

Chapter 3: Hiring and Training Construction Staff

Overview

The construction component is a complicated aspect of the YouthBuild program. It requires not only a technically qualified staff familiar with housing construction, but also one that is committed to the development of young people, capable of fostering personal growth, and able to build in opportunities for leadership development.

This chapter discusses the following issues:

- The role of the YouthBuild director
- Composition and size of construction staff
- General staff qualifications and finding candidates
- Staff orientation and training



The Role of the YouthBuild Director

The YouthBuild director plays an important role at the start of the construction program and is the key person responsible for providing overall balance between the demands of housing construction and the demands of other program components. In order to organize a YouthBuild program, it is necessary to identify housing construction work site and, usually, housing partners before key staff are hired or very early in the planning process. It is the director's responsibility to set the framework for the construction component by determining what type of housing the program will undertake and by locating and making arrangements with housing partners. Ideally, this should be done with the assistance of the construction manager, but that is not always possible.

The YouthBuild director is also the person with overall responsibility for balancing the demands of housing production with the needs of training, education, counseling, and leadership development. In order to do this, the director needs to have a clear understanding of the overall schedule of housing construction and balance those needs with other program needs, such as community service and staff development.

Staff Composition and Size

The construction component of a YouthBuild program requires an adequate level of staffing to ensure both quality training for the participants and a quality construction job. The size of the staff will depend on the construction role selected, the size and type of the project, the construction schedule, the number of program participants, and the amount of DOL funding awarded.

Most programs will need to hire:

- **A construction manager** to manage all aspects of YouthBuild's participation in the construction process and supervise the construction staff.
- **A construction trainer** or trainers to instruct and supervise participants on the construction site. There should be one construction trainer for every six or seven participants on the construction site, so the program may need to hire more than one trainer. YouthBuild programs may operate on a schedule that has half of the participants in the classroom and half on the construction site each week, or they may have participants alternate locations based on a half-day or daily schedule. For example, a program with 30 participants might have 15 on the construction site each week, ideally necessitating two construction trainers.
- **A vocational education instructor** to provide classroom instruction to supplement the training on the construction work site. Ideally, this teacher will also serve as a construction trainer, or math teacher, depending on the skills of your staff and the schedule of the program. This allows for more contextualized and project-based learning to occur so that skills learned in the academic classroom are naturally applied on the work site. In general, a construction manager does not have time to serve as vocational education instructor.

Sample [Job Descriptions](#) for each of these positions are included in Appendix B.

If a YouthBuild program decides to take on the role of developer, it will probably need additional staff depending on the program size, availability of property, and funding. Depending upon the strengths of the construction manager, the program might choose to structure development staff in a variety of ways—by adding a development consultant, an assistant project manager, a senior site superintendent, a full-time housing development staff person, or a board member with housing development expertise. Hiring union journeymen for the construction staff can bring many benefits to the program including credibility for the construction operation, a high level of skill training, and links to apprenticeships and jobs in the trades.



VOICES FROM THE FIELD

On Hiring Good Construction Staff

"Hire people who have a good working knowledge of their trade and who can work well with youth—both are essential to the success of the program."

"Site trainers have to know what they're doing. They can't earn the students' respect if they are trying to figure out how to do something in front of the participants. They also have to be flexible and be able to work with young people."

"Site trainers must have a good mix of knowledge, patience and ability to instill good habits and teach real skills. All staff must have the same vision of doing what's best for the youth."

"Not only are you an instructor . . . but you're a parent, a big brother, a big sister, a father confessor, a warden, a referee, you name it."

"Instructors must lead by example, model the behavior they are trying to create. For example, you can't expect the participants to wear their safety gear if the trainers aren't wearing their own."

Qualities to Seek in Hiring Staff

The construction component of a YouthBuild project acts as both a training program and a construction company. Although construction staff are often selected for their construction skills first, it is their training and counseling skills that are often most severely tested. YouthBuild construction staff members usually find themselves performing roles they never expected when applying for the job, especially if their prior experience is in construction rather than training. As a result, the ideal YouthBuild construction staff member possesses a combination of technical, managerial, and interpersonal skills. Perhaps most importantly, a YouthBuild construction staff member must like working with young people.

