

## Apprenticeship programs state's 'best-kept secret'

Posted: Aug 08, 2013 1:52 PM EDT WV State Journal  
By Pam Kasey - [email](#)



Photo courtesy of Clarksburg Joint Apprenticeship and Training Administration

Talk of educating West Virginians for the future tends to focus on four-year college, and then on community college and vocational programs.

What perhaps doesn't get as much attention as it could in those discussions is the apprenticeship programs offered by the building and construction trades.

"They're kind of the best-kept secret," said Steve White, director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation.

They're also one of the best deals going in education, with nearly all of the costs covered by the contractors and unions and the opportunity for a high wage and good benefits on completion.

The trades are for people who like to work with both their hands and their minds, White said.

"Construction is more than just from your neck down," White said. "You've got to have a full range of skills."

Trades apprentices work while they go to school, getting hands-on hours at real job sites, said Natalie Stone, executive director of the North Central Building and Construction Trades Council, one of the five local building trades councils across the state.

"That means you're getting minimum wage, benefits, a pension fund — things you don't get while you're in college," Stone said.

Apprenticeship programs are run differently by each of the trades — that includes bricklaying, ironworking, roofing, plumbing — 14 trades in all. Programs run from three to five years, with a variety of ways of working in the required numbers of classroom and on-the-job hours. Electricians go to school two nights a week and work during the day, for example, while carpenters go to school three weeks a year and work the rest of the time.

Stone's own husband completed the electricians' five-year apprentice training, for which there was no fee.

"Not only did he come out as a master electrician," she said, with a wage of more than \$30 an hour, "we didn't owe any money. We had health insurance from six months in that doesn't cost us a dime, and he has a retirement plan at \$6.50 or \$7 an hour into a retirement fund — so there are a lot of benefits for somebody who doesn't want to go to college but wants to take care of his family and make a great wage."

A well-organized list of the apprenticeship programs that are offered at 30 locations across the state is available at [www.wvapprenticeships.com](http://www.wvapprenticeships.com), a website maintained by the West Virginia Joint Labor Union and Management Apprenticeship and Training Advisory Council.

By choosing the county where he or she lives or wants to live and then the trade of interest, a potential apprentice visiting the website receives a list of links to the training location for that county.

All apprenticeship programs require applicants to be at least 18, White said, and to have a high school diploma or the equivalent and transportation and test alcohol- and drug-free. Some programs also administer aptitude tests.

No one can predict the availability of work in the future. But Stone spoke of the strength and consistency of the job market in her organization's north-central region.

"We're fortunate because we have a lot of university and college work and a lot of hospitals — so we have a lot of prevailing-rate work," she said. "We build all the windmills in our area. We also have three major power houses — Mount Storm, Harrison and Fort Martin, plus we work on Longview (power station) still."

On the strength of growth in extraction of natural gas from the Marcellus Shale, White said, the Wheeling area alone has more than 300 apprentices right now who are getting good experience and have great job prospects.

With its strong trades apprenticeship programs, White said, West Virginia trains the best laborers in the world.

He said the work is a source of pride.

"It's having the ability to build something and see it and have it stand the test of time, so you can show your family and friends, 'Hey, I built that.'"