

NYC WORKFORCE WEEKLY

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While entry-level and high-skills positions draw attention, middle-skill flourishes. Skills2Compete, a new bi-partisan campaign, will pressure presidential candidates and policy makers to focus on jobs that require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree.



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Women, Ex-Offenders Find Promising Career Routes Red Hook On the Road Puts the Unemployed In Drivers' Seats

A class of 23 neatly but casually dressed adults as diverse as New York City sits rapt in a store-front classroom as an instructor at the blackboard calculates the exact location of a Manhattan address. The students are learning not just how to pinpoint a building, but how to find a future for themselves as drivers of school buses, coaches and trucks.

Red Hook on the Road, a Brooklyn Workforce Innovations initiative, offers month-long commercial driving courses to those who are unemployed or on public assistance and can meet some stringent conditions. Inaugurated in 1995 to serve both the businesses of then-struggling Red Hook and its unemployed residents living in local housing projects, it trained about 35 people the first year, then scaled up to 100 throughout Brooklyn and now graduates 275 per year citywide at its Park Slope offices at 151 Fifth Avenue.

"Most of the folks we train have barriers," says Julio Perez, Program Director. "They are single women, chronically under-employed, have low literacy or a poor education. They are homeless and doubling up with family. We can remove the barriers to employment and show it can be done."

A quarter of its graduates are ex-offenders and another quarter are women to whom breaking into a traditionally male field will mean more income. The average age of the graduates is 40.

Perez says, "We can take ex-offenders and give them a commercial license and in a few weeks they have a job. They can't be school bus drivers because they have a record, but we train them to drive a stick shift truck, which gives them an

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edge. They can earn a higher starting wage than the general population because they can drive a truck." While school bus drivers begin at \$11 per hour, truck drivers start at \$18.

Red Hook on the Road places some 95 percent of its graduates, according to Perez. Women do better than men, and not because they are willing to read maps. "Women listen better," he explains. "Guys get cocky and confident after two days in class, but women get better each day and they hit their stride about the time of the road test."

Job retention rate is slightly more than 90 percent for three years. "That is thanks to good pay, raises and benefits, which are critical to those with kids," Perez says. The Robin Hood Foundation, a major funder along with The Tiger Foundation, began requiring retention rates, which is why Red Hook on the Road maintains the records. "Graduates come back with pay stubs every three months," Perez says. "At the end of the first year most show they have gotten a raise."

To get into the program, students must be 21 or over, and have had a valid New York State drivers license for at least two years. They must pass a drug test and be legally eligible to work with the U.S. and able to attend class in Park Slope weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. for a month. They must have no more than 2 points or one suspension or conviction on their driver's license abstract and no D.U.I s or D.W.I s.

Participants' skepticism is great at first. "They don't believe it's free. They think we must be fly-by-night," says

Perez. "We give them a \$2500 training for free and find them a decent job. They want to know the catch. They are New Yorkers – you can't blame them."

Each candidate is interviewed by two of seven Red Hook on the Road staff members and is given a drug test. "Not everyone makes it in," Perez admits.

Prospective students' greatest hurdle is the written test for the B-P Driving Permit for bus and commercial drivers. "Many have low literacy, so we give them a two-day course, which includes a break-down of the manual. We teach them about air brakes, dealing with passengers, and other general knowledge. Then we test them here before they go to the Department of Motor Vehicles for their test," Perez says. One student notes, "If they had not helped us study for the test, I would never have gotten my permit."

Once permits are in hand, students begin week one which consists of map reading, employer visits and job readiness counseling on matters like the importance of benefits. They also take a one-day defensive driving course, which reduces potential employers' insurance rates. Each student also undergoes mock job interviews in front of classmates who judge not just responses but posture, eye contact and dress. Perez describes it this way: "Our mock interviews put them through the ringer." In addition, participants can access Brooklyn Workforce Innovations programs that tell them about earned income benefits, and credit reports and other financial services.

"The mock interviews are tough, but you learn so much," says student Cynthia Berrios who says she was drawn to the program because she loves the highway. "Everyone who works here has made us feel we will succeed and our class feels like a family already after the first week."

In weeks two and three, students have 20 hours of instruction behind the wheel. Red Hook on the Road has four vendors teaching students how to drive school buses, coaches or stick shift trucks. Teams of four students share a vehicle and take turns driving and observing. Week four is devoted to the road test, which 80 per cent pass on their first try. The others are rescheduled and get additional practice time.

Most will opt to be school bus drivers because the schedule works best for bread-winners, especially single moms, and can lead to working for the Metropolitan Transit Authority. Some will drive coaches and others will drive trucks.

"For me driving a school bus is a start," says student Yolanda Tate. "The staff has confidence that we will pass and get good jobs."

"Our grads may start as school bus drivers but they go on to become dispatchers and supervisors, especially the women," says Perez. "Some of our graduates still can't believe they are able to provide for their families."

For more information go to www.rhor.org and call 718-237-4846.