

CASE STUDY:

VERDE — PORTLAND, OREGON



Program and Training Information

Verde is a nonprofit organization located in Cully, a diverse low-income neighborhood in northeast Portland, Oregon. Founded in 2005, Verde's mission statement reads: "Verde serves communities by building environmental wealth through social enterprise, outreach, and advocacy." Verde's roots in the community are closely tied with its relationship with the affordable housing organization, Hacienda Community Development Corporation (CDC). Verde began as Hacienda CDC's Sustainable Development Program, spinning off into an independent, tax-exempt nonprofit in 2005. Its first efforts were recognizing the need for employment opportunities for those living in Hacienda.

Based on its mission of building environmental wealth, Verde operates four social enterprises: Landscape, Nursery, Energy, and Builds. These programs were created with the objectives to hire low-income residents, pay good wages with benefits, offer classroom and on-the-job training, offer employees opportunities to develop and work toward their personal and professional goals, improve contracting opportunities for minority-owned and women-owned businesses, and bring new environmental investments to the Cully neighborhood. The most established program is Verde Landscape, a program that

received its initial grant funding from Enterprise Community's Life Opportunities Initiative, the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, and the Spirit Mountain Community Fund. Today, approximately 85% of the landscape program's financing comes from earned income from landscape contracting services, which include tree planting, stormwater facility installation and maintenance, restoration, control of invasive plants, and commercial landscape installation and maintenance. Verde also does extensive outreach and advocacy, working with community residents, peer organizations, and environmental policymakers to build the connection between protecting the environmental and making a good living.

Verde Landscape is modeled as a landscape contracting company that supports and trains its employees on the job. It is a 3.5-year program that pays its crew members and provides health benefits throughout their participation as they receive classroom training and learn more on-the-job skills. This includes at least 80 hours of paid training yearly, as well as on-the-job training opportunities. Crew members are recruited through referrals from its large network of community partners, like the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA) and Hacienda CDC. Verde's programs are also marketed through its Outreach division, and through its reputation as the program responsible for bringing

new environmental investments to the neighborhood. Currently, the landscape team employs six full-time employees and six temporary employees to work on contracting projects.

As part of their professional development and progress, each crew member develops an individual learning plan for their career and personal goals that is revisited every six months. Crew members choose one of three employment tracks as part of their learning plan: (1) advance within Verde; (2) employment with another company; or (3) entrepreneur/contractor track. Other support services include regular English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, computer classes, OSHA 10 certification, CPR and First Aid, financial education, and GED support. The program trains crew members in various aspects of environmental restoration, stormwater management, and tree planting and maintenance. Some crew members are pursuing certifications in herbicide application.

Employment Outcomes and Program Evaluations

Program participants are trained for occupations such as foreman and supervisor, crew lead, and restoration specialist. Typical wages for the positions at Verde start at \$12 per hour, increasing to \$14 within the first year and \$15 in the second year. All full-

time positions with Verde come with health benefits, which include up to \$225/month toward dependent health insurance premiums. Wages with outside contractors range from \$16-17 for crew members with experience and can increase depending on experience. The crew has fostered relationships with restoration contractors, municipalities and partner organizations, and some members have gone on to work with other contractors.

Crew members take an active part in their own evaluations as well as the program's evaluation. Every six months crew members review and update their individual learning plans, which are broken down into general job training, work certifications, asset-building activities, and personal and professional goals. In addition, managers conduct general performance reviews of crew members every six months. An anonymous employee satisfaction surveys allow the crew to inform management about how the program could be improved. At this time, Verde has not been formally tracking former employees, but is in the process of developing a system.

Program Challenges, Strengths, and Weaknesses

The major challenge that Verde faces is transitioning crew members to their next employment opportunity. At Verde, employees are guaranteed full-time employment and benefits. Since there are limited job opportunities, their next employer may not offer this type of stability. Another challenge is that the next job is not likely to have the supportive services that Verde provides. Many crew members have limited education and English skills, and not being

accustomed to formal employment and communicating well are barriers for them.

Unlike other programs, Verde earns income from landscape projects, and this income goes toward a majority of its operations. Since Verde works as a business, the Landscape program does not have to rely heavily on outside grants. This can be used as a model for other organizations that want to incorporate a business element into their organization. However, with only six full-time employees in a three-year period, Verde's program has very few spots and limited job-creation capacity. To grow, Verde is creating temporary community labor opportunities on large projects in the Cully neighborhood. Verde's business model allows the program to be self-sustaining, yet contracting projects year round keep the crew busy and this success actually makes it difficult to schedule training activities.

Opportunities in the Water Sector

Verde Landscape is aware of the opportunities in the water sector in restoration and stormwater management in Portland. The program's partnership with the City, watershed councils, and other community-based organizations allows it to be involved in many sustainable water management programs from installing Green Streets, a low-impact development initiative in Portland, to creating a .68 acre community garden in Cully Park – a 25-acre park under construction by Verde in the Cully neighborhood.

This Cully Park project, known as Let Us Build Cully Park!, includes significant restoration and stormwater management

improvements. Verde, via Verde Landscape, will restore the Park's North Slope, an area that has been designated as too steep for park features, but which can offer other environmental and community benefits. This area will be improved to meet stormwater management and economic, educational, and habitat goals. Verde, via a new social enterprise called Verde Builds, will also rebuild NE 72nd Avenue, one of Cully's forgotten streets with no stormwater management treatment system, no facilities, and no curbs. At 860 linear feet, NE 72nd Avenue ends at the Park boundary but does not currently provide access. Proposed improvements will slow and filter stormwater, support community education about stormwater management and watershed health, and create habitat for birds and other wildlife. Lastly, Verde Nursery is relocating to the Cully Park site during park construction in order to provide plant material for the North Slope Restoration, NE 72nd Avenue project, and other Cully Park improvements.

www.verdenm.org

Read the full report *Sustainable Water Jobs* at: www.pacinst.org/reports/sustainable_water_jobs