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## Training for more

Limitless possibilities in LEED Council's industrial skills course

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Editor

Raeland Alexander found himself in Springfield on Nov. 20, bending the ears of state legislators. He was arguing in support of House Bill 3889, which would restore \$3.8 million in state funding for job training and education programs.

It was a long way from the Logan Correctional Center, where Alexander was released on parole in June.

"Not by a long shot," Alexander said the day after he returned from Springfield-and the day that House Bill 3889 passed-when asked whether he ever envisioned himself as a Springfield lobbyist.

Alexander was in Springfield with the Local Employment and Economic Development Council, a Goose Island-based nonprofit community development corporation. The LEED Council works with manufacturers in the North River Industrial Corridor to promote sustainable development practices and strengthen the local workforce.



Alexander is a charter member of a new program called "LEEDers for Change," which trains volunteers to become community organizers. Advocating for House Bill 3889 was the first assignment, and it wasn't some hypothetical training exercise.

A state grant provides about 57 percent of the funding for the LEED Council's industrial skills training course, which is how Alexander got his start with the organization. But Gov. Rod Blagojevich's current budget cuts funding in half for the Job Training and Economic Development Program, which is the source of the LEED Council's grant.

House Bill 3889 would replenish the Job Training and Economic Development Program, along with the Equal Opportunity Grants Program, to its previous funding levels. It will be considered by the Illinois Senate as early as January.

Alexander delivered a well-honed pitch to State Rep. John Fritchey, who already supported HB 3889. But Gonwa said it was still important to speak directly with supporters, if only so they are motivated to persuade colleagues.

Alexander's visit to Springfield coincided with his completion of the 11-week industrial skills training course, in which 13 students in two classes constructed a one-room, 12-by-8-foot house with interior drywall and pitched roof. They also installed a toilet, sink and light bulbs.

Alexander said it was enlightening to build the house "brick by brick, pipe by pipe, wire by wire."

"You had the opportunity to be more than just a laborer," Alexander said.

Deconstructing the freshly-built house is one of the first tasks of the next class, and LEED is able to save money by reusing material.

Margie Gonwa, the LEED Council's director of workforce development, said the class is different from an apprenticeship program that teaches specialized skills. Instead, it instills a broad palette of skills-focusing on electrical, plumbing and carpentry skills-which are in demand across the manufacturing sector.

"When you go into a factory, there's plumbing work related to industrial machinery, there's electrical work, there's carpentry," Gonwa said.

The point, Gonwa said, is to increase employability before students decide if they want to specialize in any one area.

"You can't count on the employer to provide on the job training these days," Gonwa said. "In this period of belt tightening, the unskilled employees will be let go first."

The program trains about 50 people a year, and Gonwa estimated that 40 to 50 percent are ex-offenders. Most haven't finished their education and have spotty job histories.

The training course paid off for 22-year-old Bronzeville resident Keyth Morrow before he even completed it. After "two long, hard years" of unemployment, Morrow landed a position at a South Side grocery store as a "chitlin clerk"-cleaning, stocking and bagging the pork delicacies for \$8 an hour.

"I would just go to job fairs and fill out applications, but never hear back until I went to LEED Council," Morrow said.

Morrow said he never finished high school and was last employed at a dollar store in 2006, although he has done some carpet installation and removal with a cousin.

"I was just one of those kids in school," Morrow said. "If it wasn't interesting, I didn't stay."

Now Morrow said he plans to get his GED in January and apply for an apprenticeship position with the electrical worker's union.

Morrow and Alexander celebrated their completion of the course at the LEED Council on Nov. 21 at a graduation ceremony. Alexander was fresh from his trip to Springfield, and urged his colleagues to consider the LEEDers for Change program.

Alexander was recommended for the leadership program by his industrial skills teacher, who noticed Alexander's gift for communication and commitment to the course. After the ceremony, Alexander said that his experience in Springfield was especially gratifying because of its direct impact on the LEED Council.

"These people gave me the opportunity to do something when they were on their last legs," Alexander said. "If I can use my voice to help them, I'll scream as loud as I can."

*Staff reporter Micah Maidenberg contributed reporting.*

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