Finding and Interviewing Qualified Candidates

Finding construction staff with the right mix of construction skills, training experience, and commitment to youth development, within the salary limitations generally available to YouthBuild organizations, can be very challenging. One good source of candidates is semi-retired carpenters. Another potential source is vocational school faculty. A third source may be a local construction trade association. Since the majority of the work done by participants is likely to be carpentry, drywall, weatherization, and interior and exterior finishing, it is preferable to select construction trainers with backgrounds in those trades rather than the more technical trades of plumbing and electrical work. Whatever the source, it is important to take time to find out just how skilled they are in their craft, how prepared they are for a YouthBuild training environment, and how committed they are to YouthBuild's mission.

Tips on Assessing Candidates for the Construction Trainer Position

When exploring the issues below with potential candidates for the construction trainer position, it is important to include some young people in the second round of interviews, in order to gain insight into the way the candidate relates to participants.

- Does the candidate have sufficient safety training such as the OSHA 10 or 30 hour? Is the candidate certified in first aid/CPR?
- What is the candidate's construction skill level? Does the candidate have well-rounded construction experience in a variety of trade areas? How many years of experience in each trade area does the candidate have? How much of that experience is in residential construction, similar to the work that will be done by the YouthBuild program?
- What is the candidate's experience in supervising crews?
- What is the candidate's philosophy of youth development and leadership development? What are his or her ideas about discipline?
- Does the candidate understand the conditions facing young people in the program and the construction trainer's role as counselor, mentor, and teacher?
- Does the candidate have any teaching or mentoring experience with young people?

Supplementing the Program's Full-time, Paid Staff

It is challenging to run all aspects of the construction component effectively with the limited staffing previously described—a construction staff often feels stretched to the limit by its multiple roles. Many programs supplement their construction staff by:

- Establishing relationships with expert volunteer advisors or mentors from the construction and real estate industry
- Reaching out to local businesses and organizations for volunteer training opportunities such as the Building Owners and Managers Association International (BOMA), community colleges, or businesses like The Home Depot that value employee engagement in local nonprofits
- Making use of consultants
- Collaborating with the staff of other local housing organizations



Perhaps even more importantly, the construction department can strengthen its effectiveness by working closely with other members of the program staff, drawing on their strengths to supplement the work of the construction staff. The knowledge and skills of counseling and teaching staff may be especially useful both in providing information about participants and in offering insights about methods to address various problems and create an integrated learning environment.

Staff Orientation and Training

While it should not be necessary to provide training for the construction staff on technical construction skills, a strong orientation and training for new construction staff concerning the YouthBuild program and their non-construction roles can have a powerful, long-term impact on the quality of a program. The Construction Trainers Orientation Handbook, which can be distributed during the new staff training, is in Appendix A. It offers helpful information for new construction staff on working with youth in a YouthBuild program.

A good orientation program might include the following components:

1. An overview of the YouthBuild program, staff structure, history, and philosophy
2. An in-depth look at the role of the construction staff in:
 - Preparing participants for career pathways
 - Teaching construction skills
 - Providing leadership development opportunities
 - Integrating construction training with the academic program

3. A discussion of the construction project to be undertaken
4. Information about program mechanics, including forms and schedules that will be used in running the construction component of the program
5. Case studies or problem-solving exercises of the types of problems likely to develop on the construction work site, including case studies related to safety and health in the residential construction business

A sample Construction Staff Training and Orientation Outline, in Appendix B, is a series of problem-solving exercises that can be used in the construction staff orientation and training.

Construction Staff Evaluation

Construction staff need and deserve feedback about their performance on the job from both supervisors and participants. Staff evaluations should be built into the program at the end of the probationary period and at least annually, as an opportunity for structured, objective feedback. A sample Construction Staff Evaluation Form is in Appendix B.

Chapter 3 Resources in Appendices



APPENDIX A

- [Construction Trainers Orientation Handbook](#)

APPENDIX B

- [Construction Staff Evaluation Form](#)
- [Construction Staff Training and Orientation Outline](#)
- [Job Descriptions](#)