

## Getting skills faster, taking them farther

### ALASKA LOCAL, CONTRACTORS TEAM UP TO RESTRUCTURE TRAINING

Going back to the drawing board is a strength, especially when something clearly isn't operating to its highest potential.

In HVAC work, there are few places where keeping skills at 'full potential' is more crucial than vast and often frigid Alaska. At SM Local 23 in Anchorage, the service technician training was on par with the lower 48, but wasn't a fit for the demands faced by local contractors.

So Bruce Bold, training coordinator for Local 23, went back to the drawing board—and invited the service contractors to go with him.

"First- and second-year apprentices didn't know enough to go out in the truck, on jobs, alone, but contractors couldn't afford to pay a journey person to go with them," Bold said. "For those one-man jobs, contractors were losing money on apprentices."

Especially in Alaska, Bold says, "service is a different beast. You have to have a pretty qualified person right from the start."

#### Field ready fast, in-state

Bold and the contractors, with the help of training coordinators at Local 66 in Washington State, reinvented the service technician apprenticeship program, front-loading it to teach those skills contractors had requested at the beginning of training rather than later in the apprentices' schooling.

They also adjusted for the vast distances to, from, and within Alaska. Instead of sending Local 23 apprentices to Washington State for training, the joint team also developed a plan to gradually bring the classes back to Alaska.

The ready availability and market-tailored training are translating into more work for more members.

"We're getting good feedback from contractors and a lot more interest from them as well," Bold said. "That's the coolest part of putting this program together—the input. I haven't had an out-of-work service tech apprentice in a long time."

#### Classes front-loaded

With field-ready apprentices a focus, the restructuring now has first-year apprentices attending a five-week electrical class and a five-week refrigeration class as well as training in customer service.

During their first two years, in fact, school time doubled, but the third and fourth years now have less than before. Classes also take place in the off season, when contractors aren't as busy.

The new training seems to be gaining steam and popularity among contractors and interested future apprentices. Where Bold typically sees one or two new service apprentices every year, the last two years, he enrolled four; now it's 12.

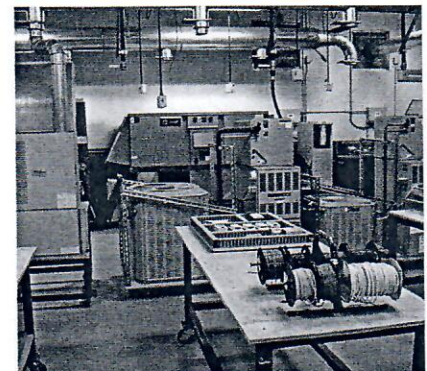
"If we can see three to four apprentices a year, if we can triple the number of apprentices and keep

them all working, that's phenomenal," Bold said.

"In a down economy like it is now in Alaska, service technicians' work ticks up. People want work done instead of replacing their old units. We've been busy."

Good service techs are hard to find, especially in an area as remote as Alaska, said Garret Travers, service manager at Superior Mechanical Service in Anchorage.

"We're a unique market in that we're isolated. There isn't a lot of exposure to schools and training," Travers said. "A huge portion of the work force is going to be retiring in the next few years. Local 23 is the only true service tech apprenticeship program in Alaska."



Alaska's service tech classes prepare them for a range of challenges, often hundreds of miles from home.



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— BRUCE BOLD, SM LOCAL 23 TRAINING COORDINATOR