills Network.

"In a global marketplace, companies can't make it alone; they've got to have each other to be able to

achieve the economies of scale that come from working together." With the Foundation's involvement, serving as a catalyst for creating these training alliances, "you have truly created an advantage in Central Louisiana," he added.

As companies share training resources and extend their marketplace capabilities, collaboration becomes a competitiveness tool. It allows companies to do together what is often difficult or impossible to do alone.

"I have no doubt that these groups are going to continue to operate after the grant funding is exhausted. There's too much of a foundation that has been established for working together. That's the ultimate goal," added Dodd.

GRANT UPDATE:

The Rapides Foundation Grants from January-March 2001

Arna Bontemps African American Museum and Cultural Arts Center

Development of strategic plan and full-time professional staff.

\$202,500 3 yrs

Central Louisiana Area Health Education Center

Implementation of a comprehensive pre and post-natal continuum of care for at-risk mothers in Concordia Parish.

399,600 4 yrs

Central Louisiana Area Health Education Center

Implementation of Phase II of an assessment to provide statistically valid information of barriers in obtaining healthcare in four Cenla parishes.

222,829 2 yrs

Charles F. Smith Community Development Corporation

Technical assistance funding to develop knowledge on effective pregnancy prevention programs.

10,000 1 yr

The Extra Mile Region IV

Collaborative effort with Faith House to stabilize services for Evangeline Parish women who are victims of sexual assault and domestic violence.

196,000 3 yrs

The Health Enrichment Network

Development and implementation of a volunteer-based medical transportation network involving churches in Allen Parish.

112,050 2 yrs

Prevent Child Abuse Louisiana

Expansion of current hospital and home-visiting program for new mothers to include Huey P. Long Medical Center.

135,281 1.5 yrs

Walk by Faith

Technical assistance and contingent implementation funding to develop support services to welfare-to-work clients in Rapides Parish.

10,000 1 yr

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