

A photograph showing several construction workers in safety gear (hard hats, high-visibility vests) working on a construction site. They are positioned around a wooden railing, possibly on a bridge or elevated roadway. The background shows a hilly area with some buildings and trees.

Highway Construction Workforce Partnership Strategic Workforce Development

Source: Ivette Carolina Agudelo-Lopez + Yerba Buena Engineering & Construction Inc.

Texas's ConnectU2Jobs Program Changes Lives through Community Partnerships

Keeping a constant flow of skilled individuals ready to enter the highway construction workforce is critical to maintaining safe roadways in Texas. To help meet that need and offer lasting career potential to individuals who typically may not be provided such options, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) established its ConnectU2Jobs program. The Highway Construction Workforce Partnership (HCWP) includes TxDOT, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), Texas Workforce Commission, Dallas College, Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas, Regional Black Contractors Association, Regional Hispanic Contractors Association, Lone Star Justice Alliance, and Associated General Contractors of Texas.

Launching a Life-Changing Program

The ConnectU2Jobs program prepares and trains justice-involved young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 for careers in the heavy highway construction industry. Lone Star Justice Alliance Chief Mission Officer Rachel Hampton says working with this group presents a unique opportunity to transform lives.

“We’re really passionate about getting our 18- to 24-year-olds set up to earn a wage that their families can thrive on moving forward,” says Hampton. “Plus, we’re creating solutions that increase public safety because these individuals never have to go back to the justice system.”

The inaugural class began in September 2021 and was made up of 10 participants who received classroom instruction and hands-on training throughout the 10-week pilot. The program results in certifications that include National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) Level 1 Core Construction, NCCER Heavy Equipment Operator, Forklift Operator, and Occupational Safety and Health Administration 10 Certification.

According to Kim Hunziker, a TxDOT small business workforce development analyst, education played a major part in program success, even before the pilot ever launched. He says it is important for partners, like prospective employers and educational institutions that could outline career pathways, to know some of the obstacles participants might face throughout the program.

“The people who come into the justice system might be in a crisis mode,” says Hunziker. “Getting the supportive services in place and getting them to a point where they’re not in crisis mode before they get into a training program helps increase their success.”

To help prepare participants for the training curriculum, HCWP created an eligibility checklist and performed reading comprehension assessments. It also secured paid internships with prospective employers to help financially support participants throughout the program.

“If you are human, you have either made a big mistake, or you have failed at something. The key to every human being able to survive that kind of event is to be able to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and have somebody give them a break or an opportunity that allows them to get back on a forward positive path.”

BEVERLY LONGFELLOW
TxDOT

Building and Supporting Lasting Careers

In addition to setting up support structures before the ConnectU2Jobs program launched, participants regularly met with a transition coach who helped identify individual needs throughout the training. Because of information learned in those meetings, HCWP added support like childcare services and guest speakers who could offer financial planning advice for participants.

“It’s important that you have a transition coach who can connect in an authentic way to the participants,” says Hunziker. “So they feel comfortable to share just about anything, any sort of crisis needs that they have.”

Four ConnectU2Jobs program participants were hired immediately, and all graduates continue to receive support from a transition coach for 180 days after graduation. According to Beverly Longfellow, a TxDOT contract specialist, this helps participants pursue advanced career pathways within the transportation industry. “If one of our participants wants to become a supervisor or a construction management supervisor, they can go on a different path and continue upskilling themselves so that they don’t have to stay in the entry-level position forever,” says Longfellow.



Source: ConnectU2Jobs

“I’m so thankful FHWA took a chance on seeing the value this innovative program could bring. It’s a true team effort, but the return on investment is so worth it.”

RACHEL HAMPTON
Lone Star
Justice Alliance

Expanding Outreach to Foster Program Growth

The ConnectU2Jobs pilot identified several challenges that partners are working to address while recruiting future cohorts. Program partners emphasize the importance of preparing participants for the rigorous curriculum while helping employers understand specific needs that justice-involved young adults may have upon entering the workforce.

“From training to employment, you have to have a lot of flexibility to help these participants be successful in their transition,” says Longfellow. “You have to buy into their unique needs, even allowing them a certain percentage of time off to attend court hearings. I don’t think the end outcome would have been as successful if we hadn’t done that at the very beginning.”

According to Longfellow, it is equally important to highlight all benefits to potential applicants who may be unaware of how the program can change their lives. “Judges can allow participants to go through the program and expunge their charges if they are successful,” says Longfellow. “That crime may never go on that person’s record. It is a big motivator.”



U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration

RoadsToYourFuture

Learn more: To get information about how you can address highway construction workforce shortages in your region and support justice-involved young adults with an interest in the industry, contact Kim Hunziker, Texas Department of Transportation, at kim.hunziker@txdot.gov; Rachel Hampton, Lone Star Justice Alliance, at rhampton@lsja.org; or Clark Martin, HCWP program manager, at clark.martin@dot.gov.