

# Victoria program wants to pad blue-collar workforce

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*Times Colonist staff*

A well-known human resources firm that specializes in the tourism sector is taking a stab at alleviating the labour shortage in the construction industry.

Christine Stoneman vice-president of Grant Thornton Job Placements, the company which runs the successful Destinations program for the tourism industry, has launched HardHATS, a program designed to get people on income assistance back into the workforce in the construction industry.

Patterned closely on the Destinations model which trains people on income assistance to take entry-level jobs in the hospitality and tourism industry, the HardHATS program comes along at a time when there is an acute need for skilled trades in B.C.

"Projects are being slowed down right now by a lack of skilled trades," said Casey Edge of the Canadian Home Builders Association Victoria, noting a lack of new blood in the industry and an aging workforce are leaving firms short-handed.

"The average age of the skilled trades worker in B.C. is around 50," he said. "And the other party of the issue is a lot of today's students are being streamed into high-tech sector. Meanwhile we're experiencing a housing boom in Victoria and in other areas of the country —

there's a great opportunity here."

The CHBA which represents the residential construction sector and groups like the Victoria Construction Association which represents the interests of commercial construction firms have spear-headed the initiative, taking it to Stoneman to implement because of the success with Destinations.

Stoneman sees the program fulfilling a two-tiered need.

While the lack of skilled tradespeople like carpenters, electricians, plumbers and welders are an immediate concern, there is also the need for entry-level labourers who understand the industry.

"We're trying to, with a 10-week training period, give them enough training and maybe a taste for it so they can experience the work and maybe they'll decide it's something they are interested in," she said.

The idea is to have some of the expected 100 graduates of the pilot project get a good introduction to the industry and realize what a great opportunity there is for advancement and to forge a real career by getting additional training and apprenticeship.

The project started last Monday with the first group of 42 people going through a week of life-skills training, resume classes and the like at the HardHATS offices in Victoria and Vancouver. From there they will move onto either Camosun College or Kwantlen University Col-

lege for a nine-week training course.

To pass, the students must have a 90 per cent attendance record and maintain a 70 per cent average.

Graduates — of the 168 expected to go through in the first year the goal is to have 100 successful students, though Stoneman is aiming for between 120 and 130 — will receive post-placement coaching and mentoring support for 12 months to help with the transition into the workforce.

"We're starting small and we'll see where it goes," said Edge.

For her part, Stoneman thinks this could be another Destinations in the making.

"I hope that within the next five years we will have built the same kind of thing," she said, adding Destinations, which has found jobs for nearly 15,000 people on income assistance, has 29 offices around B.C. and employs 111 people.

"Already other places in the province have been calling wondering why we're not doing it there," she said.

To be eligible for the program, candidates must be on B.C. Employment and Assistance, physically able to perform strenuous job functions, be between 15 and 50 years of age and have an interest in being involved in the industry.

HardHATS, like Destinations, is funded through the provincial Ministry of Human Resources as part of the government's Training for Jobs program.

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Casey Edge, Canadian Home Builders Association Victoria