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Work force

## Nonprofit helps workers improve skills and pay

By William Hamilton  
PBN Staff Writer

As pizza makers go, Chet Rodgers is paid pretty well. That's not to say he's making a lot of money.

The 24-year-old Cranston resident earns about \$10 an hour at the Whole Foods in Garden City, making more for the overtime hours he puts in every week. But often his thoughts turn to his future.

"I can't imagine being 50 years old and still making pizza," he said recently.

Building cabinets and doing finish carpentry – that's a line of work he could see himself in for the long term. "Someone is going to be looking at what I made for the rest of their life," Rodgers said. "That would motivate me for perfection."

A pilot work force development program that has the extensive cooperation of the state's building trades union is helping Rodgers reach his goal.

Since June about 50 people, mostly poor Providence residents, have participated in the nonprofit Building Futures program that prepares them for coveted trade-union apprenticeships. The program evaluates prospective workers and crafts plans to help them hurdle obstacles. For instance, Building Futures might help candidates obtaining their GED or find them a slot in English-as-a-Second-Language classes.

Building Futures, headquartered on Delaine Street in the Olneyville section of Providence, may be a pilot program, but director Andrew Cortes is sure it's here to stay. That's why 16 trades unions and the Rhode Island chapter of the Associated General Contractors have pledged to support the program, which guarantees apprenticeship slots.

An apprenticeship is the first step to a higher-paying construction job – it's a time to learn the ins and outs of a trade while getting paid. Cortes said apprenticeships can last from three to five years, depending on the trade.

And, says Cortes, "we swear by the quality of people in this program."

So far, six people have been placed in apprenticeships for carpenters, electricians, painters and insulators. The goal is to place 30 in the first 12 months.

Building Futures – a joint effort of nonprofits groups The Providence Plan, Build RI and YouthBuild Rhode Island – has garnered \$485,000 in grants, including \$125,000 from the United Way of Rhode Island's Skill Up Rhode Island program and \$150,000 from the Governor's Workforce Board.

An invitation to participate doesn't guarantee an apprenticeship. A mandatory orientation provides an honest assessment of the construction industry, and Cortes said many realize quickly it's not for them. "We don't kid anybody, better to find now it's not for you," he said. "We're not looking to set people up to fail."

Others drop out at the evaluation stage, where Building Future staff members identify potential barriers to employment – maybe a revoked driver's license, lack of a diploma or the need for child care.

Candidates also participate in a construction aptitude test, where they volunteer for 40 hours at the Southside Community Land Trust farm in Cranston. They're assessed for their reliability and their work ethic.

After that, there is career counseling and lessons on health and safety laws, financial literacy and rights on the job. Before entering the apprenticeship, participants must overcome the barriers to employment identified by the staff. That can take a few weeks, a few months, or longer.

Rodgers, who is already a high school graduate, is about halfway to paying off his speeding tickets and is already looking to buy a car. He also looks forward to the higher wages of the trade unions. He's heard it is \$13 an hour for an apprentice in the carpenters union, \$27 an hour or more for rank-and-file members.

"I could never figure out what I could do for a living that I'd wake up every morning and actually enjoy," Rodgers said. "But I can see myself doing that." •

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Andrew Cortes, director of Building Futures, prepares future workers for apprenticeships in the construction field.

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