

Building a Brighter Future with Green Jobs

Vermont was facing a workforce and demographic crisis before the pandemic, and now, it's even more urgent that we take action to reverse these trends and get Vermonters into the good paying jobs that need filled. Last month, I dedicated the first panel discussion of my 2022 "Seat at the Table" virtual meeting series to the evolving workforce needs within Vermont as the state responds to climate change and works to meet the goals of the Vermont Climate Action Plan. The plan makes wide-reaching recommendations for how Vermont can reduce greenhouse gas emissions to comply with the Global Warming Solutions Act and minimize climate change's impact on the state. We can meet these goals by prioritizing a robust variety of equitable and affordable workforce training opportunities.

Over the course of the pandemic 28,000 Vermonters have left the workforce. At the same time, businesses, their employees, and Vermont as a state must continue to evolve as we respond to climate change and work to meet the goals of the Vermont Climate Action Plan. State law requires Vermont reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 26% below 2005 levels by 2025 and to 40% below 1990 levels by 2030. To achieve those goals, modeling suggests Vermont must weatherize at least 90,000 additional homes, install 112,000 additional heat pumps, add over 150,000 additional electric vehicles to the road, and expand programs that help low- and moderate-income Vermonters access these things. Providing renewable energy and energy efficiency job training opportunities for those looking to enter the workforce or make a career change will help Vermonters secure work in the fields necessary to combat climate change and meet our mitigation goals.

Solar installation is one of the five fastest growing careers in the country. Last month at my "Seat at the Table" panel discussion, Chad Farrell from Encore Renewable said, "To best capitalize on the energy transition, Vermont will need to rapidly expand our educational, vocational and transitional training capacities to ensure that the state is most well equipped to realize the economic development and job creation benefits associated with the energy transition while also combating the worst effects of climate change for our state."

I couldn't agree more.

The good news is there are numerous Vermont organizations already leading the way in providing affordable renewable energy and energy efficiency job training opportunities, and many of the fastest growing career opportunities in the clean energy sector are high-paying, union jobs that we can recruit and train workers for right here at home.

Vermont Technical College serves over 3,200 Vermonters each year and works with hundreds of employers across industry sectors with a mission to provide an affordable career-focused technical and professional education. A VTC education can prepare Vermonters to become HVAC/R Technicians and capable of helping the state meet the growing demand for heat pump installation. Vermont has one of the highest high school graduation rates in the country, yet 41% of our new graduates don't go on to any additional training. That may be because community college in Vermont is some of the most expensive in the nation. We need to change that. We can encourage Vermonters to seek advanced training by offering loan forgiveness for vital

professions on the condition of staying and working in Vermont. ReSOURCE, a non-profit, provides work training programs that offer opportunities for adults and youth who have barriers to employment to sharpen their job skills and prepare to enter a variety of fields, including entry level job readiness in carpentry, construction, and weatherization. Vermont Works for Women is constantly working to improve gender equity practices and encourage women and gender non-conforming individuals to enroll in non-traditional career training programs like the Vermont Career and Technical Education Centers' programs.

“Renewable energy is a high opportunity career field, but employers in the renewable energy and related sectors struggle to attract and retain female workers. Women comprise only 3% of construction workers and 4% of installation, maintenance, and repair workers,” Executive Director of Vermont Works for Women Rhoni Basden shared last month at my “Seat at the Table” panel discussion “VWW is working to close that gap – and help Vermont meet its climate workforce needs – through training programs for women that impart both hard skills and the confidence to succeed in male-dominated workplaces, while also supporting employers who build a culture of respect and support for current and future female employees.”

We must make sure these kinds of programs, non-profits, and institutions, along with our career and technical education centers, like River Bend Career and Technical Center in Bradford near my hometown of Newbury, have the resources required for Vermont to develop the workforce needed to meet its climate mitigation goals. February is CTE month, so let’s not forget that our public schools are already working to give kids the critical professional skills they need to get started in the trades the day they graduate. There are ways to help these programs thrive. We can encourage Vermonters to seek advanced training by offering loan forgiveness for vital professions on the condition of staying and working in Vermont. And we can also encourage Vermont employers to invest in their workers by creating tax incentives for businesses that provide student loan repayment benefits.

Whether it’s electricians and plumbers, or electric car technicians and solar installers, we know investing in a robust variety of equitable and affordable job training opportunities can get Vermonters employed in the sectors needed to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. Investing in a 21st century workforce will help us build a brighter future for Vermont, one where we can count on sustainable food systems, resilient infrastructure, and a growing local economy. A future where every Vermont family, business, and community can thrive.