

Project CRAFT - Avon Park

Location: Avon Park, Florida

Host Organization: Home Builders Institute

Partner Organizations: Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, Habitat for Humanity, Rebuilding Together, National Association of Home Builders, City of Avon Park, Highland and Polk Counties in Florida, G4S, Avon Park Youth Academy Advisory Board

Target Population: Adjudicated youth

Program Innovations

- Employment Specialists who provide transitional and job placement support to youth for a minimum of six months after graduation

Program History

Project CRAFT began in 1994 on a Youth Offender Demonstration grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration to the Home Builders Institute (HBI). HBI founded the program based on seven components, including partnership-building and linkages, community involvement, leadership development, follow-up support services, comprehensive service delivery, industry-driven training and job placement. The program's mission is to train graduates in work ready skills for the construction industry so they can obtain immediate and long-term employment in the building industry. Several Project CRAFT programs exist in Florida and Connecticut.

About the same time Project CRAFT launched, the State of Florida and the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice began focusing on the development of employability skills for adjudicated youth. The State subsequently established several residential vocational schools for adjudicated youth. As part of these efforts, Project CRAFT launched a youth program in Avon Park, Florida in 1998.

Project CRAFT-Avon Park's vocational school is located on an old United States Air Force bombing range whose housing was converted to dorms to house the youth. Avon Park serves solely adjudicated youth, and while construction training is offered through the Project CRAFT program, youth at Avon Park can also pursue other industry-specific training, such as culinary arts or automotive

repair. Youth live on-site, practice independent living, and receive eight hours a day of vocational training that mimics a real job.

Program Summary

Participants in Project CRAFT are referred from all over Florida. At any given time, 80 youth are participating in the program and, on average, 160 participate annually. Most participants are minorities and/or low-income. Trainees first participate in a 30-day orientation. During the orientation, trainees learn about the different training tracks and choose the track they wish to pursue.

Students who choose the construction track participate in up to 26 weeks of industry-specific training contextualized around construction. Training is full-time, five days a week. Project CRAFT uses the Home Builders Institute's PACT (Pre-Apprenticeship Certificate Training) **curriculum**. The PACT curriculum, which the housing industry helped develop, combines academic instruction with hands-on training at real construction sites. The hands-on training is done on projects with nonprofit partners such as Habitat for Humanity or Rebuilding Together to renovate or build housing for low income populations. The curriculum also provides training in soft skills, literacy, and employability skills. After completing the program, students receive an industry recognized Pre-Apprenticeship Training Certificate. The instructor implementing the curriculum has a trades background and teaching experience.

“A lot of adjudicated youth get a bad rap before anyone ever knows what they’re capable of doing.....Our kids built a wheelchair ramp for a lady who couldn’t get out of her house and that ramp went a long way in the community.”

*--Tadar Muhammad, Project CRAFT
Program Manager*

Counseling, mentoring, and other **support services** aid the youth while in training. Two Employment Specialists help the trainees meet their personal and professional goals.

Once students graduate and receive their PACT certificate, they receive extensive assistance with **job placement and development**. The Employment Specialists work with each student to develop employability skills during training and to help them find employment in the construction industry after training. Since many of the program's participants return to their hometown, the Employment Specialists must have knowledge of job opportunities and the construction industry across Florida. Through the Home Builders Institute and the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), the Employment Specialists

are able to reach out to construction contractors and employers across Florida to help graduates find jobs in the construction industry. The Employment Specialists do a minimum of six months post-program follow-up to help the program's participants successfully transition into the world of work or into additional education or training programs.

“We provide 6 months of follow-up for our kids as a standard protocol for every kid who leaves our program.”

--Tadar Muhammad, Project CRAFT Program Manager

Program Funding

Most Project CRAFT programs in Florida, including the program at Avon Park are funded by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. The funding helps provide the placement support specialists and case managers, two positions pivotal to the long-term success of the program's participants. Private providers also help fund some Project CRAFT programs.

Industry Engagement

Project CRAFT is engaged with the construction industry across the State of Florida. Project CRAFT-Avon Park's Project Coordinator is responsible for building many of the industry relationships the program needs to place students in jobs. To build these relationships, the Project Coordinator and other staff reach out to other members of the National Association of Home Builders in Florida. A lot of effort goes into educating these members about Project CRAFT and selling the industry on the benefits of hiring a program graduate. For example, potential employers are informed about the skills Project CRAFT graduates develop and are told about the support graduates receive from the Employment Specialists during their job placement. Another key selling point Avon Park uses is that the program provides graduates with the tools they need to begin work, which relieves a lot of the cost and time employers spend on a new employee. When possible, Project CRAFT invites NAHB members and construction employers to Avon Park to meet the students and see the program first hand.

In addition to educating industry contacts about the program, Avon Park informs them about the Work Opportunities Tax Credit. The Tax Credit offers employers who hire formerly incarcerated individuals a payroll tax credit. Part of Avon Park's efforts include showing employers where and how to access this benefit.