

Special section: Employment Outlook 2008

A silver lining in green-collar jobs

Many fields are affected by push to reduce waste, preserve the environment and cut down on greenhouse emissions

By Barbara Rose | Tribune staff reporter
January 6, 2008

This story contains corrected material, published Jan. 8, 2008.

When crews tore down a building to make way for a new public safety complex in Elk Grove Village, Jerry Giudice made sure all the broken concrete, mangled steel and other reusable materials got recycled.

"Almost none of it went to a landfill," he says.

Hiring a firm to recycle rubble was a new experience for the veteran project superintendent, who is overseeing his first green building project. The three-story complex is aiming for a prized silver certification under a national rating system to promote environmentally friendly buildings.

Giudice's job is one of many that are changing in response to green initiatives by government, schools and businesses. Opportunities extend well beyond construction to consulting, program design and administration.

MBA programs are scrambling to integrate sustainable business practices into their curricula to meet a growing demand for managers and professionals who understand environmental issues and can plan long term. Community colleges are adding technical courses and certifications for energy efficient systems.

Community advocates are pushing for "green-collar jobs" programs to ensure that the billions targeted for environmental initiatives create opportunities in neighborhoods that need them most.

In Oakland, Calif., for instance, a union-supported program teaches young people how to install solar panels and weatherize buildings. The hope is they will progress to become solar industry managers, owners and inventors. Green for All, an affiliate of Oakland-based Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, aims to secure job training in the emerging green market for workers in cities such as Detroit, Baltimore and New Orleans.

In Chicago, where a task force convened by Mayor Richard Daley is working on a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent below 1990 levels by 2020, one of many proposals includes incentives to induce homeowners to spend \$1.65 billion through 2010 to reduce energy consumption. The measure has the potential to employ thousands as inspectors and energy auditors, manufacturing workers and installers of green roofs, energy-efficient windows and appliances.

"There is a wonderful opportunity for eco-justice," said **Kindy Kruller**, cofounder of the **Chicagoland Green Collar Jobs Initiative**, which includes labor representatives, educators, community, business and trade organizations. The group started meeting in July.

In promoting solar energy, for instance, "You can hire day laborers and have the panels made in

Mexico, or you can make them in the community and have them installed in the community. Maybe there's room for developing new models," said Kruller.

In the corporate world, one of the most visible green initiatives is Wal-Mart's effort to get suppliers to adopt practices such as recycling and reducing packaging. In its own operations, Wal-Mart aims to reduce the energy needs in its stores by 20 percent by 2009.

Sami Grover, sustainability director at a North Carolina-based strategy and design firm, the Change, predicts every company will hire a manager to oversee sustainability.

"I would argue if they're doing their job well they need to take a whole systems approach and assess the company's positive and negative impacts on the environment and make changes" to lessen the latter, he said. "It doesn't mean carrying on as usual while donating millions to plant trees."

As more businesses go green, a growing cadre of professional services firms is springing up to serve them.

Helen Kessler, an expert in sustainable design, energy efficiency and renewable energy, started her Chicago-based consulting firm in 2003. An architect with an MBA, she guides managers like Giudice through the U.S. Green Building Council's certification process.

Northeastern Illinois is a hub of green building activity, thanks largely to government incentives such as Chicago's fast-track permit process for green projects and requirements by a number of local governments that publicly financed buildings be rated silver or better.

Chicago, with about 40 green-certified buildings, had more projects certified or in the pipeline than any city in the country in November, said Doug Widener, executive director of the Green Building Council's Chicago chapter.

Kessler sees the results in her busy practice.

"It used to be it was like pulling teeth to convince people to do anything," she said. Now with the rating program, "people understand they could market their building as distinctive. It lowers operating costs. The buildings smell good. They have good natural lighting and air systems."

Giudice's interest in green building led him to enroll last year in a new program at City Colleges of Chicago's Wilbur Wright College. He was among 14 people who graduated last month from the 6-course, 21-credit hour program with occupational certificates in Building Energy Technologies. The program will be offered again starting Jan. 14.

Program manager David Inman said Wright realized that while other city colleges offered specialized training for technicians in energy efficient systems such as heating and cooling, none offered an overview.

The timing was right for Giudice, who works for Elgin-based MTI Construction (this sentence as published has been corrected in this text).

"The industry's going to be looking for project superintendents with green experience," he said. "They want to see people with the certifications, the schooling behind them. I see this to be the wave of the future."

berose@tribune.com