

CAREERS

Urban League Offers Tech Job Training for Under-Employed Adults

Program includes soft skills, tech certifications and on-the-job training

By *Melanie Sevckenko*
Of *The Skanner News*

The Urban League of Portland has teamed up with higher education institutions, training centers, and local employers to launch the Urban Tech Jobs Program, which helps under-employed adults break into the tech industry.

Initiated this past March through a Department of Labor grant, Portland's Urban League is one of seven affiliates of the national organization that is facilitating the program.

The tech jobs project was created to bridge the gap between a pool of long-term unemployed individuals and a booming industry that offers sustainable employment. In fact, jobs in STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — have among the highest earnings projections and job growth, while holding the lowest unemployment rate over other industries.

With the first cohort

underway, the Urban League's second cohort will begin accepting applications on July 31 for a September 25 start date. The program is hosting an open information session on July 18.

Over the course of three separate cohorts running through 2019, the accelerated technology training program will have served some 95 people.

Having already completed job readiness workshops — in partnership with the Leadership Lab — the program's first

a local company. Some positions also carry the possibility of full-time hire.

"We found that the local tech community is very supportive of the program," said Urban Tech Jobs Team Leader, Andrea Gall. "As we start getting more name recognition, we'll start finding more employers that are interested in specifically pulling candidates out of our pool, which is the ideal situation."

Gaining the confidence To be eligible for UTJP, a person must be un-

employed or under-employed, have a high school diploma or GED, and be 18 years or older.

Forty-seven percent of participants in the first cohort are African American; and overall, 41 percent are women and 59 percent are men.

While every participant comes to the table with a varying level of education and tech expertise, some enter the program with little to no background in the field.

Yet part of UTJP's goal is to help participants identify their transferable skills and pivot them from their past experience towards a new career path; for example, a retail background could lead to a customer care position at a software company.

"It's a stellar business model for people who are changing their career fields or have an interest in the tech world," said participant Jerome Smith, who previously served in the air force.

After the recession hit, Smith — a father of five — lost his job and found himself living in his car. Through an assistance program for veterans, he learned about UTJP and enrolled in the nick of time.

"The confidence I've gained in just four weeks — to be able to know what I'm doing with computers — it really increased my value," Smith told *The Skanner*. He's now living in a veterans' family shelter in Beaverton, with part-time employment in private security, and has aspirations to work for Boeing in the field of cyber security.

Wraparound services

In addition to UTJP's flagship tech training,



PHOTO COURTESY OF URBAN LEAGUE OF PORTLAND

UTJP participants (left to right) Betty Wakgira and Genet Tsegaw.

the Urban League offers supplemental programs that are unique to the organization, such as healthcare and housing assistance. The result is a wraparound services program that reaches beyond workforce development.

"A part of our population that we serve in this program is people that have a legal history," explained Cinna'Mon Williams, career and life coach for UTJP, who recruits participants to the program. "We work with people on how to write their resumes in a way that they're transparent," continued Williams. "We teach them how to interview and disclose. And personally, I help people

work through the mental aspect of transitioning and recovering from mistakes in their past."

After soft skills and tech training is complete, Williams provides support to participants six months into their full-time employment.

Potential careers

According to the Department of Commerce, employees of STEM jobs earn 26 percent more than from non-STEM jobs; and between 2008 and 2018, job openings in those sectors are expected to increase by 17 percent.

"This isn't a quick fix program — it's more long-term to bring you to that next level in your skillset," said Gall.

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