

First-Ever Apprenticeship Program Comes To Opportunities

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A first-in-the-state adult apprenticeship program at Opportunities Inc. is getting rave reviews from participants.

The pilot program, open to adults of any skill set, including those with disabilities, came about after two Opportunities officials — Ann Janquart, vice president of staffing, and Barb LeDuc, president and CEO of Opportunities — reached out to personnel at the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development offering the existing Fort Atkinson facility and staff to assist with the state's new initiative to promote adult apprenticeships.

The new apprenticeship program tallies well with Opportunities' overall mission of providing training and employment for people of all abilities.

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“This was the first apprenticeship of its kind,” Janquart said. “We have been proud to be part of this pilot opportunity.”

“We have a wonderful facility and we are experts in working with people of diverse abilities,” said Robin Kennedy, vice president of mission advancement for Opportunities.

“Other apprenticeships have tight guidelines in terms of who can apply,” Kennedy said. “Many people with disabilities are automatically excluded, not on purpose, but because they don't meet those qualifications,” she said.

Opportunities Inc. offered to start an apprenticeship program for all, regardless of barriers to employment.

The apprenticeship program, based at the agency's Fort Atkinson and Oconomowoc facilities, started last summer and its first class of students is just completing the program.

Some of the adult apprentices already work with Opportunities, while others came to the program from different companies.

They took on the apprenticeship program on top of their regular job responsibilities, seizing on the opportunity to gain new skills and certifications in order to make their way up the job ladder.

Overseeing the program as instructor was Rick Schabowski of the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership and Waukesha County Technical College, while Joseph Nicosia of Center of Excellence came in to proctor the exams.

Nicosia said that the apprenticeship program opened up a variety of different types of training for participants, aligned with manufacturing skills standards certification.

“This is a nationally recognized credential,” he said.

Opportunities worked with the Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards to coordinate the offerings.

Schabowski said that the adult apprentices who signed up for this first-time program have done a great job and have really been committed to improving their skills.

“It’s been a great partnership,” the teacher said. “We help companies develop incumbent employees and also help people get training to be able to find new jobs.”

He commended Opportunities for getting in on the ground floor of the program and for encouraging its own employees to gain new skills through this apprenticeship.

For many of the apprentices, this represented the first time they’d taken a computer-based, largely online and high-tech course, which involved learning a lot of new skills and a new way of thinking.

“It is tough on the apprentices who come in here after working a full shift, but everyone here has what it takes,” the teacher said. “You have to have the skills, but you have to have heart and determination too, and everyone in this group does.”

Kaia Destael, one of the class members, works with Techniplas of Nashotah.

“My supervisor and her supervisor nominated me for the program,” the adult apprentice said. “We learned all different kinds of things, from applied math to CPR to blueprint reading.

“I need training to be a technician,” Destael said. “I can qualify for raises in connection with these added skills.”

Jerry Morgan of Waukesha, who also works with Techniplas, said that this apprenticeship will allow him to become a set-up technician at his workplace.

He said the apprenticeship opened up opportunities for him in terms of new skills, new areas of knowledge, additional certifications and the potential for raises.

Kasie Preder of Watertown, who works with Opportunities as a line-lead right now, said the additional training will help him potentially move up into a different position.

“It has been really interesting,” he said. “I learned more than I expected.”

Randy Rode, current warehouse supervisor at Opportunities’ Fort Atkinson location, said that the apprenticeship program gave him the chance to advance his career.

“I have been with the company for around eight years now,” he said. “The information I have learned here is valuable and I’ll be able to use it in my everyday job.”

Josh Knitter of Fort Atkinson also works at Opportunities, serving as assistant supervisor for Plant I.

“This training has definitely helped me grow and learn different areas of the job,” Knitter said. “There’s been a lot of hands-on training, and I think it will really help with my career in the future.”

Taya Neminski of Whitewater, who works as quality lead at Opportunities’ Plant II, said the experience has expanded her mind and widened her scope in terms of her job.

Randall Knope, a third-shift assistant supervisor with Opportunities, characterized the training as in-depth, covering a lot of different areas and opening up new opportunities.

Janquart said that the new apprenticeship program was appealing to Opportunities as a new way to help people carve out their own career path.

“Instead of thinking, ‘I am here as a forklift operator and that’s all I am,’ this program has helped people expand their skills so they can possibly move into different roles,” she said.

The first apprenticeship class involved around 15 people, most of whom stuck with it through the whole program, Janquart said.

“It has really gone well,” she said. “I am amazed at the dedication of the apprentices who added this extra training to their full-time jobs.

“When you entering this kind of job, the idea of ‘continuing education’ is not really on the radar,” Janquardt said.

As Opportunities had a number of its own employees participating in the apprenticeship program, that meant the agency had to be very flexible about those employees’ schedules.

“Peggy Foth, the vice president of operations, has been a huge part of this,” Janquart said. “They are all her employees, in key positions, and every week she has had to find ways to cover for them, but she, too, is really committed to the program.”

Still to come this summer, after all of the adult apprentices have completed their hours requirements, Opportunities plans to host a graduation celebration for all participants, Janquart said.

Then, down the line, Janquart said that Opportunities hopes to offer this adult apprenticeship program to more people in future years.

“We hope to open doors for more people, while attracting a different set of talent to come into our organization,” she said.