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Lee County companies bolster their ability to withstand recession

Use Employed Worker Training Program money

BY LAURA RUANE

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Federal dollars for worker training aren't limited to people without jobs or with very low incomes.

Fort Myers-based Storm Smart Industries is tapping a \$71,500 grant for a two-pronged drive to streamline its manufacturing processes and update employee skills.

The federal dollars come from the Employed Worker Training Program, an avenue of assistance that's been around for several decades, said Joe Paterno. He's executive director of Southwest Florida Workforce Development Board Inc., which is overseeing the Storm Smart grant.

The program's ultimate goal is to help workers keep their jobs by gaining skills that enhance their value to their employers, and to help companies become more competitive.

It should be "quality, high-skilled training that will make a difference," said Jim Wall, business development director with the board. The regional workforce board also serves Hendry and Glades counties.

Wall listed priorities for participation, including:

- Employers must provide a 50 percent match for training costs. This can include in-kind contributions, such as paying employees while they are taking the training.
- The training must result in some kind of national, U.S. Department of Education- or industry-recognized credential or certification.

Grant money is given as a reimbursement after the business submits a certificate of completion and paid invoices.

The Workforce Board set aside just more than \$1 million this fiscal year for occupational training, including the Employed Worker Training under way at Storm Smart.

More than 30 firms have expressed interest in employed worker training grants, said Curt Bradbury, another business development manager at the Workforce Board. Of those, about half have contracts for grants and dates set for training.

Bradbury expects most of the remaining businesses to complete their grant applications.

Storm Smart considered three or four options before choosing the Manufacturing Extension Partnership's Time Wise program for its first round of training.

"We're introducing new products, and we're approaching our busiest time of the year," said Brian Rist, Storm Smart president and CEO, referring to the June 1 start of hurricane season.

"The quicker we can deliver - at no sacrifice to quality - the more referrals we can get, and the more jobs we can do," Rist said.

On Tuesday, workers at Storm Smart were plunged into clock assembly - a manufacturing task for which all were novices. Through alternating time in classroom instruction and sometimes-maniac 15-minute periods of clock-making, they learned the concepts of lean manufacturing, which focuses on eliminating waste of time and materials, to increase productivity and profits.

Separately, workers also will get training specific to two new company products: hurricane shutters operated by a solar-powered motor; and window and door shades to block out the sun.

Storm Smart and others seeking grants for employed worker training are benefiting indirectly from the White House's economic stimulus program.

Economic stimulus money is being used to train adults who have lost jobs; workers who need classroom training; and summer job and career-exploration programs for young people from financially challenged homes. Those people are the core clients of the Workforce Board.

The influx of about \$8 million in stimulus funds into the region, however, "allowed us to free up some dollars to work with more businesses," Paterno said.

Additional Facts

Business participation

More than 30 firms throughout the region have applied for Employed Worker Training grants. Here are their names, status of application, and number of workers affected:

Advanced Software
Products Group
approved 2
Airflyte Electronics approved 52
Allyn International
Services
approved 27
CB Richard Ellis
pending NA
Charlotte Regional
Hospital
pending NA
Collier County Utilities approved 112
Dial-A-Nurse
approved 75
East County Water
Control
pending NA
Fawcett Memorial
Hospital
pending NA
Farmer's Market
Restaurant
pending NA
FRACA Inc
approved 50
Gora McGahey

pending 5
Harvard-Jolly
Architecture approved 3
HMC Consulting
pending NA
HSA Engineering
approved 4
Investors Security Trust approved 12
International Brotherhood of Electrical
Workers
approved 77
KSI Inc.
approved 3
Lee Memorial Health System
approved 324
Mitchell-Stark
Construction approved 70
Naples Community
Hospital approved 341
Page Mechanical Group approved 15
Pall Corp.
pending 305
Peace River Hospital pending NA
Physicians Regional
Hospital
pending NA
Prism Microwave
approved 4
Saminco Inc.
pending NA
Shaw Development pending NA
Southern Gardens Citrus approved 110
Storm Smart Industries approved 49
Suncoast Aluminum
Furniture
pending NA
Sunshine Ace Hardware pending NA
Tri-Town Construction approved 14
Total number of workers:
1,768
— Source: Southwest Florida Workforce Development Board