

Prospective Power Line Workers Climb to New Heights

March 1, 2016 was a Super Tuesday at Southside Virginia Community College's Occupational/Technical Center at Pickett Park in Blackstone, but not for reasons related to the nation's primary elections. Dignitaries from around the Commonwealth gathered to celebrate the launch of SVCC's Power Line Worker Training School and to honor the students enrolled in its inaugural class. Under the banner "Climbing to New Heights Together," the event brought together many of the people involved in partnerships that made the new program possible.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Al Roberts, President of SVCC, said "Meeting the workforce needs of our region is a monumental task, and no single agency or organization can do it alone. Our success is dependent upon the collaborative engagement of leadership across the Commonwealth."

Dr. Glenn DuBois, Chancellor of the Virginia Community College System, explained how the VCCS and SVCC worked in collaboration with key partners to make the program a reality. Commitments from the Virginia, Maryland & Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives membership, along with a grant received through the Governor's Competition for Talent Solutions, provided the foundation.

John C. Lee, Jr., President and CEO of Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative, was among those on hand. He spoke words of encouragement to the students, reminding them, "Thomas Edison, a man those of us in the electric industry hold in high regard, once said, 'Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls, and looks like work.'" He continued, "Here at SVCC's Power Line Worker Training School, opportunity is dressed in fire retardant clothing, wearing a hardhat, a set of climbing hooks and a tool belt, and make no mistake about it... represents hard work."

The Power Line Worker Training School offers tremendous opportunities for students and electric utilities. Graduating students receive credentials that confer a significant advantage in the utility job market, giving them entry into a career path that leads to a well-paying occupation. Electric utilities gain potential employees trained in safety and with the skills necessary to enter the profession at a time when many current line workers will soon be eligible for retirement.

Jeff Brown, Director of Workforce Services for the Governor's Office, called the establishment of the school "a no-brainer", saying it fit into the New Virginia Economy plan and that there is nothing much more important than sources to power our nation.

Keith Harkins, SVCC's Vice President of Workforce, remarked on the urgency he felt from industry partners concerned about their large number of pending line worker retirements. Mr. Harkins also commented on the outstanding career opportunities students will have upon completing the program. "This program allows students to train for a career in 11 weeks! There are just not many opportunities like that out there today. "

Calling the new school "the perfect public/private partnership," Jeff Edwards, CEO of Southside Electric Cooperative (SEC), said that SEC and the Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative felt fortunate that the site is located nearby and that it offers an outdoor laboratory for real life skills. He claimed that students "will stand out in job applications."

The school program runs 11 weeks. Clyde Robertson, a 42-year veteran lineman serves as instructor. He is assisted by Brad Wike. Students learn essential pole climbing skills and also earn commercial driver's licenses and OSHA certification. Those in the inaugural class will graduate in May.

Enrollment for the next class, beginning on July 11, 2016, is currently underway. To be eligible, prospective students must hold a high school or equivalency diploma and be able to qualify for a CDL license. For more information, contact Susan Early at 434-292-3101.