

Job Training. Nov. 14, 2009

Poor Communities as Well as Environment Can Benefit From Money for Green Jobs

The infusion of government money for green jobs initiatives has the potential to foster economic stability in disadvantaged communities as well as environmental conservation, speakers said Nov. 13 at a conference sponsored by the National Network of Sector Partners.

In a session titled, "Green Strategies for Increasing Access to Good Jobs for Low-Income Communities of Color," panelists discussed strategies for ensuring that minority workers get hired for the new jobs expected to be created in the emerging green economy.

"The green opportunity is real, but it's not going to land in your laps," Joel Rogers, a University of Wisconsin law professor who is affiliated with the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, told the audience. To help the disadvantaged, he urged them to align with labor groups and "make connections" in the metropolitan areas where most poor people live.

Door-to-Door Outreach.

Darlene Lombos, of Community Labor United, a coalition of community and labor organizations in Boston, estimated that 11 long-term jobs are created for every \$1 million invested in energy efficiency.

She described a recent success achieved by the Green Justice Coalition, which Community Labor United formed by joining forces with environmental groups. Green Justice influenced several provisions in the \$1.4 billion plan that the Massachusetts legislature adopted Oct. 27 to cut greenhouse gas emissions, Lombos said.

For example, the plan will establish a loan program under which a homeowner can make his house energy-efficient and then repay the loan over time with the money saved on energy bills. Lombos said the coalition realized that poor homeowners could not afford to participate under the traditional model, in which a homeowner pays in advance for weatherization and then receives a partial rebate a few months later.

Green Justice also is trying to ensure that local residents get jobs performing the weatherization. Observing that many weatherization companies were small operations that employed a skeleton crew to work on a few houses at a time, Lombos said, the coalition proposed that the houses in an area be "bundled" into a larger contract so contractors would have to hire local residents to help perform the work.

The coalition also provided door-to-door outreach in communities whose residents are not likely to visit websites or call telephone hotlines to obtain information on weatherization programs, Lombos explained.

'A Triple Win.'

Jason Walsh, national policy director of Green For All, defined green jobs as "career-track jobs that preserve or enhance environmental quality." He said "investment in clean energy" creates almost three times as many jobs as energy based on fossil fuels. An increase in construction jobs "presents an enormous opportunity for low-income workers," he said, because construction jobs do not require a college degree and cannot be off-shored. Walsh noted, however, that construction wages have been decreasing and that few women and African Americans work in construction.

"Without grassroots intervention, the green economy would pass us by," according to a Green Justice Coalition brochure distributed at the conference, because most poor homeowners "couldn't afford the up-front costs" to make their home energy-efficient and "they certainly wouldn't get hired to do the retrofit work," even though low-income communities are likely to have "the draftiest, oldest, and least

energy-efficient homes." The brochure says pilot programs being negotiated with Massachusetts's two largest utility companies are "a triple win" because they "can roll back the economic crisis, the opportunity crisis, and the climate crisis."

NNSP is an initiative of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, a national research, consulting and legal organization based in Oakland, Calif.

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