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## Rebuilding lives with good jobs

### Initiative puts 2,500 to work for paychecks they can live on

By JOEL DRESANG

[jdresang@journalsentinel.com](mailto:jdresang@journalsentinel.com)

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In a metro area with 816,000 jobs, 2,500 is a drop in the bucket.

*Advertisement* The creation of 2,500 jobs in eight years easily could be overlooked after recent announcements expected to wipe out more than 2,000 area jobs at Delphi, Gehl, Kraft Foods and Quebecor World.

But the 2,500 jobs filled through the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative mark a quiet accomplishment that stands as a model for future growth in the regional economy.

The initiative suggests the power of collaboration and blended funding and regional outlook. It shows what can happen when work force development begins with employers with specific jobs to fill and then recruits and trains people who could most use the work.

"Sometimes when you've had entities out there that have just been kind of quietly chugging along, sort of doing the right thing, you don't always hear a lot about them," said Julia Taylor, president of the Greater Milwaukee Committee. "I think as we get our work force system here more aligned, you're going to see the benefits of these initiatives such as Milwaukee Jobs Initiative, which had that early foresight about how you do this right."

The initiative began 10 years ago as a demonstration project through the Annie E. Casey Foundation and brought together business, labor and community organizations committed to connecting underemployed Milwaukee residents with family-supporting jobs in growing sectors.

The program - now part of the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, WRTP, and financed through public, private and philanthropic funds - boasts average starting wages of \$11 an hour and benefits. About 70% of the workers placed are still at work a year later, at which point they typically have more than doubled their annual incomes.

To many of the 2,500 workers who have landed jobs through the initiative, the program has been transforming.

Darletha White, 34, is a bricklayer apprentice who's finding a new life through her job training.

A diabetic, White says she was close to losing her legs a few years ago, but she has been shaping up through work, which lately has involved handling heavy pieces of terra cotta 250 feet up on the Milwaukee City Hall restoration.

"I can run up and down stairs and jump off ledges," White said.

"She gets around pretty good up there," said Scott Henninger, a superintendent on the project with Eugene Matthews Inc. masonry.

White is on work release, five years through a seven-year prison sentence for identity theft. It's a crime for which she says, "I am very, very remorseful." She frequently speaks to students and jobseekers about her crime, as well as alcohol abuse, to encourage them to make wiser choices.

White credits her time in prison for impressing upon her the consequences of her crime and for helping her resolve to straighten out her life. She started taking better care of her health, earned her high school equivalency diploma, and took vocational classes that introduced her to the building trades.

"It was all about me coming out of prison with a job and to be making enough financially that I'll never do a crime again," White said.

Taylor lauds the program for anticipating the Milwaukee-area's building boom and gearing up to develop a pool of workers with the skills needed for construction. Last year, a new clearinghouse the program runs with the Building Industry Group Skilled Trades Employment Program placed about 300 workers in construction jobs.

Eric Parker, executive director of Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, said a key lesson from the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative is to get away from the approach of first training workers and then helping them find jobs.

"What we did is turn that around and started with employers and unions who were very interested in working with us to fill job openings so that we would run classes when demand was there," Parker said. "That was why we were able to connect the program with economic development but also to be able to recruit candidates who were motivated by the knowledge that there were real jobs at the end of the line."

After White got transferred to the Milwaukee Women's Correctional Center about 18 months ago, she sought tutoring and construction skills training through the program. After that, she completed five weeks of apprentice training with the International Union of Bricklayers & Allied Craft Workers District Council of Wisconsin. J.P. Cullen & Sons Inc., the general contractor for the City Hall restoration, hired her in November.

"She's a very perceptive person, picks up what has to be done," said Mike Snell, a masonry superintendent with J.P. Cullen who praises White's "gung-ho" attitude and her success at proving herself capable to her all-male colleagues.

"You give me a person with heart over skill any day, and I'll show you a winner, and that's what she is. She's a winner," said Patrick Brenner, vice president of operations with Eugene Matthews, a subcontractor that is borrowing White from J.P. Cullen.

A mason since 1979, Brenner said the work White is engaged in is not easy and that the men she works with rely on her for their safety.

"She's a major part of what we do up there," Brenner said. "There are no mistakes up there."

White earns about \$19 an hour with another \$10 an hour in benefits. Her hourly pay goes up to \$30 after she completes her apprenticeship. Asked where she sees this leading her, White replied: "I'm going all the way to the top. Hopefully in a few years I'll have my own business."

"Or my job," Brenner said.

Snell agreed: "With the attitude she's got, and the need for minority companies, she could in 10 years be very successful."

The 2,500 jobs filled by the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative is a fraction of the net loss of jobs the Milwaukee area has had in the last 12 months, according to the latest data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But Taylor said that as leaders from seven regional counties - the Milwaukee 7 - form strategies to develop the area economy, the success behind those 2,500 jobs will help.

"Having models like WRTP out there really kind of gives an idea of how to go about it," Taylor said.

*For more information, please go to [www.wrtp.org](http://www.wrtp.org).*

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