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Program makes M.O.S.T. of bad situation

By Wayne T. Price

In March, Mike Hainsel lost his job as an engineering specialist at Sea Ray Boats on Merritt Island after 22 years, and became becoming one of the faces behind Brevard's double-digit unemployment rate.

The loss has been hard on Hainsel, 48, and his family. But these days, the Merritt Island resident is a little more optimistic.

That's because he and 21 other out-of-work people are the first Brevard residents to participate in a specialized job retraining program aimed at giving them a higher-than-normal chance at getting a job joining the ranks of the employed sooner, rather than later.

The program is called Mobile Outreach Skills Training, or M.O.S.T, and it's being offered by the Florida Manufacturing Extension Partnership and the Brevard Workforce Development Board, using a U.S. Department of Labor grant and state job-stimulus funds. The rapid-response, back-to-work program, first introduced in New England about three years ago, tailors retraining efforts to employers' immediate needs.

M.O.S.T. project managers identify the type of workers employers are looking for at that moment, and then swiftly train a pool of workers to fill those jobs. This recent round of M.O.S.T. training, which lasts until Oct. 9, takes place in a customized semi-trailer parked at the Technological Research and Development Authority in Melbourne. The trailer is equipped with desks, Dell computers, and a lathe and turning machine to teach manufacturing skills.

"This is a great program," a smiling Hainsel said earlier this week, during a break from classes. The trailer is parked at the Technological Research and Development Authority in Melbourne. "It's all about learning what skills companies want and need right now."

Four local companies are interested in the current group of M.O.S.T. trainees and promised Hainsel and the others job interviews upon completion of the intensive, two-week training regimen.

"On graduation day, 95 percent of M.O.S.T graduates are immediately placed in full-time jobs with benefits and the skills needed to succeed — it's the very definition of economic stimulus," said Gene Lussier, chairman of the Florida Manufacturing Extension Partnership. "This program has an immediate impact on the economy and yields an unparalleled rapid return on invested dollars."

On-the-job training has meant 85 percent of M.O.S.T. participants remain in their new jobs six months after their hire, noted Julie Song, a program manager for the manufacturing partnership.

The program was developed and is managed by a Celebration-based firm called Time Wise Management Systems.

In Brevard, the M.O.S.T program started Aug. 21 when Song met with area companies to find out what their immediate employment needs were. Then a pool of unemployed workers, who found out about the program at one of the area Brevard Job Link sites, applied to take part. Successful candidates had to pass a basic education test and undergo background checks and a drug screening.

Since the background check and drug screening are normal employer prerequisites, having that taken care of in advance saves them additional time and money and makes the workers that much more desirable. M.O.S.T facilitators also interviewed the candidates to give them the final approval for participation.

"The first two weeks are very intense, as participants are expected to show up every day, as they would show up for any job, and put serious effort into their training," Song said. Another participant, Rick Rinaldi of West Melbourne, had nothing but praise a few days into the program. He's a carpenter who lost his job at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station 17 months ago.

"I know a lot of people criticize the stimulus funds," the 59-year-old Rinaldi said, "but this is a good program."

Companies also like what they learned about the M.O.S.T program and were eager to sign on.

One of them, Melbourne-based Harris Corp., isn't promising jobs to the participants but is offering opportunities.

"We are very pleased to be taking part in this program and look forward to augmenting our team with already trained and prepared workers who can hit the ground running when they get here," said Andrea Bortner, vice president of human resources for Harris Government Communications Systems.

Global Engineering Management & Support Inc. in Melbourne is also participating.

"Even though Brevard County is facing tough times, our company is actually looking to hire two to three additional experienced workers," said Eva Kohfeldt, the company's president. "As a small company, that's a substantial addition to our workforce. The fact that the M.O.S.T. program will provide these new hires with the skills we need is a driving factor in our decision to grow and bring on more employees."

M.O.S.T. is scheduled to return to Brevard later this month for another training session. The participants have already been selected.