

PHCC OF TENNESSEE BRINGS ENHANCED TRAINING TO STUDENTS

BY SHERYL S. JACKSON

An ongoing challenge for all plumbing, heating and cooling contractors is filling their workforce with qualified, well-trained employees who can ensure customer satisfaction and a successful business.

In Tennessee, contractors have been able to rely on the Knoxville PHCC Apprentice Training Program to develop skilled trade workers since 1988. This year, there are 174 students in the four-year program that offers three disciplines: plumbing, HVAC and sheet metal. Students attend class one Monday each week between September and May along with one additional Thursday per month to reach 160 hours of class time. They also must log 2,000 hours of on-the-job training.

Although the ultimate benefit of the program is an opportunity for a valuable career for students and the addition of well-trained employees to the workforce for employers, the brick-and-mortar school adds some flair to the program.

“Graduation from the program is an important accomplishment, so at the end of the four-year program we hold a convocation ceremony and have students come up on a stage to receive their certificate,” says Beth Killen, executive director of PHCC of Tennessee.

Family members, guests and other students in the program attend the ceremony, which includes awards for apprentice of the year as well as perfect attendance.

“The first year we presented the perfect attendance award, about 14 graduates received the recognition and a small gift such as a tape measure,” says Killen. “The following year, over 60 students achieved perfect attendance, and when I asked them why the number increased, one student explained that he wanted the gift!”

In addition to the gifts that accompany the special recognitions, all graduates receive a toolbox filled with tools donated by sponsors.

While the program is successful, the staff is always looking for ways to improve graduation rates, says Killen. “We noticed that some of our



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~ *Beth Killen*

students struggled with the math, so this past year we established a two-week construction math program in the summer to strengthen their skills,” she explains.

A comprehensive math test given by the employer to potential apprentices helps identify people who might need the extra help prior to the beginning of their program.

“We now also spend the first 15 minutes of all 12 classes working on math skills,” Killen adds.

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After evaluating the possibility of opening another school to offer the program in other parts of the state, the association determined that the expense of renting space and hiring an administrator and instructors was cost-prohibitive.

“An online course that follows the same NCCER curriculum as the Knoxville program will allow us to offer the program without hiring additional staff,” explains Killen. “The

same person who provides the reports to the Department of Labor can handle the responsibility for online students, and we will have one teacher in each discipline be available from 6 to 8 p.m. one night per week to talk with or respond to emails from students with questions.”

Members throughout the state are excited about the online program that will begin in fall 2019, says Killen. To make sure the program is serving those who can’t easily travel to Knoxville, the online course is not available to anyone who works or lives within 60 miles of Knoxville, she says.

What about graduation from the online course? “We will look for a location that is centrally located to the majority of students to hold a graduation ceremony so they can celebrate their achievement,” says Killen. ●

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