

# FEJA Program Trains Diverse Workforce for Solar Job Opportunities



Solar and construction companies from around the Chicago area gathered at Livewire Construction to recruit solar training graduates. The job training was specific to the solar industry so students were able to demonstrate their new skills to contractors.

Elevate Energy was instrumental in the passage of the Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA) in 2016, which created opportunities for a new and diverse energy workforce. One of FEJA's early successes was the graduation of the first cohort of students to undergo the Solar Photovoltaic (PV) Training Program. The program, which provided non-traditional education opportunities to enter the solar workforce, was a collaboration between Elevate Energy, Millennium Solar, and Livewire Construction.

Elevate Energy worked with Safer Foundation and other community organizations to recruit returning citizens, foster care alumni, and members of environmental justice communities to participate in the program. A group of 30 students from different professional backgrounds — electricians, masons, bricklayers, and teachers — came together with a universal desire to work in the solar industry.

"I feel renewable energy is an essential requirement for the future of the planet," said Julio Ibarra, one of the graduates of the program. "It's very important to make a positive contribution to society and convince as many people as possible to lower their environmental impact." Julio had been learning about solar and renewable energy over the last few years on his own. When he heard about the training program through the Safer Foundation, he took the next step to get professional training.

The program, led by Millennium Solar owner Chris Williams, began with two weeks of "solar bootcamp" to give students a real-life introduction to the solar industry. This was followed by ten weeks of NCCER curriculum training, an industry standard for construction training that included assignments and

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**Julio Ibarra,**  
**Graduate, FEJA Solar PV Training Program**

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exams as well as hands-on experience working with construction equipment and installing solar PV panels. Elevate Energy staff visited the class at least once a week to meet with students, participate in field trips, and hand-deliver stipend payments to students.

The twelve weeks concluded with a hiring event hosted by Chicago company Livewire Construction, where 30 of Elevate Energy's solar and construction partners from around the Chicago area recruited the program's newly trained solar professionals. The job fair was specific to the solar industry, so students were able to demonstrate their new skills to contractors.

A crucial component of the hiring event for Elevate Energy was that new jobs would be able to support the students. Unlike some training programs that result in minimum-wage opportunities, the companies at the job fair were hiring for living-wage jobs, many of which were full-time and offered benefits.

Angela Drexel, vice president of Livewire, emphasized the importance of a hiring event as the transition from training to workforce. "[The program] is what I would consider one of those stepping stones," said Drexel. "A foundational accomplishment, one to be built upon to the next level."

At the graduation ceremony following the hiring event, graduate Julio Ibarra accepted his graduation certificate along with his fellow students. Julio is studying to become a Certified Energy Practitioner in the fall, and now owns his own sustainable consulting startup as a way to give back to his neighborhood of Southeast Chicago.

"When we're giving opportunities for



Eya Louis, Contractor Development Coordinator at Elevate Energy, talks with a solar training program graduate at the Livewire Construction hiring event.

individuals to work and also look at what their future is in terms growth and development," said 30th District Representative Will Davis at the graduation ceremony, "we know it's going to be reflective of our community."

Elevate Energy is proud to be a partner of the Solar Photovoltaic (PV) Training Program to help show that working in and with a community can create transformative results for students and community members alike. The program will continue with support from FEJA funds through 2021.

**“**It's an industry that is clearly growing and present in the state of Illinois. Not only are these students getting industry-recognized credentials from the program, we are connecting them to the companies that need those skills.”

**Eya Louis, Contractor Development Coordinator, Elevate Energy**