

TOP STORY

# Second-chance program gives former inmates, Lewis Tree Service shots at success

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A Lewis Tree Service instructor works with a South Carolina Department of Corrections inmate at the Wateree Correctional Center in Rembert as part of a second chance program to assist inmates in becoming productive members of society.

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FLORENCE, S.C. — A unique public-private workforce effort neared a milestone Tuesday as participants in the inaugural Energy Industry Second Chance Pilot Program wrapped up on-the-job training and prepared to re-enter the workforce full time.

The program is designed to keep former inmates from returning to jail by removing barriers to success for former prisoners.

“Our Second Chance pilot initiative is a prime example of how private-public collaborations can expand life and career options for those preparing for release from prison,” said Diane E. Sumpter, operator of the U.S. Department of Commerce Minority Business Development Agency’s Formerly Incarcerated Program and president of DESA, Inc. “Our main objective has been to give them the tools needed to positively adjust to hurdles along their path toward reintegration. The foundation and individual donor support we received made it possible for REEMERGE and Joseph Outreach to extend their services while creating solutions for the unique resource and behavioral health challenges that each participant faced as a returning citizen.”

The program is an initiative designed to use proven best practices in restorative case management to prepare and guide formerly incarcerated individuals along a path to successful reintegration while growing the energy industry’s workforce of tomorrow.

This unique initiative began as an in-prison, paid employment and re-entry program for four inmates who volunteered to be trained and offered full-time employment in utility vegetation management, a field critical to utilities like Duke Energy across the state.

The program was developed by Lewis Tree Service in partnership with the South Carolina Department of Corrections and professional services firm DESA (through the organization’s nonprofit arm Joseph Outreach) and the REEMERGE program (funded by the U.S. Department of Commerce Minority Business Development Agency).

Lewis Tree Service began the training at Wateree River Correctional Institution two weeks prior to release. In early March, participants were released to continue training with entry-level jobs in Florence.

“What began as Lewis seeking solutions to an industrywide labor shortage has turned into an innovative partnership that taps into a unique labor pool,” said Dennis Brown, president and COO of Lewis Tree Service. “We hired dedicated professionals with tremendous growth potential. We are extremely proud that they joined our strong and growing company of employee owners.”

“I’m always so impressed with our craft workers, how they come together as a team and how they solve problems ahead of time. I love being out of the office, out in the field,” Brown said at a Tuesday morning press conference at Lewis’ staging lot on South Irby Street.

“When I was getting ready to leave (the field), four of those senior craft workers sought me out and they said, ‘Mr. Brown, we just want you to know we support the second chance program. We think the individuals you’re cycling into our work groups are professional, they’re doing the right thing and it’s absolutely the right decision.’”

Brown said the hiring philosophy at Lewis is that character trumps all else.

“The second chance program has given us the tools we need to succeed. Our past doesn’t define who we are,” program graduate Joey Hunt said. “We’re taking the steps to move forward, to empower our communities, to change the views society has on us as individuals.”

The Duke Energy Foundation supplied nearly \$27,000 in grant funding to the initiative that provides the training and support services needed to ensure the participants’ success and help them adapt from prison to the workforce and be reintegrated into society. These services include transportation, meals, transitional housing and required work clothing, as well as classes on soft skills and financial literacy.

“We are committed to keeping South Carolina’s economy and communities resilient and strong,” said Mike Callahan, Duke Energy’s South Carolina president. “One of the ways we do that is to continually look for innovative ways to support and grow our state’s workforce. This unique program is a step in the right direction in addressing some of those needs and we hope it can be a model for other industries to explore.”

Once training is complete, participants will work for Lewis Tree Service at locations across the Carolinas. They will continue to receive certain services including an assigned case manager and assistance finding permanent housing as they rejoin their families and communities.