Chapter 4: Construction Issues in Trainee Selection and Orientation

Trainee Selection

A number of construction-related issues must be taken into consideration when selecting trainees for the program. Many programs include members of the construction staff in the interview process to address these concerns. Others provide a “construction issues” briefing to the program manager, counselors, or others who are interviewing candidates for the program.

- **Realities of construction work:** Make sure that candidates understand that they will be expected to work on a construction site. What is necessary is the right attitude, not the experience level or physical stature of a candidate. Let candidates know that the work is dirty and hard and that it is hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Ask them what makes them prepared to take on this challenge. Some programs have applicants work on a small construction project for a day as part of the application process. Also inform candidates that there are positive realities of construction work such as learning new skills and growing strong physically and mentally. Construction, learning how to use tools, apply joint compounds, and drive a nail are empowering experiences.

- **Health issues:** Make sure that potential health problems are addressed with candidates. Address concerns about asthma, heart problems, or other medical conditions that may be incompatible with construction. Obtain a medical release from a doctor for anyone with potential health issues prior to a candidate’s arrival on site. Some programs arrange for all final candidates to take a physical and receive an eye exam. For pregnant women it is important to note that dust, chemicals, or accidents at a construction site could present a serious health risk to an unborn baby. These types of health risks can create complications for the program. It is however, illegal to exclude women from construction jobs because of pregnancy. Discuss this issue as part of the discussion of health considerations with female candidates.

- **Drug and alcohol issues:** Nobody under the influence on the site—period. Candidates with substance abuse problems are clearly a hazard to themselves and others on the site. Program should have a written drug policy and candidates should be informed of that policy. While it is
difficult to do, interviews should include questions that attempt to identify candidates with substance abuse problems. Some programs require random drug tests as part of the application or orientation process. If the program decides to do this, be sure to inform trainees during the interview process, verbally and in writing, that they will be subjected to random drug testing. Since drug tests will not identify alcohol problems, trainees should be warned during their interviews that the effects of uncontrolled use of alcohol are a safety risk and will cause a student to be terminated from the program.

- **Age issues:** Many states’ laws require people to be a certain age in order to operate power equipment on a construction site. The program will need to establish its age requirements with this consideration in mind. Some programs require trainees to meet the state’s age requirements. Others make accommodations in the work assignments for trainees under age. Certify all trainees on tools prior to use. This protects students and the program.

- **Women in construction:** Because women have often not been encouraged to consider construction as a field of employment, many programs actively recruit women to consider joining Youthbuild. In fact in areas of the country with affirmative action policies for construction contracts, women are often in demand as construction workers. In screening and selecting women candidates, it is important to keep in mind that many women have never had an opportunity to do any construction work at all. Therefore, interviewers should be very explicit about expectations and conditions on a worksite while encouraging women to explore this career option, if they are interested in doing so.

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**Voices from the Field:**

**On Selecting and Preparing Trainees for the Program**

“You can’t reach everyone. You have to try with everyone, but ultimately you have to accept that not everyone will make it.”

“Attendance gets worse in the cold weather. We have to prep students ahead of time to prepare them for that.”

“If you realize that someone isn’t working out, deal with the situation quickly so that the whole program doesn’t end up getting messed up.”
Trainee Orientation

The program should include a construction component for the overall orientation of new trainees. The following are some ideas for workshops based on what other sites have included in their orientation programs:

- **Team work**: Some programs include a simple hands-on project involving teamwork in their orientation program. This may be a simple community service project, or a game with building blocks, or it may be a city-wide treasure hunt in which trainees have to go to City Hall and the building inspector's office to research the history of the land or the building they will be working on.

- **Construction safety**: It is never too early to begin emphasizing construction safety. Some orientation programs include simple hands-on safety training activities such as climbing ladders or lifting plywood. This is a good time to conduct a tool orientation and introduction as well.

- **The construction site**: Most programs include an introduction to the Youthbuild construction project as part of their orientation program. This could include a site visit, or showing pictures or slides of the site. It might include a brief talk by the project's developer on the purpose and the plans for the project, the sources of financing and information on who will live in there upon completion. It might include a brief talk by a representative from the neighborhood on the importance of the project to the surrounding community.

- **Visit a recently completed construction project or another construction site**: By visiting projects in different stages of construction it is possible to visibly demonstrate that progress can be made.

- **Practical issues**: The orientation is a good time to introduce some practical information regarding the construction component of the program. Orientation may include an introduction to the work schedule and to the construction rules, as well as key information about transportation, lunch, expectations, and requirements for proper dress on the site.

- **Interaction with residents**: Some programs include a discussion about expectations regarding interaction with residents and other passersby while working on the construction site. Included in that
discussion is the idea of “representing the program” through appropriate behavior. Students must be informed that while they are representing the program, they need to also have respect for and an understanding of the community's role in supporting the program.

- **Distribution of trainee tool belts:** Many Youthbuild programs end their orientation with a ceremony presenting trainees with their tool-belts and hardhats, as a way of recognizing trainee commitment in entering the Youthbuild program.