

New year, New gear

Advanced manufacturing training program fine tuning for 2nd year

By CHRIS SHORES Recorder Staff – January 3, 2014

GREENFIELD — Following a year that saw nearly \$800,000 pour into Franklin County to jumpstart the area's advanced machining industry, officials will dedicate 2014 to fine-tuning the "Middle Skills Academy" and to ensuring that companies receive the newly qualified machinists they were promised.

Over the course of the coming year, about 30 people will take part in the Middle Skills Manufacturing Initiative — an intensive 11-week adult training program that teaches computer-aided manufacturing and prepares people to work at a local company.

Local employers, who donated \$215,000 in 2013 to help pay for new metal working machines at Franklin County Technical School, are desperate to bring in new labor as quickly as possible. And with only three more grant-funded training programs left to go, organizers are under pressure to make sure they fill available slots with the best candidates.

Five people in this fall's first class have found jobs, said Michael Baines, who manages the project for the Franklin Hampshire Career Center.

He's actively working to find local jobs for eight other graduates. One person has decided to enter the police academy and another is starting his own contracting business, he said.

Either 14 or 15 students will start the next round of training on Jan. 21. Organizers said that applicants this time around had to go through a tougher process than their predecessors, which involved employer interviews and online workshops.

Baines said that 48 applicants were whittled down to 14 finalists and seven runner-ups with help from a "speed interviewing" session with local companies.

Employers chatted briefly with different candidates and then told organizers if they thought each applicant was a good fit for the program and if they'd consider hiring that individual.

That kind of feedback is crucial, said Baines. Companies want assurance that the people going through the intensive 220-hour training are invested in pursuing a career in the field and will be qualified for immediate hire upon graduation.

Some people who did not make the cut for the inaugural round of training sessions were given free subscriptions, paid for by a Greenfield Community College grant, to free online "Tooling U" manufacturing and engineering tutorials. It helped show the organizers the people who were committed to, and qualified for, advanced manufacturing work.

Baines said resume workshops didn't begin until about halfway through this fall's training sessions.

He and other organizers are already working now with this next cohort of students on job preparation to give them a head start on finding work after the program's completion.

Organizers found that students needed more in-classroom support during the training sessions. They plan to bring in more employer instructors, as well as graduates of the past program, to help the students on their projects.

The Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment Board also secured a new \$10,000 grant for the project from MassDevelopment, the state's finance and development agency. It will allow organizers to advertise for the adult training workshops and the Tech School's high school program.

The next group of students

The group of students who will begin training in late January includes at least four women. The inaugural class of students consisted of 15 men.

The 14 finalists include 11 from Franklin County, said Baines. The group ranges in age from 19 to 56, with nine of the students 40 or younger. One additional student may be added to the group before the Jan. 21 session, he said.

They'll start their training about one year after Greenfield business owner Steven Capshaw announced plans to raise \$500,000 to buy new advanced manufacturing machines for Franklin County Technical School.

His efforts triggered a chain reaction that ultimately brought over \$800,000 to Franklin County from public and private sources.

The Tech School's machine shop was completely refurbished and Greenfield Community College developed an advanced manufacturing curriculum targeted at local unemployed and underemployed workers who could also use the milling machines to train on.

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